



Kindergarten Children's Attitudes Towards Homosexuality: The Influence of Puppet Theatre on the Topic of Diversity in a Group of Kindergarten Children

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Abstract

Homophobic stigmas and the discrimination of homosexual people are still worrying in today's society. The current study seeks to investigate kindergarten children's attitudes towards homosexuality and how they are influenced by their peer-groups and authorities. It does so by means of a puppet theatre presentation including 'Kasperl' and 'Seppel' puppets as the main protagonists in a German puppet theatre. The audience consisted of six German kindergarten children aged 4–6 years, randomly selected by the kindergarten director. A participant observation has been conducted with the first researcher as the presenter of the puppet show. The results of the recorded puppet theatre showed that several intragroup processes including the social identity theory with regard to group membership could be observed within the puppet theatre. Groups have been formed and children of the same ingroup showed equal attitudes towards homosexuality. However, the researcher's influence as an authority figure could have as well impacted their attitudes through positive reinforcement. The present study contributed to the gap in research regarding kindergarten children's attitudes towards homosexuality. To have a better overview of the results, future studies should include additional variables like kindergarten's cultural and geographical differences.

Keywords Puppets · Puppet theatre · Attitudes · Homosexuality · Kindergarten · Social identity

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Introduction

In today's education the use of puppets has been increasing especially in research studying diversity in childhood (Dunst, 2012; Whiteland, 2016). One of the reasons for the use of puppets in preschool education refers to the facilitation of communication. Majaron (2012, p.11) stated in his article that "the puppet especially provides the child with a kind of cover or disguise to hide behind: a timid child finds the courage to speak, to express his/her own emotions and to open his/her secrets to the puppet and through it to the audience." In that way, the puppet supports the child in his or her spontaneous communication without having relationships to adults which are potentially stressful (Majaron, 2012). The use of puppets in work with children is multifarious. Sometimes it is used by children to play with while sometimes children actively listen to puppets during a puppet show or other activities.

Despite momentous transformations concerning the societal discourse in terms of divergent sexual identities in general and homosexuality in particular homophobic stigmatization still play an important role nowadays with regard to psychological suffering referring to those affected as well as their social environment (Savin-Williams, 2008). Although same-sex marriage, seen as crucial marker with regard to the acceptance of homosexuality for large numbers of young people, is not legalized in every country in the world (Altman, 2013).

Western societies exhibit an ambivalent way of thinking in terms of same-sex love. On the one hand, homosexuality has become more and more visible within a few decades since its legalization and is represented in some movies, for example "Call me by your name" (Guadagnino, 2017) or "Bohemian Rhapsody" (Singer, 2018) or even books for children (Jones & Moskito, 2015; Wurm, 2017; Kantor, 2009) on the other hand homosexuals still lack acceptance in our society (Pickett, 2009).

The current study deals with the examination of attitudes and attitude change in terms of their mutual influence and other influential factors by means of a puppet theatre on the topic of homosexuality between two men. First, we will provide an overview of the theoretical background on the topic of homosexuality, attitudes and prejudices and then include previous studies on the attitudes towards homosexuality.

Theoretical Background

The term 'sexual diversity' represents 'people's sexual attractions or desires on their sex relative to that of a target' (van Anders, 2015, p. 1177). LGBTQ includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer sexualities, whereas homosexuality as part of LGBTQ will be the focus of this article (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2014).

Despite the LGBTQ topic and its discrimination being more and more covered in media, around 20% of the students reported to have obtained information on gay and lesbian safe sex at school, according to Hillier et al. (2005), indicating a need for educational work on the topic. Discrimination against LGBTQ people still occurs in Europe today. For example, in their youth homosexuals experience significantly higher levels of verbal, physical and sexual discrimination and violence than heterosexuals of the same age during their school years (Magić & Maljevac, 2016). In the following paragraph, we begin our theoretical background with social identity because it is one of the core elements of this paper serving as a foundation to grasp the following parts. Subsequently, gender identity as a subcomponent of social

identity is explained. Finally, we focus on attitudes which are the main focus of this paper playing a major role in the genesis of prejudices, which will be elucidated thereafter.

Social Identity Theory

People tend to assign themselves and evaluate themselves in terms of self-inclusive social categories like age or gender. According to the social identity theory, the self-concept can be traced back to such a membership in terms of groups and categories. When people define themselves by these group memberships, two specific processes are apparent. The first process refers to categorization, emphasizing in-group and out-group differences as well as the similarities among members of the same group in a stereotypical manner, including oneself. Another process relates to self-enhancement favoring the in-group over the out-group. The in-group refers to predefined homogenous group norms and values, beliefs, attitudes, feelings as well as behaviors. In that way, in-group differences are minimized and intergroup differences are maximized (Terry et al., 1999). For example, Aboud (2003) investigated the in-group favoritism and out-group prejudice in white children between 4 and 7 years. Whereas in-group favoritism was not present until the age of 5, but reached significant results after, outgroup-prejudice was weaker. The next paragraph refers to the topic of gender identity being part of the social identity.

Gender Identity

Kornienko et al. (2016) definition of gender identity refers to the above mentioned social identity theory where people's identification with a social category determines their perception and evaluation of themselves and other people (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Perry et al., (2019, p.289) define gender identity as "a set of cognitions encompassing a person's appraisals of compatibility with, and motivation to fit in with, a gender collective".

