

The Transformation of Sexuality

Gender and Identity in
Contemporary Youth Culture

● Thomas Johansson

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Gender and Identity in Contemporary Youth Culture

THOMAS JOHANSSON
University of Gothenburg, Sweden

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Preface

This book is written within the research project ‘Youth, sexuality and gender in transition’. The project was financed by the Swedish research council (FAS). This book is the last one of three volumes (the other two are in Swedish) where the project has been discussed and presented. Two of the chapters are written together with Nils Hammarén, who has also been responsible for all the practical details of the survey. Nils has also read and commented on the whole manuscript. I would like to thank all the people who have been directly or indirectly involved in this project. I also would like to thank all our respondents, who have contributed to this work by giving us information and material.

I am also grateful to Karen Williams, who has translated the main part of this text. Finally I would like to express my gratitude to Philip Lalander, Jesper Andreasson and all the other researchers who contributed to the project.

Thomas Johansson
Gothenburg
15 April 2006

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 1939, sociologist Norbert Elias published his work on the civilization process (Elias 1939/1982). Owing to the war, however, his efforts were forgotten for a time. It was not until 30 years later that the scientific world gave serious consideration to Elias's theory. The basic notion underlying Elias's work is that Western history is also an account of how humankind has gradually developed increasingly sophisticated forms of self-control. In particular this concerns our bodily functions and, thereby, also our sexuality. Elias describes in detail how people are becoming more observant of their own bodily secretions and how they are developing feelings of shame when confronted with them. He considers that people in the Western world are marked by control, discipline and self-consciousness and that these envelop much of everyday life. The process of discipline affects everything from how people regulate their sexuality and bodily secretions to how they speak and behave in their social life. Yet this should not be seen as a development from a spontaneous and natural stage to a civilized stage. Elias considers rather that people have always deferred to some form of discipline, but that these forms have been different throughout human history.

There are many points of contact between Elias and the French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose works include a three-volume work entitled *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1978, 1987a, 1987b). Here, Foucault describes how a modern attitude towards sexuality is developing. Modern humans internalize a kind of understanding of what may be viewed as normal as opposed to abnormal sexuality. He considers that, during modern times, sexuality has been made public – through everyday conversations, newspaper articles, scientific articles and sexual guidance information – and that this enables a new form of surveillance and control. In Foucault's thoughts we find elucidation of a paradox: things done for the purpose of liberalization, for example scientific studies of sexuality or sexual guidance information, also entail new methods of control and surveillance. In modern society, people manage their own self-oppression: they are their own controllers. In his book *Civilization and its Discontents* (Freud 1932/1989), Freud describes how this form of discipline is located to the superego, which grows strong because of the growth of a bourgeois hegemony. Put simply, the concept of hegemony refers to a type of monopoly on what is to be considered normal and desirable in a given culture.

In the classical Swedish work *Den kultiverade människan* (*Cultured Man*), ethnologists Jonas Frykman and Orval Löfgren (1979) describe and analyse how the bourgeoisie, during the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, tried to impose their own values on the Swedish peasantry. This was a question of strengthening the bourgeois position of dominance in Swedish society not only by

teaching peasants about clock time and schedules, but also by conveying values concerning physicality and sexuality. Frykman and Löfgren sketched a picture of a 'hands-over-the-covers' culture in which the sexual and the physical are seen as objectionable and unclean and in which masturbation is said to lead to serious illness and facial abscesses.

In the bourgeois culture, there was great fear of doing something wrong or of appearing deviant in some way. Considered from a Foucauldian perspective, bourgeois power was everywhere: in the schools, in how dwellings were furnished and designed, in books of etiquette, in the daily press, in the personal advertisements, and so on. If hegemony is to be upheld, people in the culture must be constantly reminded of the natural and rational inherent in what it advocates. Through these constant reminders, a certain normality is segmented in people's consciousness. Breaking with this normality is difficult, not least because it is closely tied to the individual's emotional life – a fear of doing the wrong thing is created. Elias describes this process as follows:

