



ANTHOLOGY ON SEXUALITY

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Introduction to the intercultural approach of sexuality

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Human sexuality - as deeply connected to the body and its biological functions – is often considered to be universal and treated as a natural phenomenon. Nevertheless, if we start to deconstruct the different elements of sexuality – from gender, emotions, social interactions, relationships, sexual habits, sexual orientations, different sexual practices even to the interpretation of erotic desire, the meaning or use the body - it turns out that everything around human sexuality is deeply determined by culture. To understand the complexity of various cultural identities, the overlaps and the fluidity of sexuality we can get closer not just to our own sexuality as individuals but we will be able to understand why other people behave “differently”. In this article the author follows the different meanings and social functions of sexuality from culture to culture and even in different historical times to understand that beyond ethnic differences what else “culture” means in the context of human sexuality and to reveal the mechanisms how sexuality is deeply embedded in our societies and culture.

Introduction

The world-famous anthropologist Margaret Mead writes that homosexual men were frowned upon in the Trobriand Islands but in cases involving women, such relationships were tolerated (although interestingly, the same word, lubaygu, was used for both a strong friendship between a man and a man, and a romantic relationship between a man and a woman). It was also observed by Mead that adult homosexuality is universal among men in the Makassar Islands, and among women in the Lau islands before marriage, while it was perceived as a game in Samoa. In the latter place, a separate word, soa is used for the institutionalised homosexuality between boys. Boys are circumcised in pairs. They choose an older man for themselves who is reputed to be adept at doing such things and they ask him to carry out the operation on them. The relationship between the two boys who are circumcised together seems to be a cause and effect, logical relation in such cases. The boy to be circumcised picks a

mate for himself who often is his relative. This sharing of an important life event with each other, is believed to bind two boys tightly to each other later in life. Many such pairs of boys can be seen in the village who have been circumcised together and who have maintained the closest friendship for a very long time after the operation. Such pairs often sleep together, and friendship sometimes turns into a homosexual relationship. – writes Mead. However, they not only sleep together but they also work together, eat together, dance together in the evening, and, what is more, they also court girls together. The friend, the 'soa' acts as a mediator between the other boy and the girls. The only thing considered to be an abnormality in Samoa is the 'moetotolo', i.e. the night 'love-theft'. The boy who approaches a girl this way is mocked by the village.²⁶

²⁶ Eszenyi Miklós: The man with the man, the woman with the women. pp. 68.

Original text: Coming of age in Samoa- a Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization.

'Marriage among banars includes some socially sanctioned sexual relationships. When a woman gets married, she has her first sexual encounter with one of the kins of the father of the bridegroom. She starts having sex with her husband only after bearing a child for this man. She also has an institutionalised relationship with one of the kins of her husband. The partners of the husband include: his wife, the wife of one of his kins and the wife of the son of the wife of the kin (Thumwald, 1916). Having sex with several partners one after the other is also a well-known custom among marind amins. During the time of holding the marriage the wife copulates with all the members of the clan of the husband, and the bridegroom comes last. All major festivities come with the custom of otiv-bombari when semen is collected for ritual purposes. Some women copulate with many men and the semen is collected in a coconut shell. Marind men participate in multiple homosexual intercourses during their initiation (Van Baal, 1966). Heterosexual intercourse among etors is a taboo for 205-260 days of the year (Kell, 1974). In many parts of New Guinea, men are afraid of copulation because they think that without magical preemptive measures they would die after copulation (Glasse, 1971; Meggitt, 1964).')

Another country, another story. Recently, I met an approximately twenty-five year-old girl from Sicily, who – as we found out – had also come to live in Amsterdam. Now she works for a Dutch company. We talked about how it feels to live here. She had a story about how strange it is that Dutch people are naked in the sauna, and how much it frustrates her. They have a sauna at the company which is used by practically everyone working there. The first time she went, she realised she could not even wear a bikini but when she saw men and women naked in the same place she was completely stunned. She cannot get used to the idea of working with the same people during the day and then seeing your boss in the evening completely naked in the corridor. She could never get used to this. Back at home, she says, this could only be imagined in the most

intimate situations. It is not allowed at all for a 'decent' woman to appear like this before strangers if they are men.

'I went to a religious school and keeping your virginity until marriage was a constant topic there. We girls talked a lot about this among ourselves, whether it is important or not. Still, most of us got through this barrier when we were eighteen or nineteen. I did, too. But this was a struggle for me for a time as well. This is probably the reason why I felt remorse and shame the first time I had sex.' (Éva, 32 years old, hairdresser, mother of one, Budapest, Hungary, 2010).²⁸

'As a matter of fact I was introduced to sexuality by my grandfather when I was ten. My first sexual experiences are connected to him. But this was not negative. When my grandfather came over to us or I went over to their place, we would sleep together in the afternoon. And I remember that my grandpa would reach for me and fondle my clitoris. And that it was good for me. But when he pulled my hand towards himself and wanted me to stroke him as well, I already found it disgusting. That is why I did not tell anyone, because it was good for me. Maybe I had some sense of guilt because I felt it was awkward that I wanted this from my grandfather. That I would keep pushing him, saying come on, come on, but he would tell me we should not do it yet because we had just gone to bed and my granny was still awake. I definitely wanted this. This was really good for me. And I felt it was awkward that I was pushing for it so much. I knew what was happening and that I should not talk about it. What would I tell my mom? It is not that I have to be protected here. Instead, something is happening which should not.'

(Teodóra, 41 years old, mother of three, white-collar freelancer, Budapest, Hungary, 2010).²⁹

What is sex? Definitions of sexuality

²⁷Rubin, Gayle: The traffic in women- Notes on the „political economy”. (Note four from the Hungarian translator.)

²⁸ Interview. Dóra Djamila Mester: Woman, Mother, Lover- Motherhood and Sex, Jaffa Kiadó, Budapest, 2013.

²⁹ Interview. Dóra Djamila Mester: Woman, Mother, Lover- Motherhood and Sex, Jaffa Kiadó, Budapest, 2013.

As it can be seen from the above examples, consensus is missing even in the same linguistic universe concerning the meaning of the concept of sex, sexuality. Since it affects the everyday life of everybody, the word 'sex' is often used without asking what one thinks of when hearing this notion. Indeed, what is the first thing that comes to mind when we hear the word 'sex'? What moves, what images flash before our eyes? A woman's erotic décolletage, the nude body of a man or a woman, a detail from lovemaking, a flirt, a secret workplace affair, an unfulfilled desire, a trauma, a porn scene, an obscene memory? Sex has a different meaning for everyone. Forbidden, secret or compulsory, or maybe the natural, joyful part of life? Desired images, fantasies, a concealed tingle, suppressed feelings? Spirituality, love, self-awareness, sport? Defencelessness, work, submission? Or rather does it not mean anything? And what are the social and institutional norms which we all take for granted in our own reference frame? Which mark the cultural context of our individual, subjective feelings? Sex is only allowed in a marriage. You can only make love with someone you are in love with. Sex is intimacy. Treating and handling your partner with erotic overtones is forbidden in public places. You cannot appear naked even in front of your husband. The erotic physical interaction of men with men is forbidden under any circumstances. And we could continue. How deep can we get if we try to define what human sexuality really means? Could there really be a standardised answer lurking in human nature, hiding behind the different social cultures? The explanations from (natural) sciences tend to define sexuality as the reproductive activity of the human race, in which coitus has a distinguished place. But even if we limit ourselves to nature, we can find many animal species for whom sexuality is more than a simple activity with the goal of preserving the species. Perhaps the most spectacular example is that of the bonobo, a great ape for whom sexual interaction has been proven to have a social function: it helps to defuse conflicts inside the group, to increase cooperation, to decrease aggression, and it is a defining component of social cohabitation independent of reproduction. What is sex, then? When defining

