

Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture and Society

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SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

The Summer Institute originates from the engagement of a number of scholars, mostly anthropologists, with the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic. In 1992 their engagement was expressed in the conference “Culture, Sexual Behavior and AIDS.”¹ These contacts resulted in the foundation of the Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture and Society.

By 1997 the Summer Institute had developed a viable organizational format and became part of the International School for Humanities and Social Sciences (ISHSS) of the University of Amsterdam. The University of Amsterdam supported the Summer Institute with a grant, on condition that the Institute would be fully self-supporting within two years. This was achieved, and the Summer Institute remains an acknowledged unit of the ISHSS.

The Institute began with the conference “Beyond Boundaries: Sexuality Across Cultures.” The conference expressed the Institute’s commitment to the social and cultural study of sexuality. It brought together scholars from the disciplines of anthropology, history, sociology, health policy and gender studies. As a result of this meeting, the International Association for the Study of Sexuality, Culture and Society (IASSCS) was established, a forum for interdisciplinary and cross cultural study of sexuality and to initiate future conferences (Manchester, 1999; Melbourne, 2001).

Since the year 2000 the scientific directorship is the shared responsibility of Han ten Brummelhuis and Carole Vance. The program manager, Mirjam Schieveld, is responsible for processing and structuring the program.

¹ See Appendix I for a more extensive description of the Summer Institute.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Pressing social concerns such as reproductive rights, health problems, gender issues, HIV/AIDS prevention and care have generally led to an increased degree of interest for research on sexuality. Social scientists involved in multidisciplinary research projects and government or nongovernmental organization (NGO) employees are regularly confronted with issues regarding sexuality and with the necessity to differentiate between cultures. Here the need for a culturally sensitive understanding and a cross cultural approach is strongly felt.

Sexuality has long been understood in general medical terms, which do not allow individual and cultural specification. Training in qualitative research on sexuality, critical analysis of the categories used and the development of concepts dealing with comparisons of sexuality between cultures and within cultures offer reproductive and public health programs a considerable improved chance of success.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has redefined sexuality and has placed it on the agenda of health workers and educators in areas in which, in the past, sexuality could not be addressed. Worldwide, this has created a new need and, ironically, a new opportunity for sexuality studies, although it is only one of the many faces of globalization. Another current in this process is the continuous flow of media messages. Almost everywhere in the world the media have created new opportunities for young people to express their sexual identities, and at an earlier age. The need for comprehensive knowledge and more adequate ways/forums to address sexuality in various parts of the world – especially of the younger generations – corresponds with the objectives of the Summer Institute.

Different and even contradictory issues define the social relevance of sexuality research. The interests are varied as well: emancipation, empowerment, control and repression of minorities or prevention of disease. It is the task of the Summer Institute to reflect on these various agendas for sexuality research. The Summer Institute’s specific contribution is to study and explore how culture organizes experience and structures desire and motivation.

This does not mean an exclusive focus on culture. Essential also are individual experience, economic necessities, political power and historical backgrounds. Research requires the incorporation of the perspectives offered by psychology, economics, politics and history. Culture, however, points to the most significant source of difference and variation between the various locations of the world. This means differences in how people were brought up, in what they regard as natural, in their forms of behavior, in

their obligations and commitments and especially in how they communicate all that is summarized under the abstract term “sexuality.”

OBJECTIVES

The approach of the Summer Institute has been inspired by an anthropological method that penetrates the experiential world of the individuals concerned – all the more so because local, on-the-spot social scientific work usually remained limited to standardized surveys. Until recently neither educational nor training provisions in this area had reflected increasing international interest in sexuality research. The program of the Institute on Sexuality and Culture was as well, a reaction to this shortcoming.

The primary aim of the Summer Institute is to provide participants with knowledge regarding theories and research methods on sexuality, culture and society. Participants are trained in formulating relevant research questions, designing research proposals, carrying out research, and written reporting of the above. To give insight into the local forms of this contradictory and dynamic whole is one of the objectives of the Summer Institute.

The original objective of the Institute was to become an international meeting point for researchers working with the themes “sexuality” and “culture.” In several parts of the world (India, Indonesia) former students of the Institute have, in consultation with the faculty of the Institute, developed similar initiatives. This allows us to conclude that we are satisfying a need present in developing countries and that we have offered an example that has been deemed worthwhile to follow. The Summer Institute has also become a place where expertise is bundled and where new research areas are formulated. The program leads to a concentration of international expertise, which presently is difficult to find in one single institution. A most important condition for achieving these objectives concerns the quality of the program² and of the teaching staff. The curriculum must be of a high standard and tailored to the needs of the participants. The faculty is carefully selected on the grounds of their educational and research achievements.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

All courses that are a part of the Summer Institute program are given by lecturers who approach sexuality from a so-called “constructionist” approach.

