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FROM INFIDELITY TO A RENAISSANCE  
OF ROMANTICISM

The majority of sexual experiences occur within the framework of established relationships. Even though the sexual experiences in them play the most critical role from the standpoint of individual sexual wellbeing, it is clear that in terms of public discourse, these relationships are not particularly interesting.

It is the secret relationships of people who are already engaged provide fodder for the gossip press, for literature, and for mass-distribution films. People are guaranteed to be highly interested in these kinds of intrigues. It is symptomatic that when I asked Finnish people in the 1990s to write their own sexual autobiographies, each writer's current, long-term relationship frequently received little attention, whereas various parallel relationships that had occurred at different stages of the writers' lives were depicted in great detail and with feeling. These were relationships that had brought something unforgettable, something magical to the writers.

In an earlier chapter describing a transformation in sexual attitudes, it was said that Finnish attitudes toward parallel relationships had become noticeably less tolerant in the early years of our new century, to the point that they are at times the least accepting perhaps in all of Europe. This social atmosphere has lent a new meaning to parallel relationships.

## Variable concepts and considerations of infidelity

The other sexual relationships of people who are already in established relationships have often been referred to with moral condemnation, as cheating and unfaithfulness. Unfaithfulness means engaging in a sexual relationship without one's partner's knowledge or approval after promising or even swearing to remain sexually faithful. Some of these extra relationships have not constituted cheating or unfaithfulness in the sense that the established partner may have been aware of or even condoned the liaison.

Before, people spoke of extra-marital relationships. Nowadays relationship types have evolved so much that an examination of sexual relationships within the sole framework of marriage is no longer sufficient. The 'extra' in 'extra-marital' is

misleading also because the new relationship may become a vital player if both established partners in the relationship are aware of it. The new relationship and the way it is handled may become an integral social part of the original relationship. Beyond that, the “extra” relationship is in no way an outside relationship to the third party, from whose perspective it is the old partner of this new love they have found who is in fact “the fifth wheel” of this new relationship.

The questions used to map out attitudes use the term ‘temporary infidelity’, which is inherited from the 1971 study. In order to continue comparing data, it has not been possible to change the wording or terminology of the survey questions. The wording clearly depicts something that is unimportant and temporary. That is not necessarily the case in all such relationships. On occasion, they may become more valuable than life itself.

I myself have generally used the term ‘parallel relationship’ to refer to the other relationships that people have beyond an established relationship. It describes both short- and long-term sexual relationships that take place in addition to an established relationship, and of which one’s regular partner may or may not be aware. Some people may have their partner’s permission to have such a relationship. From the perspective of the third party, it is his or her new companion’s previous and often long-term relationship that is now the parallel relationship of this new relationship. As a concept, the term parallel relationship does not confer a moral judgment. Some parallel relationships may mark the beginning of a new long-term relationship.

Especially the discourse in the press on the subject frequently uses terms such as unfaithful and dishonest. The use of terms like these may be tempting when the target is a public figure and when there is a desire to label their behaviour in a particularly negative way. The behaviour is labelled socially unacceptable, especially in light of the irreproachableness that a person in a public role is supposed to occupy. The moral condemnation is not only a justification for publishing the story but also for breaching the privacy barrier.

The boundaries of cheating and infidelity are often quite subjective and may also vary between men and women. Different people rarely share exactly the same view of what constitutes infidelity or dishonesty in a particular situation. This is a sign of how personally and emotionally we approach this subject.

## Parallel relationships in Finland

Lifetime parallel relationships in Finland were mapped out by asking: “How many outside (parallel) sexual relationships have you had while in a steady relationship with your current or a past partner?” Respondents were asked to include all previous couple relationships and the outside (parallel) relationships that occurred simultaneously.

The question and several subsequent questions were probably among the most sensitive in nature in the entire survey. Particularly married and cohabiting people have had to risk a partner accidentally seeing or asking to see their response. In these cases, respondents probably did not have the courage to report the other relationships. As attitudes toward parallel relationships become increasingly judgmental, disclosing information about them becomes harder and harder. Thus, it may be assumed that the data regarding the prevalence of parallel relationships presented in the following represent an underestimation.

