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QUAERE

ETHICS OF SEXUALITY: THE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH OF THE MORAL VALUES OF EU CITIZENS

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Abstract

This paper deals with moral values of the individuals and their relation to their sexual behaviour. Its aim is to examine the moral ideas related to sexuality and the sources of these ideas found by the qualitative research conducted among citizens of the EU in 2016. Even though the qualitative research strategy does not provide a representative view of the society, it represents the problem, thus a simple typology of the moral views found at the informants is presented.

Key words: *Ethics, Morality, Sex, Sexuality, Qualitative Research, Moral Values,*

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper tries to investigate an ethical context of sexuality through a sociological research, in particular through qualitative interviews made with residents of four member states of the European Union in 2016. Its aim is to explore what moral values surround sexuality of individuals, where they spring from, how their changes are perceived and how people assess sexuality presented in their society.

Ethics is seen here as an area consisting of three distinctive layers: custom – morality – ethics, where custom means social conformity, which is local and time-varying, and which says what “should be done” without any reasoning. Morality is practical and always individual, it addresses one’s moral consciousness. Ethics itself is a part of practical philosophy which does not only ask what is permitted, but looks for the best way of acting possible (Sokol 2016: 65-69). Sexuality, however, is not reduced merely to coitus and other activities aiming directly to orgasm, but it takes into account the fact that apart from its marginal forms (e.g. prostitution, casual sex, ...) sexual encountering usually involves reluctance and hesitation and never goes straight to orgasm. Normally it involves courting, erotica and a lot of social institutions enabling them (e.g. parties, dancing, promenades). Throughout the whole paper sexuality is considered to be an activity that has a moral dimension, although somebody would like to claim the opposite¹.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The empirical research tried to find out what moral ideas people create about their own sexual acts and what the source of such ideas is. This problem can be elaborated into following research questions:

1. How do the individuals perceive linking of sexuality and morality?
2. What sexual behaviour does the individual consider moral?
3. What sexual behaviour does the individual consider immoral?
4. What makes such a behaviour (im)moral?
5. What is the source of these ideas?

The nature of the explored problem called for an inductive research strategy and so for a qualitative method, which, in its constructivist paradigm, proceeds from Thomas Theorem

¹ The reason for such a claim would be obvious: sexuality had been limited by religious morality for a long time and after its liberation it needed some god (sexual freedom) to aim towards and a devil (which happened to be morality) to escape from. Yet, morality has not disappeared, it is just called differently.

claiming that the action is caused by interpretation of the given situation not by any divine truth², and so every construction of meanings depends on the cooperation of all the participants in the interview.

The explored sample consisted of 18 people, gained by the purposive sampling in which two first informants were the people I had known before then the sampling proceeded with the snow-ball method. I was successful in finding informants of different sexual orientations (6 homosexuals, 10 heterosexuals and 2 bisexuals), beliefs (9 atheists, 2 Buddhists, 5 Roman Catholics, 2 Anglicans) family background (5 single, 4 married, 7 partnered, 2 divorced) place of residence (11 the Czech Republic, 2 Italy, 2 Germany, 1 England and 2 Poland), gender (6 women and 12 men), education (6 secondary school, 2 college, 4 bachelor's degree, 6 master's degree) and age range (21-46 the average was 29,3). What I did not succeed in, and what can be a certain limit of this research, is the fact that I did not get to any teenage informants, who could have offered the most up-to-date (but also the least stable) moral ideals, I also did not get to any basically educated or even uneducated informant. Also the most of the informants (11 people) were from the Czech Republic.

As a particular method of data gaining a non-standardized face-to-face interview was used. In order to get 18 informants I had to address 34 people, which means 47% refused to talk to me, the reasons of their refusal was not usually explained or it was very vague (e. g., It is better not to talk about it; If I told you, you would blush, etc.). The interviews were recorded later transcribed and sensitive parts which could identify an informant were anonymized. Analysis was performed continuously (Creswell 2014). At the first phase I used the emerging codes, slowly developing a code book used for the follow-up interviews, at the second phase I created categories and looked for the links and order among them. All informants were presented the purpose of my research; at the beginning of an interview an informed consent with purpose, anonymity and future data archiving was granted. Informants always knew which part of their speech would be recorded.

