

PERCEPTIONS OF SEXUAL RECIPROCITY IN FEMALE UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS IN SLOVENIA*Alenka ŠVAB*

University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Kardeljeva ploščad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

University of Primorska, Faculty of Humanities Koper, Titov trg 5, 6000 Koper, Slovenia

e-mail: alenka.svab@fdv.uni-lj.si

ABSTRACT

The article presents the results of a qualitative research study of female university students' perceptions of sexuality, focusing on perception of sexual reciprocity in intimate relationships. As reciprocity is understood as basic element and at the same time condition of late-modern intimate relationships, our attention was paid on whether sexual reciprocity is defined by female students as basic condition of intimate relationship and how is sexual reciprocity in itself constructed. The concept of reciprocity is here taken as an indicator of reflexivity of sexual and intimate relationships. Sexual reciprocity as perceived by female students in the study revealed three main characteristics regarding perceptions of reciprocity: first, reciprocity is understood as basic element and condition of (reflexive) intimate relationship and sexuality; second, reciprocity is also framed within broader understanding of sexuality (especially differences between female and male sexuality); third, a certain economy of reciprocity is created, which makes the meanings of reciprocity and intimate and sexual relationship an complex issue.

Key words: sexuality, female university students, sexual reciprocity, permissive and traditional sexual cultures

LA PERCEZIONE DELLA RECIPROCIÀ SESSUALE NELLE STUDENTESSE
UNIVERSITARIE IN SLOVENIA

SINTESI

L'articolo presenta i risultati di una ricerca qualitativa sulla percezione della sessualità nelle studentesse universitarie, con particolare riguardo alla percezione della reciprocità sessuale nel rapporto di coppia. Poiché la reciprocità è intesa come un elemento e una condizione fondamentale dei rapporti di coppia tardo-moderni si è cercato di capire se, tra le studentesse, la reciprocità sia effettivamente definita in tali termini e in che modo esse pervengano alla sua costruzione. Il concetto di reciprocità è preso come un indicatore della riflessività dei rapporti sessuali e intimi. La reciprocità sessuale, per come essa è percepita dalle studentesse partecipanti alla ricerca, si manifesta in tre caratteristiche della percezione di reciprocità: in primo luogo, la reciprocità è intesa come elemento e condizione fondamentale sia di un rapporto di coppia (riflessivo) sia della sessualità; in secondo luogo, la reciprocità va inquadrata nel più ampio contesto della sessualità (in particolare nella percezione delle differenze esistenti tra la sessualità maschile e quella femminile); in terzo luogo, sembra crearsi una sorta di economia della reciprocità, che introduce una ulteriore dimensione di complessità nei concetti e significati attribuiti alle relazioni intime e sessuali.

Parole chiave: sessualità, studentesse, reciprocità sessuale, cultura sessuale permissiva e tradizionale

INTRODUCTION

According to main commentators of late-modern changes in intimate relationships (Bauman, 1998; 2003; Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 2000; Schmidt, 1995; 1998; Weeks, 1995), late-modernity is characterised among others by a radical transformation of intimacy and sexuality. These changes are closely related to wider social changes, especially the phenomenon of reflexive individualism (Giddens, 1991; Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and changes in sexual cultures and morals. According to Giddens, changes in the sphere of intimacy do not only mean a transformation of intimacy as such but also a new way of creating intimacy (Giddens, 1998). This means above all that intimacy and sexuality have become ever more defined from 'within', by the individuals themselves. Intimate relationships no longer depend on external conditions of social or economic worlds but are said to be free-floating (Bauman, 2003; Giddens, 2000; Schmidt, 1998).

Pure intimate and sexual relationships being interpersonally determined and conditioned by respect for others necessarily rest upon some other basic conditions in order to last. Intimate relationships of this late-modern form are believed to be built on »egalitarian and reciprocal sexual standards« (Vance in Braun et al., 2003, 239) or in other words, they are »defined by the presence of certain formal conditions in the interpersonal context, for example, consent, reciprocity and respect« (Seidman in Braun et al., 2003, 239). In this sense they become reflexive relationships (Giddens, 2000).