² See Appendix II for a description of the program content.

The emphasis is on a perspective that views expressions of sexuality within their historical and cultural context instead of using a general scheme assumed to be valid in all cultures and in different historical periods. Without doubt, the methods that are taught are of a qualitative nature with the accent first and foremost placed on insight and critical analysis, – requirements for good and relevant research questions – rather than on the transfer of techniques and procedures.

We consider the cultural differences between our students to be one of the assets of the Summer Institute. Students share common interests that they rarely otherwise experience in class or workshop situations as they learn from each other’s different perceptions, experiences and formulations. Apart from the differences in culture, our students include those with an academic background and those who work as professionals (in most cases in governmental institutions or NGOs in developing countries, in projects related to HIV/AIDS or reproductive health). The challenge is to translate the experiences of the professionals into practical lessons for those who follow an academic route, and to allow the academic group to assist with the formulation of research questions and the development of adequate strategies, and provide critical questioning of assumptions held by professionals.

The Summer Institute does not presume to offer immediate solutions for the daily challenges of professionals working in the field of sexuality. The courses are intended for those professionals who feel a need for reflection on the nature of their work, to critically analyze assumptions of their work (concerning, for example “sex drive,” “maleness,” “prostitution” or “transgender”), to understand the external forces that define the problems they try to solve, or to see the relevance of individual motivations (e.g., of the discrepancy between individual desire and social form). Clearly the implications of these insights can be highly practical.

That the Summer Institute is located in Amsterdam is of considerable significance. Students regularly confirm that Amsterdam facilitates an atmosphere in which all participants are prepared to discuss more openly themes that would have been more difficult to discuss at home. Amsterdam often provides important practical illustrations, such as the organization of prostitution/sex work, the presence of a gender clinic and the spatial and architectural remnants of a history of sexuality.

CRITICAL POLICY ISSUES

Several important themes will continue to be given particular emphasis at

the Summer Institute: human rights, sexuality education in different cultures, sexuality and political power, changing sexuality in relation to the dynamics of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, modes of sexual communication and the political economy of sexuality.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT AND SUPPORT

The Summer Institute is affiliated with the Medical Anthropology Unit of the University of Amsterdam (most particularly its master degree in medical anthropology [AMMA] program) and with the Sexuality and Gender stream of the ISHSS. Through these formal and informal contacts, students benefit from the existing expertise at the University of Amsterdam. The schedule of the Summer Institute allows students to plan courses in succession: through the regular academic year and then through the summer with the Institute. The Institute also collaborates with academic institutions in the USA, UK, France and the Philippines; with Dutch organizations, such as the Rutgers Foundation, the Schorer Foundation and the Mr. A de Graaf Foundation; and with international organizations, including the Social Science Research Council's Sexuality Research Fellowship Program (SRFP) and IMPACT Cambodia. The networking of the Institute is expanding with every new contingent of students.

Since 1997 the Summer Institute has featured more than 130 students from 26 countries.³ Of these students, 65% were female, 35% male. Little more than 25% of participants had an NGO background. Students arrive with different educational backgrounds; most students have a background in anthropology, sociology, psychology, women's studies, history, public health or human sexuality studies. The standards and contributions of the participants themselves enhance the quality of the program.

In the past, professionals from NGOs have at times been financed by the organizations for which they work, as well as by Dutch NGOs (HIVOS, NOVIB, Bilance, ICCO, Mama Cash) or international NGOs (The Ford Foundation, CARE).

THE FACULTY

The participation of an international multidisciplinary faculty and participants from different educational and cultural backgrounds provides a fruit-

ful and challenging atmosphere enjoyed by students and faculty alike. During lunch and weekly get-togethers, informal contacts with faculty and guests flourish. The sharing of experiences, research, future work plans and different perspectives provides a unique networking opportunity to increase participants' knowledge within an international context.

Each year guest lecturers from various countries are invited. The faculty is selected on the grounds of their educational and research achievements. The core faculty consists of Han ten Brummelhuis, Carole Vance, Michael Tan, Stefan Dudink, Saskia Wieringa and Mirjam Schievelde.

CHALLENGES

The primary obstacle for the Summer Institute is financial support given that the Institute is dependent each year on sufficient numbers of registrants. There would be considerably less pressure if the Institute knew that it could survive irrespective of the number of students that apply each year. The Summer Institute does not receive any outside financial support.

Students from developing countries often need scholarships. Since the Institute is self-supporting, it is financially impossible to offer grants. Another primary concern is maintaining an international faculty, vital to the high quality of the program. This consumes a substantial amount of the Institute's budget.

