

# 1. Introduction

## Background on sexual research

### Different approaches

People have always been curious about topics related to sexuality, partly because of their secret nature. Almost without exception, expressions of sexuality have been restricted to the private sphere, away from the gaze of others. In certain cultures not even married spouses set eyes upon each other naked. People have always been unsure as to what kind of sexual behavior can be considered normal. Information about sexuality has therefore been very desirable from a social standpoint, and it has also become increasingly important in the promotion of sexual wellbeing and health.

Sexological research responded to this need for information in many different ways during the past 100 years. Some researchers attempted to map out the sexual attitudes and behavior of populations to make broader generalizations – also the purpose of this book. Other researchers have focused on particular population groups or on special issues. In such cases, researchers have used qualitative research methods in favor of surveys. The methods and perspectives used in each case have varied depending on the scientific or occupational field in question.

Sexological data is compiled and developed through the interdisciplinary approach that characterizes the field. In Finland, research into sexuality hails at least as far back as the anthropological studies of the late 1800s conducted by Edward Westermarck (Westermarck, 1891). The subsequent period has been characterized particularly by the sexological research and publications in the field of medicine. There has also been the systematic mapping out of discourse on sexual politics (Nieminen, 1951). A bibliographic work published in Finland contains a comprehensive record of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century's research and publication, *The Bibliography of Finnish Sexual Literature 1549–1989* (Turpeinen, 1991). This bibliography was later updated by the research division of the Finnish Association for Sexology.

An early Finnish study on sexual matters that should be mentioned here is a survey of male students from the early 1950s, inspired by Alfred Kinsey (Westling, 1954). The survey data mentioned in the Prologue, representative of the entire

Finnish population, was compiled in 1971 and the results were published as the book (in Finnish) *The sexual life of Finns* (Sievers et al., 1974). It was the second study about sex ever, worldwide, that was representative of an entire population. The first such study had been conducted in Sweden in 1967 (Zetterberg, 1969). The Finnish study provided the groundwork to examine the changes in sexual lifestyles that have occurred in Finland over the past several decades.

In the 1900s, sexological topics became increasingly popular as subjects of academic theses. The fields of sociology, public health, medicine, social policy, social psychology, psychology, history, pedagogy, media studies, political science, legal studies, theology, literary studies, philosophy, and philology all have addressed sexological topics. Sexological information is interdisciplinary and, at the same time, used by multiple occupational groups. Finnish and international studies on the development and testing of contraceptive methods have represented a particular area of Finnish expertise.

Until the second half of the 1980s it was relatively rare worldwide to examine the sexual behavior of an entire population. At that point, the problem of AIDS spurred research into sexual risk groups. Nationwide sexual surveys were launched in Europe (Hubert et al., 1998; Wellings et al., 1994; Spira et al., 1994) and the Third World (Cleland & Ferry, 1995; Gage, 1995), financed with funds allocated to HIV research. Up to that point, the promotion of sexual health or the academic interest regarding sexual issues were not considered good enough reasons to fund research in this field. There was one exception: Finland. Here, we were able to conduct the 1971 survey (Sievers et al., 1974) and the later survey carried out in connection with the FINSEX project in 1992 (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 1993), funded by the Academy of Finland.

The present study compares the sexual lifestyles of Finns to those of Swedes, St. Petersburg residents and Estonians. The study on the sexual lifestyles of St. Petersburg residents, included in the large study *Social change and cultural delay in Russia*, and, again, funded by the Academy of Finland (Haavio-Mannila & Rotkirch, 1997; 2001; Rotkirch, 2000) seems to be the first study on sexuality to compare Eastern and Western Europe, using identical interview questions and guidelines for sexual autobiographies. This interview and survey data on the adult population, including the sexual autobiographies – which also have literary merit – and in-depth interviews, presents a rich and varied picture of the phenomena of people's private lives. The intention is to continue to process this wealth of material even beyond the completion of this book.

The sexual lives and roles of Estonians and Finns have previously been compared in the context of family life and changes in it (Haavio-Mannila & Kelam, 1996), the ideals regarding marriage among young people (Haavio-Mannila & Tiit, 1981), and sexual behavior among young people (Papp et al., 1998; Papp, 1997). Comparing Estonia and St. Petersburg to Finland is of particular interest,

because Estonia has generally tended to identify with the west rather than the east. During the Soviet period, the expression of sexuality among Estonians was also influenced by Russia; for example in the case of contraceptives, Estonians were dependent upon Soviet policies concerning contraceptives. In addition, from the vantage point of the Soviet Union and therefore also Estonia, it was difficult to keep pace with the sexual revolution that took place in the west in the late sixties and early seventies.