Self-categorization is an important aspect of the gender identity with regard to children's own understanding of themselves. As group members of a social group, the group serves as guideline to who and how they are or should be (Rogers et al., 2014). According to different studies gender-typical children frequently exhibit reliable preferences in terms of gender (Serbin et al., 2001; Zosul et al., 2009). For instance, boys have the tendency to choose other boys as friends and play mates and prefer boy's clothes. (Martin & Fabes, 2001; Shutts et al., 2013). Transgender children show similar tendencies, i.e. playing with children of their own gender, choosing toys and clothing typical for their gender, but not for their natal sex (Olson & Enright, 2017). From the age of 3 years most children are able to label themselves correctly. After that, at the age of 6 years, the majority has a gender which is conserved remaining unvarying in spite of superficialities like changing hair length (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Kohlberg, 1969; Ruble et al., 2006). In terms of status awareness, 6-year-olds understood the gender differences in terms of employments, for instance that business executives are mostly male and jobs that male-typical jobs have a higher status than female-held jobs (Liben et al., 2001; Teig & Susskind, 2008).

Attitudes

Attitudes as psychological structures offer a glimpse to a person's thoughts as well as his or her behavior, since they serve as bridge affecting human behavior (Cooper et al., 2016).

To gain a better understanding with regards to the underlying learning processes in terms of the genesis of attitudes, it is helpful to take common learning approaches into consideration which will be elucidated within the next paragraphs.

The operant conditioning, which was shown in many experiments, implies that the acquisition of attitudes can be influenced through negative and positive reinforcement (Insko, 1965). “Consequences that strengthen the behavior are rein-

forcers and consequences that weaken behavior are punishers (Coşkun, 2019; p. 519).” In a qualitative study, Sumiati et al. (2019) investigated the impact of positive reinforcement in the form of praising the children and smiling at them with regard to 5–6 year old’s learning motivation. According to the results, positive reinforcement could help to increase their learning motivation.

Imitation is another process in the acquisition of attitudes. Children imitate the behavior of a person who has been rewarded for his or her behavior (Bandura et al., 1963). Attitudes can as well be generated through the observation and imitation of other people without taking the aspect of a reward or an act of reinforcement into account. For instance, children’s attitudes in terms of politics or religion resemble those of their parents (Boehnke, 2001). For example, in a study, a 4th grader first asked the teacher for permission to help another child, which he allowed. A short time later, many other children asked for permission to walk around imitating the first pupil which asked (Sumiati et al., 2019). In terms of peer-group imitation, often in young children the imitation of other children of the same sex as themselves can be observed (Grace et al., 2008). Grace et al. (2008) conducted a study on preschooler’s categorical thinking with regard to gender *inter alia* through imitation. According to studies (Bussey & Bandura, 1984; Bussey & Perry, 1982), the imitation of other children of the same sex in terms of behaviors and at the same time the rejection of the children of the opposite sex depended on how the behaviors are seen. The imitation depended on the evaluation of the behaviors as normative or not, for males or females. Before the adoption or rejection of a behavior, children verified if a specific behavior was showed by every man or woman before exhibiting it themselves. This approach refers to the social proof theory where consensus on a matter leads to social proof or validity (Cialdini, 2009). Since children receive a great amount of information regarding their social environment, “[w]hat they encode as gender normative, however, are those behaviors exhibited most frequently and consistently by multiple members of each gender category” (Grace et al., 2008; p.1929).

In the following, some background information on the functions of attitudes is provided, in order to better understand their importance and to be able to apply this knowledge on the explanation of individual attitudes in the context of homosexuality.

One of them refers to the facilitation of psychological processes. Attitudes help to reduce complexity, because forming an opinion one time to apply it to similar cases in the future, is the most efficient way. Like this, the information processing takes less time (Gollwitzer & Schmitt, 2009). When a person encounters a homosexual couple for the first time, he or she will already have developed an attitude towards them, so the processing of information takes less time the next time another homosexual couple walks by.

The instrumental function of attitudes facilitates the search for positive and the avoidance of negative consequences. People generally refer to objects being associated with punishment as negative, whereas objects associated with a reward lead to positive attitudes (Gollwitzer & Schmitt, 2009). The instrumental function of attitudes is closely related to the operant conditioning which has been elucidated above (Sumiati et al., 2019).

In terms of the attitudes towards homosexuality, in accordance with the public opinion i.e. being in favor of homosexuality, pro-homosexual attitudes do not lead to criticism from

society, while being against homosexuality does. According to this assumption, members of a society will deny their homophobic attitudes in consequence of the fear of punishment, being criticized or reprimanded. However, given the early age of the participants, it is questionable if kindergarteners are already aware of the negative consequences that public homophobia may entail.

However, with regard to the acquisition of attitudes, it is not only important to take their functions, but also their influence into account, since it is an essential part when investigating the children's attitudes towards homosexuality. Therefore, in the next paragraph, prejudices will be discussed.

Prejudices

Bergen (2001) defines a prejudice as 'a negative feeling toward a group based on a faulty definition. The family affects prejudice through modeling. Models have their most powerful influence on children below the ages of 7 or 8. [...] The child can become prejudiced by adopting the biases and the attitudes of the family and by living in an environment that fosters prejudice. [...] Prejudice is not instinctive. Prejudice is taught directly or the child learns through verbal and non-verbal messages (Bergen, 2001, p.154).'

In their meta-analysis, Raabe and Beelmann (2011) investigated age differences in ethnic, racial and national prejudice among children and adolescents including a summary of 113 research reports. According to their results, there is an increase in prejudice in middle childhood between 5 and 7 years, which is accompanied by a slight decrease in late childhood between 8 and 10 years. The researchers also observed positive effects of contact with the outgroup in terms of prejudice development.

