Sexual Lifestyles in the Twentieth Century

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Sexual Lifestyles in the Twentieth Century

A Research Study

Elina Haavio-Mannila, Osmo Kontula, Anna Rotkirch

Foreword by Jeffrey Weeks

palgrave

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Foreword by Jeffrey Weeks

Elina Haavio-Mannila and her colleagues have established themselves in the great tradition of sex researchers over the past century. Like their predecessors and contemporaries in Europe and America they have brought a social scientific zeal and a liberal imagination to bear on what is simultaneously the most intimately personal and the most publicly controversial of life's pleasures, passions and pains. The fundamental aim is always to understand before we condemn on the basis of prejudice or ignorance, to know in order to act (or not act), to tolerate rather than to excoriate. The sex research tradition has embodied many paradoxes and contradictions. Some of the earliest pioneers in the early 20th century now appear to us as old fashioned, mired in their own confusions and unwarranted assumptions. But they also offer a signal achievement: they have provided beams of light on what the forces of sexual regulation have often preferred to leave in obscurity, namely the vital importance of sexuality in shaping our sense of self, social identity and place in the wider society. The authors of this book embody the best of the tradition, while being alert to the wider debate about the history, meanings and shifting values of sexuality. The result is a fascinating and illuminating work that adds an important piece to the jigsaw which is contemporary sexuality.

Sex only acquires its meanings through the web of beliefs, values, norms and relationship patterns in which it is embedded. An important aspect of this book is that it locates its findings in a sense of great historical change which is transforming that web of meaning. Broadly, over the past couple of generations there has been a major shift from authoritarian patterns of erotic life, backed by tradition, church and state, to more highly individualised patterns, where sexuality has become increasingly a matter of negotiation between more or less equal, consenting partners.

Behind that shift are dramatic changes in family life and economic mobility, growing gender equality, and an awareness of sexual as well as cultural diversity. Of course, it is possible to exaggerate change. Inequalities between men and women persist. Prejudices and discrimination against sexual minorities remain potent. There are gross social and income differences. There are differences between cities, towns and villages, between regions. Value differences are growing rather

than diminishing as we come to recognize the pluralism of even the apparently most homogeneous societies. We are still in the midst of a long, unfinished revolution. But no-one with a sense of history can doubt the importance of the transformations in intimate life that have taken place – and the transformations continue.

The result is a change in the western pattern of sexual life that is common across the highly industrialised world, and which this book documents. The details may be from Finland, but the pattern can be verified in many studies, from western Europe to North America and Australasia and beyond, even as different cultural histories give a distinct shading to each example. Marriage may not any longer be the only gateway to respectable sexual life, but committed relationships are the norm. Divorce may now be commonplace and easy, but serial monogamy shapes the lives of most couples. There are still unwanted pregnancies, but birth control and abortion are more freely available than ever before. Homosexuality is still encrusted by prejudice, but most jurisdictions are removing gross discriminations, and there is an international move towards the recognition of same sex partnerships. Sexual abuse, against children and adults, may persist, but everywhere there is a growing recognition that sexuality and power are inextricably linked, and that positive steps can be taken to check abuse. Sex may remain for many a source of fear, anxiety and disease, but by and large sex education is improving, sexual health is taken seriously, and the pleasures of sexual activity rather than the burdens are increasingly taken for granted. We live in a different world even from the one most of us were born into, and no doubt we will see yet further changes in the years ahead.

This book shows a world in the process of significant sexual change. It captures both a moment and a history. In its dispassionate presentation of the facts of contemporary life, it also gives us an opportunity. By understanding better, we can respond in more appropriate and sensitive ways to the processes of change. Sexuality is not a given. On the contrary it is a sensitive conductor of social change. By understanding what is happening to sexuality, we can better understand what is happening to our culture and society. As with the pioneers of the tradition of sex research, the authors of this book are casting light on the intricate processes of social change, as it is happening.

Acknowledgments

This book is a part in a series of research projects on sexuality in Finland (FINSEX) and its neighbouring countries. In the latter part of the 20th century, three representative surveys on sexuality have been conducted in Finland, one in St Petersburg, one in Sweden and one in Estonia (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila 1995a; Haavio-Mannila and Rotkirch 1997; Haavio-Mannila 2000; Haavio-Mannila *et al.* 2001; Haavio-Mannila and Kontula 2001). The results of the two first Finnish surveys were presented in English by Osmo Kontula and Elina Haavio-Mannila in 'Sexual Pleasures– Enhancement of Sex Life in Finland, 1971–1992' (1995b). Sexual autobiographies have been collected in Finland, Estonia, Lithuania and St Petersburg (Russia) using partly the same guidelines as in Finland. The Finnish autobiographies have been analyzed by Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1995a, 1997) and Haavio-Mannila and Roos (1999). Anna Rotkirch has analyzed the St Petersburg autobiographies in 'The Man Question – Loves and Lives in Late 20th Century Russia' (2000). Comparisons between countries, combining autobiographical and survey research, are found in Haavio-Mannila and Rotkirch (1997, 2000) and Haavio-Mannila and Purhonen (2001). The third approach of the FINSEX study was to analyze how the way of presenting sexuality in certain Finnish newspapers and magazines had changed since 1961 (Kontula and Kosonen 1994).

We are grateful for the financial support of the Academy of Finland, which has made it possible to do broad and long-term empirical research in people's sexual lives. We also thank our Finnish publisher Werner Söderström Oy for paying for the English translation. Maija Mäkinen, a Finnish-born New-Yorker, translated the manuscript showing great flexibility and humour. Professor Tuula Gordon at the University of Tampere made detailed and useful comments on the English manuscript. Jo Campling was the wise adviser in our co-operation with Palgrave.

