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Norms at stake in the history classroom

Norms, values, and sexuality in upper secondary school with an anti-oppressive intent

Härа Jess Haltorp

This study examines how norms and gender are negotiated in history lessons integrating Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) with an anti-oppressive intent in Swedish vocational programs. Through classroom observations and interviews, it explores student positioning, resistance, and didactic dilemmas. Findings show that while the teacher aimed to challenge traditional gender norms, male students often resisted, reinforcing conservative views, whereas female students generally supported the norm-critical approach. The study highlights how meaning-making is shaped by intersecting norms of gender, education, and social belonging, often resulting in classroom power struggles. A key challenge is that anti-oppressive education can unintentionally reinforce hierarchies if not supported by explicit strategies for critical engagement. By addressing the complexities of integrating norm-critical perspectives in history education, the study contributes to understanding how controversial issues can be pedagogically managed and calls for clearer frameworks to support teachers.

Keywords: controversial issues, history education, relationship and sexuality education, anti-oppressive educational intent.

Introduction

Relationship and sexuality education (hereinafter RSE) has been a part of the Swedish public school system since 1942 (Lindgren et al 2023), and has been recognised as an interdisciplinary field of knowledge

Härа Jess Haltorp är doktorand i didaktik vid Institutionen för pedagogik, didaktik och utbildningssociologi vid Uppsala universitet. E-post: hara.haltorp@edu.uu.se

since 1994 in the curriculum. This has been further emphasised in the new curriculum by stressing that RSE should be integrated into various school subjects. Addressing RSE in history education can highlight how norms for sexuality and relationships change and are connected to different cultures, times, and places (Bennett & Johnson 2021). However, few studies have investigated history education that concern RSE in Sweden (Haltorp et al 2024). The Swedish National Agency for Education (hereinafter SNAE) encourages teachers to include RSE in various school subjects, and to practise anti-oppressive education or use what they call norm-aware language to highlight that norms are changeable, contextual, and fluid in both time and place (Skolverket 2013, 2024).

The purpose of this study is to explore how students in vocational upper secondary school programmes position themselves in relation to norms, values, and gender during history lessons that integrate RSE with an anti-oppressive intent. The study examines the types of resistance and consensus that emerge in classroom discussions and investigates the didactic dilemmas that arise when a teacher challenges traditional gender and sexuality norms within historical narratives. By analysing interactions and expressions of subjectification in the classroom, the study aims to highlight the complexities of addressing controversial issues, such as gender and sexuality, within a historical framework. During the autumn semester of 2021, history education concerning RSE was observed in an upper secondary school, followed by two interviews with the teacher and one with a focus group of her students. This article explores what happens in the classrooms when RSE is integrated into history education with an anti-oppressive purpose from the teacher Diana.

The curriculum for upper secondary school states that the fundamental values of education are based on a democratic foundation. It also emphasises that ethics grounded in Christian tradition and Western humanism should guide students' education, promoting 'tolerance', among other values (Skolverket 2011, p. 5). As such, the fundamental values in the curriculum are normative. The support material published in 2013 was in use until 2022 and was later replaced with updated writings (Skolverket 2023, 2024). The data in this article was collected during the autumn semester of 2021. Therefore, the policy documents published in 2011 and 2013 are relevant to Diana's lessons and interviews, as these documents influenced the classroom practices observed. The SNAE has stated that RSE is an interdisciplinary field in the Swedish curriculum that concerns all teachers and should be integrated into various subjects (Skolverket 2011, 2013, 2023). While there are different interpretations of anti-oppressive education, this

article defines it as education intended to work against oppression by highlighting norms and normality while encouraging students to think critically about them (Kumashiro 2002). Educational content contains facts but also norms and values (Almqvist et al 2008). In this article, norms are defined as social rules that dictate what is normal or desirable, which change in relation to time, place, and culture, and differ based on gender and social expectations for men and women (Butler 1993). Norms are viewed as contextually bounded, (re)produced, and cited as part of the students' meaning-making in the classroom. It is important to note that history education connected to RSE and anti-oppressive education is not an isolated phenomenon but should be seen as part of a larger school context where the history teacher can work together with teachers in other subjects on RSE. Since RSE is a complex field involving different topics and interests that intersect, collaboration is essential (e g Planting-Bergloo 2023).

Navigating controversial norms and values

Education concerning norms, sexuality, and relationships in connection to history can be viewed as controversial, since it involves both facts and strong temporal values (Mocnik 2021). Tsafrir Goldberg and Geerte M Savenije define a controversial issue as a matter of highlighting different views on historical events in the classroom, rather than a question of public opinion or academic opinion (2018). Since everyone acts and stands in relation to political discussion, societal norms, and values, different ideas about what is normative, what is acceptable, or who is regarded as being "at home, who gets to inhabit spaces, as spaces that are inhabitable for some bodies and not others (...)" (Ahmed 2007, p. 162), can make discussions intense in some cases, creating controversiality. Which is relevant in relation to this article since some questions become controversial in the classroom.