Referring to LGBTQs as 'other' and therefore as outgroup 'positioned as diseased, abnormal, perverted, predatory, evil, immoral and sexually suspect' (Foucault, 1978, as cited in Ullman & Ferfolja, 2014, p. 147). Prejudices against LGBTQ can further result in LGBTQ phobia, implying the rejection of the latter (Borrillo, 2001). As a protection strategy many LGBTQs "hide significant parts of their lives knowing that if they reveal these aspects of themselves, they can become targets of rejection, isolation, mockery and intimidation (Platero, 2008, as cited in Aguirre et al., 2020, p.2431). However, there are possibilities to decrease prejudices. Binder et al. (2009) claimed the contact hypothesis as a remedy for the reduction of intergroup prejudices. For instance, Schenk et al. (2019) increased the 4 to 6 year old preschooler's attitudes toward puppets with Down Syndrome. At the beginning of the experiment, the participating children showed negative attitudes towards to puppets. However, at the end of the experiment, the preschoolers exhibited positive play behavior with the puppet indicating the advantages of contact with regard to prejudice reduction.

In their study, Farr et al. (2019) focused on elementary students of around 8 years in average toward other children of same-sex parents. Viewing pictures of same-sex (homosexual) and other-sex (heterosexual) couples having a child, they were asked about their perceptions with regard to these families, especially to the children. Results showed that the children preferred children having other-sex instead of same-sex parents. Despite the increasing diversity with regard to family constellations, heterosexual parents are still more common and therefore children are much less likely in touch with homosexual families. Binder et al.'s (2009) study on the contact hypothesis in Germany, Belgium and England provides a possible explanation for the results of Farr et al.'s study. The findings of the study indicated that even though "contact reduced prejudice, [...] prejudice also reduced

contact” (Binder et al., 2009, p. 843). In the following paragraph, the benefits of using puppets in the pedagogical context will be explained.

Method

The Use of Puppets

Kröger and Nupponen (2019) defined a puppet as “a movable doll that a puppeteer manipulates” (p.393). The body movements provide visual impressions: a puppet conveys emotions and thoughts through movement, for example, of its hands and head. A puppeteer can also give the puppet a voice. A puppet is an inanimate object that, in the hands of a puppeteer, comes to life” (p. 393).

In their literature review, Kröger and Nupponen (2019) investigated the potential of puppets as a pedagogical tool in the context of formal education of children aged 5–18 years in the framework of a literature review including 15 articles. In consideration of the papers, Kröger and Nupponen (2019, p. 393) detected five potential uses for puppets: “(1) generating communication, (2) supporting a positive classroom climate, (3) enhancing creativity, (4) fostering co-operation in and integration into a group, and (5) changing attitudes. Korošec (2012) highlights the increased communication between teacher and children engaging motivation for young children in English language classrooms and claims them to be an effective tool for this context. Using an opinion poll among preschool and primary school teachers on the use of puppets in education, Korošec (2013) aimed to assess their opinions. They mainly had a positive opinion on puppets and believe that they increase both socialization and communication in class and stimulate the children’s creativity. Despite the advantages, puppets are rarely used at school.

The phenomenon of attitude change has been investigated in different areas. Dunst (2012) examined the effects of Kids on the Block puppet shows with regard to the knowledge and attitude toward disabled people in elementary school students. Results showed positive effects on attitudes and knowledge. In her study, Whiteland (2016) investigated elementary student’s attitude change in an intergenerational art project with older adults and children, whereby the attitudes towards old people have not changed. There are various studies focusing on the attitudes towards homosexuality in college students (Hong, 1984; Kurdek, 1988; Lin et al., 2016). According to several findings, the attitudes of females, young persons, educated persons as well as persons rarely attending the church were more accepting (Hong, 1984; Kurdek, 1988; Lin et al., 2016; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Roggemans et al., 2015; Xiao, 2022). In their study, Collier et al. (2012) examined the attitudes of 12–15-old Dutch towards homosexuality exploring the impact of contact with homosexuals. Results showed that contact with homosexual persons was positively associated with the attitudes towards them.

We are not aware of any study focusing on the attitudes towards homosexuality with kindergarten children. Thus, this study will contribute to this gap. The aim of the present study is to investigate intergroup dynamics and influential factors for attitude change within a group of kindergarten children on the topic of homosexuality and therefore to detect an attitude change and find out the reasons behind it. Therefore, the study seeks to identify intergroup relations, i.e. how the children influence each other in terms of their attitudes and how they change, but also how authority figures can have an impact on their attitudes on homosexuality.

The Context of the Study

The puppet theatre was part of the first researcher's Bachelor thesis. The literature research comprised the topics of homosexuality, preschool children, attitudes, prejudices as well as gender identity. The data collection took place in the gymnasium of the kindergarten as a participant observation. The core element of the participant observation is the researcher taking part in the study (Heinzel, 2012). The kindergarten of the study is located in a German municipality in Rhineland-Palatinate, Western Germany and has a strong focus on social skill aiming to integrate the children to life and work in the society improving their ability to work in a team. It is supporting children's independence and their sense of responsibility. Another important aspect in order to be able to improve their ability to work in a team is to teach them tolerance and respect, recognizing and valuing others in their otherness through resilience and sympathy for other people. The first author has not been in touch with any of the participating children before the data collection and was thus a stranger to them.

