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## 22. Non-Heterosexual and Transgendered People in Finland

In Finland as in most cultures a heterosexual gender system exists. This system includes norms about how people should express their sexuality and enact gender roles. These norms discourage sexual intimacy and love between people of the same gender. In addition, it is against cultural norms for females to behave in highly stereotypical 'masculine' ways or for males to display highly stereotypical 'feminine' behaviour. Finnish lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people have been trying for a long time to find their place in society which promotes heterosexuality and restricts cross-gender behaviour.

Non-heterosexuals are people, who have sexual feelings toward and/or who engage in sexual activities with persons of their same gender and /or who have sexual identities which are linked to these feelings and behaviour. Non-heterosexuals include lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, individuals who to varying degrees are motivated by a definite erotic desire for members of the same gender. Transgendered persons are men or women who in some way surpass the limits of normative gender behaviour. The gender identity of a transgendered person is different from the normative gender identity associated with the person's biological sex. Transgendered people include transsexuals and transvestites.

First I discuss homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism from a historical-cultural perspective. I explain how ideas associated with these constructs have become part of Finnish culture and emphasise their pluralistic nature. Next I concentrate on heterosexism and homophobia in Finland. I describe how these cultural stereotypes and labels have had an overwhelming detrimental effect on the sexual health and general well being of homosexual, bisexual and transgender people. I also highlight problems and dilemmas these people have because of their marginal positions in society.<sup>1</sup>

### Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people in Finnish culture

The concepts of heterosexuality, homosexuality and bisexuality have only been used to describe people's sexuality for about one hundred years. This trichotomy was used

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Kaija Kurkela (social worker of SETA), Jussi Nissinen and Olli Stålström for their comments.

mainly in medical journals. In 1882, a case study of a Finnish woman who had sexual interests in women was published in a medical journal (Löfström 1991). In the 1950's the term homosexuality started to become more common in everyday use but the word heterosexual has only been in common use since the 1980's. Previously, heterosexuals were and still are today referred to as 'normal' or 'ordinary'. In the 1960's non-heterosexuals adopted the word homosexual. Before that the word 'meikäläinen' (meaning 'one of us') was used in the company of others with a similar same gender attraction. That term is still used in older generations of homosexuals. At the end of the 1970's and the beginning of 1980's, the word lesbian started to be used to mean a woman erotically attracted to another woman. About the same time the word 'homo' (gay) became widely used and it began to refer only to men who have a same gender erotic preference. Less has been written about the origin of the term bisexuality, but currently in Finland a bisexual woman is called 'bi-nainen' or literally bi-woman and similarly, a bisexual man is called 'bi-mies' (bi-man). (Lehtonen 1997).

Because Finland remained a predominately rural country later than most Western nations and homosexual culture is concentrated in cities, common use and meanings of the terms heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual are relatively new to Finnish culture. In Finnish rural, culture good work was valued more than sexual performance and the emphasis on the value of work reduced the incidence of homosexual labelling (Löfström 1997; 1998). Sexuality, in general, was not much talked about and men did not have to depend upon their heterosexuality for the construction of a positive male identity to the degree that is common in many other cultures. It was only after the second world war that the increased urbanisation made it possible for new terms and ideas relating to homosexuality to spread among the ordinary people.

The history of transgender terms is even shorter. In Germany in 1910 research was published on transvestites and after that the term became more widely used. Transsexuality was differentiated from transvestism only in the 1950's in the United States. In Finland these words did not become popular until the 1970's and 1980's. The existence of biological women who had male gender identity was not acknowledged until the 1990's. Previously transgenderism was understood to apply only to biological men. Today it is common to speak about trans-women or trans-men.

The meanings and importance of the constructs of homosexuality, bisexuality and transgenderism vary in people's lives. Those with sexual interests toward members of their own gender define themselves in many different ways and use a variety of words to describe themselves. The process of defining one's gender identity and sexuality is often a difficult process for nonheterosexuals. Interpretations and understandings of their sexual orientation and gender often undergo change and variations in different life stages. In the last decade some young people especially have questioned traditional categories of gay and lesbian and seem to deal more pragmatically with sexual and gender issues than those from earlier generations (Lehtonen 1998a; 1998b). Recently,

some have tried to accept and promote a philosophy of individualism and empowerment that encourages people to develop and define their own categories to describe themselves.