Nina Burridge et al provide examples of topics to include in history education that highlight how history "is essentially and fundamentally a moral and ethical exercise (…)"which, for example, can "investigate the motives of both those who currently propose and oppose same-sex marriage" (Burridge et al 2014, p. 20). However, James Bennet and Marguerite Johnson state that the study of history in itself is inherently controversial, since historical topics are unstable and open to interpretation (2021). Previous research on history education concerning controversial history also connects to human rights education (Mocnik 2021), which makes history education concerning RSE a research field that intersects with several research areas. The

study by Nena Mocnik highlights how controversial issues regarding war-related sexual violence can be addressed in history education (2021). Mocnik emphasises both the risks and potential in discussing controversial histories with students, since trauma and emotion need to be handled with care by the teacher.

Balancing facts, values, and emotions is relevant in anti-oppressive education where history meets RSE, since teachers cannot know in advance what potential traumas students carry or what their interests or empathy for the past might be. Andrea Watson-Canning's article discusses a similar balancing act between teachers' norms and values and the knowledge they select to teach, highlighting opposition among male students to anti-oppressive education (Watson-Canning 2020). However, viewing Watson-Canning's research in relation to Fanny Ambjörnssons dissertation shows that norms should not be viewed 'merely as voluntary or even conscious acts. They must also be analysed as an outcome of the emotional and communicative capital one is given, based on one's social position in the world' (Ambjörnsson 2004, p. 306). Norms based on gender, class, and ethnicity intersect and are, according to Ambjörnsson, closely connected to sexuality. This suggests that the students' acts of subjectification involve a balancing act as they navigate several intersecting spheres and norms.

Ambjörnsson's study also investigates vocational programmes, highlighting that students' acts of subjectification are not just in relation to gender but also in relation to vocational norms and intertwined norms of class and gender. Maria Bäckman's research shows that, despite good intentions, what is taught in the classroom is situational, and students navigate several forums that contradict each other (Bäckman 2003). This can relate to Ambjörnsson's and Watson-Canning's findings, emphasising that this is a complex field (Lukkerz 2023; Planting-Bergloo 2023).

By using the history subject as one way of integrating questions concerning RSE, it is possible to highlight how sexuality and norms are bound to specific contexts and that norms and sexuality change through history (Haltorp et al 2024), especially since Jane Gerhard stresses that her students tended to see heterosexuality as timeless and unchanged (2010). Jenny Bengtsson and Eva Bolander have problematised inclusive and anti-oppressive education by suggesting that it risks becoming static and merely presenting students with the results of critique rather than engaging them in the critical process (2020). This issue is further problematised by Sara Planting-Bergloo, who argues that inclusive language risks making education gender blind instead (Planting-Bergloo 2023).

Kevin Kumashiro identifies four different types of anti-oppressive education: *Education for the Other*, *Education about the Other*, *Education that is critical of privileging and othering*, and *Education that changes students and society* (Kumashiro 2002). These four strands are often blended and modified, but what unites them is the effort to work against oppression by highlighting and questioning norms (Kumashiro 2002). Anti-oppressive education, therefore, includes critical approaches to norms and normality and is characterised as

> exposing the construction and history of normality, investigating how oppressions operate by the repeating of norms in everyday lives, and engaging educators and pupils to think critically and question structures of power as well as their own oppressive actions and positions.
>
> (Bengtsson & Bolander 2020, p. 155)

Several Swedish scholars have written about how anti-oppressive education can be used in a Swedish setting and what it can entail for teachers and students, calling it norm critical pedagogy instead (e g Alm & Laskar 2017; Björkman et al 2021; Hill 2021).

Previous research concerning RSE has highlighted the complexity of the field due to different interests and topics intersecting, e g religion, history, market-oriented views, and societal norms (Junkala 2023; Lukkerz 2023; Planting-Bergloo 2023). Karin Gunnarsson and Simon Ceder have emphasised how didactic choices of lesson content concerning RSE in social studies and Swedish become vital in the enactment of facts and values in the classroom (2023). Topics discussed during lessons include some aspects of facts and values while excluding others (Gunnarsson & Ceder 2023), which in turn affect teaching and meaning-making.

RSE integrated into various school subjects can become controversial since it involves moral exercises. However, how questions concerning RSE are addressed in history education classrooms in upper secondary school has not been investigated in sweden. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how students in vocational upper secondary school programmes position themselves in relation to norms, values, and gender during history lessons that integrate RSE with an anti-oppressive intent.

Constructing data

The paper draws on data constructed through interviews with a teacher, a focus group interview with five of her students, and observations in

two classrooms during a four-week period in upper secondary school (students aged 16–19) in Sweden during the first semester of the academic year 2021–2022. The history course that the students take is the shorter version given in vocational programmes, which is about 50 hours in total. The classes have covered most of the history content so far, but are revisiting some of the historical content again with an anti-oppressive intent during the final weeks of the semester, during which the observations took place. The student groups are heterogeneous in terms of background, gender, religion, socio-economic status, etc. according to their teacher Diana. The research has undergone an ethical vetting and was approved in January 2020 by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (ref. no. 2020–06822). The school has been anonymised, which also applies to the classes observed and the students. The classes have been assigned a letter, and this letter guides the pseudonymised names of students to secure confidentiality while highlighting context (Example: Classroom 1: class D, student Devin. Classroom 2: class G, student Gerard). The location of the school has also been anonymised (see table 1).

