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AGNIESZKA RADKA

## A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF YOUNG WOMEN'S SEXUAL LIFE

### Introduction

Sexual activity in its broadest meaning is one of the essential elements of human life. That is why almost all psychological trends have been attempting to define the interdependence between a sexual life and a mental frame of a man. Despite a great amount of literature dealing with this problem, some issues have not been explained sufficiently. Such an issue is the influence of a concept of sexual life on a sexual activity of an individual. This work is concerned with sexual activity of young women, yet it may be helpful in drawing conclusions about men as well.

As it has been already mentioned in the introduction, the literature concerned with this problem is enormously vast, however the concepts of S. Freud, C. G. Jung, W. H. Masters and V. E. Johnson and K. Obuchowski seem especially vital for this paper.

The formulation of the research problem, which is the regulating influence of views, beliefs and attitudes to sexual life, has been inspired by A. Kuczyńska's notion "the concept of sexual life". The notion combines the psychological side of sexual life, as well as social variables, and simultaneously stresses the subjective dimension of the phenomena in question. "The concept of sexual life is a system of dynamic schemes. This cognitive representation of one's sexual life contains the overall knowledge concerning that sphere of life, which an individual achieves during his own activity in different social conditions. As well as other cognitive structures they can be discussed from the contents and formal point of view. The contents aspect comprises the aims people try to achieve (values), ways in which the aims are carried out (behaviour), and conditions in which realization takes place." (Kuczyńska, 1980)

In the course of the conducted experiments we took under consideration the influence of sexual activity, and which is connected, the concept of sexual life, on fulfilling both sexual and extrasexual needs, as well as the way the sexual

contact affects the development of emotional sphere of the partners. In order to elicit the research problem — “how do young women make up a psychological concept of sexual life” — one should present the theoretical assumptions accepted while conducting the research.

The theoretical foundation for this work were the concepts of T.Tomaszewski (1975) and the one of solving life problems of M.Kulczycki (1975). According to those authors the whole life activity of a man can be viewed as undertaking and solving widely understood problems, which result from man’s relation to the world.

The relations are of the following kinds:

- the man is influenced by the environment
- the environment is indispensable for him to exist
- and he himself affects the environment trying to introduce changes in this environment. (Tomaszewski 1971, Kulczycki 1979).

Besides, none of the processes taking place inside man or in his surrounding world depend solely on him. Man’s relation to the surroundings is determined by various and dynamic properties of those systems.

Having the subject of this paper in mind, we should transfer the above general definitions to the sexual sphere of life, understood as a process of problem solving (Kulczycki 1979). A positive solution leads to achievement of higher life value. Following Kulczycki the higher life value has been described by the following criteria:

- preservation and transmission of life
- diversifying life connected with a creative attitude to sexual activity
- close and intimate contact with the partner connected with the abundance of subjective experience (impressions and emotions) and
- endowing the surrounding reality with meaning thanks to satisfying emotional and sexual contacts.

The views often reflect social tendencies, omnipresent stereotypes, not entirely internalized. Beliefs, on the other hand contain an element of one’s own interpretation and are fully internalized. Attitudes are not clearly defined tendencies to react in a specific way. The origin of views, beliefs and attitudes, which are the foundation of this concept of life are of twofold kind.

They may be one’s own or adopted from others. The former may be formed on the basis of one’s own considerations or experience, which may be incidental or deliberate. The latter originate as a result of deliberate imitation of others or subconscious following, e.g. as the result of upbringing, culture influence, conditioning, or just direct observation of the others (Kulczycki 1979).

According to the assumed theoretical concept of the work, the concept of sexual life is a system of beliefs, conscious views and subconscious contents making up a structure of three systems:

- values (essential aims, functions and the place of sexual activity in life of an individual)

- the ways of carrying them out (learned strategies allowing achieving the aims and
- conditions in which the aims may be gained.

The realization of the programme connected with the system of values referring to sexual contacts accepted by the individual, takes place while undertaking certain definite activities. It verifies the accuracy of assumed life direction to achieve higher and higher life quality.

From the above reasoning we can draw a conclusion that the concept of sexual life is an essential psychological mechanism controlling sexual activity of a man. That is why, by means of proper research device one can attempt at separating the essential, from the point of view of the examined, elements of the concept of sexual life, which could prove helpful in understanding this sphere of life.