The self-defined sexual orientation of those who engage in same sex interactions varies greatly. Some people can have same-gender sexual feelings and occasionally engage in same gender sex and not define themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Thus a man in a heterosexual marriage, who occasionally has sex with men, does not need to create a gay identity. Others can define themselves as lesbian or gay even if they have not engaged in sexual behaviour with or even feel a sexual attraction toward someone of their same gender. Some radical feminists, for example, might find a lesbian rather than heterosexual identity more consistent with their political or ethical ideology. There are numerous possibilities for combinations of sexual feelings, behavioural enactment, and self-definition. Educators and health professionals need to be aware of the oversimplification and inadequacy of conventional categories used to describe nonheterosexuals as well as heterosexuals.

Sexual orientation is a multidimensional construct and includes sexual dreams, fantasies, desire, feelings, sexual behaviour, self-defined sexual categorisation, sexual attitudes, gender identity, and sexual orientation linked life style (Lehtonen, 1995). Dreams, fantasies, feelings and sexual orientation are usually kept private. Behaviour, life style and attitudes are more visible, at least to some people. It is also common for people who define themselves as heterosexual to occasionally have a sexual dream about or erotic feeling toward someone of their same gender. Not all people who have same gender feelings and sexual experiences construct a gay, lesbian or bisexual identity. However, some do live gay or lesbian lifestyles characterised by living with or dating someone of their gender and taking part in the activities of gay and lesbian communities. Although it is common for gays and lesbians to have tolerant attitudes toward diversity, this is not always the case. For example, gay men with a traditional gender role identification may be prejudiced against effeminate men. Among people of all major orientation groups — homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual— a great deal of variation exists with respect to almost any quality or characteristic.

Because of this plurality and variation it is difficult to determine the number and proportion of non-heterosexuals and transgendered individuals. Depending on the research method it has been estimated that homosexuals and bisexuals make up 1-15 % of the Finnish population or between 50 000 and 750 000 people (see Kontula & Haavio-Mannila 1993; Sievers & Stålström 1984; Kontula 1987; Diamond 1993). The proportion of sexual minorities changes depending on the question asked and the sample. If the question requests respondents to identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual, the answers will differ from those to a question about ever having had erotic feelings for a person of the same gender. For example, in a 1993 survey of students at the University of Helsinki, 9% reported that they were either often or sometimes attracted to persons of the same gender, yet 3% of the respondents described

their sexual orientation as bisexual, gay or lesbian (personal communication, Elina Haavio-Mannila). It is estimated that there are about 50,000 transvestites and about 5000 transsexuals in Finland. Not all transsexuals want to have surgical treatments.

Lesbians, gays and bisexuals in Finland are often grouped together and referred to as a sexual minority, and recently transgendered persons have been referred to as a gender minority. These minorities do not form a coherent well-defined group with clear boundaries. Variations in age, residence, gender, religion, education, language, background and cultural heritage as well as possible disabilities and social status influence how they as nonheterosexual or transgender people live and create images of themselves. Although nonheterosexuals look for models and materials from their environment and culture to aid in the construction of their self concept, they can also be considered active agents involved in this construction process. Finland is a small country with only a small immigrant/foreign population. About 99% of the population of Finland consists of racially white-looking Finns, and the income distribution is not great, among the smallest in Europe. The culture is fairly homogenous and similarity and conformity are valued more than plurality and difference. The needs of minorities are often not accepted and frequently discussions about the human rights of lesbians and gays are considered a demand for special advantages.

## Heterosexism and Homophobia in Finland

Historically, public discourse about homosexuality and transgender issues has been linked to religious, medical and legal considerations (Foucault 1984; Weeks 1986). These discourses posit the views that heterosexual relationships and marriage including the nuclear family are better for society's well-being and more "natural" and healthier for the individual than are other lifestyles. Christianity labelled sexual activities outside heterosexual marriage as sins against God. Medical doctors defined individuals who engaged in same gender sex as sick and psychologically degenerate and laws defined this activity as a crime. Those who engaged in transgender behaviour were subjected to similar negative reactions by religious, medical and judicial institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Attention should not be directed only towards social institutions but also to heterosexist ways of thinking about sexuality and gender. Heterosexism operates on many levels (Herek 1990). Cultural heterosexism includes negative labelling and exclusion of non-heterosexualities by major societal institutions in all basic areas – the economy, government, the family, education, religion and medicine. Psychological heterosexism is a way of thinking adopted by an individual, which can result in homonegative prejudices. Heterosexism or heteronormativity can also be defined as a belief in the superiority and self-evidence of heterosexuality in which non-heterosexuality or non-heterosexual persons