Table 1. Information about the data set

Group	**Class D**	**Class G**
Teacher	Diana	Diana
Students	3 women 13 men	5 women 15 men
Location	Rural	Rural
Educational topic	Vocational	Vocational
Observations in classrooms	3 lessons	6 lessons
Interviews	1 teacher interview 1 focus group of students	1 teacher interview

The observations were documented using field notes and video-recordings during a total of nine lessons in two classrooms. Class D was observed for three lessons of 80 minutes each, and class G was observed for six lessons of 45 minutes each. The researcher sat at the back of the classroom without interfering with the lessons, except for the first lesson when the researcher was introduced by the teacher. During this introduction, the students were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and were provided with both verbal

and written information in order for them to give informed consent to participate in the study.

The observations and interviews were then transcribed to create the text for analysis. I argue that by observing, interviewing the teacher, and conducting a focus group interview with students, I am able to triangulate the meaning-making process. The analysis will show how students express their meaning-making and what they build their statements on.

Analytical framework

The analysis of the interaction builds on a post-structural understanding of subjectification through Butler (1997), examining interaction as contextually bound and containing acts of subjectification (Barad 2003; Butler & Scott 1992; Davies 2006; Renold 2006), which can sometimes be contradictory. This includes an understanding of social practices as activities where students and teachers construct their reality through the use of words and bodily expressions. The focus of the analysis is on the positioning and negotiation carried out by students and teachers during lessons and interviews.

By using Judith Butler's framework, it can be argued that subjectification and gendered norms are constantly being produced and reproduced without a pre-existing original (1997). However, it is a complex process that still has some stability, as people cite previous productions that correlate to societal norms for different genders, social classes, etc. What is regarded as male of female changes through history and is performed and negotiated through their relation to power expressions (Davies 2006; Youdell 2006).

Different types of power relations will be visible through the interaction by using Butler and Michel Foucault's understanding of power (Butler 1997; Foucault 1969/2002). Power and subjectification are unstable, multiple, and contextually specific, which suggests that both power and subject are constantly changing and being negotiated (Butler 1997; Youdell 2004).

I argue that by using both theories of subjectification (e g Davies 2006; Honan et al 2000), and Kumashiro's work on anti-oppressive education (2002), it is possible to showcase how norms and normality are intertwined with history, gender, and class, and are negotiated and performed in a complex web of contradictions and attempts to make sense of the world, the self, and the lesson content. Through this negotiation in the classroom, it will also become apparent which questions are considered controversial based on the students' experiences

and beliefs, which the focus group interview elaborates on further. These actions and expressions of subjectification are situational and contextual (Haraway 2016; Orlander 2016), but are also connected to traditions, history and culture (Almqvist et al 2008). Consequently, the excerpts shown in this article should be viewed as samples of specific and temporary actions (Butler & Scott 1992; e g Orlander 2016), intertwined with previous productions of norms and gender (Butler 1997).

Lastly, the students will be referred to as man or woman students instead of male or female students, since female/male is a scientific term that refers to sex and fails to capture the complexity of women and men (Springer et al 2012).

Analysis of data

The analysis was conducted in two steps. The first step involved a close reading of the transcribed material together with the field notes from the observations, marking segments where the teacher and students interacted around norms, values, sexuality, and history, highlighting when students subjectified themselves in relation to the lesson content and their teacher (Davies 2006). This first step also included a similar analysis of the interviews, i.e. a close reading of the transcribed material and marking segments concerning norms, values, sexuality, and history. Moreover, this first step was inspired by a thematic content analysis based on Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006). The thematisation was conducted through an inductive analysis, identifying themes (examples of identified themes include: norms for men and women, problematising the historical perspective, patriarchal history, women in the past, norms and legislation connected to the church, social classes and different living conditions in the past, work opportunities, unwed mothers, the shame connected to illegitimate children, sexuality).

During the second stage, four questions served as analytical guidelines for examining the material and deepening the analysis of the observations (see table 2). This included closely examining how students spoke, i e their use of intonation and responses to questions, and how they showed consensus and dissensus through their utterances. The reasons why some students did not answer certain questions cannot be analysed in this article, as they were not asked why they kept quiet. These quiet students also did not want to be included in the focus group interview. This will impact the results in the study, and the results should not be interpreted as universal. The

quiet students might think differently than the outspoken students, which is always a challenge regarding constructing data that entail controversial matters since not everyone is comfortable expressing their views on the matters discussed.

During the interviews with the teacher, the first question in the second step was used to guide the analysis, while questions 2, 3, and 4 were applied to the interview with the focus group as well as the observations.