Starting from the theories of transformation of intimacy (Giddens, 2000) and reflexive individualism (Beck, Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 2000), this article presents the results of a qualitative research study of female university students' perceptions of sexuality¹ with special emphasis on perception of sexual reciprocity in intimate relationships. Students are in particular sociologically interesting social group to study in relation to the changes in sexuality and intimacy as they are understood as an avant-garde in this field (Schmidt et al., 1998) and women in general are sought to be bearers of changes in intimacy of late-modernity (Giddens, 2000).

As reciprocity is understood as basic element and at the same time condition of late-modern intimate relationships, our attention was paid on whether sexual

reciprocity is defined by female students as basic condition of intimate relationship and how is sexual reciprocity in itself constructed. The concept of reciprocity is here taken as an indicator of reflexivity of sexual and intimate relationships. The analysis followed the main idea that female students' perceptions of sexuality are grounded in the following key social contexts, namely, reflexive individualism, changes in intimacy and partnership, and the permissive sexual culture; and that characteristics of these social contexts will be present in female students' perceptions of sexuality in general and reciprocity in particular. However, we expected that certain residuals of traditional sexual culture will be present as well, especially those related to gender differences and inequalities regarding sexuality. According to some authors, gender differences are articulated in the form of the so-called »pseudo-reciprocal gift discourse« (Gilfoyle et al. in Braun et al., 2003, 240). This study is therefore interested in the ways female students construct their perceptions of reciprocity and how these are based in different social contexts and discourses that have implications for (quality of) their sexual and intimate lives.

SEXUALITY AND INTIMACY OF LATE-MODERNITY: THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL STARTING POINTS

From the 1960's onward we faced a shift from traditional restrictive sexual culture, which established clear and also differentiated limits for sexual behaviour² to permissive sexual culture emerging as a key context of the late-modern organisation of sexuality. In the private or intimate sphere, changes in sexual culture are reflected in the phenomena of a pure relationship and plastic sexuality (Giddens, 2000; Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), while in the public sphere they are reflected in (cultural) sexualisation and the phenomenon of the so-called striptease culture (McNair, 2002).

Permissive or liberal sexual culture is characterised by »permissive discourse« (Hollway in Gavey et al., 1999) governed by the idea of the possibility of free sexual expression, sexual equality, by liberal and tolerant views on sexuality and sexual diversity, by sexual pluralism (diverse sexual practices, behaviours, patterns). Sexuality is organised around pleasure and no longer in reproduction (Gavey et al., 1999). Also characteristic of

1 The author of the research is Alenka Švab (Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana). As part of their study requirements, the students Nina Sirk (Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana; assisting in the conduct of focus groups and transcription of interviews) and Evgen Štefančič (Faculty of Human Sciences-University of Primorska; transcription of interviews) have collaborated in running the research. Under the author's mentorship, the students presented the preliminary results at the International Student Symposium in May 2008 held in Grožnjan, Croatia.

2 Sexuality is located within the frameworks of a marriage and closely connected with reproduction, there is a sharp distinction between socially acceptable and unacceptable sexuality and the implied sanctions and stigmatisation of sexual behaviours and practices, which deviate from socially normative or permitted sexual behaviour, such as pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships, homosexual relationships etc.

permissive sexual culture is the sexualisation of the public sphere, sexual commercialisation and expanded accessibility of sexual knowledge and information (even an information abundance), especially with the development of new technologies such as the Internet and so on.

However, a permissive sexual culture is certainly not the only one in existence. Following Williams' division of the existing culture into dominant, residual and emerging (Williams, 1985), the sexual culture or cultures of late modernity can also be divided into: the permissive sexual culture as dominant; the traditional (restrictive) sexual culture as residual; and the subversive sexual (sub)culture (e.g. queer, trans-hetero sexual culture) as the emerging sexual culture.

