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## Constructs of Sexuality in the Context of Imaginary Worlds

### Constructs of sexuality

Sexuality is an extremely complex umbrella term, which covers elements constituting an integral sphere of every human life (Weeks 1986). These include, among others, the categories of eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, procreation, gender and gender roles, identity, and sexual orientation (WHO, BZgA 2010). Their meanings are formed as a result of an interaction between “biological, psychological, social, economic, political, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors” (WHO, BZgA 2010: 19). The body, which is the biological base, can become eroticized.<sup>1</sup> The circumstances and main actors involved in this process are defined by the culture that an individual belongs to. People experience their sexuality on the basis of scenarios and patterns created by social relations, and biology serves as a set of possibilities that gets transformed through these relations (Weeks 1986). What people understand as sexual is therefore a matter of cultural negotiation,<sup>2</sup> shared meanings and common ideas that construct the framework of intersubjective imaginary worlds. Consequently, elements of sexuality (including, particularly, the rules of how a body should look, behave, and even what it should feel) are often referred to in arbitrary terms, rooted in the historical and socio-cultural context (Kochanowski 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Mariola Bieńko (2004: 73) emphasizes that “eroticism differs from sexualisation in a way that it is a set of innate natural reactions of an organism to stimulation of its certain parts. Sexualisation, on the other hand, is a learned erotic response to another person or other external object.” However, it should be noted that these terms are often used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> For example, if a man touches a woman’s breasts, depending on the context, circumstances and attributes assigned to the role being played at that moment (Goffman, 1959), it can be understood as either an erotic act or not. As the reality of everyday life is shared and institutionalized, if a man is wearing a white coat and has a stethoscope, this touch will probably not be considered erotic and most likely a woman in this situation will be undergoing a breast examination by a doctor. If this man is the woman’s partner and they are in their bedroom, the touch will presumably be deemed a form of foreplay. Obviously, this scenario may vary depending on the given culture. Hence, this is a rather simplified illustration for the assumptions of social constructionism and how sexual meanings are shared within imaginary worlds.

Imaginary worlds are created thanks to the cultural patterns existing on a supra-individual level. These patterns become a basis for mental projections and individual attempts at reconstructing socially shared meanings, while individual actions can be recognized and understood only in relation to the cultural context and to the intersubjective imaginary worlds which they are a part of (Weeks 1986).

An extremely useful tool in theoretical discourse on sexuality is the perspective of sexual scripting (Simon, Gagnon 1984), based on the assumption that human sexual activity is a result of processes taking place on three levels: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts and intrapsychic scripts (Simon, Gagnon 1984).

The historically determined socio-cultural context defines cultural scenarios that are "instructional guides that exist at the level of collective life" (Simon, Gagnon, 1984: 53). A possible "lack of congruence between an abstract scenario and a specific situation" is resolved at the interpersonal level, which accounts for managing interactions with others (Simon, Gagnon 1984: 53). On the intrapsychic level, which is in charge of the reflective, internal dialogue of an individual (Simon, Gagnon 1984), subjective imaginary worlds, understood as intimate narrations of self, are co-created and recreated.

The content of the socio-cultural patterns determine the acceptable categories in which sexuality is negotiated. Therefore, it is of great importance to look at the context of the discussed issue.

### The essence of context

The reality of late modernity features a new social quality that contributes to the breakdown of traditional social structures, authorities and reference groups (including their values, norms and the social control inscribed in these structures). This new quality is also characterized by the pluralism of the mutually influencing cultures, fragmentation and episodicity of social life (Bauman 1993:7). Modernity, therefore, becomes a source of uncertainty for individuals and causes a loss of predictability and stability that leads to an identity crisis. Consequently, the structural pressure on self-realization becomes more compelling, which contributes to the need to develop individualistic attitudes. Individualization, which results from the ability of the information society members to make informed choices, also becomes an opportunity of self-creation (Giddens 2006). In this context, identity becomes a reflective project, "something that must be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 1991: 52). Modernity offers a great number of models available in the "cultural supermarket" that individuals can choose from (Mathews 2002).