Participants

The criteria for the children concerning the participation on the study was the age between 5 and 6 years. Their parents were white Germans with different educational backgrounds. 10 children were chosen by the kindergarten director, although only 6 of them were in the audience, 3 boys and 3 girls with heterosexual parents. The kindergarten director chose the participants based on her own estimation of who would be suitable to maintain the attention during puppet play and to understand the subject matter. The missing children have been absent for different reasons at the day of the data collection. The focus group consisted of Theo and Johannes, two male kindergarten children who were at the same kindergarten group and therefore knew each other. The children have been rewarded with candy after the participation. In the next paragraph, the relevance of kindergarten children for the current study will be discussed.

Procedure

The parents of the children received an information sheet as well as a consent form concerning the study. Children not being part of the study did not have access to the puppet show, therefore there were no disturbing background noises. Apart from the first researcher, who was also the presenter of the show, there was also the kindergarten director filming the audience with the researcher's smartphone while listening to the puppet show. The length of the puppet theatre was around 10 min and was presented to six children between four and six years. The puppet show was mostly in standard German, but the researcher switched to Pfälzisch in some interactive parts of the theatre, when a child replied in dialect. Like this, the child would feel more comfortable since the educators in der kindergarten speak dialect as well.

For the puppet theatre method in the German kindergarten the first author's colleague Janna Hämpke and her mother as an educator invented a story on the topic of homosexuality including Kasperl as the most famous puppet in German kindergartens, which was invented more than 200 hundred years ago by Franz Graf von Pocci. Franz Graf von Pocci is known for his "Kasperliads", the classical stories of a puppet called Kasperl

having a gentle personality and an exhilarating backstory. Kasperl was conjured inside a golden egg by a magician. The egg was then incubated by a hen until Kasperl crawled out (Duller, 2015).

For the study on the attitudes towards homosexuality, the children's inner world and beliefs are of high relevance and are more likely to be revealed and shared in a puppet show where they are spontaneously asked for their opinion instead of in an interview with the adult researcher. The children's intergroup dynamics have been assessed using a puppet show including Kasperl, the main protagonist being in love with another man, and his friend, Seppel to whom Kasperl opens up about his romantic feelings towards Anton.

Results

In this section, the results of the puppet theatre, focusing on all children participating in the study will be presented. Within the puppet theatre, an interactive presentation, the researcher took actively part in the observation in the role of "Kasperl" and "Seppel". In this paragraph, the results of puppet theatre are discussed.

Analysis

With regard to the interpretation of the children's behavior during the show, a Moment Analysis has been employed in order to investigate their spontaneous and transient actions. The Moment Analysis allows the researcher to focus on spontaneous, impromptu, and momentary actions and performances of the individual (Wei, 2011, p. 1224).

Various sources are needed to conduct a Moment Analysis, yet it is of particular importance to include observations and recordings of naturally arising interactions as well as nonverbal behavior such as facial expressions when, in the case of the puppet theatre, the children are presented to the story about Kasperle who is in love with another boy (Wei, 2011). The focus is on the group dynamic processes as well the behavior, which can also be verbal or non-verbal. The Moment Analysis targets the influence of these processes, e.g. how verbal contributions or nonverbal behavior of the individual children have an impact on the other children's reactions. The following scenario shows the interaction between the researcher as "Kasperl" being in love with a man and "Seppel" his best friend and the audience of kindergarten children actively taking part in the play, being asked about their opinions and attitudes on homosexual relationships.

Moment 1. Attitudes Towards Kissing

The children are keen to watch the presentation of the puppet play. This moment shows that after being asked if they had ever seen a homosexual couple in public, none of the participating children answers the question in the affirmative. However, while answering, the majority of the children seek reassurance in the other participants hoping for similar experiences in order not to stand out.

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| 21 Johanna (Seppel) [...] Kinder, habt ihr auch schon einmal gesehen, wie sich zwei Männer oder zwei Frauen geküsst haben? ((K6 schaut sich in erster Reihe um)) | [...] Children, have you ever seen two men or two women kissing?
((C6 looking around in first row)) |
|--|--|
-