This distinction between individual sexual cultures allows us to understand their co-existence and mutual relationships and consequently explain perceptions of sexuality among the participants in our study. Namely, each sexual culture has its own typical discourses and imperatives that are also present in these views on sexuality. Typical characteristics of the traditional sexual culture are biological imperative (Gavey et al., 1999), the male sexual drive discourse (Weeks, 1986), and the coital imperative which give direction to the traditional, differential view of female and male sexualities, or support the »masculinist model of sexuality as generic sexuality« (Jackson, 1984). On the other hand, the permissive sexual culture is characterised by the permissive discourse, reciprocity discourse and the orgasmic imperative.

Within traditional sexual culture, the male sexual drive discourse (Hollway in Gavey et al., 1999), based on the idea of biological and reproductive conditioning of sexuality or the biological imperative (Gavey et al., 1999), follows the idea that male sexuality is dominated by a strong biological need for sexuality in the coital form (Weeks, 1986). Male sexuality is presented as the opposite of female sexuality and represents the general model of how we understand sexuality (Jackson, 1984). Female sexuality is considered to be passive, subjected to male sexuality and closely connected with reproduction (Gavey et al., 1999; Weeks, 1986). Traditional sexual culture is also supported by the so-called coital imperative, within which coitus is considered to be the most natural expression of heterosexual activity, with its key element and goal leading to sexuality being equated with coitus. Thus, the idea is maintained that men have a strong sexual instinct that aspires to experience coitus (Jackson, 1984).

Reciprocity discourse and orgasmic imperative are typical products of permissive sexual culture. Reciprocity discourse means promotion of reciprocity in intimate relationships (i.e. reciprocity as basic element of late-modern pure relationships (Giddens, 2000), however, the research revealed that reciprocity does not necessar-

ily rest on egalitarian relations between partners (Braun et al., 2003). In combination with elements of traditional sexual culture (differential understanding of male and female sexuality as essentially different), it creates the so-called pseudo-reciprocity where exchange of sexual pleasure (e.g. orgasms) gets realised through established rights (e.g. woman's right to orgasm) and obligations (male responsibility for female pleasure) (Braun et al., 2003). Discourse of pseudo-reciprocity is closely related to the construction of orgasm in the so-called orgasmic imperative, within which orgasm is understood as the final goal of heterosexual activity for men as well as for women. Orgasm is therefore pictured as final point of »natural« sexual intercourse (Potts, 2000).

In this context, our starting idea is that young people's sexuality, the ways how they perceive and practice sexuality and intimacy, is inevitably related to the described social context. Sexuality plays an important role in personal biographies of young people and is also a key part of reflexive project of the self. In other words, sexuality is means of self-realisation (Haavio-Manila et al. in Bernik, 2010). Reflexive project of the self in the field of sexuality and intimacy presupposes sexual autonomy, (gender) equality, reciprocity (emphasis on intimacy, agency and mutual achievement of pleasure), commitment, constant reflexion and high demands regarding sexual and intimate relationship.

Sexual reflexivity is seen in how young people view themselves as autonomous sexual subjects with their own highly reflected views, aspirations and interests regarding sexuality, and in how they openly express them in sexual and intimate communication. One of the presumptions of this study was that reciprocity will play an important part in this context and is a condition for satisfying sexual and intimate relationship. Reflexivity has therefore become a measure of successful and satisfying sexuality; however this is probably more evident at the level of opinions and viewpoint rather than practices of everyday life.