## **THE SUBJECT OF THE RESEARCH**

Relying on the assumption of regulating role of the concept of sexual life in sexual activity of an individual, the following questions have been formed:

1. What is the structure of beliefs and attitudes called as the concept of sexual life in respect of young women?
2. Which ways of creating the concept of sexual life can be distinguished.
3. What are the functions of the concept of sexual life in young women's life?
4. What is the influence of the situational factors on the change of the concept of sexual life?

The research was of the exploratory character. It results from the lack of empirical data concerning vital, in respect of accepted theoretical assumptions, elements and the wholeness of examined reality.

Conducted researches, both native and foreign, provide precious little information concerning the values realized in sexual activity. Beyond research is the influence of beliefs and attitudes connected with the sexual sphere, on the sexual activity of an individual. Most of the investigations deal with particular elements and aspects of sexual behaviour.

## **METHODS**

### **PERSONS EXAMINED**

30 students of Wrocław colleges took part in the research (table 1).

Table 1. The distinction of the examined persons according to the colleges they study at.

Colleges					
University	Academy of Agriculture	Technical University	Academy of Physical Education	Academy of Economy	Total
13	8	1	1	7	30

The subject for the research were women age 22–24, the students of the III–IV year, being in permanent (at least one year long) relationship with one partner. Admission of such an age group is due to the fact that this is the age when sexual activity plays an important role. It is connected with the formation of permanent relationships, either in matrimony or in a concubinage (research on biological aspect of sexual activity, Imielinski, 1974). Besides, before their 25th year, women are on the course of creating and verifying their system of values, and views connected with sexual activity.

The following procedures were applied in the research: a psychological interview, a questionnaire interview and simulations. Due to the exploratory character of this work and overpowering prevalence of quality data, a psychological interview was used.

The psychological interview procedure was constructed on the basis of nine general subjects:

- I. Expectations and visions concerning sexual activity before starting it.
- II. Expectations from the sexual partner.
- III. Formation of the concept of sexual life.
- IV. The origin of young women's concept of sexual life.
- V. The influence of a sexual concept of life on the stability and satisfaction in sexual sphere of life.
- VI. The influence of a sexual concept of life on the development of the emotional sphere.
- VII. The influence of a sexual concept of life on solving problems connected with sexual life.
- VIII. The importance of a sexual concept of life for a young woman.
- IX. The change of the concept of sexual life.

In order to develop the questions, a questionnaire interview was introduced. It consists of 25 questions of closed character. Some of the questions were formed to widen the problems dealt with in the psychological interview. Most of them, however, constitute the questions, which are an attempt at defining univocal attitude of the person examined to the area being explored and confirming the information obtained in the course of a psychological interview.

Persons examined tend to deform their self-image in a twofold way; either they present themselves in a facade way or the present an idealized image of themselves ('Me' — ideal). One may try to overcome those difficulties by means of a projective method. In the research simulations were chosen. Their contents coincide with reality, however its construction (the examined person is being asked questions about her attitude to some fictional situations), allows an interpretation of the events described without having to refer to one's private experiences.

The construction of the above described exploratory programme is a synthesis of an exploratory research and procedure *ex post facto* (Brzeziński 1980)

### THE COURSE OF RESEARCH

The researches were conducted in the woman's habitation — a house or a dormitory during four months of the year 1992. The women examined were the first ones who responded to the advertisements about planned researches, which were placed in colleges and dormitories.

### SUMMING UP AND RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

The results obtained underwent the quality and quantity analysis, according to the methodology of the research. To put in order the "fresh" results and to find out the answers to the questions a system of data categorization has been created.

I. In order to describe the structure called the young married women's concept of sexual life the following categories have been distinguished: autonomous, vital and global concept of life.

The concept of life referred to as autonomous is a separate and conscious constellation of views, beliefs and attitudes concerning the sphere of sexual activity. They may be concerned with e.g. preferences in choosing a partner, the kind of sexual activity, the function of sexual activity and values realized in this sphere of life.

An opposite category to the one described above is the category called a vital concept of sexual life. It is characteristic of people who do not pay much attention to considerations connected with sexual life. It does not imply, however, an absolute lack of views concerning this sphere of life. That concept is typical of people of a lively attitude to the sexual sphere.