The context of choices and constructs of intersubjective images is created in Poland in relation to the contemporary consumer culture (transformed from the capitalist culture of producers), which constitutes pleasure as the basic category of the social reality (Melosik 2012).

The media content<sup>3</sup> plays a significant role in this process. Being a part of the consumer context, it co-creates a reality in which achieving pleasure becomes one of the main goals. It also creates in people the illusory conviction that this pleasure can be achieved by inventing your “self” at will, shaping your identity<sup>4</sup> basing on the innumerable models<sup>5</sup> and products available in the cultural supermarket (Mathews 2002) and hence, your becoming whoever you want to be.<sup>6</sup> However, the process leading to achieving pleasure<sup>7</sup> may often be long and arduous. Therefore, it does not comply with the pervasive culture of immediacy. In the face of such a social reality, constructing one’s sexuality becomes a difficult task.

In such an environment, transferring some elements of self-construction to the virtual world enables almost the immediate realization of the promises which were created in the media and subjected to individual negotiations. It is possible to create or recreate alternative<sup>8</sup> versions of the self<sup>9</sup>, choosing from the myriad of elements available virtually. One can modify both the dream self (for example, fulfilling all culturally imposed requirements of corporality) as well as the “real” self (for example, rejecting the necessity to fit into a socially imposed model of identity and sexuality).

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<sup>3</sup> Thus the media create reality instead of presenting it. They shape and model society, and individual life becomes an imitation of what is presented in the media. As a result, the social reality and the media (imaginary) reality get confused, which contributes to a rise of a culture of staging (Melosik 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Identity meant as a way to understand yourself and what matters are relevant to you (Giddens 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Being, however, a part of the social system of segregating sexuality, we can still distinguish the dominant and preferable model of experiencing sex in our society: and this would be sex in a heterosexual, monogamous, and preferably long-term (if not marital) relationship between a woman and a man (Kochanowski 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Our imagined ideal “self” is not entirely our autonomous choice, and its construction is based on the dominant models shown by the media (Kochanowski 2013).

<sup>7</sup> “Achieving” satisfaction has been used in a simplified way, we should rather speak about “striving for” satisfaction, because “an individual is never able to get fully satisfied. The category of unfulfillment and attrition is inherent in the ideology of consumption” (Melosik 2012: 32).

<sup>8</sup> The complexity of sexuality mentioned above has a significant influence on the creation of alternative versions of the self. This construct is an umbrella term covering such elements as: “sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction.” (WHO, BZgA 2010: 17). It also includes numerous options for expressing and experiencing sexuality in thoughts, desires, fantasies, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, interactions, activities, practices, roles and relationships, and their cultural and social representations (Waites 2005). Notably, however, all these components of sexuality are not experienced and expressed simultaneously (WHO, BZgA 2010). Significant in this respect is the relational nature of the complementary elements of sexuality (including the relationship between particular elements with the general structure of individual sexuality) such as actions, desires and fantasies.

<sup>9</sup> Although late modernity offers innumerable options for experiencing sexuality, the socio-cultural context conceives models of sexuality which, gender-wise, we are supposed to strive for. They are internalized to the extent that they are often acted out in fantasies. Constructions of self are created on their basis while escaping to the imaginary worlds.

## The internet as a platform for fulfilling needs and realizing identity constructions

The internet is a tool that – due to its ever-expanding offer – allows the realization of individual needs (getting support, consolation, security, recognition, self-fulfilment, etc.), including those of love or sex. The internet is a platform that allows you to acquire and verify information through access to expert discourses, but it also enables the purchase of services and products. Being the source of endless sexual scenarios<sup>10</sup> and ways of their implementation, it responds to the needs of almost every user.<sup>11</sup> It makes it possible to materialize individual desires and fantasies, gives the opportunity to acquire theoretical knowledge, get to know other users' opinions derived from their experience, and eventually see what a particular fantasy might look like (e.g. specific sexual position, or improved body), which can influence the decision to realize it in the real world.<sup>12</sup> The results of a survey conducted in 2010 by professor Izdebski (2012) on an unrepresentative sample of 10,016 internet users showed that almost one third of the interviewed had sexual intercourse with a person they had met on the internet (30.5% of the men and 27.1% of the women), and most often these were people aged 26–30. What is more, the increase in the use of applications such as Tinder and Grindr, which are platforms created to facilitate the search for sexual partners, is also important.