22	Johannes	Nein ((schaut sich nach den anderen um))	No ((looking at other children))
23	Child 3	Nein ((schaut sich nach rechts um))	No ((looks to the right))
24	Theo	Nein ((lächelt))	No ((smiling))
25	Child 5	Nein ((lächelt; streckt ihren Oberkörper durch, dreht sich nach rechts))	No ((smiling, stretching her upper body, turns her head to the right))
26	Child 6	Nein	No
27	Johanna (Seppel)	Niemand?	No
28	Johannes	Doch, ich! ((K3 und K5 schauen sich nach Johannes um; K5 lächelt))	Yes, me! ((C3 and C5 looking at Johannes; C5 smiling))
29	Johanna (Seppel)	Ja? Wo war des?	Yes? Where was it?
30	Johannes	Bei mir daheim küsst, mei Mama und de Roman sich ((lächelt und schaut Richtung E2))	At home, my mom and Roman are kissing each other. ((smiling and looking at E2))
31	Johanna (Seppel)	Okay, aber das sind jetzt nicht zwei Frauen oder zwei Männer, oder?	Okay, but that's not two men or two women, are they?
32	Johannes	Hmhm ((Kopfschütteln))	Hmhm ((shakes head))
33	Johanna (Seppel)	Nein? Und hat – ((Unterbrechung durch Johannes))	No? And has ((interrupted by Johannes))
34	Johannes	Das ist ein Mann und eine Frau	That's a man and a woman
35	Johanna (Seppel)	Ein Mann und eine Frau, und wie findest du das?	A man and woman, and how do you find that?
36	Johannes	Nicht toll	Not good
37	Johanna (Seppel)	Nicht toll? Warum nicht?	Not good? Why not?
38	Johannes	Weil ich's nicht toll finde ((lächelt; K1 lächelt; K5 lächelt))	Because I don't find it good ((smiles, C1 and C5 smiling))
39	Johanna (Seppel)	Und was findest du daran nicht toll? ((K1 schaut auf den Boden)) Findest du's ekelig?	And would do you think is not good about it? Do you find it disgusting? ((C1 looking at the floor))
40	Johannes	Ja. ((K1 und Johannes lächeln; K6 macht sich klein und schaut nach links; K5 lächelt))	Yes. ((C1 and Johannes smiling))
41	Johanna (Seppel)	Okay. Findet ihr das alle ekelig?	Okay. Do you all find it disgusting?
42	Child 3	Nein	No
43	Child 1	Ja	Yes
44	Theo	Ja	Yes
45	Child 5	Nein	No
46	Child 6	Nein	No
47	Johannes	Ja ((Johannes und K5 schauen sich an; Theo schaut Johannes an))	Yes ((Johannes and C5 looking at each other; Theo looking at Johannes))

Right at the beginning, after the first question that Seppel asked, “Children, have you ever seen two men or two women kissing?”, Johannes affirms the question and starts looking at the other participants. According to Cialdini (2009), one of the core principles of social influence is social proof. It refers to the phenomenon that consensus on a matter leads to social proof or validity. In that case, Johannes is looking for reassurance in the other children to know if they as well, have never seen a homosexual couple kissing (line 28). The fact that the other children also deny the question (lines 23–26) serves as an indicator for Johannes that kissing between the same sex deviates from the norm and therefore rarely occurs. Based on the results of some studies, Johannes' behavior does not relate to

his lack of knowledge regarding the meaning of kissing (Margalit, 2017; Sahlins, 2017; Thomas et al., 2022). Preschoolers already possess the ability to distinguish between different forms of relationships, like “thick” relationships and cooperative relationships being outside of this close circle (Thomas et al., 2022). “Thick” relationships occur in all cultures and are characterized by high levels of attachment and the feeling of togetherness comprising mutual responsiveness where bodily substance such as saliva is shared across the people being in this relationship (Margalit, 2017; Sahlins, 2017; Thomas et al., 2022). When the authors conducted another experiment with 5-to 7-year-olds, the children preferred to share ice-cream among family members over friends indicating that from young age children are able to differentiate between close and distant relationships (Thomas et al.’s (2022). Referring to the topic of homosexuality, these findings suggests that Johannes was able to evaluate the kisses between two men as an indication for a homosexual couple.

With regard to the question “Do you all find it disgusting?” (line 39) referring to a man and a woman kissing, all boys agree, whereas the girls don’t (lines 42–47). Johannes, as the first one to find it disgusting to see a heterosexual couple kissing, could have influenced the other boys in the audience which can be explained by the social identity theory. The male participants are aware of their “group membership” of the boy’s group which they evaluate as positive. The influence of Johannes as the first one rising to speak, can be massive. Groups tend to spontaneously develop norms and standards, in that case “kissing is disgusting” as an implicit influence referring to the expectation that the opinions or attitudes among the group members should be the same among members (Terry et al., 1999). In the last situation, Johannes agrees a second time on the fact that kissing between a man and a woman is disgusting (line 47). Meanwhile, he is having eye-contact with C1 and Theo is looking at Johannes as well (line 47).

Moment 2. Heteronormative Socialization vs. Influence of Authority Figure

In this moment, the opinion on homosexuality within the group of kindergarten children is not unanimous. While the attitudes of one child voicing his opposition against homosexuality as something normal could be a result of his heteronormative socialization, the other child’s attitudes could be under the influence of the researcher as an authority figure being in favor of homosexuality.

70	Johanna (Seppel)	Und wenn sich jetzt zwei Frauen küssen, is des dann auch normal?	And if there is two women kissing, is it still normal?
71	Child 1	Neein	Noo
72	Johanna (Seppel)	Warum nicht? Was is daran nicht normal? ((K2 schaut Richtung K1 dann Richtung E2))	Why not? What is not normal about it? ((C2 looking at C1 then at E2))
73	Child 1	Ich sah jetzt auch kä Wort mehr	I’m not gonna say anything anymore
74	Johanna (Seppel)	Möcht jemand andres was dazu sagen? Findet ihr des auch normal? ((K5 zieht ihren Pullover über einen Teil ihres Gesichtes und verdeckt dieses mit ihren Händen))	Does someone else want to say something? Do you find it normal? ((C5 puts her pullover over a part of her face and covers the face with her hands))
75	Theo	Ja	Yes

Even though C1 as part of the boy's group is clearly against the statement of homosexuality as being "normal" (line 71), Theo agrees on homosexual love as something "normal" (line 75). Influential strength can be reached through authority (Vogel & Wänke, 2016). Since the researcher presenting the puppet theatre is not neutral in terms of homosexual love and as well older as the group of children, she could be considered as authority figure and therefore massively influence the children's opinions on homosexuality in the course of the presentation.