The third of the described dimensions is the category referred to as a global concept of sexual life. Views, beliefs and attitudes to the sexual sphere of life embraced in it results from a wider system of values and beliefs, which regulates activity of a man in all spheres of life.

Women of autonomous concept of sexual life mastered a skill of clear verbalization of their views, beliefs and attitudes connected with sexual life. Preferences in respect of partners as well as preferable forms of sexual activity were precisely defined. They stressed the meaning of their reconsideration of their sexual life to achieve higher and higher quality of sexual life.

Among the women with the vital concept of life, sexual activity was undertaken spontaneously and as a rule brought them a lot of satisfaction. It might have been the reason why they did not feel motivated to try to think over this sphere of life. The group consisted of people whose attitude to sexual life was generally unrestrained and unreflective. Another possible explanation for not having a developed concept of sexual life among these women might have been a generally unreflective attitude to themselves and the world, which they revealed.

The global concept of sexual life results from a wider system of values and beliefs regulating activities in other spheres of life as well. The people of whom such a concept was characteristic constituted an inhomogeneous group. These were women who almost entirely adapted an outlook on life controlling man's activity in all spheres — in this very particular case — a Christian outlook, as well as women who manifest a great independence in their all beliefs, whose views are independently worked out, often as opposed to the generally accepted ones.

Table 2. The description of a concept of sexual life.

A kind of a concept of sexual life	The number of people classified
Autonomous	20 (66 %)
Vital	5 (17 %)
Global	5 (17 %)

II. Another system of categorization was conducted from the point of view of values realized in sexual life. Within this system four basic domains of values realized in sexual life have been singled out. These are: stricte sexual values, values connected with the sphere of higher emotions, values connected with procreation and values connected with the extra-sexual sphere.

Table 3. The values realized in sexual life.

Values realized in sexual life		Number of people
Stricte sexual		10 (33 %)
Connected with the sphere of higher values	keeping and developing love	27 (90 %)
	development of friendship	6 (20 %)
Connected with procreation		2 (7 %)
Connected with extra-sexual sphere	bestowing meaning upon life	6 (20 %)
	fulfilling aesthetic need	8 (27 %)
	fulfilling the safety need	19 (63 %)
	psychic relaxation	9 (30 %)
	fulfilling the need of intimacy	19 (63 %)
	upkeeping of health	3 (10 %)
	a kind of entertainment	2 (7 %)
	expression of life activity	11 (37 %)
	diversity of life	21 (70 %)
	expression of womanhood	8 (27 %)

The field of stricte sexual values is connected with the realization of purely physiological aspect of sexual activity. It resolves itself to the relaxation of sexual tension.

The values connected with the sphere of higher emotions are manifested in establishing social ties in the course of sexual activity.

The values connected with procreation, embraced by the concept of sexual life, are understood as a conscious intention to have progeny.

The domain of values connected with extra-sexual sphere is abundant and diversified. It results from the fact that all other values realized in sexual activity and not falling into the above presented categories have been classified here.

The main conclusion that comes to one's mind after having analyzed the above observations is that a small number of women realize in sexual life stricte sexual values as relaxation of sexual drive, fulfil the need of entertainment as opposite to the great number of women declaring fulfillment of safety, need of closeness and development of emotional sphere. It might point to a sense of threat in which the young women live. The reason for this state of things might be economic difficulties, uncertainty about the future, low prestige of people with higher education, and which follows, inability to lead an independent life.

Those assumptions seem to be confirmed by the small number of women, who clearly associate sexual activity with having progeny, strangely enough as women in procreating age are in question. It seems that sexual life is no longer an expression of joy of life.



III. Another system of categories defines the level of a woman's sexual activity and her attitude to the changes in the sphere of sexual contacts. Four kinds of attitudes have been distinguished:

A. Woman's passive attitude, associated with the preference of partner's domination in sexual contacts.

B. Woman's active attitude

a) the preference of her own activity in sexual contacts

b) the preference of partnership in sexual life.

A. Inflexible attitude in sexual life.

a) stereotype fashion in sexual contacts (e.g. rejection of the partner's offer to introduce changes in the sexual relationship)

b) no motivation for change in the sexual sphere in case of problems (e.g. no orgasm).

B. Flexible attitude in sexual life.

a) openness to changes in the sphere of sexual contacts (e.g. under the influence of the partner, experience, literature)

b) initiation of changes in sexual life

c) motivation for change in the sexual sphere in case of problems.