human sexuality it seems to be justified to look for a definition which conveys the complexity of sexuality. The English word 'sex' refers to the biological gender that is mostly used for the physical and genetic peculiarities of sexuality. The existence of only two genders is only a myth even in a biological sense. Today, man and woman are placed at the two ends of a horizontal axis, emphasising the manifold transitional phases between them since the sexual anatomy of men and women go through the same developmental path. Male and female genital organs resemble each other in their tissues and functionally as well. Concentrating solely on the physical aspects of our sexuality, it can be said that the genitals, the hormones or the chromosomes can be placed on a very wide spectrum in fact. That is why it is difficult to talk about 'pure' men and women even on a biological basis in most cases. If sex as a sexual activity is mentioned, most people understand it as the copulation of a man and a woman. According to the results of the survey of Kinsey Institute published in the February 2010 edition of the journal *Sexual Health*, based on the answers of 486 randomly selected heterosexual adults, the insertion of the penis into the vagina is considered to be sexual activity in a narrow sense by most people but three out of ten would already dismiss oral sex as a sexual intercourse, and half of the respondents thought that stimulating the genitals by hand had nothing to do with sex.³⁰ These results suggest that not only in the past but in the present as well, the definition of sexuality has been dominated by a heteronormative and biologising approach according to which the primary goal of sex is procreation. However, since many people cannot relate their own practices and personal experiences to this approach, why not assign a definition to sex that is based on the real life situations of people? Based on the above examples, looking for an open and inclusive sex definition seems to be justified. Just like our sexual identity, orientation varies quite much based on our culture and individuality. The meaning of eroticism, sexual desire and attraction can be very diverse as well. Sex may or may not include emo-

³⁰ http://www.kinseyinstitute.org/newsletter/win2010/researchwin2010.html#sex_meaning

tions. Though strict definitions tend to limit sexuality exclusively to the genitals in a physical sense, there are also people for whom a kiss or a handshake may carry just as much of a sexual meaning as playing with the genitals does for others. Sexuality is so manifold and variable that the ratio of cultural and biological components in our individual sexuality becomes questionable.

Man and sexuality: nature or culture?

No matter how much sexuality is perceived as a subjective, intimate state of being, all our personal desires and opportunities are defined by the given society, macro- and micro-culture we are born in, grow up in or live in at the moment. The perceived personal freedom, self-determination (how we feel, think, how we see, live our body), and how our sexual life is realised on a daily basis is framed by the norms of the society. Even the often self-explanatory ideas of sexuality are in fact created by institutions like ethics, laws, education, psychological theories, medical definitions, social rituals, pornographic or romantic stories, popular culture, and different professional and amateur discussions on the Internet. In fact, this draws the borderlines that mark our opportunities and determine our desires. According to historian-sociologist Jeffrey Weeks, who specialises in work on sexuality, "No universally acceptable codes of appropriate behaviour have been elaborated despite all the heated debates. But something much more valuable has happened. We are being forced to rethink what we understand by sexuality because of a growing awareness of the tangled web of influences and forces - politics, economics, race, ethnicity, geography and space, gender, morals and values - that shape our emotions, needs, desires and relationships."³¹ Our 21st century sexuality is very far from the 'natural' world of instincts even on the level of desires. Still, in the public thinking – whatever we mean by it – images still appear hinting that deep inside we are instinct beings and our sexual motivations are basically focused on mate choice and race preservation. This is supported by the essentialist understanding of

sexuality according to which sexuality is a biologically determined, eternally changeless entity independent of society and history. The main components of this understanding are: 1) man is either male or female in a biological and a historical sense as well, these appear as binary opposites, which at the same time delineates the boundaries of the normality of sexuality, inasmuch as the only 'natural', in other words 'normal' form of sex (as we have already pointed out previously, the English word 'sex' means biological gender and sexual intercourse at the same time) is the lovemaking of a man and a woman; 2) sexual desire appears as an overwhelming natural force piercing through civilisation and culture; 3) the definition of sexual instinct whose only goal is reproduction.

Opposite to this understanding stands the constructivist understanding of sexuality which relates the definitions and forms of expression of sexuality to the appropriate historical and social context. It does not mean that human sexuality could not be viewed as a clearly biological phenomenon. As Gayle Rubin, cultural anthropologist of Berkeley University in California says: 'Human organisms with human brains are necessary for human cultures, but no examination of the body or its parts can explain the nature and variety of human social systems. The belly's hunger gives no clues as to the complexities of cuisine. The body, the brain, the genitalia, and the capacity for language are all necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms. Moreover, we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give to it.'³² Ethics, law, institutionalized pedagogy has always defined what is forbidden, tolerated and allowed in a given society for people regarding their sexual practices. The achievements of modern civilization, medical science, psychiatry, psychology, and then sexology created the science of sexuality, classified, categorized the people practicing different sexual habits. It taught us what is perverted – as experts

³¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality*, Routledge 1986 and 2003, page 9.

³² Rubin, Gayle: *Thinking Sex- Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality*. In: *Sexualities- Critical Concepts in Sociology*. Edited by Ken Plummer. Volume II. Routledge, London, 2002. pp. 197.

today formally say, sexual paraphilia – and what is normal. This is how it becomes apparent for the members of a society in the civilising process of different cultures how they should ‘appropriately’ regulate their physical and mental processes, social interactions in order to meet the norms of our closer and wider social environment. With this in mind, it is interesting to observe that introducing younger generations, children to sexuality poses a problem in many European countries. As if the sexual education in families did not treat sex as a ‘natural’, biological event. As if it resulted from some biological cause that the child is unaware of the relation of the genders, and it were an especially delicate and difficult task to enlighten the developing young girl or boy about himself and about everything that happens around him. We only realise how much this situation is not self-explanatory and how much it is the result of a civilisation process when we observe the specific behaviour of the people of another era or culture different from ours. Sociologist Norbert Elias shows a 16th century example in his book *The Civilizing Process* when children lived in the same social space as the adults from quite an early age on; and adults did not yet demonstrate such a strong self-control in sexuality, neither in speech nor in action, as they would in later eras.³³ In his work ‘History of sexuality’, Michel Foucault arrives at the same conclusion. At the beginning of the 17th century the practice of sexuality did not need to be hidden; the code regulating roughness, obscenity, and indecency left a much wider space for people than it did in the 19th century.³⁴ Before the 17th century it was indeed strange for adults to hide the manifestations of instincts before each other and the children, to banish them to the sphere of intimacy or to lock them away tightly. All this decreased the distance between the expected behaviour of adults and children already. The biological development of humans did not differ much from today; only in connection with this social change can the whole problem of ‘adulthood’, as it presents itself today, become understandable for us. As in the course of the civilizing process the sexual drive, like many others, is subjected to ever stricter control and transformation, the problem it poses changes. The pressure placed on adults to privatize all their impulses (particularly sexual ones)

the „conspiracy of silence”, the socially generated restrictions on speech, the emotionally charged character of most words relating to sexual urges- all this builds a thick wall of secrecy around the adolescent.”³⁵