Moment 3. Attitude Change Due to Group Membership

The children are agitated being confronted with numerous questions not wanting to have an opinion that differs from the attitudes of the whole group. This moment shows the impact of social group membership on the attitudes of the individual group members striving for unanimous attitudes throughout the group.

81	Johanna (Seppel)	Findet ihr's ekelig jemanden zu küssen?	Do you find it disgusting to kiss someone?
82	Child 3	Ja	Yes
83	Theo	Ja	Yes
84	Johannes	Ja ((schaut zu E2))	Yes ((looking at E2))
85	Child 1	Ja ((wirkt unruhig))	Yes ((seems stressed))
86	Child 6	Ja ((nervöse Bewegungen auf dem Stuhl, zieht ihr Bein hoch und macht sich klein))	Yes ((nervous movements on the chair, putting up her leg and scrunching herself up))
87	Child 5	((öffnet Mund, Arme angespannt, Hände ineinander))	((opens mouth; tensed arms, hands in each other))
88	Johanna (Seppel)	Okay. Aber wenn ihr älter seid, dann isses bestimmt ganz normal, oder?	Okay, but when you are older, it will be normal for sure, right?
89	Child 1	Nein	No
90	Theo	Jaa	Yees
91	Johannes	Neein ((Theo und Johannes schauen sich lächelnd an))	Noo ((Theo and Johannes looking at each other smiling))
92	Child 3	Jaa	Yees
93	Child 5	Jaa	Yees
94	Johanna (Seppel)	Nein? Ja? Aber manche haben jetzt ,ja ' gesagt ((Theo schaut zu E2; K1 bewegt sich unruhig hin- und her))	No? Yes? But some of you said 'yes' ((Theo looking at E2; C1 moving back and forth))
95	Child 1	Und manche ,nein ' ((K6 schaut auf Boden))	And some said no ((C6 looking at the floor))
96	Johanna (Seppel)	Und wenn sich jetzt aber zwei erwachsene Frauen oder zwei erwachsene Männer küssen, dann isses doch auch normal, oder? ((K5 beugt ihren Rücken und schaut an die Decke))	And if now two adult women or men are kissing, it is also normal, right? ((C5 stretching her back looking at the ceiling))
97	Child 1	Nein ((schaut links auf den Boden; K6 gähnt))	No. ((looking at the floor, turning his head to the left; C6 yawning))
98	Theo	Nein ((lächelt))	No ((smiling))

Both Johannes and Theo find it disgusting to kiss someone (lines 83,90,91), which is a normal reaction for that age. Answering the next question “Okay, but when you are older, it will be normal for sure, right?” (lines 90–91), Theo and Johannes are not giving the same response. While Theo confirms the researcher’s question (line 90), Johannes denies (line 91), however they are looking at each other while answering to the question (line 91).

When the researcher asks the audience “And if now two adult women or men are kissing, it is also normal, right?” (line 96), she is already conveying her views on this topic, since she only asks the children to confirm her opinion. Theo might be under social influence of C1 as one of the three boys in the audience, and as the first one to deny the question, since he is now denying it, too. Earlier, he agreed that it would be normal if two women are kissing (line 75). Theo’s answer could be explained by the social identity theory as well. Since C1 is the first and the only one in the audience to answer the question and part of the boys’ group as well, Theo feels obliged to endorse C1’s view in order to have unanimous opinion within the group (lines 97–98).

Moment 4. Changing Social Identity

In this moment, it becomes clear that group membership is changeable and new groups can be formed within an already existing group. Furthermore, a person’s social identity is not permanent but variable and dependent on the attitudes of friends which. When one of the two befriended participants changes his opinion, his friend does so accordingly.

110	Johanna (Seppel)	Und wenn ihr jetzt in der Fußgängerzone seid und dann seht ihr zwei Männer, die Händchen halten, isses dann auch normal? ((K3 schaut Richtung E2, dann auf den Boden))	And if you are in the pedestrian precinct and you see two men holding hands, is it normal as well ? ((C3 looking at E2 and then at the floor))
111	Child 1	Nein ((ernste Stimme))	No ((serious voice))
112	Theo	Ja ((schaut zu Johannes))	Yes ((looking at Johannes))
113	Johannes	Ja	Yes

When the researcher asks about homosexual people holding hands (line 110), the opinion within the boys’ group is not equal among all members. Only C1 is against it (line 111), while Theo is in favor (line 112). While Theo is answering to the question, he is looking at Johannes who is then also changing his opinion (lines 112–113). Since the two boys are friends, they could have influenced each other’s contributions. According to the social identity theory, a person’s social identity is not constant, but changing over time. The current social identity refers to the category which is salient in the momentary situation (Amiot et al., 2015). In this situation, Theo and Johannes could find themselves in an even smaller group, their friendship not taking the boy’s group into account, only focusing on a unanimous view on things within this friendship.

Moment 5. New Group Formation or Authoritarian Influence?

In this moment, the two friends still show the same attitudes as in the previous attitudes, even though the other boy in the audience does not agree with them. Therefore, the two friends could have formed a new group excluding the other boy. On the other hand, the impact of the authority figure can play a role as well.