In Finland, the change that has occurred in sexual culture can be seen in the new way in which the issue of sexuality is treated in the media. Many topics that previously belonged strictly to the private sphere are now discussed publicly (Kontula & Kosonen, 1996). In particular, women's and health magazines have begun to educate people to become better lovers, and many public figures have become candid about their sexual lives. Pornography has been liberalized little by little. In this book, we will attempt to provide answers to at least these questions: What impact has all of this had on sex in Finland? Do the developments we uncovered in our previous research (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 1995a) continue? Our second task is to analyze the similarities and differences in sexual lifestyles in the four Baltic regions. This book looks for answers to these and many other questions.

In addition to depictions of attitudes about sex and sexual behavior, the book will also look at the social factors that pertain to sexual expression. We will analyze how information related to social background, generation, lifestyle and sexual history explains attitudes toward sex and sexual experiences in different years in two Nordic countries, i.e. Finland and Sweden, and two areas of the former Soviet Union, Estonia and St. Petersburg.

### **Sex and sexuality**

Earlier, what people viewed as 'sex' consisted exclusively of the act of sexual intercourse. Nowadays, sex and sexuality are understood to mean approximately the same thing. Individual preferences, needs, desires and dreams, as well as the information, skills and resources connected to realizing them are all connected to sex and sexuality. Frequently, people have different impediments or lacks (such as lack of a sexual partner) that make it difficult to satisfy their sexual needs. Also included in sex are various meanings and images and their interpretations, and of course sexual activities, or expressions of sexuality. Erotic feelings and sexual activities are connected to individual orientations and proclivities as well as the social norms and customs of the reference groups and the society at large. People's individual sexual desire, self-image and orientation vary, and people try to actualize their sexuality in accordance to these factors. No society permits everything, and transgressing the boundary of propriety leads to punishment.

Sexual life occurs at many levels. Sexual motivation is grounded in biology, but the conscious awareness of sexual issues, and processing and realizing them, is a complex physiological, psychological and mental process that requires cultural knowledge and understanding. A local sexual culture consists of the different levels and forms of sexuality. Sexual culture includes, among other things, rules concerning sexual interaction (approved and forbidden things), conceptions of what constitutes a sexy appearance, public control of sexual matters, and theoretical conceptions and definitions of sexuality and the nature of femininity and masculinity.

In this book, sexual matters are examined as a phenomenon that consists of many different levels and with a social and cultural grounding. In other words, sexuality is not viewed merely as a mechanically occurring biological instinct or a certain stage in evolutionary development that maximizes the preservation of the human species. The social dimension in sexuality comprises numerous actions, expectations, stories, identity formations and knowledge – all connected to how human genitals react.

There are universal and permanent characteristics within the sphere of sexuality – for instance, the avoidance of sexual relations between parents and children, and the relative decline in sexual interest as people grow older. Many of the characteristics that humans and animals display in their sexual behavior are connected to the propagation of the species. The difference is that animals mostly mate during mating season and always in the same manner, while among humans the sexual act is intertwined with many different actions, institutions, rites and representations (Featherstone, 1999, 1).

People are sexually attracted to one another in all societies, but the way in which sexual love is recognized varies culturally and historically. Eroticism, or love life, means to culturally define sexuality according to a certain ideal. When speaking of love, a distinction is often made between passion and companionship (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993, 67). Passionate love has also been called ‘being in love’, romantic love or ‘being madly in love’. Companionate love means warm affection, which is often related to commitment. Passionate love is common in the beginning of a love or sex relationship, but after a year or two the relationship usually continues – if indeed it does – as a more restrained companionate love.

Human biological characteristics, like sex and age, regulate the actualization of sexual life, though they are not the only factors that affect it. Because of physiological differences, men’s and women’s sexual expression is in part complementary. Sexual relationships among same-sex partners indicate that people can and want to have sex with a partner even when both partners share the same physiological characteristics.

Sex for the purpose of reproduction (propagating the species) is not possible at a very young age or for women who are past fertility age. Age does not predeter-

mine sexual life, however, economic, social and cultural factors, for example economic wealth, increased awareness, and improved health care have contributed to a situation where people reach sexual maturity at a younger age and remain fertile longer.

The focal point of sexuality is increasingly not the propagation of the species but the seeking and maintaining of social relationships and pleasure. As a result of more effective contraception, the roles of men and women as active and passive sexual agents have undergone a change. This has offered new opportunities and situations for expressing sexuality.

### **Sexual generations**

As time passes, people who were born in a certain period age, and their bodies change and become brittle. At the same time, the ways people express their sexuality are changing. One of the themes of this study is in fact to map out the changes that have occurred between the seventies and the nineties in the sexual attitudes and behavior of Finnish people who belong in different generations. We will focus in particular on the differences and similarities in the lives of three generations. Those born in 1917–36 we will refer to as the generation of sexual restraint, those born in 1937–56 will be termed the generation of sexual revolution, and those born in 1957–80 are the generation of sexual equality.