Fears of this kind play a considerable part in the control to which the child is subject from the beginning, in the prohibitions placed on him. Perhaps only partly conscious in the parents, and partly already automatic, they are transmitted to the child as much by gestures as by words. They continuously add fuel to the fiery circle of inner anxieties, which holds the behaviour and feelings of the growing child permanently within definite limits, binding him to a certain standard of shame and embarrassment, to a specific accent, to particular manners, whether he wishes or not. (Elias 1939/1982: 330)

So, becoming embarrassed and feeling shame derive from a fear of breaking with a certain normality. The line of reasoning pursued thus far, however, does not imply that the individual is totally regulated and controlled by internal directives. A controlled or even uncontrolled acceptance of desire and pleasure is sometimes allowed. Using Elias's term, a kind of escape zone is created to deal with the expectations of normality that each individual lives with. On certain occasions, such as parties, disregard of the norms and values that regulate the sphere of intimacy is accepted. Moreover, imposing taboos tends to create curiosity about the forbidden. In the bourgeois culture that Frykman and Löfgren describe, the consequence of hiding naked flesh was Peeping Tomism.

Elias's and Frykman and Löfgren's analyses of how the body and sexuality are regulated in modern society provide an avenue into the topic of the present book: youth, gender and sexuality. While we see today a picture in which young people's sexual thoughts and actions are characterized by experimentation and freedom, free and equal sexuality between men and women is still restricted and obstructed in many ways. For instance, research shows that young women are subjected, to a great extent, to sexism, oppression and dominance (Jeffner 1997; Holland et al 1998).

In approaching the present topic, we notice that it is intersected by prejudices, ideological notions and desire. Young people are both actors and objects. They shape their own sexuality and form their own desire, but they are also subjected to sexualization and exploitation. On advertisement billboards we see perfect,

well-trained young bodies. Most of these bodies belong to young women, but it is becoming more common to aestheticize men, too, thereby transforming them into objects (Nixon 1996, Johansson 1998).

The present book constitutes an attempt to get behind media images and prejudices. Based on an extensive survey, but primarily on in-depth studies of different groups of young people, we will explore some central questions concerning young people's sexuality. Considering the work of authors such as Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault, it may be worth reflecting on the question of just how regulated young people's sexuality actually is; and what, exactly, is meant by sexual freedom.

The book begins with a section that presents several central theories of sexuality and society. This chapter brings to the fore some of the perspectives and questions used throughout the book. The central question concerns the extent to which we may speak today about sexual liberation, or whether we instead should view human sexuality as increasingly controlled and manipulated by commercial forces. This chapter places this book within a field of sexuality and gender studies. Thereafter the book is divided into several different parts.

The second part of the book – 'Youth, Gender and Sexuality: Positions and Transitions' – consists of two chapters, each treating different aspects of young people's construction of gender, sexuality and identity. The first chapter deals with Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon school and youth research. Much of the discussion on young people's sexuality has centred on what is happening in and around schools. Thus, educational research on young people has often started specifically with the classroom and what happens there, only later to expand its interest to the youth culture in general. In this chapter, we discuss the different depictions of young people's sexuality that emerge from this research. Chapter 4 brings forward changes within youth culture research, starting in the 1970s and then gradually presenting a more up-to-date picture of research on these issues.

The third part of the book – 'Desire and Identity in Contemporary Sweden' – contains the main part of this book. Here the Swedish study is presented in several chapters, each dealing with specific issues. Chapter 5 is largely based on data from an extensive Swedish quantitative study of young people's outlooks on and relations to their own sexuality. The major areas dealt with here are: fidelity/infidelity, love, homosexuality, pornography and beauty ideals. We discuss the data in the light of other relevant research findings. In Scandinavia and the Anglo-Saxon world, there are a number of studies similar to ours; we consider these in relation to our study. The following chapter focuses more specifically on how young people look upon and consume pornography.

In Chapter 7, we deal primarily with young women's struggle for independence and gender equality. We use examples from a great variety of empirical studies, and discuss the relation between politics, sexuality and gender. Emerging from this chapter is a tremendously active, self-confident and potent young woman. This image is intended to function as a contrast to the young female images often appearing in research, the media and other public spheres.