Table 2. Analysis in 2 steps

		Analytical questions
Step 1	Interpretation of interaction	-What are they talking about? -How are they talking? -What themes can be identified?
Step 2	Explanation of the relationship between interaction, social context, and effect	What didactic choices are made by the teacher? How do the students show consensus or dissensus? Which issues become controversial and why? What power relations are visible through the interaction?

This second and final step enabled analysis of the social practice and highlighted how and what was being negotiated in the classroom through students' acts of subjectification and during the focus group interview.

The analysis will highlight how students position themselves in relation to their teacher and other students through verbal expressions. I argue that this will emphasise that meaning-making is a complex process, which combines individual, social, and cultural dimensions (Almqvist et al 2008), in order to fulfil the article's aim to explore how students navigate and position themselves in relation to norms, values, and gender during history lessons that integrate RSE with an anti-oppressive intent. The didactic choices made by the teacher during lessons will be included in the analysis to show their consequences for the students' meaning-making.

Findings

Initially, the idea was to analyse acts of subjectification made by students without concentrating on the gender of the person speaking. However, during the analytical stage, it became apparent that there were differences between the man and woman students' ways of subjectifying themselves in relation to their teacher and each other during lessons. When students' express meanings concerning RSE in interview, they use the lesson content as a basis for the conversation. During the focus group interview, the students collectively form and express meanings related to the lesson content, allowing me, as the researcher, to ask in-depth questions based on their statements. This section focuses on how students navigate and position themselves concerning norms, values, and gender in history lessons integrating RSE with an anti-oppressive intent. By analysing interactions and acts of subjectification, the complexities of addressing controversial issues in the classroom are highlighted. The results will be divided into two themes –*Student resistance and balancing norms* and *Challenging traditional gender norms and the prevalence of the present*. This thematisation of the results is intended to illustrate the controversial questions in the classroom, the students' positioning of themselves and others, and the challenges that an anti-oppressive history education presents in the data.

Student resistance and balancing norms

The anti-oppressive education strategies initiated by the teacher during the lessons consist of highlighting norms and how they are connected to different times and places. Diana encourages the students to engage in comparing norms in history with those of the present. She also challenges the students to critically view norms, especially when they attempt to hold on to some of the traditional gendered norms expressed by their peers. Diana has chosen to highlight sexuality, norms, and values in ancient history, the Middle Ages, and examples from the 1800s and 1900s. Some of the cases she introduces concern Roman and Greek laws (lessons 1 & 2), religious laws during the medieval period (lessons 1 & 2), and norms connected to sexuality during the 1800s and 1900s (lessons 3 & 4). She has prepared worksheets and questions together with shorter lectures for each lesson. Examples of the lesson content also include unwed mothers during the 19th century, abortion laws during the 2000s, and questions concerning who is responsible for contraceptive methods according to the

students in the present, as well as questions regarding different views of LGBTQ+ issues.

During the first lesson, all students are willing to participate in the anti-oppressive education. However, in the following lessons, two-thirds of the man students position themselves by showing more and more resistance to Diana's didactic focus on working with the students against oppression. The difference between the first and the later lessons is that, in the first lesson, students are encouraged to identify norms both in the past and the present. In the following lessons, Diana tries to question norms and makes the students actively participate in the questioning, while connecting and comparing present norms to different historical periods with contradictory norms (e g how unwed pregnant women were viewed by society during the 19th century and how they are viewed in present day Sweden, or how homosexuality was classified as an illness in Sweden until 1979).

This presupposes that the students already know how to be critical of norms, agree with the anti-oppressive intent, and believe that patriarchal norms regarding gender and sexuality are problematic. In both class D and class G, two-thirds of the men in class position themselves by disagreeing with and questioning progressive discussions on gender and sexuality, while the other third of the men are silent. The women engage in critical discussions concerning norms. In contrast, the men express disagreement, making statements through laughter and jokes about homosexuality and transgender issues, as well as by condemning same-sex marriages.

They assert that sex/gender is (or should be) unchangeable.[1] Their actions of subjectification in relation to their peers and their teacher highlight that they were reluctant to engage in critical discussions about societal and personal oppressive actions. This is evident from their interactions in the classroom, both verbal (sometimes shouting out their opposing views) and non-verbal. They often look at their classmates to see their reactions after making statements opposing Diana's claims. Non-verbal cues include e g crossing their arms over their chest, leaning back in their chairs, and shaking their heads. This behaviour also emphasises that the act of subjectification is a balancing act for the students as they try to navigate the classroom dynamics, interactions with their teacher, and the norms within the group while creating meaning from the lesson content. Interpreting this in relation to Kumashiros research underlines that there is discomfort in questioning norms, as the men students shows disbelief (Kumashiro 2002).