Some days ago I went to a baroque concert. The melodies born many centuries before came to life ‘among the walls of the past’ in a wonderful, elegant building of Amsterdam. On the open cover of the cembalo there was a renaissance painting with a naked Venus lying lazily with her left hand resting upon her Venus hill which would later be named after her. In the hall, the orderly, elegantly dressed citizens, all decent, listened to the baroque music; no one would have dared to think that the naked woman grasping her groin would radiate eroticism or any sexuality. I was thinking how different it would be if the same image were a contemporary photograph. Just like an erotic photo that simply displays a naked woman with tits and a pussy, this painting awakened the same curiosity in my five year-old son. He has ‘not yet learned’ that acknowledged artworks painted in the past ‘do not count’ as erotic, arousing in a different cultural context. What is considered normal and ‘perverted’, what is desired or uninteresting always reflects the expectations and system of norms of a given era. In sexuality, just like in every other aspect of being a human, it is absolutely necessary for a society to create a system of rules. This is the reason why it makes no sense to put the biological, natural explanations ‘hiding at the bottom of everything’ forward and in the meantime forget the social, cultural peculiarities forming our lives in reality. The cultural aspects of sexuality get a bigger emphasis at the moment we interact with somebody. Let it be a love, a gynaecological examination, a family conflict, a school or a workplace affair, suddenly what the participants in the situation think about the definition of sex, what gender identity, eroticism, and desire means to them and how they relate to their own or the other person’s body becomes very important. Our key concepts surrounding sexuality and often thought of as basic and self-explanatory – let it be our social or biological gender, our body, our sexual

³³ Elias, Norbert: *The Civilizing Process- Sociogenic an Psychogenetic Investigations. Volume 1. The History of Manners- IX. Changes in Attitude Toward Relations Between the Sexes.* pp.169. Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1978, England- Worcester.

³⁴ Foucault, Michel: *The history of sexuality. Vol. 1. An introduction.* New York, Vintage Books : Random House, 1990

³⁵ Elias, Norbert: *The Civilizing Process- Sociogenic an Psychogenetic Investigations.*

identity or sexual practices – are not universal at all. Even the seemingly most basic and most similar physical processes may carry a different meaning in every culture. But where do the boundaries of cultures lie?

What is culture?

'The intercultural approach is built on the realisation that we (everyone else as well) are all part of some culture, or rather cultures. The aim of collecting knowledge about culture is just to understand what this statement means and to realise how deeply culture intermingles with our behaviour, way of thinking, and emotional life. The Western man likes to overestimate his independence, autonomy, and freedom of choice: essentially, the notion of free will is a very important part of our cultural heritage. That is why we tend to underestimate the effect of culture. This can lead to an attributional mistake when judging others: we attribute intention to an act behind which there is actually no intention. The goal of knowledge about the expression, consequences, and mechanisms of culture is to decrease the incidence of such errors.³⁶ 'Everything we see around us is the product of culture: not only the pictures on the wall or the books but everything else as well: the tools of work, the walls, and even the house plants. Furthermore, the furniture also bears witness to the development of the furniture industry: a desk or a bookshelf reflects the concept of knowledge and learning, just like a bathroom or feminine pantliners tell us much about our concept of cleanness. The workplace, the given institution, the function it provides, and the way the fulfilment of this function is organised are all cultural phenomena. Let us take a look at ourselves, what we wear, what posture we sit in, how we step up to others, how we are physically 'prepared' for interaction with others. 'Culture surrounds us; it is written in our body, our soul, we cannot step out of it.³⁷ That is why the physical,

emotional, behavioural, and social aspects of sexuality have no culture-independent meaning. Because what we consider sexual, erotically attractive or repulsive is also defined culturally.³⁸

"Culture refers to the total way of life of any society, not simply to those parts which the society regards as higher or more desirable. Thus culture, when applied to our own way of life, has nothing to do with playing the piano or reading Browning. For the social scientist such activities are simply elements within the totality of our culture. This totality also includes such mundane activities as washing dishes or driving an automobile, and for the purpose of cultural studies these stand quite on a part with the 'finer things of life'. It follows that for the social scientist there are no uncultured societies or even individuals...every human being is cultured in the sense of participating in some culture or other." Ralph Linton (1945:30)

Despite all this, there is no unified scientific answer to the question: what is culture? No wonder no consensus has been reached in the matter since practically irrespective of what approach we would choose, it is hard to get hold of it. We may get closer to the answer to the question of where the boundaries of cultures lie in the case of sex if we consider the definition of culture which, instead of using the common values, language or customs to

³⁶ Vera Várhegyi: The Intercultural Competence Approach; Artemisszió Foundation

³⁷ Vera Várhegyi: The Intercultural Competence Approach; Artemisszió Foundation

³⁸ Much of the ambiguity surrounding the concept of culture results from the etymology of the word 'culture'. Our word 'culture' is derived formally from Latin 'colere' which was an agricultural expression originally, meaning taking care of the soil and the animals. Cultivating the soil was a metaphor for cultivating the human mind, that is how the new meaning of this expression could spread by the 16th century. In its first canonized definition on the pages of the 1719 edition of Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française it includes the arts and the sciences, and embodies humanity's parting from the natural, the animalistic. In the century of light, culture and civilization signify the path on which humanity leaves dark era of irrationality and darkness behind. Therefore, only one kind of human culture could be imagined which had to be approached by every people gradually. The first contesting was formulated by Herder in 1774. Herder claimed not less than that every people is worthy of acknowledgement for their own individuality. Thus, Herder can be seen as the forerunner of modern cultural relativism. (Vinsonneau:19-20) . Vera Várhegyi: The Intercultural Competence Approach; Artemisszió Foundation'

draw the boundaries of a culture, asks whether there is any kind of common language with the help of which we can share our differences with each other.³⁹ If there is, then we are still part of the very same culture. Maybe we think differently about whether gay people can adopt a child, or whether anal sex is acceptable in a relationship but if we are able to even argue about it, if we have a common system of concepts, then we still belong to the same cultural group. The same cannot be said about the mutilation of the female genitalia for religious causes which is customary in several Islamic countries, or about sentencing homosexual people to death. Indeed, in case of these traditions insurmountable boundaries seem to lie between culture and culture.

Does culture define sex or does sex define culture?

The above definitions of culture agree that culture is related to some kind of group of people. Nonetheless, it is hard to determine what kind of grouping we mean. Because we can 'talk about Hungarian culture but about Gothic culture as well, and what is more, lately about the culture of the mobility-impaired, or gluten-sensitive people, gender culture, or cultures defined based on sexual preferences. The latter ones deserve the title of culture not less than the previous ones. In other words, for the forming of a cultural group, common territory, imaginary or real blood or genetic relationship, or ethnicity are not needed objectively because any of the previous may be the basis of the idea of culture.⁴⁰ That is why, concerning the cultural aspects of sexuality, it is important to make a clear distinction between talking about a group of people belonging to a given ethnicity, nation or religious group, living in a given district of a given city whose sexual culture is necessarily defined by their national, ethnic, religious, ethical cultural tradition, and talking about social groups, or say subcultures,

who were explicitly formed based on a given sexual attribute (gender identity, sexual practices, fetish, custom). Naturally, these mostly overlap with each other multiple times, and that is the reason why it is hard to discern how such segments of culture appear in the sexual identity and practices of a given person. This also explains the importance of the long introduction above about whether we can consider human sexuality a universal characteristic intrinsically linked to human nature. Since we cannot, it is worth analysing and consciously reflecting on how our own cultural environment determines our sexuality. How we, too, depend on the culture we live in and how we, too, create and form everything (through our sexuality) we call sexual culture.