The chosen method, however, involves certain limits. Firstly, due to the qualitative research strategy the discovered moral values cannot be claimed to be the prevailing ones of European population. Also the reliability of qualitative data is low, especially in comparison with quantitative strategy. But since the aim was a deep insight into the problem, traditional reliability was not the main measure (Creswell 2014: 256).

3. ETHICS OF SEXUALITY IN THE EXPLORED POPULATION

There were no significant similarities among the informants of the same nationality, education, gender, orientation, background or age, the only thing which seemed to play some part was their religion. Nevertheless, the rules given by a certain church did not influence the members of that church only, but the atheists as well, though, in a negative way – the rules of Roman Catholic Church were named as an example of hypocrisy by 6 informants and stood in the centre of moral conceptions of 8 informants, 4 of the latter created their own moral conceptions in their strict opposition. Even the believers did not fully follow the teaching of their churches. For instance Informant 9, a Roman Catholic gay could hardly fulfil a procreative function of sexuality, therefore he hesitated whether this function is important and then he rejected it. Informant 7, a female Buddhist, rather tended to confront Buddha and Christ and concluded that the only source of right actions is human's heart and love. Informant 18, an Italian lesbian, was very strictly convinced about the conspiracy against humanity taking place in all the current religious movements, very similarly Informant 12, an Italian gay, saw papacy as the only remaining monarchy in the world with all its bad points and with hypocritical suppression of normal human needs.

² It literally says: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences." (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 571-572)

None of the informants saw morality and sexuality as two separate things; the link between morality and sexuality seems to be valid, it is not questioned and everybody is aware of ethical dimension of sex. All the informants had more difficulties to express what was good than what was bad. Problems with expressing wrong actions may come from their effort not to judge the others, because all informants condemned hypocritical morality, even though some condemnations of hypocrisy were only proclaimed not observed. Surprisingly, nobody mentioned the Bible, which may result from many reasons: Mark D. Jordan, for example, thinks that Bible can be a source of controversial readings, because everybody searches there for what they want to find (Jordan 2007: 20-31).

No extreme values appeared in the sample. No informant took sex as a simple tool of procreation; no one took it as a matter of pure pleasure with any other regards either. No informant condemned sex in a Victorian way as something principally wrong either.

3.1 What is moral?

The sampled informants agreed on several things: every sexual act that was not forced or violent is good; even the religiously based informants considered sex a pleasant thing, which had to be consensual and to bring pleasure; at the same time they realized the problematic nature of pleasure, which is hard to judge in terms of possible harm or wider moral context. Two informants appeared at least partly hedonistic: Everything evolving and deepening intimacy was seen as good, as same as everything beneficial to the relationship. Informants 16, a British gay male, whose moral conception was strongly relationship-aimed, regarded exploring his fetishes and hidden needs to be important, because their satisfying prevents relationship from boredom and from perishing. A very similar conception could be found in Informant 2, a Czech gay male, who also emphasized the danger of being bored. An easy ethics of reciprocity was observable in Informant 6, who claimed “I must get what I give”.

3.2 What is immoral?

Non-consensual acts and any violence were considered strictly immoral or bad. The most frequently mentioned bad acts were those violating freedom of a partner; purposely causing pain; the hypocritical acts; also violating an agreement was considered bad as well as humiliation of a partner and any behaviour harming either a partner or an informant. Informant 6 has created a very specific conception, in which sexual morals apply only to married people, a single human can do what they want. Informant 14, a male Buddhist from Germany wanted all sexual acts to be free of morals, but he obviously meant his own acts only. Some informants discussed disgusting things rather than immoral ones.

No agreement was achieved on marginal forms of sexuality. While some informants called a threesome immoral, wrong or humiliating, the others saw it as an unproblematic matter. Four informants considered extramarital sex an ideal form of realizing their own sexuality. Not surprisingly, homosexuality was seen positive by gay and bisexual informants, Informants 5 and 17 did not mind homosexual acts, Informants 1 and 12 saw homophobia as a typical manifestation of patriarchal society. Only unpaid prostitution was considered a problem.