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<sup>2</sup> These labels and reactions are discussed more in the chapter of this book by Olli Stålström and Jussi Nissinen

are consciously or unconsciously shut off from programmes, happenings or other activities (Sears & Williams 1997). A common heterosexist assumption is that everyone is heterosexual. Other options are not considered or even silenced. Instead of speaking of psychological heterosexism, some have used the term homophobia which can be defined as irrational fear of homosexuality in others, the fear of homosexual feelings within oneself, or self-loathing because of one's homosexuality. Homophobia can be expressed in many ways, silently and covertly (exclusion and avoidance) as well as blatantly and obviously (jokes, name-calling, violence) (Epstein & Johnson 1994).

The general population accepts numerous myths and stereotypes about nonheterosexuals and transgendered people. One such belief is that there are major biological and physical differences between nonheterosexuals and others. A common stereotype is that gay men are always effeminate and lesbians masculine. In heterosexist thinking children of transgendered or non-heterosexual persons will develop gender and sexual disorders. Research has not found children raised in these nontraditional families to have a higher incidence of such problems (e.g., King & Pattison 1991). Sexual minorities are often judged and thought about primarily with respect to their "perceived" sexual behaviour instead of according to the wide range of qualities and activities that are commonly used in reference to their heterosexual friends and acquaintances. (See Heikkinen 1994; Lehtonen 1996)

A typical homophobic reaction is the violence towards men who are thought to be homosexuals by men unknown to their victims. For young non-heterosexuals, schools can be unsafe places and name calling and bullying linked with homosexuality is common. Research in the 1980's (Grönfors et al., 1984, N=1051) indicated that overall every sixth gay or bisexual man had experienced violence based on his sexual orientation. For men over 35 years, the proportion who experienced such violence was 25 %. This type of violence usually occurs outside gay restaurants and in parks which are places for men to meet a sex partner. The aggressors are usually groups of young men. Violence towards women is more often committed by acquaintances and by men who propose that sexual intercourse with them will 'cure' them of lesbianism.

Researchers have found that boys' attitudes towards homosexuality are especially negative in comprehensive school when they are 13 to 15 years old (Kontula 1987; Lehtonen 1995). Findings from research indicate that only a small minority of boys reacted positively to homosexuality. Despite the fact that most homosexuals hide their sexual identity, 12 % of women and 21% of men reported that they had been teased, discriminated against or called names in school or university because of their sexual orientation (Grönfors et al., 1984). In my own survey research involving adult lesbian, gay, and bisexuals most of the young (under 30 years old) respondents had heard negative stories about homosexuality from their class mates. Boys much more often than girls, told these stories. Boys also frequently used references to homosexuals as swear words or to degrade or make fun of another boy. Homophobic bullying is not

always directed towards gays or bisexuals, but works as a control mechanism as 'ordinary' boys are growing up to be 'ordinary' men. This homophobic culture in schools seems to be used to construct a distinct type of heterosexual masculinity (see also Mac An Ghail 1994, Nayak & Kehily 1997).

Despite the stereotypes and heteronormative attitudes on transgender issues and homosexuality, general attitudes in these areas have improved (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila 1993). In a large national survey, two thirds of Finns regarded homosexuality a private matter that authorities should not interfere with. However, the majority of adolescents report negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Kontula 1987). On the other hand, as they grow older their attitudes become more positive and in general, adults between 18 and 44 and especially women have accepting attitudes toward non-heterosexualities (Kontula 1991).

Silence and lack of recognition of sexual minorities are more common than overt prejudice and homophobic action. In schools, for example, gay and lesbian artists, writers and historical figures are portrayed in a heterosexual context. Consideration is not given to the possible influences of their same sex eroticism on their creative works and accomplishments. In addition, many public discussions of nonheterosexuality and transgender issues have a narrow focus, concentrate on negative aspects, or deal with sensational topics. Nevertheless, some attempts have recently been made to expand the curriculum in school sex education and to sensitise social and health care workers (Lehtonen 1995, 1998c)

Lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered persons have had to deal with sickness, sin, crime and other labels as well as heterosexist attitudes. Some have adopted these negative stereotypes. Some have resisted them but these labels and attitudes impact their life in many ways and contribute to feelings of low self-worth, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and excess drinking. Sexual and gender minorities have in the past tried to hide these problems. Recently the mental and alcohol problems of non-heterosexuals and transgendered people have been acknowledged. This is an important first step for now health and education systems can begin to provide services and information to help these minorities.