When culture defines sex: sex and ethnicity

Western philosophers have long considered their own world universal. The first big wave of cultural anthropology, the work of Bronislaw Malinowski⁴¹ and Margaret Mead⁴² was the first to call the attention of the West to the fact that seemingly natural human phenomena, physical and emotional processes, social relations and sexuality, sexual culture, which integrates them, is far from universal, and rather varies nation by nation, ethnicity by ethnicity. Their findings are still profound even today; just think about Europe where many ethnicities live close together with different traditions, customs, and cultural patterns. Roma children go to school with non-Roma children, Muslim women and men work in Dutch workplaces, students from the Far East sit in the halls of Western universities, so we may as well say that the European Union itself reflects this phenomenon. Day by day we interact with people of different ethnicities; we work, study, make business, fall in love, yearn, flirt, found a family. However, whatever we do together, our body, soul and the cultural traditions written in them are

³⁹ L. Drummond 1981-2. "Analyse sémiotique de l'ethnicité au Québec" Question de culture, No.2, 139-153

⁴⁰ Vera Várhegyi: The Intercultural Competence Approach; Artemisszió Foundation'

⁴¹ Malinowski, B. (1927). [Sex and Repression in Savage Society](#). London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.; Malinowski, B.; H. Ellis (1929). [The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia](#). An Ethnographic Account of Courtship, Marriage, and Family Life Among the Natives of the Trobriand Islands, British New Guinea. London.

⁴² Margaret Mead: Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies (1935), [Male and Female](#) (1949),

there with us. We differ on what we think about our body, intimate hygiene, what is beautiful or repulsive in a man or woman, what we are allowed to talk about in the family, in company or what is considered a 'delicate' topic. How we show our emotions, get to know new people, or what is allowed in sexual intercourse and what is forbidden for a man or a woman.⁴³ Racial, ethnic, and national borders are sexual borders as well. One's national, racial, and ethnic identity is most often combined with ethnosexual boundaries; every ethnicity carefully guards and watches over its own sexuality. Hungarian public life has recently been stirred by the case of MPs Ági Osztolykán (LMP) and György Gyula Zagyva (Jobbik) which happened in the corridors of the Parliament.⁴⁴ The MP from Jobbik happened to say to his colleague: 'Just because you are Roma, I would still do you!'. In itself, this sentence can be seen as a 'simple' racist, sexist comment – which tells us a lot about how racist and sexist ideology is blurred together, but the rest of the story teaches us a lot as well. The above-mentioned MP tried to deny having made the comment saying 'because of course these are just the type of people I get aroused by'⁴⁵, and then simply attributed the comment to another one of his colleagues. That colleague in turn, in an open letter, managed to put the sexually and culturally relevant moral of the story into words, saying: 'You are afraid what your

bulldog comrades you usually simply call 'cannibals' would think if they hear you would date a gypsy.'⁴⁶ In other words, the aforementioned MP wanted to deny his comments made in the corridors of Parliament only partially on the grounds that it had been simply indecent for a politician of a European country to say such a thing. Rather, he was trying to deny it much more out of fear that his comrades would brand him for committing a sexual transgression. Normative heterosexuality is a defining component in most racial, ethnic, and nationalist ideologies; sticking to the generally accepted sexual identities and behaviours, and treating the deviations from it contribute to the regimes sustained on a racial, ethnic or national basis. In this context, sexuality signifies an element of power, sexualisation is one of the defining components of constructing and maintaining an ethnic, racial 'queerness'. These ideologies are built on a given society considering the sexuality of the dominant racial, ethnic, national or political group to be the norm, i.e. natural, and any 'queerness', deviation from it as abnormal, perverted, or unacceptable. This is the source of stereotypes like the lustful, amoral gypsy women, the coloured women and men who are shown as naturally highly sexualised. This type of (hetero) normativity is the basis of homophobia and intolerance towards any kind of sexual difference. That is why we have to make ourselves conscious and sensitise ourselves towards the ethnic aspects of sexuality, however, if we focus the cultural differences of sexuality on ethnicity, we may lose many other aspects of the peculiarities of sexual cultures. As a practicing sex educator, I find that it is quite different to work with gypsy teens in schools in the central and the more peripheral districts of Budapest. Many nuances are added to the same ethnic characteristics if we take into account every detail of the socio-cultural, social, family, school, and institutional background.

Sexual cultures – when sex defines the boundaries of culture

⁴³ 'A collection of essays published not long ago deals with the sexuality of gypsies living in countries based on the Western culture and with the narratives of sexuality of gypsies and non-gypsies (Gypsy sexuality: Romani and Outsider Perspectives on Sexuality, edited: Jud Nirenberg, Clambake Press, 2011), but a number of social scientific analyses, studies have also been born looking for correlations between sexuality and ethnic differences. Just to mention a few: , Joane Nagel: Ethnicity and Sexuality, Annual Review of Sociology, Vol. 26 (2000), pp. 107-133; Paloma Gay-Blasco: „A Different Body?”- Desire and Virginity among Gitanos, The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Vol. 3, No. 3. (Sep., 1997), pp. 517-535; Lorena García: „Now Why do You Want to Know about That?” – Heteronormativity, Sexism, and Racism in the Sexual (Mis)education of Latina Youth, Gender & Society Vol. 23. No. 4. (2009), pp.520-541.; Amy C. Wilkins: Stigma and Status: Interracial Intimacy and Intersectional Identities among Black College Man, Gender & Society Vol. 26. No. 2. (2012), pp.165-189.

⁴⁴ http://osztolykanagi.blog.hu/2013/02/20/sotetseg_a_tisztelt_hazban

⁴⁵ http://hvg.hu/itthon/20130220_Attol_hogy_cigany_vagy_meg_ledofnelek_j

⁴⁶ http://vagagabor.blog.hu/2013/02/21/nemcsak_taho_hanem_gyava_is_vagy

As the concept of culture got more and more refined, the attention of cultural anthropologists turned to the different social groups of their own countries. It turned out that customs abound and it is almost impossible to describe the sexual habits of people only along ethnic, religious, national lines. Since it was initially released in 1983, British social anthropologist Sheila Kitzinger's popular book *Woman's Experience of Sex*⁴⁷ has been republished several times. Kitzinger, a natural birth activist has written many world-famous books about pregnancy, birth and female sexuality. In her books she voices the real-life experiences of real women, which contradicted the social myths of the era. In their extensive social survey, the legendary American pair of researchers Masters and Johnson⁴⁸ arrived at the conclusion that most American mothers – unlike the cultural expectations of the era – were not indifferent towards sex; on the contrary, they showed a much higher sexual activity than those without children. In the world-famous survey of A. C. Kinsey, eight thousand American women were asked about their sexuality. From this study, many facts that had until then remained hidden came to light about the desires and sexual practices of everyday women, showing a much more varied picture than what would have been possible if they had been categorised as a single group just because they belonged to the same nation.