Most of the examined women were characterized by the passive attitude. More than half of them : 16 (53%), prefer the partner's domination. They accepted their total subjection to the partner, who as they see it, should be the initiator of sexual activity, as well as any change or innovation. Most of the remaining 14 women included in the group of active approach prefer partnership in the sexual life — 12 persons (40%). Only two women value their own sexual activity more. It proves that a traditional model of a relationship between man and woman prevails in spite of liberation trends. One can endeavour at a conclusion, that this very model suits women the best.

The results of the research on attitudes to changes of the form of sexual activity coincide with the above conclusions. As many as 27 (90%) of the examined women had nothing against introducing changes. Any of them expressed readiness of accepting a change in the relationship suggested by the partner. However only 12 (40%) of them displayed their own initiative in changing the form of sexual activity. Each of the active women actively attempted at solving a problem in case it appeared. Moreover, three women (10%), who did not introduce any changes in the form of relationship themselves, pronounced the intention of active solving the problem if it appeared.

Only 3 women (10 %) declared a negative attitude to any changes in the form of conducted relationship. Only one of them was determined not to change her standpoint, even in the case of an open conflict. The other two, on the other hand, declared that for the sake of saving the relationship they could introduce some modifications.

IV. Women's preferences in respect of sexual partners were the basis for the next system of categorization. The dimension subject-object treatment of the

partner was applied as a criterion of categorization. The following categories and subcategories have been distinguished:

Partner as the object in the sexual activity:

- a) expectation of emotional satisfaction on the side of the partner
- b) expectation of physical–emotional satisfaction on the side of the partner
- c) expectation of intellectual attractiveness of the partner
- d) expectation of physical–intellectual attractiveness of the partner
- e) expectation of emotional–intellectual attractiveness of the partner
- f) expectation of physical–emotional attractiveness of the partner

Among the women examined prevails the tendency of subject–treatment of the partner. It is manifested mainly in the fact that emotional satisfaction is expected — 23 women (77%) and also physical–emotional — 17 women (57%). Expectation of physical–emotional satisfaction entails also expectation of physical and emotional attractiveness. Each of the women from this group was included into both categories. Object treatment of the partner was characteristic of 4 women (13%). In their case it meant expectation of purely physical satisfaction from the partner. Moreover, each of them found physical attractiveness as the main advantage of the partner.

Preferences to partners were as follows. The expectation of physical and emotional attractiveness was prevailing — 17 women (57%). A little fewer women expected only physical attractiveness — 10 (33%). To this group belonged the women, who expected physical satisfaction from the partner.

The fewest women expected intelligence and both intelligence and physical attractiveness from their partners — 2 women in each case — (7%). A little more women thought that their partner should be both intelligent and satisfy their emotional needs — 5 persons (17%).

The overall results confirm the previous assumptions about extra–sexual and emotional gratifications achieved in the relationship. Most of the women do not expect purely sexual satisfaction from their partner. Emotional sphere seems to be most essential, physical satisfaction on the other hand, is a welcome, yet not indispensable addition. It testifies to the fact that sexual life is rather the means to fulfil other needs, than an aim in itself.

V. Another problem, subject to the research was the origin of the concept of sexual life. The following division of the sources of the views, beliefs and attitudes to sexual activity has been made:

A. One's own experience

- a) sexual activity (sexual experience)
- b) one's own consideration (intellectual experience)

B. Patterns acquired concerning sexual activity

- a) parental talks
- b) talks with sexual partner
- c) talks with friends
- d) erotic literature, magazines and films

e) social ethic norms (e.g. Christian).

In the origin of the young women's concept of sexual life, their own experience was of the greatest importance, and 19 of them (63%) found their considerations to be the source of their concept of sexual life. Almost as many, 18 (60%) stressed the meaning of their own sexual activity in forming the views on this domain of life. In this group 12 women equally estimated the influence of their own activity and considerations.

Among the patterns acquired of greatest significance was the influence of the sexual partner — 16 persons (53%). Talks with friends, literature, films and magazines influenced the formation of the concept of life in case of 10 women (33%), while only in 3 cases (10%) both sources were mentioned. 9 women (30%) admitted following socially accepted ethic norms (Christian) in their sexual activity. This appears surprising still having in mind the fact that only two women viewed sexual life as a procreation activity. 4 women only (13%) admitted being influenced by their parents in forming their own concept of sexual life. It seems unlikely. Such an influence might have been forgotten, suppressed or even concealed.

