

Handout B: Sexual identity and cultural objects

Sexuality studies are increasingly interested in the material conditions through which sexualities are conceived and practised. Sexualities are represented in symbols and objects, some of which may readily be associated with culturally specific ideas regarding sexuality, and some of which may be more readily imagined as transnational in scope and scale. Taking the object you have selected for the class discussion, your task is to explore the interaction between sexual symbols and practices and the implications for understanding sexual cultures and identities.

Working within a group of 3-4 people, place your object in a position where it can be seen, explored, touched and discussed by everyone in the group. The task is for group members to 'free-associate', to reveal the ideas that the object evokes regarding sexuality, culture and identities.

Discussion of the object can be guided by the following questions:

- Does the object evoke personal meanings from your own experiences or those of friends and family?
- What does the object reveal about social and cultural context?
- Does the object evoke ideas regarding social, political and/or economic changes and their relationship to contemporary sexualities?

The different views of the group should be recorded, either on tape or in note form.

Approximately one hour should be given to the discussion of objects (10-15 minutes per object).

Once the objects have been discussed, the whole group should consider the following questions:

- To what extent were the objects seen as pertinent to the particular social and cultural context within which participants live?

- Do the objects evoke ideas of ‘traditional’ sexualities or ideas more strongly associated with modernity?
 - Can sexuality be easily categorised as ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’?

- Do the objects suggest ideas about contemporary changes in social context and political-economies?
 - How do these changes relate to sexual identity and culture?
 - What, if anything, do the objects imply about globalisation and cultural change?

- Are the objects regionally specific or culturally specific, or linked to broader flows of information globally?
 - Are such distinctions between global and local meaningful when we look at actual cultural objects and the ideas about sexuality that they may represent?