From following the two classes over three and six lessons across four weeks and watching them interact with each other and their

teacher, it becomes clear that the men in the class position themselves against Diana's intent, adhering to their own norms and values contrary to those expressed by their teacher. They resist the critical examination of traditional gender norms that Diana seeks to foster. None of them vocally expresses disbelief in the norms or values stated by other man students during class. Every man who speaks up during lessons acts in accordance with the beliefs expressed by their peers. The women in class, however, often roll their eyes or shout at the men when they make statements about women being inferior to men. Following Ambjörnsson's example, the students navigate a complex field where several norms intersect and interact (Ambjörnsson 2004). Diana tries to challenge the men, but a didactic dilemma arises because the policy documents guiding the lessons presuppose a right and wrong way of being 'norm-aware'. This becomes problematic in the classroom, as Diana is required to adhere to these documents without compromising the fundamental values stated in the curriculum, which the men's statements often contradict. The anti-oppressive intent of *Being critical of privileging and Othering* becomes *Education about the Other* instead (Kumashiro 2002).

Using an anti-oppressive approach in RSE within history lessons involves judging students based on their values. This creates didactic dilemmas in the classroom, as the different policy recommendations contradict the fundamental values outlined in the curriculum. The vocally active women in the class, however, position themselves in opposition to the man classmates, which can be interpreted as two dichotomous positions with different norms, values, and beliefs. This observation is based on the vocal students in the classroom, which suggests that there might be several other unvoiced positions.

The women students' acts of subjectification include agreeing with Diana, leaning forward over their desks to engage in the discussions, looking at their teacher and nodding, and interacting by answering questions and posing their own to Diana and each other. When the men students show discontent, the women in class look at them and frown, roll their eyes, and shake their heads, and question the men's statements. These conditions illustrate how the woman students' positioning shapes them as "good students", which makes it possible for them to be a part of the anti-oppressive approach advocated in the curriculum.

During the first interview with Diana, conducted right after the first lesson, she expressed concern about how the men in class might react to anti-oppressive history education. She acknowledged that there are 'problematic' beliefs regarding gender, sexuality, and identity within the classes. She explained that this is one of the bases for her didactic choices to discuss sexuality and history in class, believing

she needs to highlight that everyone has the same rights regardless of sexuality. Relating this to Kumashiro's thematisation of anti-oppressive education (2002), it is clear that Diana's intent aligns with anti-oppressive educational goals. However, there are limitations to what is feasible in the actual classroom with these student groups, which creates didactic dilemmas. In essence, Diana's intent is to teach about human rights and individual freedom, challenging harmful societal masculine norms expressed in the classroom, as she stated in both interviews. Despite her efforts, some of Diana's students in class D and class G repeatedly express doubt about acknowledging and accepting that LGBTQ+ people (should) have the same rights. On several occasions during the lessons and interviews, some students expressed thoughts that are cynical and negative regarding LGBTQ+ issues. Diana tries to prevent these reoccurring homophobic utterances in her classroom by demonstrating that homosexuality is part of history and by providing examples of past discrimination. She highlights norms and questions them by using examples from history to make sexual minorities visible and explicitly connecting past and present in her teaching. This is her didactic choice, aimed at challenging students to be critical of their own expressed norms.

In the focus group interview following one of the lessons, it becomes clear that while the students recognise that homosexuality is not a taboo subject anymore, they strongly question LGBTQ+ issues and Pride:

> Researcher: so, what is the difference you see in history?
>
> Devin: well, for starters, it is not taboo to talk about homosexuality anymore; everything is so positive now, and I think it has gone too far!
>
> Damian: it was more restrictions for those people before, in the past, but it goes to a line you know, because it is developing now like everything should be normal, and some things are just sick that you should try to restrict instead.
>
> Researcher: What do you mean?
>
> Damian: well, for starters, it is not okay to have sex with children!
>
> Researcher: but is that what the LGBTQ+ movement wants?
>
> Dennis: yeah, some people do!

> Dante: I think, the line goes at throwing around dildoes in the Pride parade, that is NOT okay; they should have the protest in some country that needs it, not here where they are already accepted. I mean, it is good that they are, but it is starting to derail.
>
> (Dennis, Devin and Damian humming and nodding in agreement)

In this student interview, a certain tolerance of homosexuality is voiced, indicating that the men do recognise LGBTQ+ to some extent. However, the discussion becomes problematic as the students try to confuse the fight for LGBTQ+ rights with the legalisation of paedophilia, also referring to LGBTQ+ individuals as 'those people', thus reinforcing their perception of these individuals as the Other (Kumashiro 2002). This underlines the complexity of intersecting norms in the men's responses, which can be interpreted as progressive to a limited extent.

During the interview and lessons, the students navigate the social landscape and position themselves in relation to their teacher and each other. The norms and values articulated during the interview are influenced by the group present. While Diana's didactic aim is to stress human rights and individual freedom in the present together with a historical framing, the men in the class question the need for (more) equality. Their arguments during the interview resemble misconceptions and anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric often used in homophobic propaganda. Their acts of subjectification can be interpreted as positioning them as gender-conservative men.