The internet is also becoming an integral part of social life. More and more often the activity on social networks – such as Facebook or Instagram – is classified as one of the fundamental elements of identity constructions, especially among young people, who are at an age when searching for their own identity involves experimenting with it (Castells 2001). These experiments are possible at the interpersonal level, where the scripts are integrated as a result of individual negotiations of the cultural scenarios offered by social institutions at a collective level (Wiederman 2015; Simon, Gagnon 1984). The emergence of alternative forms of realizing sexual scenarios constructed on the basis of the specificity of virtual context is also not surprising. Simon and Gagnon defined cultural scenarios that are general instructions indicating the context and particular nature of virtual interactions, possible roles and the relations between these roles. Internet interactions reduce the possibility of sensory perception, but offer at least partial anonymity and a sense of security, which makes it possible to mute the internalized mechanism of

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<sup>10</sup> Including the most sophisticated ones or even those prohibited by law, sometimes being on the verge of paraphilia and serious disorders of individuals who approve of such content. These scenarios definitely go over the limit of acceptable sexual behaviour, which is based on the assumption that the individual's choices in sexuality are conscious, safe and are carried out with the consent of all involved.

<sup>11</sup> In 2012, more than half of Poles declared that they regularly use the internet (CBOS 2012), and it can be assumed with a high probability that currently this percentage is higher.

<sup>12</sup> The knowledge collected in this way can also affect the decision to cancel the plan of realizing a fantasy.

social control for the time of choosing and acting out scripts at a redefined interpersonal level. The intrapsychic level as well enables the symbolic reorganization of reality in order to fully realize the innermost dreams of an individual (Wiederman 2015). The virtual equivalent of everyday life with the use of innumerable tools (e.g. Photoshop<sup>13</sup>) allows individuals to materialize improved concepts of themselves, ranging from small adjustments /corrections, to creating themselves from the proverbial scratch. In the process of creating the virtual “self”, they can make you look older or younger, add flesh to certain parts of the body or make them appear thinner, completely change their outfit, etc. . The imagination seems to be the only limit here. In addition to the possibility of a virtual materialization of subjectively understood “better” (or “worse”) versions of the “self” at the body level, this world allows an equally far-reaching interference with one’s identities<sup>14</sup> and biographies.

In relations based solely on internet contact, the boundaries of “freedom” in inventing oneself practically do not exist. This process of self-creation takes place with a relatively little effort and is most often subjected to acceleration, which facilitates the reproduction of the instant culture – the culture of immediacy<sup>15</sup> (Ściupider-Młodkowska 2013). This means that it is not only easier to maintain a coherent vision of the “self” and a stable front stage (Goffman 1959), but basically immediately after imagining the new attribute of the “self” one may move on to its implementation – even if this new image of the “self” would be impossible to realize (immediately) in the real life. Therefore, in the virtual world it is easier to “feel at ease” and in a quick, “safe” (anonymous<sup>16</sup>) way satisfy one’s needs, “including the needs of affection and sex” (Ściupider-Młodkowska 2013: 308).

The internet therefore also provides countless opportunities for realizing sexual scenarios. Pornography is one of the channels offering these scripts. It is discussed primarily in connection with the aspect of “flooding with sexual content” (Izdebski, Niemiec, Wąż 2011: 64) as well as with free access to unreal sex, which involves bodies realizing, determining and recreating the cultural pattern of attractiveness. Indeed, pornography very often shows exaggerated, inaccurate images, and by reducing a human into the role of an object and by glorifying sexual sensations, it ignores the emotional sphere (Zabielska 2009). This objectification,

<sup>13</sup> Graphic software used, among others, for editing photos.