148	Johanna (Seppel)	Viele stimmen aber zu, oder?	But many agree, right?
149	Child 5	Ja ((lächelt))	Yes ((smiling))
150	Johannes	Ja	Yes
151	Theo	Ja	Yes
152	Johanna (Seppel)	Okay ((K1 und Theo schauen sich an))	Okay ((C1 and Theo looking at each other))
153	Johanna (Seppel)	Einige stimmen zu. Genau ((K5 schaut zu K6))	Many agree. Right ((C5 looking at C6))
154	Child 1	Einige net ((gelangweilte Stimme))	Some don't ((bored voice))
155	Johanna (Seppel)	Siehst du, Kasperl! Liebe ist etwas ganz Normales und etwas super Schönes. ((K1 schaut auf den Boden))	You see Kasperl! Love is something normal and beautiful ((C1 looking at floor))
156	Child 1	Nicht Schönes ((ernste Stimme))	Nothing beautiful ((serious voice))
157	Johanna (Seppel)	((lacht)) Für mich isses aber schön ((Johannes, K5, K6 lächeln))	((laughs)) but for me it is ((Johannes, C5, C6 smiling))

From the last moment on, Theo and Johannes do not seem to take C1's opinion into account with regard to their own attitudes toward homosexuality. Both of them confirm the researcher stating that it was not important who you love (lines 150–151). Even if K1 persists with his opinion, the researcher in the role of Seppel is constantly emphasizing his own attitudes on the topic of homosexuality, namely that homosexuality is something normal and that love in general is something nice (line 155). When the researcher contradicts C1 being of the opinion that love would be 'nothing beautiful' replying 'but for me it is' (lines 156–157) both Johannes and Theo are smiling.

Another explanation of Theo's and Johannes' attitudes on homosexuality in that moment could be again the influence of the researcher in the role of Seppel as an authority figure. Theo's and Johannes' attitudes toward homosexuality could as well arise due to the positive reinforcement by the researcher. In the course of the presentation and in this specific moment as well, she asks for confirmation of her positive attitudes towards homosexuality, namely "But many agree, right? (line 148)". After hearing most participants of the audience declaring themselves in favor of homosexuality, she is satisfied saying "okay" (line 152) without asking further questions and not spreading a bad atmosphere.

Discussion

Homophobia is still present in our society. The aim of the study was to investigate attitudes and possible attitude change in terms of the mutual influence of kindergarten children and other influential factors by means of a puppet theatre on the topic of homosexuality between two men.

The study was conducted in a kindergarten located in a southwestern German village. Six children as well as two educators participated in the study. To analyze the research questions five moments have been analyzed and discovered inter group dynamics in terms of an attitude change in the course of the puppet theatre. Although nowadays attempts are made to raise awareness about different sexualities, including homosexuality, for example by celebrating "Pride month" in German cities, the kindergarten children have not yet been

in contact with homosexuality at their age (Klotz, 2017). However, most of them are open about it or at least claim to be.

Nevertheless, and apart from that, in the framework of the puppet theater, some factors of influence on attitudes have arrived as predicted by theories, especially the social identity theory in relation to group membership. When the researcher asks the kindergarten children if they have ever seen a homosexual couple kissing, social proof as one of Cialdini's (2009) core principles of social influence could be shown. It refers to the phenomenon that consensus on a matter leads to social proof as well as validity. At the beginning, Johannes is searching for the other children's experiences on the topic to be reassured not to be the only one to have never seen a homosexual couple. Since the rest of the audience has as well denied the question, Johannes, it serves as a proof for Johannes that kissing between two men is something that rarely happens deviating from the norm. However, when the researcher asks the audience on their opinion regarding homosexual people holding hand, the members of the boys' group do not share the same opinion among all members. While child 1 is against homosexuality, the focus children Theo and Johannes are in favor. While Theo is answering to the researcher's question, he is looking at his friend Johannes. Both are potentially influencing each other's contributions. However, child 1's negative attitudes towards homosexuality could not exclusively be held towards gay couples, but as well towards "love" in general (line 156). Child 1 stated earlier that "kissing" between a heterosexual couple would as well be "disgusting" (line 43). According to Renold (2006), in children's discussions romance had a female connotated, while it was eschewed by boys, it was celebrated by girls.

Since Theo and Johannes are friends, their attitudes are unanimous on the question on homosexuality as something "normal" at the end of the presentation. The social identity theory refers to unanimous attitudes among group members which matches Theo's and Johannes' who agree on their attitudes toward homosexuality by the end of the puppet theatre. At the end of the puppet play both Theo and Johannes could be allocated to an even smaller group than the boys' group, only consisting of the two children as friends, focusing on a unanimous view on things within their friendship, tolerating homosexuality. Thus, the results of Farr et al.'s (2019) study, which examined 8-year-old elementary school children's attitudes toward parents of the same sex, could not be confirmed among five- to six-year-olds. According to the study, children preferred heterosexual family constellations compared to homosexual ones. However, in this study participants were presented with both options and asked to choose a family. In the puppet theater, the children were only confronted with a gay couple and were given to express their opinion about it. Thus, they were not confronted with a choice, as in the study by Farr et al. (2019).

However, the researcher's influence as an authority figure could have as well impacted their attitudes through positive reinforcement, constantly expressing her tolerant view on homosexual relationships. In general, not all possible factors influencing the children's attitudes and attitude change could be clearly identified nor led back to one specific factor.

Limitations and Outlook

This study has several limitations. First, as children are young, we cannot claim that they have already developed attitudes at their age. However, there are studies measuring 5 to 6-year-old kindergarten children's racial attitudes (Baron & Banaji, 2006; Williams et al., 2022).