In the 2007 survey, 42 percent of men and 32 percent of women reported having a parallel relationship at some point in life. Men's figures corresponded with what they had reported eight years before, and among women, were only one percent higher. The figure for men was up to ten percent lower than in 1992, but a few percent higher among women. No comparison can be made with 1971, as that survey did not yet include a question about parallel relationships in a lifetime.

The changes over time have evolved logically in that the figures for men and women reported parallel relationships have been converging. The same development could be seen in the lifetime number of reported sexual partners.

Men and women diverged in terms of parallel relationships in that of men who had at some point entered into a parallel relationship, a significantly higher proportion than of similar women reported having several such relationships. Twenty-nine percent of all men had formed more than one parallel relationship, compared with 14 percent of women. Six percent of men had had at least ten parallel relationships in their life, as opposed to only one percent of women. The figures for both genders have declined slightly since 1999.

The proportion of people who at some point had a parallel relationship grows with age, as more opportunities present themselves and new motives emerge as a result of changes that take place in one's relationship and life. Half of all men in the oldest age group had had a parallel relationship, 40 percent of middle-aged men and 30 percent of young men. For women, the figures were one-quarter, 40 percent and 30 percent, respectively. This reveals that men and women differed from each other only in the oldest age group, where women reported significantly fewer parallel relationships than men. For this generation of women, it was not really appropriate to form only sexually motivated relationships.

In 2007, young and middle-aged men reported fewer parallel relationships than in the two surveys conducted in the 1990s. From the early 1990s, the changes were up to almost 20 percentage points. Parallel relationships declined somewhat among young women as well, but increased by several percentage points for middle-aged women. In addition to real change, this development may also reflect a gender-related change in the honesty with which people report their sexual behaviour. Perhaps men no longer

have to exaggerate their experiences, or women hide theirs. The more the responses of men and women converge (as they now do), the more reliable are the findings.

At the time of the latest survey, of men in living-apart relationships half, and 40 percent of married or cohabiting men, had at some point had a parallel relationship. More than 40 percent of single men had had a parallel relationship at some point. Over one-third of cohabiting, living-apart, and single women had had a parallel relationship at some time. The figure for married women was lower, over one-quarter.

The greatest gender difference was found among married respondents, of whom men were much more likely than women to report parallel relationships. A change from 1999 was that both cohabiting men and women reported fewer parallel relationships in 2007, whereas more and more single men and women had experienced a parallel relationship. For some, it may have been the very fact of a parallel relationship that led to separation from a previous partner and their currently single status.

People who had had more than one established relationship in their life were more likely to have also experienced a parallel relationship. Of men and women who had cohabited or been married to only one partner, approximately 40 percent and one in four, respectively, had had a parallel relationship. In practical terms, this was the only significant difference between men and women. Of men and women who had cohabited or married twice, half had engaged in a parallel relationship. Those who had had three or more unions, nearly three-quarters of men and two-thirds of women had had a parallel relationship at some point. This relationship may occasionally have turned into a new, established couple relationship.

Men's experiences with parallel relationships did not vary depending on the number of years their current relationship had lasted. The highest relative prevalence of parallel relationships among women had occurred in relationships that had only lasted a few years. The birth of children and parallel relationships did not have much of an effect on each other. Among men of different ages, there was no difference in terms of parallel relationships whether they had had children of their own or not. Middle-aged and older women had slightly fewer parallel relationships when they had children of their own. The existence of children, however, did not have a significant impact on their decision to enter into a parallel relationship.

Logically, it follows that people who are accepting of the other sexual relationship of those in established relationships are also more likely themselves to have had a similar relationship. Three-quarters of men and two-thirds of women who said that they would accept a temporary infidelity of a husband or wife had had such a relationship themselves. Respondents who said that they found the extra-marital relationship of a married person acceptable were even more consistent in this. It was, however, contradictory that one-fifth of the men and women who judged temporary infidelity and other sexual relationship with a third party most harshly had nonetheless engaged

in a parallel relationship. They had acted against their own values, and a tempting situation had weighed more than the principles they held dear.