## Out of the Closets or Not?

Only a small minority of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgendered people are living their life openly which means that they mention their sexual or gender identities to general acquaintances. Most, however, do talk about their identities, feelings or relationships to some other people: most commonly to those whom they feel would be understanding of their situation such as lesbians, gay or transgender individuals, family members, and close friends. Most keep this information from their school, study or work mates or tell only a very small group of people in education and work environments

(Grönfors et al., 1984; Lehtonen 1995, 1999). Because the general societal expectation is that people are heterosexual, being open about sexual orientation is an on-going process and continually presents dilemmas. There are three ways to deal with openness about one's sexual orientation: the first is to live as heterosexual, the second is to adopt a lesbian and gay life style and the third is a combination of the other two—to sometimes speak honestly about sexual orientation and to sometimes keep it a secret (Davies 1992). The same type of patterns apply in most situations for transgendered people.

The situation of transsexuals is slightly different from that of the homosexuals, especially if they are living the gender role they want and if they have started the sex correction process. If transsexuals are accepted in their new role, they do not need to face other people's amazement or disgust. In situations where transsexuals need to tell their identification number or reveal their body, problems can occur if their name and social security number have not been changed or if the sex correction process is incomplete. Some transsexuals hope to be "ordinary" women or men and choose not to disclose their previous gender. Others want to acknowledge their transsexualism publicly with the view that their story will help others in a similar situation. Some find openness easier because they do not have to make efforts to hide their past.

The situation of transvestites varies depending on whether they are always living the opposite gender role, or only on certain occasions, or only in their own home privately and alone. There are also motivational differences. Some want to behave in a variety of ways not expected to their gender and others are mainly interested in getting sexual satisfaction by wearing clothes of the opposite gender. Only a few transvestites always dress in opposite gender clothing. (Pimenoff 1997; Toivonen 1997).

Reasons for hiding sexual and gender identity vary greatly. Some are unsure about their personal issues but most are simply afraid of the negative reaction they would receive from honest disclosure. Sexual and gender minorities fear that revealing their identities would result in teasing, exclusion and loss of friends. Some of these minorities still choose to be open in order to live honestly as themselves, to avoid the effort needed to hide personal matters, or to work to improve the social situation of individuals like themselves.

Open or known non-heterosexuals or transgendered people can be models for either their communities or a larger public. The characteristics of these open individuals often become stereotyped and generalised to all sexual and gender minorities. The current view of most therapists as well as members of the minorities themselves emphasises acceptance of pluralities and differences rather than limited categorisation of sexual and gender groups (Lehtonen 1996).

Although discussions about openness versus secretiveness of sexuality and gender are major topics for many non-heterosexuals and transgendered persons, issues involving relationship problems and loneliness are also common topics of conversation.

Professionals in the health, education and social welfare professions need to be sensitised to the special problems that confront sexual and gender minorities.

## Social Change

The social and legal situation of nonheterosexuals has greatly improved in Finland, largely due to the work of SETA (see chapter 9). The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs has also helped by supporting research projects (such as the study on HIV risks of men having sex with men) and appointing committees to work on issues of concern to sexual and gender minorities. In addition, this ministry has included information about homosexuality and the risk of HIV infection in the magazine sent yearly to all 16 year olds. Problems that still exist for sexual and gender minorities involve discrimination at work, and teasing, harassment and violence or its threat in schools and elsewhere. These minorities still frequently encounter situations where their needs are ignored, more often because of the assumption of heterosexuality rather than intended exclusion.

Major goals for the beginning of the 21st century include not only legal equality based on sexual orientation and gender identity but also equality in the services and benefits of society. Education of social and health care workers, teachers, members of parliament, police, and lawyers about minority issues is needed. Financial support of services, education, and research must be continued in order to improve the sexual health of sexual and gender minorities. Research has consistently supported the view that these minority groups can contribute a great deal to the betterment of society. Indeed many have argued that a more accepting and tolerant view of sexual and gender roles would benefit both heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals. It has been difficult to change the long established and widely held beliefs and practises that have denied minorities their sexual rights. Yet substantial progress has been made. If present trends continue, we may be able to consider Finland a model country in promoting good sexual health for sexual and gender minorities. Societal and community efforts do not change our heteronormative culture easily. Old ways of thinking and traditional practises do not change in one moment, but without these activities human rights and equality do not even have a chance to become a reality.

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