Before the final lessons, during the last interview, Diana expressed concern that it might be very difficult to challenge and change the students' perspectives on gender and sexuality:

> I am actually quite nervous about next week when we are going to talk about different genders and stuff, because I know that these guys have really strict thoughts that there are only two genders and that the gender is the same as the person's genitals; so, I do not know how they will react really. I mean statistically, there should be someone present in the classroom that is not cis, but what they identify as does not matter to me per se, but I want them to see some sort of representation; it will be though to discuss, but I think we as teachers need to take on difficult discussions too. There have always been people that do not fit the norms, and I want them to see that. I am trying not to get stuck in that heteronormative trap.

The claim that the lessons have an anti-oppressive purpose is based on interviews with Diana, where she states that her aim with the lessons is to work against oppression by highlighting norms in history and encouraging students to think critically about them. As the excerpt above shows, Diana is aware of the didactic dilemmas and challenges. During the interviews with Diana, the focus group interview, and the observations, the importance of context is emphasised. The students navigate their relationships with their teacher, each other, their vocational programme, and social norms within the group, which can be interpreted as a multiplicity of co-existing norms and expectations. They articulate what is important to them in relation to their vocational programme and societal norms, differentiating themselves from what Dante calls the "girl power-league, strong independent woman" in a study preparational programme.[2]

Dante's statement is made during the first lesson, in response to Diana asking if they thought answers from students in a study preparational programme would differ from their answers in this class. Dante and four of his man classmates debated how the so-called girl power-league wants norms to change regarding gender and sexuality, which the students revisit during the focus group interview as something that is negative in relation to societal norms development.

During the final lesson with class D, the students work in smaller groups to answer questions on their worksheets. Diana joins one of the smaller groups to discuss pre-marital sex and birth control with two students. In this conversation, Diana explains that in the past, sheep and pig intestines were used as condoms. Dilshad, one of the man students she is talking to, states that if they (women) used condoms, no one would be able to see if the woman had done wrong, which would be haram (forbidden by Islamic law). It is unclear whether Dilshad means that the use of condoms per se is forbidden, or if he is referring to pre-marital sex being forbidden. However, it can be interpreted that he views contraceptives as the woman's concern.

During their interaction with Diana, the two students seem to agree with her statements about ethics and what is morally right and wrong in relationships and sexuality, both in relation to historical and contemporary norms. This agreement is framed in relation to both Islamic law and norms in Sweden. They ask questions related to the worksheet, history, and practices in other countries today (e g Dilshad: "In [students' country of origin], there is no birth control; it is like Sweden in the past. Did birth control exist in the past?"). Diana and the students also discuss same-sex marriage and the ability to become parents, forming a consensus that everyone who wants to become a parent should be able to. However, during this part of the

conversation, both students raise their eyebrows, look at each other, and laugh at the idea of two men having a baby together. When the lesson ends and the two students exit the classroom, Dilshad says to his classmate, "but two guys, if they want to have kids together, that is haram", emphasising the last word. His classmate loudly agrees, humming "yes, yes" and patting Dilshad on the shoulder. The use of religion as a part of positioning and negotiating of norms also highlight the complexities the students face while trying to navigate the meaning-making processes.

The consensus with their teacher can be viewed as a power relation where Diana holds authority over the situation, and the men confirm through acts of subjectification by being submissive. However, they later subjectify and assert their own power by disagreeing and stating that it is haram as they leave the classroom. The laughter during the conversation can also be interpreted as a way of showing disagreement by ridiculing the idea posed by Diana. At the same time, the situation highlights the complexity of intersecting contexts. The expectations in class are to be tolerant, empathetic, and open minded, which the students signal through their consensus conversation with their teacher, even though they laugh at certain points. However, this attitude does not seem to carry over into the hallway afterwards. This correlates with what Bäckman and Ambjörnsson also saw in their studies (Ambjörnsson 2004; Bäckman 2003), where students often conform in the classroom but later voice different and contradictory beliefs.

The students' positioning in the classroom underlines the different availabilities for students in relation to their lived experiences and the complex web of negotiations and attempts to make sense of contradictory norms. In sum, during the observed lessons, students frequently expressed varied responses to discussions on norms and gender. Men students, in particular, displayed increasing resistance to anti-oppressive discussions as lessons progressed. This resistance and adaptation reflect the discomfort included in questioning students own norms (Kumashiro 2002).

Challenging traditional gender norms and the prevalence of the present

The didactic choices made by Diana that became controversial in the classroom involve discussions surrounding gender norms, both past and present. During the lessons, the students have several conversations about the lesson material and discuss general norms in Swedish society (i e how a Swede looks and what they do for work), norms related to their specific vocational programme (i e how a 'real worker'

looks and acts), and traditional gender norms for men and women. The latter part differs between men and women in the class (men in the class: e g strong, large men and vulnerable, thin women; women in the class: e g strong and capable women, which does not exclude vulnerability or a range of body sizes).