According to this survey, unfaithfulness, or parallel relationships, accumulated and became gradually more common as people aged. As expected, they occurred mostly to people who actively frequented bars. Some of the women had been compelled by opportunities to take advantage of them. The same people also reported a higher number of sexual partners and put a high value on sex in their relationships. The same characteristics were also typical of the men and women whose partners had been unfaithful to them more often than other people.

## Parallel relationships in the present relationship

The second survey question to address parallel relationships was formulated as follows: “Have you had other sexual relationships during your present cohabiting relationship or marriage?” This excluded living-apart relationships, because the current formulation made it possible to compare the responses with the 1971 survey. A follow-up question asked whether the relationships had been short-term or steady, or possibly both.

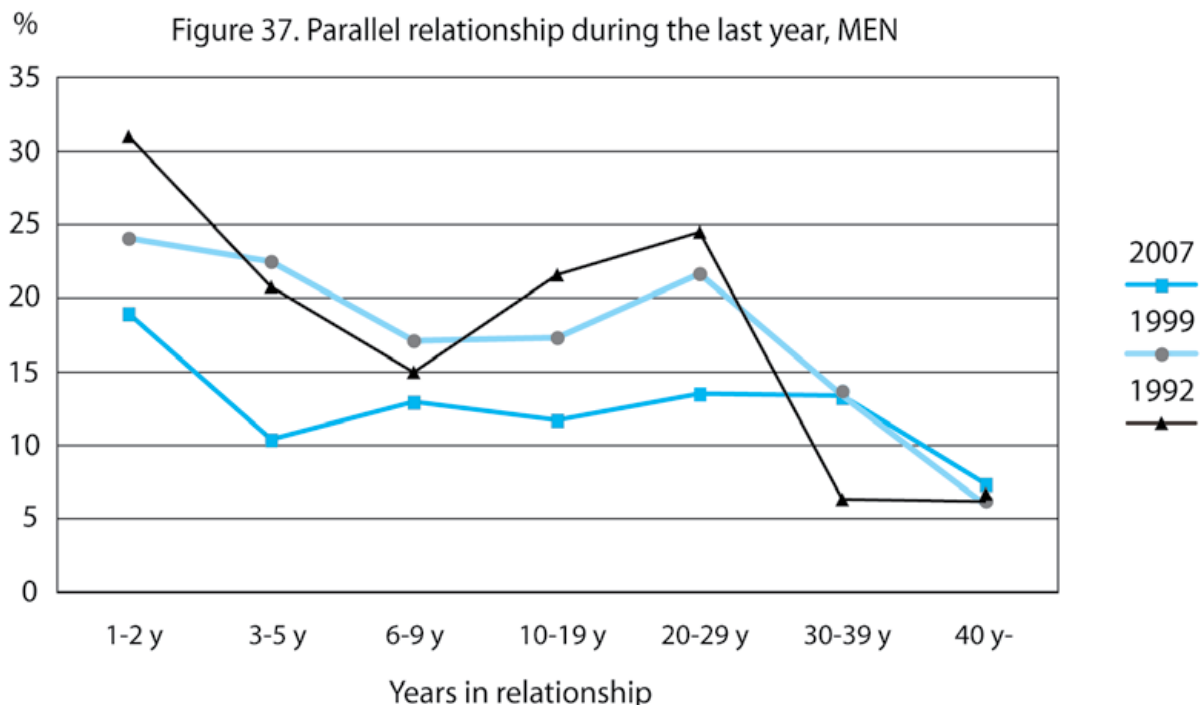
In the course of a present cohabitation or marriage, 27 percent of men and 13 percent of women admitted to having a parallel relationship. The difference between men and women was nearly two-fold. Parallel relationships declined for both genders by 2–3 percent compared with the previous study. Among men, 25 percent and 12 percent of women had had a short-term parallel relationship. Here, women have probably hidden some of their experiences. Six percent of men and four percent of women had had a steady, long-term parallel relationship that constituted having an actual lover.