A strong trend for independence among young women becomes conspicuous and manifests itself mainly in the search of their own source of knowledge about the sexual life, while traditional sources are being neglected. However, taking the previously presented results into consideration, such claims might be only appearances. The model of relationship is still traditional. The disagreement between the statements and practice could be solved within the research directed on this particular problem.

VI. Another research problem concerns the functions fulfilled by the concept of sexual life in the life of young married women. Two kinds of functions fulfilled by considerations, views and attitudes to sexual life have been singled out: progressive and regressive. Another category was formed so as to consider the women for whom considerations, views and attitudes have no special influence on the kind of contacts with the partner.

The former of the functions mentioned — progressive one, improves the quality of sexual relationship by:

- a) stimulation to sexual activity
- b) influence on achievement of sexual satisfaction
- c) solving problems connected with sexual activity
- d) affecting the development and intensifying of feelings
- e) preventing conflicts and problems connected with sexual life

The other of the distinguished functions — the regressive one, due to the prevailing subconscious motivation to judge oneself negatively, leads to lower quality and lower sexual activity level.

A concept of sexual life fulfills almost exclusively the progressive role. Merely 3 women are exceptions. In the examined women's opinions the considerations connected with sexual activity influenced development and intensify-

ing of emotions — 18 persons (60%). Very vital are stimulation to sexual activity and affecting the achievement of sexual satisfaction. That kind of meaning was assigned by 15 women (50%) to each. Besides, two other similar functions of consideration got almost the same score, prevention of sexual conflicts — 13 (43%) and solving problems connected with sexual activity 10 (33%).

There have almost been no declaration of a regressive influence of the young women's concept of sexual life. Only one woman counted into the group (3%) — her negative estimation of herself and her body caused inhibition towards the partner.

The lack of significance of a concept of sexual life was characteristic of two women (7%). In those very cases it meant general lack of reflectiveness, and underestimation of consideration. Their life was devoid of any sexual problems and consequently they achieved satisfaction in their sexual life.

VII. The last of the main research problems is concerned with the factors affecting the change of the concept of sexual life and the direction of the changes.

The change of the concept of sexual life may be affected by the following factors:

- a) sexual partner
- b) erotic literature, magazines and films
- c) negative experience e.g. breakup of a relationship.

A separate category consisted of women who displayed no change of the concept of sexual life.

The following directions of the change of the concept of sexual life have been distinguished:

- a) liberalization of views on sexual life
- b) enrichment of views on sexual activity
- c) puritanism of views on sexual life.

The majority of women tended to introduce changes into their concept of sexual life — 23 women (77%). Most often they were stimulated by the opinion of their partner — 19 (63%) of women. Very rarely the influence of literature, magazines and erotic films was the reason for change — 3 persons (10%) and similarly negative experience (conflicts and the breakup of the relationship, contacts with perverts) — 4 persons (13%).

In a few cases the change in the concept of sexual life was unnoticeable — 7 persons (23%). It is, in a way, a result quite contradictory to the attitudes described above, where stiff attitude was characteristic solely of 3 persons (10%). It might be due to a more precise formulation of the problem of the change of the concept of sexual life. It seems that while discussing the attitude to sexual life the number of women of stiff attitude was lowered.

The directions of change of the concept of sexual life are most often diversifying the sexual relationship — 12 persons (40%). Liberalization of views on sexual life was characteristic in 8 cases (27%). The change towards puritanism took place in the case of three women (10%). That again seems to be contradic-

tory to the statements of following the Christian outlook in sexual activity, which was characteristic of 9 women (30%).

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## **A PSYCHOLOGICAL CONCEPT OF YOUNG WOMEN'S SEXUAL LIFE**

Formulating the research problem, which is the concept of young women's sexual life, has been an attempt at the global treatment of young women's sexuality in its psychological aspect. The obtained research data were classified according to the categorization system, in which three concepts of sexual life were distinguished: autonomous, vital and global. Moreover, the controlling influence of the system of values on sexual activity was analyzed as well as the origin, function and changes of the young women's concepts of sexual life.

**Key words:** women – sexual life – concept of sexual life