The woman students express an interest in the correlation between norms, working and living conditions, the use of contraceptive methods before the advent of birth control pills, and laws concerning abortion. This interest is interpreted as the woman students positioning themselves as relating more to contraceptive issues, which also aligns with Dilshad's view that condoms are primarily women's concern. Social classes, work opportunities, and living conditions are discussed between Diana and her students throughout all the lessons, with connections made between living conditions, social class, and sexuality by both the women in the class and Diana. The women in the class compare the past with the present and express sympathy for women in the past, subjectifying themselves as agreeing with Diana's intent and capable of understanding the experiences of women in the past.

Other themes that are represented through the discussions relate to laws and regulations (e g Diana "no, but if he breaks it, he has to pay a fine"), religion (e g Diana "the church views all lives as sacred and therefore is against abortion") shame (e g David "But with suicide, why then? Because they did not want to live with the shame?"), and sexuality (e g Dennis "heterosexual, if Dante does not have any other thoughts"). Throughout the lesson series, Dante's man classmates regard him as the arbiter of what is accepted as a relevant answer in several cases, which the woman classmates oppose by questioning them. The connection between the identified themes is also prevalent throughout the lesson series, as laws and regulations are connected to the church in the past, and shame and sexuality are connected to both laws and religion, all of which have influenced living conditions. This connection is highlighted by Diana in her lectures and is something that the students keep on discussing as they work on questions and worksheets. The link between history and religion are evident through the lesson series, while being part of Diana's intent of highlighting the intersections of different social categories and conditions.

In class D, the controversial issues spark heated discussions among students, particularly in relation to the opposing views expressed vocally about norms, gender, and values. One of the questions that is particularly controversial is the medieval belief that both men and women needed to orgasm in order to create life, which the students use as a starting point to discuss gendered norms for men and women

in the present and how they are connected to sexuality and expressions of sexual freedom:

> Doris: haha! if that was the case, there would not be that many people on earth! (laughs)
>
> Devin: (mutters something and shrugs)
>
> Dante: Speak for yourself! (shouts at Devin)
>
> Disa: it is a nice belief though (looks at Doris with a smile)

Following the excerpt above, an intense and heated discussion ensues, with many students talking at the same time before Diana intervenes. The vocal men in the class position themselves against the progressiveness of norms, arguing that the historical changes in norms have benefitted both men and women in the present, and that the present does not need to change. The vocal women in the class, in contrast, argue that current norms for men and women need to change, as they believe the present is not equal. Here, it becomes evident that their lived experiences are quite different and that the anti-oppressive intent of the discussion becomes uncomfortable and controversial (Kumashiro 2002). It is in the interaction between the men and women in the class that the questions become controversial, since both groups assert that the others' beliefs are wrong or even unacceptable. However, since Diana has an anti-oppressive intent with the lesson series, which the men in the class heavily oppose, it becomes a power struggle between the two groups that is not beneficial to the teacher's intent. Similar struggles has been identified as a possible pitfalls by Kumashiro (2002).

Diana has a didactic intention of demonstrating the connections between past and present. She has chosen to start with the present, move back into history, and then return to the present. Even though the texts and lectures focus on historical content, the discussions concentrate on the present, as the intention is to help students relate history to the present (Haltorp et al 2024). This is shown in some of the questions Diana has written down in relation to the texts they have read, with the following examples focusing on the present: "Is there any similar punishment today concerning sexual misconduct?", "Whose responsibility is it to use contraception?", "Do you think there are arguments for forced sterilisation today? Why, why not?", "Is it a human right to have children?".

The questions Diana asks her students during lessons are primarily related to the present, with only a few connected to history. These

questions require students to make their own judgements based on what is discussed. Later during the interview, Diana's didactic choice of using the worksheet and questions is explained as she wanted the students to start to think about contemporary norms and stereotypes before adding a historical framing to norms by going back in history in order to make the lesson series more relevant to the students.

During the student's discussions, the present is prevalent, and historical content is interpreted by the student through contemporary norms. Diana tries to challenge the men's expressions of gender norms, but they shut down these challenges with statements citing, what can be interpreted as, a gender-conservative understanding of sex and gender:

> Diana: Gender? [kön][3]
>
> Gerard: man
>
> Gustav: but you do not know that! It could be a transsexual! (smirks)
>
> Glenn: but it is still male or female (shouts)
>
> Diana: but gender, what is gender? [kön]
>
> Gustav: there are two genders! (shouts)
>
> Gordon: either you are a man or a woman
>
> Diana: so, it is biological sex?
>
> Glenn: biological sex, are there other types?
>
> Gordon: There are different orientations, but only two sexes/genders
>
> Diana: wait interesting, what did you say?
>
> Gordon: There are different orientations, but not different sexes/genders
>
> Diana: do you have to identify with the sex/gender you have since birth?
>
> Gerard: no
>
> Glenn: I would say yes

> Gordon: but there are two sexes/genders, but then you can have a different orientation, but that has nothing to do with sex/gender
>
> Diana: but there are also those who feel that they were born in the wrong biological body
>
> Gerard: it is ok to feel that way
>
> Gustav: you can have like surgery
>
> Glenn: You cannot escape from your body! (shouts)
>
> Gordon: but you cannot run away from who you are
>
> Diana: but the question is, what are you? Are you your biological body or are you what you feel like?
>
> Gordon: but then, there is something wrong with the brain