We have analysed the autobiographies while working as teachers and researchers at the Departments of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Helsinki and at the Population Research Institute, The Family Federation of Finland. In these scientific environments several people have helped us. At the Department of Public Health Helena Suoknuuti and Päivi Penttilä typed or scanned the original, partly

handwritten autobiographies into a computerised form. The thematic coding of the fragments by Osmo Kontula was transferred to the computer mainly by Peija Haaramo at the Department of Sociology. Peija also coded the data statistically and Elina Kuusi helped in the preparation of the index. At the Department of Social Policy, Professor J.P. Roos and docent Anni Vilkkö have given us stimulating advice in the fine art of autobiographical research work. At the Department of Sociology, Marika Jalovaara commented on an earlier version of the manuscript and gave useful references to the theoretical part of the study. We warmly thank these colleagues for their kind support and assistance.

The writing of the book was divided as follows: Osmo Kontula wrote most of Part I (Sexuality in Early Age), Elina Haavio-Mannila most of Part II (Sexual Lifestyles in Different Types of Relationships) and Anna Rotkirch most of Part III (Remembering Sexuality). The Introduction, Chapter 1 and the Conclusion were written jointly. The book is based on empirical research conducted by Osmo Kontula and Elina Haavio-Mannila, reported in Finnish in Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1995a and 1997). Our deepest gratitude goes to the many men and women who sent us their autobiographies and wanted to share their intimate experiences and reflections with us.

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Introduction

How have people's love lives changed during the last century? This book will depict changes and continuities in the sexual lifestyles of three generations. We will analyse changes in sexual behaviour both statistically and through excerpts from autobiographies that present people's experiences and evaluations in their own words.

Both in a global perspective and on the microsocial level, many of the most drastic social changes in the 20th century were connected with sexuality. The beginning of that century witnessed declining birth rates and the spread of birth control in the industrialised world. A weakening of traditional morality and an increasing cultural detachment of sexuality accompanied this from reproduction. The sexual revolution in the 1960s continued to transform sexual behaviour and attitudes, especially with regard to women's sexuality, and to the public and commercial uses of sex. Finally, at the threshold of this century, sexuality assumed a leading role in identity politics and the increasing reflexivisation of everyday life.

Earlier research shows that as a result of these changes, sexual life has in general become more versatile, more gender equal and more satisfying (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1995b). However, most sexological studies are either based on survey questionnaires or on studies of specific sexual subcultures, such as youth or homosexual sexual cultures. We were interested in how so-called ordinary adults remembered their sexual history. Which key events structured the sexual life course and which themes were seen as belonging to a sexual autobiography? Which problems and anxieties accompany the undeniable progress in family planning and sexual satisfaction?

In 1992, we collected a body of close to two hundred autobiographies about love and sexuality, written by adults in Finland. The rich experiences depicted in the autobiographies allow us to see how sexuality has evolved with time—in the life span of an individual as well as in the historical time of generations. The stories reveal how sexual experiences vary with gender and stage of the life course. They also describe the impact of major historical events – from war to economic crisis – and of the 'spirit of the times', from the emancipatory zeal of the 1960s to new age-influenced holistic ideals of total harmony of the 1980s.

While each life story is unique, the authors are ordinary in the sense that their education, working status and family relations are about the same as in the general population in Finland. The main exception is that young educated women are somewhat over represented among the writers. This generation of women, in which women are professionally autonomous and postpone child bearing into their thirties, clearly wanted to reflect on its experiences. Young women were also often those who sought to voice alternatives to conventional views of sexuality.

Here we will discuss Finland as one example of western European sexual culture. Some words should, however, be said about the specificity of Finnish sexual culture. Comparative research has shown that Finns share most of the western values and habits, which extends to sexual issues. Finnish legislation is based on full sexual self-determination unless the rights of other human beings are threatened. Finnish citizens usually have a favourable attitude toward sexual matters and believe that sexual health contributes to general well being. These opinions result in the general acceptance of an egalitarian gender ideology: Finland has longer traditions of gender equality than most other countries of the world, especially with regards to women's citizenship rights and their participation in the work force. Additionally, Finland does not have any influential religious or political forces that would oppose women's emancipation or sexual education. There has also been little prostitution in Finland (Järvinen 1990; Häkkinen 1995). Concerning sexuality, people receive free counselling on contraception and family planning at the communal health centres and the rates for unwanted pregnancies and abortions are among the lowest in the world. Finland has become a leader along with the Netherlands and other Nordic countries in providing high quality sexual health services and education.

Autobiographies can be quoted and analyzed in a number of ways. This book looks at key events in the sexual life course from the perspective of generational change and sexual lifestyles. We will talk about three generations: *the generation of sexual restraint, the generation of sexual revolution, and the generation of gender equalization*. The five sexual relationship types detected in the autobiographies are called monogamy, consecutive relations, searching, devitalised unions and parallel relations. These lifestyle groups describe people's ways of making choices or of repeatedly drifting into similar situations or circumstances.

Part I of the present book looks at sexuality at an early age, from children's sexual games to sexual initiation. Part II presents the rich variety of sexual lifestyles through an analysis of the five most typical sexual relationships in adult age. Part III analyzes the pleasures and disappointments voiced in the autobiographies and inquires into the changing meanings of sexuality. Our aim is to show in which respects sexual scripts and everyday morality have changed, as well as how surprisingly stable they have remained in other respects.