The children's responses within the puppet theatre may vary due to interindividual differences in life events and their personality and are therefore highly subjective. The audience of six children and the focus group of two children was too small as a sample in order to draw general conclusions. Four children were missing due to an illness, so the number of spectators was even lower than originally planned. In other circumstances, the group dynamics between the children might have been different. Furthermore, one child was only four years old, therefore not fulfilling the criteria for the selection of the participants, when the oldest participants in the puppet theatre task were six years old. The age difference, especially at that age, might have made a big difference in terms of the comprehension of the whole story. The youngest child asked the researcher to show her the "princess" after the presentation of the puppet theatre referring to "Kasperl" as one of the two protagonists in the story. She might not have understood the key parts of the presentation. Therefore, the comparability between the children might therefore be limited. Further research should include the girl's behaviors during the play as well as their interaction with the group of boys.

In general, other forms of measurement with regard to attitudes, like the implicit-association test could as well be considered in order to gain more reliable information on the children's attitudes, since some children might not want to openly express their attitudes in settings like the puppet theatre or also the picture book task. In addition, the strength of social influence is also dependent on personality traits of the children which were not considered in the study, so a second attitude measurement without the presence of other people would be a good addition in order to get more reliable results.

Furthermore, the first researcher herself as a supporter of diversity and homosexuality in specific could have influenced the children's attitudes on homosexuality by agreeing on children's contributions in favor of homosexuality, while asking for reasons and explanation if one child was against. Rewarding children with confirmation and appreciation, this form of positive reinforcement could have distorted the children's results, enhancing the possibility to express pro-homosexual attitudes. Further research could repeat the puppet theatre task with an expert researcher not showing any preferences, but rather staying neutral not expressing their attitudes toward homosexuality openly. Further research should also focus more on age, gender, cultural and geographical differences in terms of the attitudes on homosexuality taking several kindergartens from different regions in Germany into consideration.

However, the strengths of the study are various. The puppet theatre was filmed with the first author's mobile phone. Therefore, both verbal contributions and nonverbal behaviors were observable at the same time allowing a holistic approach in terms of the analysis. For instance, the phenomenon of social proof was apparent in the videos when the participating children were looking around in the audience to reassure themselves with regard to their reactions and opinions to the questions which the researcher as Kasperl and Seppel asked to the children. Another advantage refers to the setting of the puppet theatre. The children are in their familiar surroundings, in the gymnasium of the kindergarten. Therefore, they might be less distracted than in another setting with new and unknown external stimuli.

Furthermore, the costs of the puppet theatre are low and it reaches many children at the same time being less time consuming than the conduction of single interviews. Moreover, the researcher can actively influence the direction of the children's contributions to the asked questions during the puppet theatre. The depth as well as the topics of the children's statement can be impacted by further questions of the researcher. Still, the researcher plays the role of a puppet. Children might feel more at ease talking to puppets than to a real person improving the quality of communication between the puppet and the children.

Practical Implications

This study about kindergarten children's attitudes toward homosexuality may serve as a reminder of the importance of educational work in terms of homosexuality in specific, but also with regard to diversity in general. As many of the children have never been in touch with homosexual people, they could be made familiar with the topic on different levels.

On an individual level, educators but as well the parents of the kindergarten children may be more aware of their impact and responsibility to shape children's attitudes. Educators and parents serve as role models for the children and have the most powerful impact on children below the ages of 7 or 8 (Bergen, 2001). Confronting children with homosexuality and other sexualities from their childhood may prevent them from developing negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Raabe & Beelmann, 2011). According to Nasie et al. (2021) study the positive encounters between persona dolls representing four different cultural groups helped reduce intergroup prejudices in multicultural society and may therefore also be applicable in the case of discrimination against homosexuals.

On a more general level, this study may encourage the federal states to financially support diversity programs for kindergarten children. As many telecasts present mostly heterosexual relationships, the state television may support diversity television programs for children focusing on diversity. On both levels, the education on homosexuality and other sexual preferences diverging from the norm may serve as a prevention for the development of homophobia (Nasie et al., 2021).

In summary, this study highlights the importance and the need of diversity programs and early education for children promoting love beyond heterosexuality to raise awareness on homosexuality as a necessary step on the long way towards its acceptance. In order to make changes and to achieve the acceptance of different sexualities on a societal level, one has to start educating the children of this society on interindividual differences from an early age. According to studies, homophobic discrimination can lead to young homosexual people harming themselves or committing suicide (Igartua et al., 2009; Plöderl et al., 2010; Tomicic et al., 2021). Therefore, an improved suicide prevention is needed in order to stop the suffering and decrease the suicide rate of homosexual people.

Conclusion

Discrimination against homosexual people is still present in today's society causing harm, suffering and exclusion to homosexual people. Presenting 5–6-year-old kindergarten children a puppet show on the topic of homosexuality, their attitudes were assessed. During the puppet theatre intragroup processes could be observed among the audience changing attitudes in the course of the presentation referring to the social identity theory, group membership and influential factors on their attitudes. This study highlights the importance of diversity programs in early childhood education to fight homophobia and to prevent homosexual people's suffering being discriminated against.

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Author's Contribution Both Gabrijela Aleksić and Johanna Maus contributed to the design of the study. Johanna Maus implemented the research, contributed to the analysis of the results and to writing the manuscript. Gabrijela Aleksić was in charge of overall direction providing critical feedback and contributed to the shaping of analysis and the manuscript and supervised the project.

Data Availability The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to data protection.

Declarations

Ethics Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The study was approved by Dr. Gabrijela Aleksić, the supervisor of the first author.

Consent to Participate and Publish Written informed consent was obtained from the parents. The participant's parents have consented to the submission of the case report to the journal.

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