Among men, parallel relationships during the present union increased from less than one-fifth in 1971 to one-third in 1992. Thereafter, they have declined to the current level of one-quarter. Some of the change no doubt reflects the marked shift in attitudes that was mentioned earlier. Development among women has been different, because their starting point was different. In 1971, only eight percent of women admitted to having been unfaithful. By 1992, parallel relationships among women had increased by up to three percentage points, compared to the level in 2007. No major changes have taken place among women thereafter, not even in the proportions of long-term and short-term relationships.

One-fifth of men in the younger generation who were cohabiting or married had had a parallel relationship during their current union. This was exactly the same proportion as eight years earlier, but up to nine percent lower than in 1992. The figure was only slightly higher among middle-aged men and only close to half of what it had been eight years before. In the oldest group of men such relationships had occurred among one in three, 12 percentage points more than in previous years surveyed.

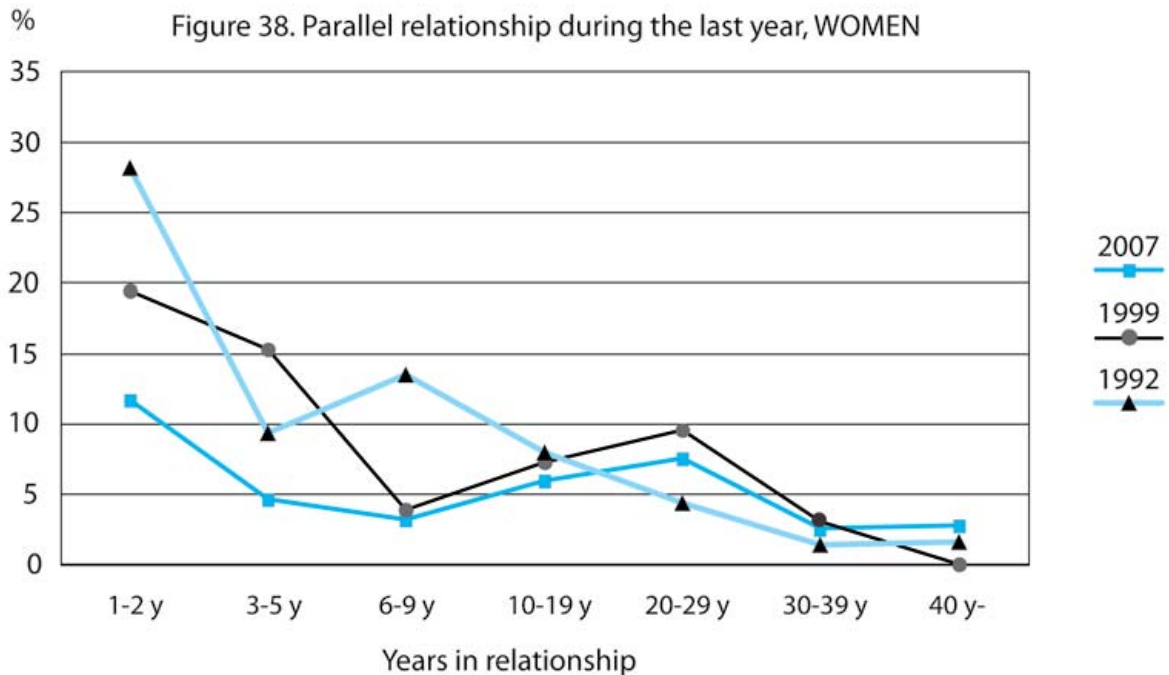
Eight percent of young married or cohabiting women had had a parallel relationship during their current relationship, as had 17 percent of middle-aged women. Among the oldest group of women the proportion was 14 percent. The figures for young and middle-aged women were about five percentage points lower than eight years before. In other words, the sexual faithfulness of these women as well as middle-aged men had greatly strengthened.

Men accrued more parallel relationships as their primary relationship lasted longer. In relationships of only several years, one in ten had had a parallel relationship, more than one-fifth in relationships lasting 10 years, 30 percent in relationships of 20 years or more, and approximately 40 percent in those lasting 40 years or more. The figures were somewhat lower than the corresponding figures from the 1990s surveys.