The men who are vocal during the lessons try to hold on to traditional gender norms that the teacher tries to challenge, which correlates with previous research (Watson-Canning 2020). For instance, Gordon expresses that wanting to be something other than the sex you were born with is wrong or even indicative of a mental illness ("something wrong with the brain"). The responses from the men in the class during the lessons are interpreted as power struggles between upholding traditional norms and the women's expressions of wanting norms to change. This clash between the intention of questioning traditional gender norms and values and the responses trying to maintain them results in an impasse that neither the students nor the teacher manage to overcome during the observed period.

In sum, historical and contemporary norms around sexuality and relationships, including same-sex marriage, contraception, and gender identity, sparked controversy. Men students often questioned the legitimacy of progressive norms, while woman students countered with critical perspectives. These interactions illustrate how controversial issues become moral exercises, with students navigating personal beliefs, societal norms, religious norms, and educational expectations. The teacher's intent to challenge oppressive norms faced significant resistance, particularly from men students, which also highlights that the pitfalls identified by Kumashiro (2002), became obstacles in this case.

Concluding remarks

The findings of this study highlight the complexities of subjectification processes in history education as well as the complexities of integrating RSE with an anti-oppressive intent. Students navigate overlapping norms and social spheres, assuming different positions based on their agreements or disagreements with the content. The results highlight that the quieter students might hold divergent views, which are less represented due to the study's reliance on verbalized perspectives. Future research should explore alternative methods to capture a broader range of student voices.

The analysis shows that students actively render lesson content controversial, turning discussions of norms, relationships, and sexuality into moral exercises fraught with both risks and potentials (Bennett & Johnson 2021; Kumashiro 2002; Watson-Canning 2020). Controversiality in the classroom stems from the interplay between students' personal beliefs, societal norms, and the teacher's anti-oppressive intent. Men students often resisted norm-critical discussions of gender and sexuality, framing them as irrelevant or counter to their values, while women students generally aligned with the teacher's objectives, creating a polarized dynamic.

The teacher's efforts to implement anti-oppressive education were constrained by a lack of clear scaffolding for students on how to critically engage with norms. This aligns with Kumashiro's argument that anti-oppressive education often becomes *education about the Other*, unintentionally reinforcing existing hierarchies (2002). To foster meaningful engagement, explicit guidance and structured norm-critical thinking exercises are necessary. Addressing the discomfort inherent in challenging one's norms should also be an integral part of the pedagogical approach, as such discomfort is essential for transformative learning (Kumashiro 2002).

Students' resistance is further shaped by competing expectations: being a *good* student versus adhering to peer group norms, particularly along gendered lines. This negotiation of norms impacts meaning-making, as students balance group belonging with individual stances on controversial issues (Ambjörnsson 2004; Bäckman 2003). Resistance to lesson content thus reflects broader social dynamics and identity negotiations.

There are several didactic dilemmas in the classroom stemming from policy-level tensions, as the curriculum advocates norm-critical education but does not include being norm-critical of the fundamental values specified in the curriculum. Men students' resistance to the teacher's anti-oppressive intent reflects this gap, while woman

students' alignment with the teacher's view underscores the varied ways in which students' lived experiences influence their reactions and responses. The analysis highlights how the norms at stake—traditional versus progressive beliefs—intersect with historical content, shifting the lessons' focus from knowledge about history to debates about norms and privileges.

Integrating anti-oppressive RSE into history education presents inherent challenges, as observed in this study and supported by previous research (Bengtsson & Bolander 2020; Mocnik 2021; Watson-Canning 2020). The controversiality of such content depends on its perceived relevance to students' lives and societal debates. History education aimed at fostering anti-oppressive values must critically engage with multiple perspectives on historical events while addressing the lived realities and tensions within the classroom.

This study underscores the need for further research to identify strategies for overcoming resistance and enhancing anti-oppressive education in diverse classroom settings. By illuminating the tensions between teacher intent and student responses, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the pedagogical complexities involved in addressing controversial issues. If the basis for history education, or education overall, builds on the agreement that anti-oppressive education is desirable and that societal norms should change to include a wider variety of identities, sexualities, and cultures, then the history subject must continue to engage with several critical perspectives on different historical matters (Bennett & Johnson 2021; Burridge et al 2014; Haltorp et al 2024; Watson-Canning 2020).

Notes

1 It is important to note that sex and gender in Swedish are referred to as the same word "kön", sometimes divided into biological sex "biologiskt kön" and "kön", with the latter meaning gender. Sometimes, a Swedish version of the English word gender "genus" is also used to explain socially constructed gender. Therefore, it is hard to know exactly what type of "kön" is referred to in the excerpts.
2. This is a direct quote from one of the students, in which he says 'girl power-league, strong independent woman' in English and not Swedish during this statement.
3. See note 1.

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