Another challenge the Institute faces is maintaining the international composition of its students. While determining from which countries and cultures our applicants come is out of our power, we continue to strive to maintain a broad range of perspectives/approaches.

FUTURE DIRECTION AND POTENTIAL

The Summer Institute has proven to be a viable enterprise fulfilling an important function in sexuality studies. After six years the Summer Institute is internationally known and highly valued by students.

Each group of students maintains contact with one other. In order to broaden and deepen this networking, the Institute is considering starting an electronic newsletter for former students. Former participants consider ongoing contact with other students studying or working in the field to be extremely worthwhile, especially being able to exchange experiences and ideas. There are also plans to provide a space on the Summer Institute Website for posting and retrieving contact information regarding NGO-related projects.

³ See Appendix III for students' experiences with the Summer Institute.

APPENDIX I

The conference “Culture, Sexual Behavior and AIDS” was a satellite meeting of the Eighth International Conference on AIDS. The aim of this conference was to formulate new approaches and new categories in the study of sexual behavior within its cultural context. Apparently this was one of the first times that a group of anthropologists addressed the worldwide epidemic and all its various links/expressions of sexuality (ten Brummelhuis and Herdt, 1995). It was determined at the conference that no university offered a systematic teaching and supervision program in the cultural aspects of sexuality. A *summer* program would offer many advantages. It could bring together specialists from different institutions and universities during a period in which most are free from regular teaching obligations. And most important, students would have an opportunity to participate in the program outside the requirements and obligations of their curricula.

In 1995 the course was offered for the first time through the cooperation of Han ten Brummelhuis of the University Amsterdam, Bill Leap of the American University in Washington, DC, and Gilbert Herdt of the University of Chicago. It was offered as part of the University of Washington’s summer session program.

APPENDIX II

Description of the Summer Institute Program

The program consists of four one-week morning courses focusing on different topics and is open to all students. In the afternoon a group of selected students attends the research seminar (Track 2). This group is made up of those with completed research proposals or those who are already involved in preparatory work for a research project. The seminar takes place over a period of two weeks and provides a context for the creative exploration of research studies in an interdisciplinary perspective. The rest of the students attend thematic afternoon courses (Track 1). All students are convened in the last weeks for afternoon closing sessions.

In the first week all students attend the course *Sexuality, Culture and Society*, an introduction to the anthropological view on sexuality studies. This course aims to provide a framework for the following weeks. Concepts are discussed and students receive an overview on sexuality discourses.

In the afternoon of the first two days faculty members provide an introduction and discuss what track is most appropriate for them to conduct individual assessments for each student. During the other afternoons lectures

are held, usually by guest lecturers. Students also get introduced to Amsterdam through a special city walk.

The second and third week offer two morning courses, one by scientific director Carole Vance and one by a visiting professor.

In the afternoon course, *The Netherlands and Sexuality*, Dutch tolerance is explored through the supposedly liberal attitudes and policies concerning sexuality. Themes covered are transexuality, sexuality education, sex work and gay emancipation. These themes are illuminated by means of lectures and site visits, and ample opportunity is provided to discuss cultural differences within the group.

Track 2 students then begin the research seminar. The research seminar is intended for students who formulated a research proposal, research design or preliminary ideas for research projects. The objective is to give careful attention to each research proposal, in order to further develop and strengthen it, while using each proposal as a case study from which general principles of research design may be identified. The first week of the seminar is devoted to presentations of works-in-progress, with opportunities to receive constructive and focused comments from seminar leaders, Summer Institute staff and fellow seminar participants. In the second week participants discuss formulating the research question, the relationship between theory and method, implications of various models of sexuality and challenges posed by sexuality research in another culture. Discussions also focus on the advantages and limitations of specific techniques, including interview, observation, life history, sexual and narrative history and textual analysis. Finally, participants have the opportunity to confront problems of representation and interpretation by working with case materials, including video and film, interview transcripts, official reports and colonial documents, medical case studies and newspaper and magazine journalism.

For Track 1 students, the afternoon course *Diversity in Women’s Sexual Cultures* compares women’s sexual cultures in regions of two different parts of the world, such as Asia and Latin America.

The course *Sexuality in State and Nation Building* aims at an understanding of the importance and meaning of gendered sexuality in processes of state and nation building from the late 18th century forward.

Of the rotating courses, one addresses *Sexuality and HIV/AIDS*, while the other reflects the research interest of the specific guest lecturer.

Guest lecturers over the years have included: John Gagnon (US), Peter Aggleton (UK), Alain Giami (France), Melford Spiro (US), Theo van der

Meer (the Netherlands), Jeffrey Weeks (UK), Gail Hawkes (UK), the Rutgers Foundation (the Netherlands), the Schorer Foundation (the Netherlands), Jan Visser (Mr. de Graaf Stichting) and Oliver Phillips (UK).