Among women parallel relationships became more common in the same way as with men, as relationships got longer, but the proportions were lower. It is true, however, that approximately one in ten women had had a parallel relationship in the beginning of her current relationship, but one-fifth of women who had been in the same relationship for more than 20 or 30 years had had a parallel relationship.

On the basis of age group comparisons, women who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s had been particularly active in forming parallel relationships. They also expressed the most tolerant attitudes regarding them. Among men, there was an increase in parallel relationships among those who had come of age in the 1960s. Male and female respondents whose youth coincided with the 1990s had in part lived in keeping with their stated attitudes and had entered into fewer parallel relationships, compared with the same age groups in previous surveys.



Among newly married or cohabiting partners, love and passion often still run rampant. It might be assumed that at this stage in the relationship, people have no reason or desire to enter into other relationships. The truth does not bear out this supposition. The early stage of a relationship is when people are most likely to have affairs; one in five men and one in ten women report having them. The explanation for these parallel relationships is probably that before settling down, people may have had one or more consecutive relationships of which they have not completely let go yet, keeping the other relationship going in case the newly formed union does not work out.

Another culmination point in the occurrence of parallel relationships was relationships that had lasted over 20 years. At that point, parallel relationships become just as common again as they were in the early years of relationships. People sought confirmation for their desirability as men or women, or a different kind of experience to compensate for the feeling that they weren't living out their life in full. Some parallel relationships occurred in unions of all durations. Their incidence declined over eight years, however, in all relationships regardless of duration. The proportion of men who had entered into a parallel relationship in the last year declined from 20 percent in 1999 to 13 percent in 2007, and among women from 11 percent in 1999 to six percent in 2007. These changes in in the relationships of Finnish people are very significant.

Three in four men and half of women who had formed a parallel relationship reported having more than just one such affair during their present union. One in five men who had entered into a parallel relationship had had affairs with at least ten women. Among female spouses, only three percent had had this many parallel relationships during their

present established relationship. Men had a substantially higher number of parallel partners compared with women. These numbers had not changed since the early 1990s, whereas among women the number of parallel partners had declined somewhat.

One-third of men's most recent parallel partners was, as far as they knew, married or cohabiting. Married men were somewhat more likely to have these relationships than cohabiting men. More than half of women had their most recent affair with the spouse of another woman, among married women this was true of up to 70 percent. Married women, then, were particularly tempted by men who were already taken. These figures have remained approximately the same since the early 1990s for both men and women.

More than two-thirds of men as well as women reported that their spouse had remained unaware of their parallel relationship, or relationships. There was no change in this compared with the early 1990s. The married and the cohabiting had been equally successful in keeping their affairs secret.

Interestingly, men and women had managed to keep the affairs concealed from their partners equally well, regardless of how many affairs they were involved in. The "cheaters" had learned to cover their tracks and find credible explanations for their absences. Of course, they may have been deceived in believing that their partner did not know of their affairs. It is possible that not every spouse had always reacted particularly, and had hid whatever suspicions he or she had had from the respondent.

Of the approximately one-third parallel relationships that had come to the attention of spouses, the latter had reacted in a number of different ways. One in three of the spouses of men had been either tolerant or indifferent. Jealousy was nevertheless the most common response. One in ten women who discovered a spouse's affair wanted to end her relationship with the offender. The ways in which people responded had not changed much from the early 1990s.

Nearly half of the men who discovered a female spouse having an affair were either tolerant or indifferent. Approximately the same proportion of men, one-third, who had found a female partner having a parallel relationship, had been jealous and about one-third had been tolerant. Fewer men than women considered ending the relationship because of the spouse's cheating. As reported by female respondents, jealous reactions on the part of men who were faced with a spouse's infidelity had declined over eight years.

Of those men and women who had been discovered having an affair, and whose spouses had shown tolerance for the parallel relationship, over half would themselves have been tolerant of their spouse's similar relationship, according to their responses to survey questions asking about attitudes. The data indicate that these open relationships make up approximately two percent of all relationships in recent years.