One the other hand, our study was led by the idea that traditional sexual cultures at least in some aspects still influence young people's ideas and perceptions regarding sexuality in intimacy. While the majority of young people probably hold liberal views on sexuality in general, we presuppose that to some extent differential view on sexuality will be present and will guide the perceptions of sexuality among participants in our study. In other words, although equality and reciprocity are important components of late-modern intimate relationships that most young people strive for, these are nevertheless embedded in structural gender inequalities. Duncombe and Marsden (Cacchioni, 2007, 301) in this sense refer to connection between the micro-politics of sexual relationships and the institutionalised gender inequalities of power. Their concept of »sex work«, which refers to »the rationalisation, improvement and mastery

of sexual pleasure in personal sexual relationships« and an »unacknowledged effort and the continuing monitoring which women are expected to devote theirs and their partners' sexual desires and activities« (Cacchioni, 2007, 301), is therefore relevant also for our study, especially in understanding the relations between perceptions and practices of reciprocity within sexual and intimate relationships.

METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out with focus groups on the sample of female students. The research was primarily of explanatory nature and focus group therefore represented basic source of information (cf. Morgan, 1997; Frith, 2000), since sexual behaviour in Slovenia has been under-researched and at the same time we do not have any data on sexual behaviour of students. The main reason for choosing focus groups as a qualitative technique was the fact that the aim of the research was not to explore sexual behaviour, practices and experiences of individuals (for this purpose individual interview would be more appropriate), but to explore viewpoints and perceptions regarding sexuality, where the interaction between participants of focus group is an important source of information in itself (e.g. different views on sexuality and their confrontation).

Focus groups are research technique for collecting data through group interaction on a certain topic chosen by a researcher (Morgan, 1997). As in social sciences in general (Litosseliti, 2003), the use of the focus groups in the field of sex research is becoming more often, especially in the case of exploratory research (Frith, 2000; Graham et al., 2004). Discussion in the focus group depends on individuals who form the group as well as on the dynamic of the group as whole (Morgan, 1997, 60) and enables a broad collection of data on the discussed topic (Krueger, Casey, 2000; Litosseliti, 2003). In the discussion on advantages of focus groups Morgan (1997, 20) stresses that focus groups reveal aspects of experiences and views that would not be revealed without group interaction. The most important result that could be observed through interaction is the way how participants react on each other: do they agree or disagree, pose questions and answer the questions etc. Group discussion and interactional nature of focus groups are especially appropriate for research in the field of sexuality (Frith, 2000), and focus groups are especially appropriate for researching viewpoints and opinions of participants (Morgan, 1997).

Procedure

Choosing the size of individual focus group and the number of focus groups was done according to the existent references (see e.g. Greenbaum, 1993; Krueger, Casey, 2000; Litosseliti, 2003; Morgan, 1997). According to Morgan (1997) the main factor in choosing the size of the group is the extent of individual's contribution in the discussion and also the question how detailed data we want to collect from individual participant. In the current research small focus groups were chosen (4–6 participants)³ (Greenbaum, 1998, 3) due to the extensiveness of the topic (high number of questions) and due to the intimate nature the researched topic. The idea behind this was that smaller groups were more likely to create an atmosphere of trust in which participants will feel comfortable and more willing to talk than in larger focus groups. In addition, the small number of participants (especially in the light of the extent of the topic) enables every participant to talk and develop their own ideas and opinions.

At the same time the focus groups were big enough to enable heterogeneity of opinions which is the key factor in determining the size of the group (Litosseliti, 2003; Krueger, Casey, 2000). The research managed to create a good ratio between the size of the group and the number of questions on the list, which can be seen also in the duration of particular focus group. The average duration of focus group was one hour and a half, which is a time that still enables continual concentration of the participants and the detailed discussion of all aspects of the defined topic.

As a general rule the number of focus groups in social sciences is 3 to 5, based on the argument that after five focus groups new information is rarely gathered (Morgan, 1997, 43), which some see as an ability to stop collecting data when we can correctly predict the answers of the participants (Zeller in Morgan, 1997, 43). This is also known as reaching the point of saturation after which we can no longer get new information and the answers start to repeat. The number of focus groups necessary for reaching the point of saturation depends on several factors, in the first place the heterogeneity of the participants within the focus group and between them (Morgan, 1997, 44). In the current research some information started to repeat already after the fifth focus group, however the decision was made to carry out eight focus groups as the size of the focus groups was small.