When the generation of sexual restraint (the elderly) were young, it was not common to discuss sexuality openly, especially within the earshot of children. In the patriarchal society characterized by Christian morals sexual behavior was monitored vigorously, and actions that threatened the social order were condemned harshly. Sexual expression among people who were not intending to reproduce, same-sex sexual relationships and masturbation, and women's sexual independence were all denied or prohibited. A sexual double standard afforded men more sexual freedom than most women, and consequently the sexual aims and behaviors of men and women differed. Because safe contraceptive methods were unavailable, the fear of pregnancy occupied an important role in the sexual lives of many people.

The generation of sexual revolution idealized sexual liberation and wanted to make sexual education available to everyone. The revolutionary generation wanted to be rid of all the traditions and power that it assumed the preceding generation represented. Sexual liberation, according to Lyttkens (1989, 164), was possible in part because parents of the generation of sexual revolution were not as authoritarian as the parents of the generation before.

The generation of sexual revolution (the middle-aged) was more likely to have had premarital and extramarital relationships; they employed a greater range of sexual techniques, and had a greater incidence of divorce and remarriage than the

generation of sexual restraint. New contraceptive methods made it possible to have uncommitted sex without the fear of pregnancy. Some feminists, however, criticized the fact that sexual liberation contained hidden social pressures to force women into casual sexual relationships.

In Finland, the work for sexual liberation in public was connected to the fight for gender equality and sexual equality in numerous organizations (for example, Yhdistys 9 forwarding gender equality, Sexpo furthering sexual politics and Seta working for sexual equality). The media also spoke out in favor of sexual liberation (Kontula & Kosonen, 1994). Talk of liberation came to be seen in a different light after AIDS became a matter of public knowledge in the mid-1980s. After that, safe sex rather than sexual liberation became a marketable item. People were forced to re-evaluate their sexual objectives.

The generation of sexual equality (young people) has been characterized by a narrowing of differences between men and women. Even though the moral double standard has not entirely disappeared, girls and boys do act in increasingly similar ways inside the sexual sphere.

The young generation emphasizes that individuals should be free to choose their sexual behavior without interference from parents or authorities. At the same time, when young people commit to a couple relationship, they expect mutual adherence to this contract that they have entered into as individuals. This came out in the 1992 study on Finnish sex, which indicated that the younger sexual generation's attitudes (toward everything except extramarital relationships) were more liberal than attitudes among the middle-aged and oldest generations (Haavio-Mannila et al., 1996).

We will interpret these findings somewhat belatedly here. Young people are more adamant in their expectation that the spouse be faithful than are middle-aged or older people, because as they enter into a love relationship, they are already well aware of the possibility of divorce or the end of a cohabitation. They do not necessarily enter into the relationship with the assumption that it will last a lifetime, but they do consider it important that as long as the couple relationship is 'in effect', the spouses remain faithful to each other. Among the middle-aged and older generations, people who entered into a couple relationship in their youth did so from the premise that the relationship would last until death, often for other reasons besides love – for example, because of pregnancy, economic advantages or custom. The older generation may even view extramarital flings as invigorating, and in any case as a better alternative than divorce.

### **International comparisons**

In this book, we will compare sexual trends in Finland from the early 1970s to the late 1990s, as well as the manifestations of sexuality in the four areas studied.

We will examine how attitudes toward sexuality and the manifestations of sexuality reflect the state and development of society at large. What are the changes that have occurred in sexual life in recent decades, and how do the processes of change differ in the Nordic countries and areas of the former Soviet Union? To what extent do traditional sexual norms and the practical manifestations of sexuality, and the differences in the timing of the cultural change affect people's sexual life today?

In an international comparison we will distinguish between sexual equality between the genders and the strive toward sexual freedom. Previously it has been found (Haavio-Mannila & Rotkirch, 2001) that sexual life in the Soviet Union was largely characterized by a fairly far-reaching equality between the genders (for example, women could initiate relationships and express their desires), but sexual behavior remained within the realm of tradition. In Russia today gender roles have polarized with regard to attitudes toward sex and certain sexual behaviors, for example in the practice of prostitution, so that women behave according to the traditional female role and men according to the traditional male role.

Various expressions of experimental sexuality, for example oral sex and masturbation, became common in St. Petersburg 10–15 years later than in Finnish cities. On the other hand, the incidence of certain phenomena that bespeak sexual freedom, such as multiple sexual positions, parallel relationships and divorce, was higher in St. Petersburg and Estonia than in Finland and Sweden. Because access to contraceptives was problematic in the area of the former Soviet Union, important contraceptive methods included abstinence, coitus interruptus, the rhythm method and abortion.