In her article "The Intercultural Competence Approach", Vera Várhegyi writes that 'man and culture are bound together by cultural identity. We can think of cultural identity as the imprint of our social belonging we carry with us continuously, and our keeping alive the respective emotions, values, behaviours, and beliefs. For instance: I can imagine that I belong to the community of Hungarians (even when I am not with them, or perhaps then even more so). My heart aches when a Hungarian competitor falls behind the German one in a hundred meter swim (emotion). I am sure I am part of a country having a history of a thousand years (value). I believe the bloodline of the people who settled in

Hungary runs in me (belief). Last, stunning many foreigners, I insist on eating pasta with ground poppy seed and sugar (behaviour). However, this simple image is complicated by many details. First, cultural identity is not a static or uniform phenomenon: everyone chooses a different way to incorporate his culture into himself – Hungarian identity can also mean something completely different for the individual Hungarians. Second, everyone is part of several communities, cultures and his cultural identities reflect this diversity: we are the unique combinations of professional, national, perhaps ethnic, religious, gender, musical, etc. identities. As a result of this diversity, our identities dynamically react to our social environment, more precisely, it is always the given environment that decides which one of our identities is activated. When we work, our professional identity comes to the forefront most probably, although it happens that our belonging to another group becomes dominant, for example when our colleague tells a sexist joke discriminating women negatively. What group the people that surround us belong to also influences whether we momentarily consider ourselves a woman, a professional, or black. Typically, we relate the most to the least represented group in a community, i.e. to the most outstanding identity. Karim, who has Arabic origins, will consider himself an Arab in Budapest, but a Hungarian in Tunisia. And a psychologist will impersonate his male identity if there are only women in a conference except for him, but his psychologist identity will be stronger once surrounded by anthropologists.⁴⁹

Opinions are divided concerning whether sexuality can mean the basis of our identity in any form and whether sexual identity can be a bond between people, whether it can be the basis of a subculture. As we could read above, cultural identity is dynamic and relational in nature; therefore the answer to this question depends mostly on an individual's social, cultural context. I remember the feeling I felt in San Francisco, California at the introduction of the sex educator training of San Francisco Sex Informa-

⁴⁷ Kitzinger, *Women's Experience of Sex*.

⁴⁸ Masters, W.H; Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*

⁴⁹ Vera Várhegyi: *The Intercultural Competence Approach*; Artemisszió Foundation

tion. Twenty of us future participants were sitting in a circle. Everyone had to say her name, who she was living with, what her sexual identity and sexual orientation was. I did not even know then that the latter is not the same as sexual identity. By the time it was my turn to introduce myself, I managed to realise how relatively I could categorise my sexuality. While I was maybe sticking out a bit at home in my own social environment by living in an experimenting, 'open' relationship, here, in this sexually more colourful, diverse medium, my introduction definitely 'stuck out' from the others with its conservatism. Just like when looking at the gay rights movements of different countries we can see that homosexuality as a sexual identity always appears against the heterosexual social groups in majority, or to be more precise, the hegemonic heteronormativity. Nothing shows this better than the fact that the sexual relationship between members of the same gender remained without a name for a long time in Western culture. We all have a sexual identity, but what we fill this category up with is absolutely a function of the historical, political, social, and cultural environment; when and what it means, and where its importance lies.⁵⁰

There are communities formed explicitly based on sexuality. They may be organised according to sexual identity (gay rights and social activist communities, events, parties) but it also happens that members of the community do not identify their sexual identity based on this and the driving force behind

the organisation remains their sexual orientation. It may be a virtual community or connected to a specific physical space like adult playgrounds created for BDSM sex (dungeon)⁵¹, the swinger clubs for the fans of group and pair switching sex, night clubs or sex parties in costume, and according to some views, commercialised sexual services also belong to this category, just to mention a few. Similarly, certain forced communities can form a sexual subculture, like in prisons or in the army.⁵²

Here we have to mention the role of the Internet and technology in the changes of sexual cultures. Today, the internet can allow many people preferring many kinds of 'unusual' sexual desires to find each other without physical proximity, to create a virtual community, or to access sexual, erotic content according to their interest. Just like it can also provide us with information about the existence of sexual cultures that are different from ours, thus influencing the cultural reference frame we thought to be stable. It not only has a role in widening our perspective and increasing our awareness, but technology also provides space for many new sexual, erotic games, like producing home-made porn films (home porn), sexting (sending erotic profile pictures by phone), looking for a mate or a sex partner on the Internet, just to mention a few. Thanks to this, the Internet provides opportunity and space for people having similar passions to find each other reaching beyond country and language borders to form a community, or at least considering them-

⁵⁰ Many ethnographic, sociologic and psychologic studies have been written about examining and understanding sexual identity, for instance Paula C. RUST "Coming out" in the Age of Social Constructionism: Sexual Identity Formation among Lesbian and Bisexual Women, *Gender & Society* (1993) vol. 7 no. 1 50-77; Ramona Faith Oswald: Who am I in Relation to Them?: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer People Leave the City to Attend Rural Family Weddings, *Journal of Family Issues* (2002) 23: 323-348; Jessica F. Morris and Esther D. Rothblum: Who Fills out A "Lesbian" Questionnaire?: The Interrelationship of Sexual Orientation, Years "Out," Disclosure of Sexual Orientation, Sexual Experience with Women, and Participation in the Lesbian Community, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* (1999) 23: 537-557, Diamond, Lisa M.: Sexual identity, attractions, and behavior among young sexual-minority women over a 2-year period. *Developmental Psychology*, Vol 36(2), (2000), 241-250. Dubé, Eric M.; Savin-Williams, Ritch C.: Sexual identity development among ethnic sexual-minority male youths. *Developmental Psychology*, Vol 35(6), (1999), 1389-1398.

⁵¹ Bondage, Discipline (B&D vagy B/D); Dominance és Submission (D&S or D/s), Sado- Masochism or Sadism and Masochism (S&M or S/M).

⁵² Numerous social scientific analyses have been prepared about sexual subcultures, just to mention a few: Carole S. Vance: Anthropology rediscovers sexuality: A theoretical comment, [Social Science & Medicine, Volume 33, Issue 8](#), 1991, Pages 875–884, Gates, Katharine Deviant Desires: Incredibly Strange Sex!, Juno Books, 2003, 1999.; Walshok, Mary Lindenstein: Emergence of Middle-Class Deviant Subcultures: The Case of Swingers, *18 Soc. Probs.* 488 (1970-1971); Laura María Agustín: New Research Directions: The Cultural Study of Commercial Sex, *Sexualities* (2005) vol. 8 no. 5 618-631; Dawne Moon: Culture and the Sociology of Sexuality: It's Only Natural?, *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2008) vol. 619 no. 1 183-205; Introduction to the Cultural Study of Commercial Sex: Guest Editor *Sexualities* (2007) 10: 403-407; Andreas Spengler M.D.: Manifest sadomasochism of males: Results of an empirical study, [Archives of Sexual Behavior](#), (1977), Volume 6, [Issue 6](#), pp 441-456.

selves to belong to the given subculture. This virtual connection can assist in recognising (even going public with) our particular identities in a certain sense as much as it can justly pose the question of how much an identity born in a virtual space can be 'real', or at least how vulnerable it is outside the Internet.⁵³

As we can see, the Internet's role in our sexual identity seems to be very complex and diverse: 'Our identity defines our values, thoughts and behaviour, but what unique way our identity chooses to grasp the cultures of the groups we belong to and in a given environment which of our identities we feel most accessible is the function of the interplay of countless personal and environmental factors. The relation between culture and identity is not a one-way relation, however. Just like we ourselves and our environment can be considered the product of culture, so can we find the opposite to be true as well, namely that individuals continuously participate in reproducing, forming, and changing culture.'⁵⁴ This is just as true about the sexual components of our identity. One of my friends recently told me about one of his adventures. As a Hungarian, heterosexual, white, atheist man with a family he got into an affair at a North American University with a dark-skinned, religious catholic, lesbian female colleague living in the US but originally from Sri Lanka. In this story, the differences between the ethnic, national, religious characteristics, and also sexual identity of the two of them were present at the same time.