## The renaissance of romanticism reduces the popularity of parallel relationships

The chapter “What constitutes ‘acceptable’ or ‘perverted’ sex?”, above, described the increasingly disapproving attitudes Finns harboured toward parallel relationships. Their attitudes also turned out to be rather intolerant in a European comparison. By adding to this the present study’s finding that fewer parallel relationships were being reported, even among the youngest generation, all of this together represents a remarkable shift toward more faithful relationships. Here, I will look for reasons and background factors contributing to this change. The immediate impression might be one of increasing conservatism, but this notion is too simplistic and also apparently incorrect.

Committing to someone, being “taken”, implies that one has signed away exclusive rights to one’s sexuality to one partner. This idea is at the core of couple relationships, even more than the idea of love itself. It contains the paradox that in order to promote one’s own sexual wellbeing, people must first discover and possess their sexuality, and once discovering it, deny it in relation to all other people besides the partner.

History has shown us that women can effectively monopolize a spouse’s resources by controlling his sexuality. On the other hand, men have controlled their spouses’ sexuality after providing resources to them. The sexual control of one’s partner has been an important factor and skill needed to ensure subsistence and safety.

The consequence of public discourse about sexuality is that society now places greater expectations on sexual happiness. This fits in with the social exchange theory, which claims that people seek relationships in order to gain benefits and rewards. Hurlbert argues that the relationship is maintained for as long as it rewards more than it demands. People today increasingly look not only for happiness, but also for individual rewards and high-quality relationships.

Couple relationships are less and less founded on external, formal sanctions concerning togetherness, and they are increasingly based on mutual love and trust, which are more about feelings and sexuality than previously. Both men and women are expected to express love through sexuality. Women have a tendency to emotionalize their sexuality, and convert their sexual feelings into verbal communication. Men are expected to sexualize their feelings, and sexuality becomes the channel through which men communicate a host of emotions such as stress, excitement, anger, frustration, and love.

It has emerged in the sexual surveys of some other countries as well that parallel relationships are now less tolerated than they were several decades ago. The new trend may reflect a renaissance of romanticism in an otherwise increasingly individualistic era. It may also be an expression of faithfulness not to one person, but to the romance and emotion afforded by a particular situation – “you are where your heart is.”

There are many reasons why love and romance are so frequently emphasized these days. Bulcroft has said that in a more rational and impersonal world such as ours, the human need for social bonds is increasingly important. For this reason, people today are more concerned with "irrational" love unions and they value the ideals of romantic love, such as spontaneity, strength of feeling, and duration of the relationship. In this private world and its intimate attachments people are able to express and experience elements of their subjective selves for which the public sphere permits no outlet.

The romantic script is one of the few still-vital incentives to the institution of marriage, especially because incentives connected to economics or child-birth and -rearing have diminished over time. Romance has come to represent the epitome of individualism and self-actualization. Our individual, true selves are more and more defined through our intimate and emotionally driven commitments. In a social system in which all other aspects of social life are based on rationality and bureaucracy, one's emotional life has become important in a whole new way.

The romantic renaissance is connected to people's greater need to find a faithful partner. The desire to exclude other relationship is a normal, natural emotion, as we enclose ourselves in the birthing pains of passionate, romantic love. Finnish sociologist Riitta Jallinoja has argued that in the West, the partners' mutual independence has shifted the boundaries of love with the limits of the relationship. With an independent partner, you can never be sure of their love. Hence, the relationship is a constant object of internal speculation and assessment.

Forming a union, or maintaining an existing one, is an investment based on the hope of becoming happier. The interdependence theory and investment model, presented by Rusbult, proposes that the more investments that are made in the relationship (for example, children, shared property, years spent together), the greater its durability. For women, the investments made by a partner are exceedingly important, because it has been estimated that women's success in gaining these investments maximizes the survival of her offspring.

Because love is expressed through sexuality, a partner's faithfulness proves that he or she continues to want to invest in the relationship and that there is no serious risk of a competing relationship. Being forced to end a relationship would entail a lot of time spent as well as having to make new investments. The investments made into the previous relationship would then, at least in part, be lost.