The following chapter deals with the construction of masculinity. It takes up a number of current tendencies and changes among young men. In this chapter, we use empirical examples from case studies of young feminist men, women playing on women's soccer teams and bisexual men. The central question is: what changes are we able to discern among young men today?

Chapter 9 deals with questions concerning different norm systems and cultural perceptions of sexuality. On the basis of several case studies of young immigrant men and women, we will discuss issues of power, ethnicity and sexuality. This chapter also makes connections between sexuality, gender and space.

In the next part of the book, I will sum up all these different discussions, and once again return to the issues and questions raised at the beginning of the book. The purpose here is both to draw some general conclusions and to indicate the need for further research in certain areas. In this section I have also added a chapter that looks more carefully into issues around the media and sexuality. The last part of the book contains a more thorough discussion of methodological issues.

The present book is largely based on empirical data from an extensive Swedish research project on youth, gender and sexuality. The project has taken a fairly broad approach and has tried, using surveys and a number of qualitative in-depth studies to capture developments among today's Swedish teenagers (16–19 years of age). This broad approach has also been combined with a number of group interviews with young people as well as a number of more specific qualitative in-depth studies. The survey was distributed among young people attending schools in two Swedish cities: Gothenburg and Kalmar. A total of over 1,300 surveys were completed and returned (see Chapters 5 and 6).

The purpose of the various in-depth studies has been to obtain a broad as well as an extensive picture of how young people belonging to different groups and constellations view and relate to their own sexuality. Among other groups, we have spoken with political lesbians, male handball players, female soccer players, young Christians, immigrant young people and young men who view themselves as feminists (Johansson and Lalander 2003, Johansson 2005).

The interested reader will find in the Appendix a more thorough presentation and discussion of the empirical basis of the study. I would finally like to stress that in writing the book my sole ambition has not been to present our own investigation, but instead to use it as a point of departure in discussing current Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon research on youth, sexuality and gender.

PART I

Scientia Sexualis

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Chapter 2

Pleasure and Desire in Modern Times

It is in this sense that the sexological account of sexual identity can be seen as an imposition, a crude tactic of power designed to obscure a real sexual diversity with the myth of sexual destiny. (Weeks 1987: 37)

In one sense, it may point to the fact that overall inequalities in the relationship between man and woman handed down to us by our culture are playing havoc with many people's lives, both men's and women's. (Hite 1981: xvii)

The first quotation is taken from an article by feminist historian Jeffrey Weeks. Here, he sharply criticizes sexology. Weeks asks whether sexology – the purpose of which is to increase our knowledge of human sexuality – doesn't actually result in increased sexual repression and the categorization and compartmentalization of individuals rather than in their liberation. This is a perfectly apt question based on a critical theory of gender and sexuality. The second quotation is from sexologist Shere Hite's well-known study of male sexuality. She states that the sex-role stereotypes that still dominate our ideas about gender and sexuality tend to diminish people and to reduce their ability to grow and mature sexually. On a superficial level, both Weeks and Hite seem to have the same ambitions for their work on sexuality: to work toward liberation and to counteract sexual repression. Yet these two scholars actually belong to two completely separate schools of thought and research that have developed around issues of human sexuality.

While Weeks explores the historical and cultural factors that help to form our sexuality, Hite focuses on detailed studies of sexual behaviour and expression: how often do you have sex? Do men like oral sex? Is masturbation a frequently occurring behaviour? How is an orgasm experienced? And so on. Weeks's work concerns putting sexuality into a cultural and social context, while Hite's research deals with detailed investigations of factual and concrete forms of sexual expression. Thus, the scientific study of human sexuality has different manifestations and focuses on different aspects of the phenomenon. Weeks criticizes the scientification that sexology has been responsible for, yet he is also partly a victim of the same process. His work too may be used to legitimize a particular view of sexuality.

In late-modern society, science is no longer a project that takes place inside an ivory tower – it is not a glass bead game, but instead a reflexive process involving scientists, the people they study and journalists. The study of sexuality has also helped to create sexualities, that is, to shape and develop our view of sexuality and our behaviour as sexual beings. This is also one of the strong points made by Michel Foucault. Here, we may speak of a widespread scientification of sexuality.