APPENDIX III

Observations of former students

Celia Szterenfeld *student from Brazil – attended 1997 and 1998*

The Summer Institute offers a powerful update on contemporary matters concerning the study of sexuality, gender and AIDS, encapsulated in a few weeks of intensive work. Classes are lively, readers are carefully chosen and teachers are highly motivated. The class itself is multicultural and the seminar format allows for a lot of exchange among students. Specialists are brought in from all over the world to help expand students' views of sexuality in relation to different cultures, and they seem happy at the prospect of having a less formal environment to debate issues of their interest. The readers are precious guides to the study of more complex questions and are totally integrated into the course. Even after attending classes for a whole day, students feel motivated enough to read some 50 pages for seminars the next day. Staff is friendly and competent, and the course infrastructure fair.

As the program changes year-to-year one is able to participate in more than one course. I enrolled in 1997 and 1998, benefiting from the presence of great professors both times. This experience allowed me to establish a study group in Rio, which meets twice a month, and greatly improve my staff's understanding of current issues, upgrading their level of participation in research methodology debates. As a result, many key texts on sexuality are now available in Portuguese and posted on the Internet.

Manuel Fernandez-Aleman *student from Chile – attended 1997*

I had the fortune to attend the Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture and Society in 1997. The value of the course rested not only on the excellence of the faculty but also on the location of the Institute: Amsterdam. Amsterdam is an amazing city, full of cultural possibilities and urban examples of contemporary issues in culture, society and sexuality. Therefore, living in Amsterdam was an essential part of the learning experience provided by the Institute.

In addition to what I learned about the history of sexuality, the politics of AIDS, the anthropology of gender or the psychoanalytic facets of masculinity, the course was a key opportunity to meet other young scholars

doing research on sexuality worldwide and faculty who can serve as key contacts in future professional projects. Attending the Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture and Society will open up numerous and unexpected professional opportunities to emerging scholars, especially those coming from Third World countries. For example, last summer I worked at Tulane University in New Orleans as a field research analyst supervising a qualitative study of the National Institutes of Health Adherence Grant project. The person who hired me for the position had been a classmate of mine at the Summer Institute!

The Institute also provided me an invaluable opportunity to rethink my fieldwork and dissertation work, as I got important feedback both from faculty and students. I could not imagine my fieldwork and dissertation being as successful as it was had I not attended the Institute. Finally, this program also represents an extremely important and unique opportunity for people living in countries outside of the developed West to meet leading and world-known scholars in the field of sexuality and gender, which will help their work become better known internationally.

José Fernando Serrano Amaya *student from Colombia – attended 1999*

The Summer Institute has been my best opportunity to share my knowledge and my doubts with people from very different countries and experiences and to improve my current research work. And I'm talking not only about scientific knowledge – my time there was also a personal experience. I could talk about theories on gender and sexuality, about methodologies and research, and I could compare how far from and how close I was to the international trends in this area.

Ben Junge *student from the USA – attended 2000*

The Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture and Society brings in eminent sexuality researchers from all over the world. (This year's faculty included: Carole Vance, Jeffrey Weeks, Peter Aggleton, Michael Tan and Han ten Brummelhuis.) Together with 35 other individuals (about half of whom are graduate students; the other half, professionals of different kinds), I attended classes daily. The curriculum was divided into different modules or "mini-classes," including sexuality and human rights; sexuality viewed cross culturally; sexuality and processes of nation building; a proposal-writing seminar; and sexuality and globalization. On the whole, the course was excellently organized, demanding and very rewarding. I would highly recommend it to others with a serious interest in sexuality studies.

Dào Quang Vinh *student from Vietnam – attended 2001*

As a person working in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention and an SSRC sexuality and reproductive health fellow, I applied for and was admitted to an intensive course entitled Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture and Society organized in Amsterdam in July 2001. Since the area of sexuality is new to me, I chose to attend Track 1.

I think the course was really beneficial to me for several reasons. First, it provided me with a dimensional understanding of sexuality that helped me commit to the study of sexuality in the future. The course covered useful topics, including an overview on sexuality discourses, sexuality in the political culture of state and nation building, diversity in women's sexual culture and sexuality and human rights. Second, the course was taught by an international team of well-known lecturers and eminent researchers in the area of sexuality, and gathered 29 participants who have different educational backgrounds but the same interest in sexuality studies, from Europe, America, Asia and the Pacific and Africa. This is a good opportunity for us to learn and discuss sexuality across cultures. Third, Amsterdam is definitely a good location for us to learn and explore about sexuality since it has a unique pragmatic approach to sexuality policies. I strongly recommend the course to anyone who has interests in sexuality studies.