The dimensions of our sexual differences

⁵³ The topic has a comprehensive literature as well, from which to mention a few Keith F. Durkin and Clifton D. Bryant: "Log on to sex": Some notes on the carnal computer and erotic cyberspace as an emerging research frontier, *Deviant Behavior*, [Volume 16, Issue 3](#), (1995); *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia* edited by Chris Berry, Fran Martin, Audrey Yue, Duke University Press (2003); Michael W. Ross: Typing, doing, and being: Sexuality and the internet, *Journal of Sex Research* [Volume 42, Issue 4](#), 2005; Jane D. Brown: Mass media influences on sexuality, *Journal of Sex Research* [Volume 39, Issue 1](#), 2002 Special Issue: Promoting Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior.

⁵⁴ Vera Várhegyi: The Intercultural Competence Approach; Artemisszió Foundation'

If every culture embodies unique answers, then it is natural that these answers differ from each other. In the case of sex it is further complicated by which aspect of sexuality is at the centre of the intercultural dialogue in question: the body, some sexual practice, or our gender roles. Discovering what these differences constitute and what scale of our activities they affect is an unending task for which applied anthropologists and cultural (comparative) psychologists bring newer and newer data bit by bit. 'Culture signifies the historically conveyed patterns of meanings embodied in symbols, the system of inherited concepts expressed symbolically with the help of which people can communicate with each other, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge and attitude towards life.' (Geertz 2001:74) Based on this, we can say that the extent of cultural differences by far surpasses the differences between values, religions, everyday habits, etc.⁵⁵ If we try to enumerate what subcategories sexuality might have at all, we already find a number of dimensions that simply 'offer' cultural differences.

The sexual body

Sex, considering its everyday aspects, has many points of connection with the flesh and the body. Since the relation between body and culture constitutes a separate article in the BODY anthology, here I would rather stick to the questions of body especially related to sexuality. But even so, examples abound. Discussions about sex are dominated by viewpoints restricting it to medical, natural scientific, and bodily functions. And this is not only misleading because sex is just the topic for which it is especially important to thoroughly observe the soul, the psyche, and the social and cultural environment of the 'owner' of the body, but also because the biological texts of sexuality are not at all value-neutral. The assertions, the language, the symbolic system of science, too, always reflect the cultural norms (expectations) of the given era. Historian Thomas Laqueur, whose work deals with

⁵⁵ Vera Várhegyi: The Intercultural Competence Approach; Artemisszió Foundation'

sexuality, analysed the medical texts of many centuries starting from the classical age and came to the conclusion that it is not our anatomy that takes form in our fate, but it is rather our fate that takes form in our anatomy. That is, the place men and women hold in society is not determined by our biological characteristics, instead on the contrary: culture defines how we perceive the anatomical and physiological build-up of women and men, and what follows from all these biological 'facts'⁵⁶. For instance, it was a scientifically 'proven' fact that the female orgasm is just as necessary for conception as is that of the man. Although there has been no change in the anatomy of women during the centuries, this scientific standpoint has still come off the agenda. Laqueur also states that until the mid-eighteenth century, the so-called 'one-gender' model had been predominant both in science and in the public thinking, which had positioned man and woman on a vertical scale where the woman was of a lower rank. According to this, only one biological gender existed in a more or less perfect form: more in the case of men, and less in the case of women. The basis of this theory was supported by drawing parallels between the male and female genitalia, while the physiological explanation was provided by the theory of common human bodily fluid. On the contrary, from the mid-eighteenth century onwards a new, 'two-gender model' transferred man and woman to the two ends of a horizontal axis as a creature of two, fundamentally different biological genders. Feminist anthropologist Emily Martin used this as a basis in her book *The Woman in the Body*⁵⁷ to point at the historical tradition according to which women are closer to nature, to bodily processes, to the family, to taking care of children. Let's just think of the simple everyday expressions such as 'she must be on her period, that's why she is upset', or the male version of the biologising argument in the topos 'a man always follows his cock'. But this can be just as well seen in the natural scientific de-

scriptions of the sexual body, as conception has long been depicted as an act in which the female body is passive and receptive, while the man is active, dominating, intruding.

The things considered erotic on the body, or the body parts seen as more or less sexual have differed a lot with every historical age and cultural environment. Let's think of the European cultural history of the female breast. The breast of women – compared to other parts of the body – has always been depicted with a distinguished erotic content, irrespective of the real experiences of real women. We cannot detach ourselves from the beauty ideal and expectations of our age, they are all part of how we perceive our own body, let's say, how we experience our own breasts. A certain hegemonic normativity is present in every culture concerning which bodies are considered sexually acceptable. It includes expectations about beauty, sexual attractiveness as well as what the given culture considers healthy, complete, whole. Looking at the depictions of the body in Western culture, a certain heteronormativity can be observed in the definition of the sexually attractive female or male body as young, fertile, heterosexual, healthy, and whole. Child sexuality is not part of it, nor any kind of disability, or sexuality in old age. Attributing a special sexual meaning to the genitals is also a cultural concept, while it can be proven from personal accounts that the erogenous zones is different in every person. The bodily processes that differ with age and for people living with different disabilities indicate the relativity of sexual tactility and sensuality. Inversely, it is worth taking a look at how much different cultures differ on the handling of nudity for instance. In some places the skin, the flesh has to be invisible, while in other places everything can be shown without any concern. But the same is true for the processes of treating and caring for our body; for example, whether a woman is allowed or explicitly expected to remove body hair, whether pantliners are in use, whether she can touch her own genitals, or for instance whether touching herself or her bodily fluids are considered acceptable or outright disgusting also differ from culture to culture.

⁵⁶ Laqueur, Thomas: Making Sex- Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud. „Of Language and the Flesh“. Pp.1. Harvard University Press, USA, 1990.

⁵⁷ Emily Martin: *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*, Beacon Press, Aug 1, 2001

Sexual desire

However strange it may sound, sexual desire itself is determined culturally. Drawing a simple parallel may help understand it. The carnal desire of sexuality can be compared to the tastes that motivate what foods we want to eat. What may seem to be an intrinsically physical desire is actually acquired. Our preferences for olives, Brussels sprouts, or ground poppy with sugar have been learned; the same is true about the way we perceive different types of touch. If I do not know, if I have never even heard about it, maybe I would not have thought about trying it, 'wanting it'. Just like we have to 'learn' that we have the right to desire, we often have to learn what forms of desire are acceptable. For example, although seemingly everything is about enjoying life and consumption in Western culture, some forms of desire seem to remain illegitimate. Sexual desire is especially problematic. Whichever official sexual educational program for young people we look at, sexual anatomy is solely restricted to the reproductive functioning of our body, as if experiencing pleasure through our bodies had no *raison d'être*. Michel Foucault uses this viewpoint to compare the different concepts of sexuality in Western and Eastern cultures. On the one hand, there are the societies- and they are numerous: China, Japan, India, Rome and Arabo-Moslem societies- which have endowed themselves with an *ars erotica*. In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself, it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul."⁵⁸ We, in our Judeo-Christian culture talk about sexuality in the language of science and imagine it based on universal norms. Doctors, sexologists, psychiatrists, psychologists, sexual-therapists treat our sexual dysfunctions, analyze the problems of our souls, the

perversions of our psyche. Desire has to be explained in every case: I want him, I am in love, because I want to have a child with him, because I have the right to want him, or just because it is forbidden. The secrecy of desire, eroticism is rooted in its forbidden, sinful nature.