<sup>14</sup> Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory may help to explain the reality of imaginary worlds. The interaction order is based on the regulations of a particular portal/application. The interference in the “self” may probably look different in the case of an application or portal which aims to bring about a meeting with another user in the real world. The truth is that the more you interfere and manipulate with the virtual “self”, the more unreal is your virtual facade. As a result, maintaining the coherent self-image in case of personal contact becomes more challenging (Goffman 1959).

<sup>15</sup> “In an instant world, where a goal must be achieved immediately, the sphere of emotions is also strongly accelerated. In such a structure, human behaviours, artificially stimulated by technology, become accelerated, adjusted to achieve immediate needs” (Ściupider-Młodkowska 2013: 313).

<sup>16</sup> Anonymity allows you not only to freely manipulate with the front stage, but also to replay the whole process of “self” creation in the context of sexuality, and other elements that make up individual attractiveness, such as uniqueness (hobbies, interests, certificates, education. . .). You can write your whole story from scratch.

however, also takes place at the level of the virtual acting out of everyday life. Let us just note three elements that significantly affect interpersonal relationships: progressive individualization, moving everyday life to a virtual level and the culture of immediacy. Getting used to acquiring “tailor-made” parts may change the requirements for future partners, including the sexual ones, which results in their objectification on the basis of the filters from our expectations.<sup>17</sup>

The internet objectifies people who create their own imaginary world, offering them illusions of subjectivity, agency and decision-making. A person who presents themselves in a particular way, usually basing on the dominant model of attractiveness, becomes a ready-made product looking for someone who meets their expectations.<sup>18</sup> When people assess the photos and profiles of other users, they expose themselves to being treated according to the same categories. Thus the virtual world, being an imaginary world, combines innumerable possibilities with countless threats.

## Conclusion

The major significance of subjective and intersubjective analyses of imaginary worlds for the construction of sexuality is an indication of the diversity of forms and ways of experiencing and negotiating sexuality. Presenting this diversity may contribute to undermining the dominant understanding of sexuality in binary, dichotomous, emotionally-charged categories. Throughout all the levels: the sexual scripts shared on the collective level, playing one’s role on the interpersonal level, and individual fantasies of the intrapsychic level, the construction of sexuality should not be limited to the material aspect of the real world only. The conditions of late modernity also enable re-constructing sexuality and its constituent elements in the virtual world. The internet functions not only as a source of knowledge but also as a space that is an imaginary world itself. On the one hand, it supplies an infinite number of sexual scenarios and provides tools that enable modification of our real bodies. On the other, it allows a complete detachment from the sexuality of the real world and transition to the illusion in which it is possible to transform, repair, and even create oneself anew. Although the rules governing imaginary worlds give an individual an impression of subjectivity, agency, and choice in a myriad of possibilities, at the same time they entail individual risk, which may be another multidimensional aspect worth investigating.

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<sup>17</sup> It also gives the opportunity to consciously expose the body to market laws: the value of an individual increases depending on the level of acceptance of the posted photos, affecting the bids for defloration.

<sup>18</sup> Despite this risk, the situation is somewhat different for people with non-heteronormative sexuality, where the internet is often the only “safe” space which creates an opportunity to meet a partner.

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### Summary

While discussing sexuality we are referring to a multidimensional sphere of elements that construct everyday social life. These elements are influenced by a number of factors, including those derived from imaginary worlds. The sphere of imagery is therefore directly linked to sexuality. Symbols, meanings, stories and desires are all parts of intersubjective imaginary worlds and their negotiations are possible by means of, inter alia, the new media, and the internet in particular. Not only is the latter a key opening the door to the world of countless opportunities of pursuing and negotiating sexuality. Reality can be “fixed”, or even created from scratch. Imaginary worlds, therefore, can be understood in two ways: as intersubjective worlds: patterns and meaning shared at the collective level, as well as the subjective worlds, which are implementation of these patterns and meanings from an intrapsychic level.

### Keywords

sexuality, social constructivism, internet, social scripts

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