Up until the 1970s in the Nordic countries, sexual gender roles were fairly differentiated and sexual behavior remained traditional. In recent decades, sexual roles have become more similar and simultaneously sexual behavior has become more liberal.

The international comparison is divided into three primary thematic areas: first of all, we will examine differences and similarities between the four regions according to themes. Second, we will attempt to evaluate the effect of the geographic east-west dimension on sexual life. Is there a continuum from Sweden to Finland, Estonia and St. Petersburg, with regard to attitudes and manifestations of sexuality?

The third question is this: To what extent was sexual life different in the past, and how different or similar is it today, on the one hand, in the Nordic countries (Finland and Sweden), and on the other hand, in areas of the former Soviet Union (Estonia and St. Petersburg)?

### **The structure of this book**

This work will analyze sexual phenomena in their social and cultural contexts. Chapter 1 will describe the empirical data and the processes used by the researchers.

Chapter 2 will focus on attitudes toward sexual initiation and the first sexual experiences. We will describe numerous factors that are related to sexual initiation: age at first sexual intercourse, characteristics of the first sexual partner, gender of initiator of first sexual intercourse, and the contraceptive methods used in first sexual intercourse. For the purpose of further analysis, we organized the respondents into three groups according to age at first sexual intercourse: early (under 17 years), normal (17–19 years) or late (20 and over).

Chapter 3 contains a discussion of couple formation and sexual relationships. We examine the number of sexual partners and the commitment level of the relationship at the present moment, as well as in the course of a person's lifetime. According to their present type of couple relationship people were classified as single, living-apart-together, cohabiting and married. 'Living-apart-together' (LAT) refers to people who are in a regular sexual relationship but do not live together. They have also been called 'two-apartment relationships'.

In a person's lifetime, he or she may have one or more sexual partners with whom he or she may enter into one or more marriages or cohabitations. In accordance with marriage laws and customs relating to cohabitation, a person is usually only engaged in one marriage or cohabitation at a time. But he or she may simultaneously have several permanent or temporary sexual relationships, or parallel relationships. We have classified the respondents into lifetime sexual relationship types based on the number of marriages or cohabitation relationships and on whether or not they have had parallel relationships. Lifetime relationship types correspond to some extent to the sexual relationship types used in autobiography studies – one great, lifelong monogamous relationship, consecutive relationships, searching, devitalized unions, and parallel relationships (Kontula & Haavio-Mannila, 1997; Haavio-Mannila & Roos, 1999).

Chapter 4 will examine the essence of sexual desire. Respondents who were in a couple relationship were grouped based on the frequency of sexual intercourse and the hopes attached to sexual intercourse, into people with a high level of desire, regular level of desire and low level of desire. There will also be a discussion of lack of sexual desire.

In Chapter 5 we will look at sex with a partner, as well as sexual practices that people can engage in alone. Among sexual expressions that occurred with a partner, sexual intercourse was the most central – meaning sex that involved either penetration, oral sex or manually stimulating the partner. (Vaginal) penetration can occur only in sex between a man and a woman, but same-sex partners can also practise oral and manual sex. The surveys conducted in Finland, St. Peters-



burg and Estonia did not ask respondents to specify the sexual partner's gender, unlike the Swedish survey. Therefore, the responses concerning sexual partners and practices cover all sexual relationships and practices between different-sex and same-sex partners.

For purposes of the study, data on sexual practices with a partner was available for the partner with whom the respondents had had the most recent relationship, time elapsed from last sexual intercourse, gender of initiator of sexual intercourse, use of alcohol before intercourse, and sexual positions. Data from respondents' entire life spans covers discussing sexual matters with a partner, touching and intimacy in the couple relationship, and sex with a same-sex partner. In addition to these practices, the chapter takes a look at manual stimulation, oral sex, anal sex, and bondage and sadomasochism. Finally, the topics of paying for sex and accepting payment for sex will be discussed.

It is possible to practice sex also without a partner. Among expressions of auto-eroticism or 'solo sex' the discussion will include masturbation and the use of sex magazines, books and videos, i.e. the use of pornographic materials.

Chapter 6 deals with sexual health and wellbeing. The first part examines orgasm and sexual satisfaction as well as problems with sexual arousal and duration of sexual intercourse. The last part of the chapter is concerned with contraception, abortion and sexually transmitted diseases.

The final chapter (Chapter 7) compares the sex lives of Finnish people to those of people living in Sweden, St. Petersburg and Estonia in 1996–2000. A summary of findings is also presented in this chapter, and a discussion of how issues related to social development explain the differences that exist between the four areas in the study.