The social contexts of sex and gender

The people considered to be man or woman based on their social and biological characteristics and the existence of other social gender roles differs from culture to culture, just as what these identities mean, their power dynamics, hierarchical relationship, or simply what social role they fulfill can vary. Social gender roles constitute one of the pillars of the BODY project, with an entire article dealing with the intercultural aspects of the concept of gender. I would simply mention how norms regarding the kind of sexual, erotic, corporal or virtual relations we can establish are culturally dependant. It always depends on the given culture where the limits of normality are drawn and what their regulatory functions or their selfish cultural traditions are. In sexuality this is illustrated by the notion of *taboo*, or *that which is considered* explicitly or implicitly prohibited. The taboo of incest or the prohibition of sexual intercourse between relatives has a totally different function in each society and different patterns lie behind their apparent universality. Family systems vary on a wide scale from one culture to another. They contain jumbled and complex rules about who can and cannot marry whom. Anthropologists have been pondering the question of family systems for decades in order to find an explanation for the taboo of incest, marriages between cousins, the conditions of inheritance, the relationships to be avoided, the compulsions of intimacy, the taboo of names, the wide scale of real family systems. Anthropologist Gayle Rubin of Berkeley University in California citing Lévi Strauss – comes to the following conclusion: "Lévi-Strauss adds to the theory of primitive reciprocity the idea that marriages are a most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious gifts. He argues that the incest taboo should best be

⁵⁸ Foucault, Michel: *The History of Sexuality*. pp. 57.

understood as a mechanism to insure that such exchanges take place between families and between groups. Since the existence of incest taboos is universal, but the content of their prohibitions variable, they cannot be explained as having the aim of preventing the occurrence of genetically close matings. Rather, the incest taboo imposes the social aim the social aim of exogamy and alliance upon the biological events of sex and procreation. The incest taboo divides the universe of sexual choice into categories of permitted and prohibited sexual partners. Specifically, by forbidding unions within a group it enjoys marital exchange between groups.”⁵⁹ Studying the process of civilization, Norbert Elias argues that the super ego, just like the psychic structure of man or our whole individuality, strongly correlates with the system of rules of social behaviour and with the structure of the society. The pronounced division in the “ego” or consciousness characteristic of man in our phase of civilization, which finds expression in such terms as “superego” and “unconscious”, corresponds to the specific split in the behavior which civilized society demands of its members.⁶⁰ Today, prohibition is so deeply rooted in us that we don’t necessarily reflect on its causes, and we cannot handle the ensuing turmoil in many cases. If the relation between parent and child starts to include the slightest hint of eroticism it becomes suspicious immediately, the fear of abuse appears. But it varies from culture to culture – as shown by the quotations at the beginning of this article - that sexual intercourse itself within a group has a defined and strictly controlled social meaning for many ethnicities. Similarly, the organisation of the family also varies between cultures.

“Types of marriage and marriage rules”: marriage can mean commitment between a man and a woman (monogamy), between a man and more women (polygamy) or between one woman and more men (polyandry). We know types of marriages

that don't fit into any of the above categories. For example the “mosol” girls in China never get married. With the help of their brothers they build their houses where then mothers, daughters, uncles and brothers live together. In the evenings men visit the house where their darling lives. These are totally legitimate relationships, they often last for years and of course children are born from these relationships. But these children have a father concept which is completely different from that of a Hungarian, German or Russian child growing up in a nuclear family. Besides, deciding who can marry each other is also defined by cultural norms. For example the marriage of cousins is frowned on in many places. From the perspective of the Western Judeo-Christian culture it can seem weird that in many societies marriage between cousins is not only possible but outright preferable. But we can find differences even in this. For example in the Arabic marriage system the ideal wife for a boy is the daughter of the mother’s sister or the father's brother. A marriage like this would cause a strong uproar in Amazonia, where it goes the other way around: the daughter of the father’s older sister or the mother’s brother should be chosen. In the family system known to us it's difficult even to distinguish between these relationships, because we are not used to differentiating between our cousins this way.⁶¹

Sex as an activity

As it came up previously the things we consider erotic, attractive, arousing, or the reasons we have sex with someone or alone varies from culture to culture as well. The goal and the content of sexual activity are also culture-dependent. We have sex because we find great pleasure in it, because it is obligatory, because it's an expectation, because of intimacy or emotional closeness, because it gives security, because it alleviates stress, reduces distress, because we need company, because it has spiritual content, because it is a means of earning money or because we consider it

⁵⁹ Rubin, Gayle: *The Traffic in Women*. pp. 173.

⁶⁰ Elias, Norbert: *The Civilizing Process- Sociogenic an Psycho-genetic Investigations*. IX. Changes in Attitude Toward Relations Between the Sexes. Volume 1. *The History of Manners*. Basil Blackwell Publisher, 1978, England- Worcester. pp.190-191.

⁶¹ Vera Várhegyi: *The Intercultural Competence Approach*; Artemisszió Foundation'

to be good physical exercise.

In simply thinking about the history of masturbation we see that different eras have considered it reprehensible (Thomas Laqueur: *Solitary Sex, a cultural history of masturbation*, Zone Books, 2003) for different reasons, that it has had different religious and sanitary approaches, and that it has had different meanings in the case of boys and girls. As it was mentioned in the definition of sexuality, many people consider sex the insertion of the penis into the vagina (PV sex). It's not only a hetero-normative definition related to reproduction but it also narrows the opportunity of the sexual playing field for heterosexual people. But whether we play with our own body or with our partner's, how we handle - even unrelated to our body - eroticism not only depends on our fantasy (that is also framed by our cultural traditions), but also on what the closer-wider social environment surrounding us considers acceptable, tolerated or expressly prohibited. As a practicing sex educator, I find it quite interesting to keep this in mind when listening to the negative feelings people have about different sexual practices. In Hungary I often get letters from readers, questions for example in connection with anal sex. For many heterosexual couples it is a natural act, but there are men who consider receiving anal sex (from the female partner) unimaginable because they associate anal reception with homosexuality. I often hear similar reservations about oral sex when working with Roma young people. If a woman gives pleasure to a man orally, it is considered unacceptable and disgusting by boys and girls alike because 'only bitches do that'. But it is also culturally determined whether we consider taking the lead, being active, passive, or submissive in sexual intercourse and whether we assume a traditionally masculine or feminine role.

In San Francisco, California professional sex workers told me they would have no job if their culture allowed wives to be completely free in bed. From this perspective, we can look at the activities preferred by sexual subcultures or at the usage of different tools and the attitude those outside of these communities have of such practices. It's enough to think about binding or experimenting

with pain and how these acts generate repulsion or incomprehension from those who can only imagine pain as a negative human feeling and cannot imagine linking it to pleasure in under any circumstances. And we could continue by examining cultural differences in relation to bodily fluids, to tasting them, to the erotic usage of different objects, "tools", and toys. To close the list, I would like to mention the following example: I, myself, as a sexual educator often see and experience a lot as a result of my profession but I distinctly remember the first time I saw Japanese girls addicted to octopus and fish sex on the Internet. For me, seeing the tiny fish splashing in and out their vaginas and mouths, their completely naked bodies, and the jerking tentacles of the living octopuses was like crossing a cultural border. On the other end of the spectrum, sex does not always mean moist nudity. A handshake or a love letter can also carry an erotic message. In the novel "Midnight's Children" by Salman Rushdie, Adam Aziz falls in love in Kashmir, India as a result of having to examine his client through a white bed sheet for months. Just as the body has its own symbolic and cultural meanings, so does sexual intercourses. It can be the confrontation with authority (marquis de Sade), it can mean the expression of hierarchy in our gender or social roles, but it can also carry other dynamics of power and force, just like it can embody belonging to a community.