3.3 Sources of moral values

Probably the most expectable source of values could be religion, but with the exception of one informant, religion was not obeyed rigidly. Informants 3, 6, 13, 18 did not distinguish between morality and law; consequently they considered every legally unanchored rule hypocritical and purposely limiting. Morals based on nature and biological-need satisfaction were represented by informants who saw sexual acts as general body necessity. Three informants based their moral conceptions opportunistically (e. g. on their sexual saturation,

drunkenness and relationship condition). The sources of two informants were completely individual, which did not rely on any moral system.

4. MORAL TYPOLOGY

A simple typology based on a main motive of moral considerations can be now made. This typology can surely be compared e. g. to Hiltner's moral considerations (Hiltner 1953) or to Kohlberg's stages of moral development (Kohlberg 1981), but it does not correspond with them, mainly due to the fact that they are hierarchized from the worst to the best.

Simple moral rules centered on one's ego – (Informants 5, 11, 14). What harms the informants must be wrong, what is beneficial to them must be good. The other people's feelings are reflected only basically and marginally usually in the terms of economy (money solves all problems). All of them were aware of a problematic social acceptance of such an attitude, which was visible in their effort to lean on something higher and more constitutive. Informant 5, therefore, refers to the biological necessity to solve sexual passions, informant 11 talks about vague love and understanding by heart, informant 14 mentions sexual organs as a source of possible redemption for everybody.

Conservative moral rules supplemented with idealized liberality – (Informants 4, 10, 15). These people observed conservative values in their real lives, but their ideals run wild with undetermined limits and regards. Informant 1, for example, would like to have an open relationship and sex with anybody, informant 15 imagines sexual freedom with no judgments and remorse. But in their real life they prefer sex with one partner and they realize that it would be impossible to have sex with anybody while being in marriage or a partnership.

Realistic moral rules based on a protest – (Informants 1, 2, 7, 12, 16, 18). These informants based their moral conceptions on a revolt against some existing or imagined moral system. The system, they were revolting against, was most frequently the Christian morality represented by the Bible and teaching of priests (Informants 1, 2, 7, 12, 18), sometimes it was simply any moral conception imposed on a human by a human (Informant 12, 16). Protest or revolt of these informants resulted in creating their own moral system, which some of them even needed to write down (Informant 1) realizing that only strictly given rules can be trusted.

Morality for everybody – (Informants 3, 6, 9, 17). Principles, on which people belonging to this group based their conceptions, were different, but morality was always seen as a system that did not allow any exceptions and is strictly binding for everybody. Informant 3, for example, claimed everybody had a right to have sex, having sex can be even required of a partner or husband. The others claimed sex was based on the mutual agreement between two partners (Informant 6, 17), but such an agreement was as binding as legal code, Informant 17 even claimed the partners living together had right (not just chance) to have regular sex with each other.

Complex independent morality – (Informants 8, 13). The last type is represented by people whose moral rules are independent and deeply internalized. They understood, it was themselves who created these rules, but yet they neither revolted against them, nor wanted to reject them. Informant 8, for instance, described his internalized morals as his private autopilot. These rules were conservative and based on agreement between partners and on a non-harming approach, both informants saw their inner values more important than any sexual pleasure. In a sharp contrast to the previous type, people having this moral conception did not judge the others and were very open-minded to all activities that they, however, completely forbade to themselves.

5. CONCLUSION

For many years, sexual ethics was obsessing about masturbation of pubescent boys, permitted sexual positions, virginity or sodomy. From this point of view, I consider the fact that these

“traditional” topics of sexual ethics were not even present in my research important. The conducted investigation shows sexual acts still have ethical dimension, even though it is not frequently called “ethical” in order to distinguish good and bad actions from unacceptable hypocrisy and moralizing. Morality is very often confused with law, which may be a result of the effort to define moral principles more strictly, clearly and to base them on something generally respected. In sexual ethics the reproductive function of sexuality does not seem to play any part, nobody seemed to see sex mainly as a tool of procreation, which supports Giddens’s theory of plastic sexuality freed from procreation (Giddens 1992). Since the Christian ethics is no longer taken for granted, the question of what moral conception is discussed, when we discuss sexual ethics, seems to be growingly interesting. The fact that no venereal diseases have been mentioned may be a bit alarming, in the age of increasing number of HIV positive people it may become an important ethical issue.

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