In Anthony Giddens' analysis, a "pure" relationship is ideally based purely on feelings and happiness. This type of relationship may not last long because feelings change from one moment to the next and passions may wane. This is no problem, if no major investments have been made in the relationship, but if the partners already share property and children, and possibly even an exceptionally good love relationship, they generally want to continue the relationship. The partner's faithfulness may offer added security for the relationship.

Nowadays feelings often play a larger role in wanting to continue a relationship than does the fear of losing the investments that have been made. Being together for a long time or having children together no longer prevents people from ending a marriage as effectively as before.

Even though, when asked about their attitudes, young people today value faithfulness, they are having shorter relationships than previous generations. Their conception of fidelity nevertheless differs so much from that of their grandparents that it is impossible to call them more traditional. In a “pure” relationship, the reason for mutual faithfulness does not come from the marriage institution or even the other person, but stems from the feelings toward the partner. Partners are expected to commit to being sexually faithful only for as long as they view the relationship as satisfying and whole.

The increased commitment of women to the labour market seems to have increased the special value of mutual spousal commitment. Individualism has made divorce more acceptable. This has reinforced attitudes that reflect a desire to restrict marital infidelities.

Respondents who had had parallel relationships and who also viewed such relations with tolerance had usually had intercourse at an early age, had more numerous sexual partners, and a higher socio-economic status. This group is often not particularly happy in their relationships and would prefer to have sexual intercourse with their partner more often. They have sought new experiences and partners, even though their regular relationship is a long-term one. As individuals, sex for them is so rewarding that it is worth taking risks for.

Financial independence has brought many new ways of having a satisfying life, but it has had other effects that may increase feelings of insecurity in people’s private lives. With a partner who is independent of oneself, their love cannot be taken for granted. This results in pressure to stay young and attractive and to live an exciting life – things that would entice a partner. It is particularly threatening to one’s sense of safety when a partner has a sexual escapade with someone else. One never knows how fantastic that other person is, especially in bed.

People who have seriously invested in their present relationship and consider it a happy one do not want to lose it. A partner’s faithfulness is therefore tremendously important for maintaining the image of a relationship’s uniqueness, of it having been worth all the effort and investment.

Investments that people make in relationships and marriages do not always seem to prevent infidelity. Getting married, being together for a long time, having several children together – none of it prevents infidelity to the same extent that it often acts as a barrier against divorce. The quality of the relationship is a better predictor of unfaithfulness than the investments people have made in the relationship. This supports the idea that it is the emotional bonds in a relationship that are critical from

the standpoint of infidelity, rather than any investments. Moreover, people seem to be placing an ever-growing importance on emotional bonds.

The growing expectation of fidelity in an era when individuality is in other ways increasing translates to a renaissance of romanticism. Sex is now part of the romantic script, with a high value on sex. Individual pleasures are connected to romantic relationships. Yet romanticism does not mean committing to one's partner at whatever price. The traditional romantic ideals valued greatly in female culture have been converted into an appreciation of the relationship between two partners. This is especially true for the youngest generation.

The renaissance of romanticism may either be traditional or pleasure-seeking. Traditional romanticism is closely related to the traditional family values that still prevailed in Western countries fifty years ago. Women married young, had many children, and were financially dependent on their spouses. These women invested their resources into marriage.

Today, the women who represent this type of romanticism are more often less educated, working-class women. In their relationship, they look for safety and they invest a lot into it to find happiness. Interestingly enough, this choice of lifestyle seems today more typical of men than of women. A lower-status man has a much lower chance than a woman of finding a new partner in the event that he loses his partner as a result of her infidelity.

In pleasure-seeking romanticism, family formation occurs later and more time is spent looking for the right partner. Romantic hedonists are frequently more highly educated and also high earners. They expect that their partner is a good lover and able to give them sexual pleasure. And part of being a good lover is, of course, to desire only that one person. Pleasure-seeking romantics are looking for a quality relationship that offers intimacy and pleasure. For these people, sex symbolizes the merging of two partners.