The spaces of sex

"Space and time are not only relative concepts in Einsteinian physics but in human behaviour as well. The usage of space and time are coordinated by cultural rules that remain completely invisible until two individuals following different expectations meet. The users of different proxemic⁶² rules may easily fall victim to mutual misunderstanding if one of them considers a smaller distance appropriate for dialogue in the given relationship or situation, while the other prefers a bigger one. These differences can lead to funny situations even in Europe, for instance when an Italian and a Swede

⁶² http://www.lelkititkaink.hu/testbeszed_terhasznalat.html

try but cannot find the distance suitable for both of them. The alternative approaches to time also first become tangible (sometimes painfully so) during cooperation and interaction. Differences cannot only be seen in ‘how late’ people are for a meeting, although this is the most frequent observation.”⁶³ To what extent a culture organises our sexuality along the dimensions of space and time is very much visible, tangible in some aspects, while in others it remains almost completely unseen, or at least unreflected by the individuals. However, the spaces of sex have always been well regulated. Just think about which sexual activities are allowed for whom and how in our own culture and which are those that remain confined to the private space. Let’s take a Western European capital where kissing is allowed in bus stops, but a woman can’t show her breast and a same-sex couple can’t kiss. It is no coincidence in most Western cultures breast-feeding in public places is a controversial question because we can’t forget about the sexual meaning of the female breast even if it shows up only to feed the mother’s baby. For example, in Budapest such a regulation applies to how far a shop with sexual content can be from a school or a church. But in some towns the same meaning is carried by where red-light houses can and cannot be found, or where the bedroom of the parents is located in the space of the family house : open, together with the children’s room or at an intimate distance from the common family spaces. The legitimate and illegitimate spaces of sex tell us much about how the given culture handles sexuality.

Intercultural competence and sexuality

But why is the knowledge that everything around our body and sexuality is defined by culture (cultures) interesting in itself? The answer is because cultural features are often very difficult to perceive regarding bodily issues and sexuality. We think they come from nature and that they are universal, so we cannot even imagine in most cases that the things which are absolutely natural for us

could provoke adverse feelings in others. Similarly, we also forget to think about why we feel such strong emotions when we come across things which are strange for us. If we do not consider our values and understanding of our body, gender roles, social relations, or sexual practices as universal but rather believe that they are as diverse as we are many, it can bring us closer to seeing them point towards connection points and understandability instead of representing insurmountable obstacles in our social interactions. We all carry everything laid out in the previous pages within ourselves. Unreflected or consciously, we keep dragging along the complex tissue of our sexual culture and identity in ourselves with a constantly changing, expanding and renewing content and quality. But several times this package doesn’t make our situation easier at all. The cultural differences in the case of sex address primary senses (smells, tastes, touches); they activate deep feelings, desires, and attitudes and touch our basic values.

In some cases this means a quick, natural reaction, in which we immediately feel, think, and tell something about the “other”. We feel that the other is “strange”, unusual, disturbing or even irritating, scandalous, or shocking. If someone makes us blow a fuse or simply surprises us by being tattooed, by missing one of her breasts, by being untidy, by falling in love with people from the same gender or by having sex for money, then the first thing we will do is surely not to think over what may have caused our feelings of contempt. Are we afraid? Are we unsure? Do we judge him or her because we grew up in a totally different value system? The differences can easily (and even invisibly) build an impenetrable wall and several times they don’t point towards dialogue at all.

As Várhegyi Vera writes in her article ‘The Intercultural Competence Approach; Artemisszió Foundation,’: “The intercultural approach was called into being by the realisation of the fact that the coexistence or the co-operation of different cultural groups might cause difficulties. We can arrive at the same conclusion ourselves if we try to count how many years there were in the history of humanity without wars, or how many violent conflicts are go-

⁶³ Vera Várhegyi: The Intercultural Competence Approach; Artemisszió Foundation'

ing on between different groups of people at the moment. But there is more to it than just the above. Because the conflicts transmitted in the media and the tensions that seemingly verify Huntington's 'clash of civilizations' thesis come to life along fault lines of economic policies and power, while the problems of co-operation with others may show up irrespective of all this, even in the most banal daily interactions. That is, even without any special manipulation for power and material difference of interests, it may be difficult to understand and accept cultural differences and we can get into a conflict relatively easily just because the programming of our human nature is not based on accepting the different, the other but rather on defending, keeping and preferring our own culture. Despite the several obstacles, the meeting of different cultures and confrontation with the cultural differences can mean a resource as well".⁶⁴ But why do we have to be tolerant of every kind of sexual difference which is unlike ours? Why should someone whose profession is not related to sex still care about sex? In the case of sexuality intercultural competence does not necessarily mean we should 'speak' all kinds of sexual culture or diversity 'languages', nor does it mean we should be tolerant of all kinds of difference. It rather means that the ability to self-reflect can be useful in numerous situations. Because sexuality is not only present, it is explicitly the subject of discussion – it is also in sexual education, counselling, dating or family life, and every human interaction, even in the seemingly most professional and most eroticism-free situations. We cannot "put away" our body, gender, attraction, sexual orientation, we cannot forget about them. They are present even when we try to ignore them in the given context. It is not good or bad. It is an absolutely natural and unavoidable characteristic. What happens if we don't notice them? Just because we don't reflect on it, we still live the situation, we react in a given way and so we affect the simplest social interactions as well. Our different identities are present in parallel at the same time, and it is diffi-

cult to find the balance between them all, especially if the interaction is characterised by some asymmetry. Such can be a parent-child, doctor-patient, teacher-student, helper-client, local administrator-migrant relationship, where the hierarchy between the parties isn't necessarily present openly but implicitly, without any reflections. A supporting expert can look at himself or herself in a professional situation as a neutral expert, while as a man or a woman he or she is present with body and soul, with all his or her emotions, values, prejudices. The identity provided by the professional culture can put a hat or a mask on us in which we do not even think about considering ourselves the equal of the other party, because it is the other one who needs help, counsel, healing, answer. 'We', professionals are open, inquisitive, empathic while the 'other party' will be, wanted or not, client, sick, child, patient. The ability to self-reflect offered by the intercultural approach enables us to examine ourselves in each and every situation like we often do without thinking with our partner - whether he (she) is our future love, the conductor or our customer. This can help us to understand why a situation "gets stuck", what causes a strong rejection, shock, resistance, why we get into conflicts even if we don't want to. Of course this approach is no guarantee for the avoidance of conflicts and misunderstandings, but it helps us to mark and understand our own limits, helps us to say *yes* or *no*, and reduces our uncertainty in situations caused by not understanding why the other is so different.

English translation: Eszter Nádas

⁶⁴ Vera Várhegyi: The Intercultural Competence Approach; Artemisszió Foundation'

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