The sampling was done through the snow-ball and link-tracing methods. The participants were recruited through social networks, by sending e-mails, and all participants were asked for further possible contacts.

3 Average number of participants per focus group was 4 (five focus groups consisted of four participants, two groups of five and one focus group of three participants).

The focus groups were held in January and February 2008. Before each focus group started, the students were asked to fill in a short questionnaire containing basic socio-demographic questions. This was followed by a short presentation of the aim and course of the focus groups. Further, the participants were acquainted with their role in the focus group. The focus groups were then conducted according to the usual procedure with a moderator and a facilitator (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997).⁴ The 68 questions for focus groups were divided into seven sub-topics (the male sexual drive discourse, intimacy and sex, the coital imperative, sexual reciprocity, the orgasmic imperative, faking orgasm, sexual autonomy or decision-making).

Sample characteristics

Eight focus groups were carried out with 33 female students of social science and humanities from several faculties of the University of Ljubljana and the University of Primorska, both in Slovenia. The participants formed a largely homogenous group regarding their age and study course. Their average age was 22.8 years and they were all social science students.⁵ While the sample was broad regarding the place of residence (the participants came from across Slovenia), the majority came from urban areas (15 from towns, 5 from suburban settlements, 5 from small places and 8 from rural areas). The sample included 12 single participants and 21 participants involved in a partner relationship. Regarding sexual orientation, 29 participants declared themselves heterosexual, two bisexual and two homosexual.⁶

RESULTS

Sexual reciprocity as perceived by female students in the study revealed several characteristics which function in a complex relationship in the context of late-modern perceptions and practices of intimate relationships and sexuality. Three main characteristics regarding perceptions of reciprocity can be distinguished. First, reciprocity is understood as basic element and condition of (reflexive) intimate relationship and sexuality. Second, although reciprocity is defined as equal giving and receiving, it is also framed within broader understanding of sexuality (especially differences between female and male sexuality). Third, in the light of the second characteristic (understanding sexuality as different for men and

for women), a certain economy of reciprocity is created, which makes the meanings of reciprocity and intimate and sexual relationship more complex. The following section presents and discusses these results in more detail.

Positioning reciprocity within stable relationship

Participants relate reciprocity with intimate relationship, which was revealed through a discussion about advantages and disadvantages of sex in stable relationship at the one hand and one-night stand on the other. For participants one-night-stand is primarily intended for satisfaction of their own sexual needs, being more oriented toward personal interests and therefore more 'selfish' and non-reciprocal.

»I have a positive attitude toward this; basically I regard it as ... it is about satisfaction...« (Manja, 24)

»... A one-night stand is to satisfy desire« (Polona, 20)

However, since sex/sexuality is in general put in the context of a stable partnership, the one-night stand represents its opposite. In this sense, it is a practice with no prospects:

»It cannot continue permanently, sooner or later everyone gets fed up because we are all emotional beings and because, regardless of what your feelings are, positive or negative, you sooner or later get to need them.« (Manja, 24)

For the majority of participants reciprocity is therefore located within the relational context of stable partnership, closely related with feeling, emotions, connectedness, disclosure, therefore the elements of reflexive intimate relationship. Sex in a stable partnership and a one-night stand are not comparable and reveal qualitative differences. Sex in a partnership is more fulfilling; it brings more pleasure, more to the relationship and better sex:

»Because the fulfilment is bigger with sex with someone you are intimate with. Much greater than with someone you do not know well or not at all.« (Marta, 24)

4 Moderator was the author of the research (A. Švab).

5 The fact that the participants of the focus groups were social science students might represent a weak point on one hand as a more diverse sample would undoubtedly show more diverse perceptions and perhaps also less reflexive and critical attitudes toward sexuality. On the other hand, the homogeneity of the sample offers an advantage as it enables an analysis of perceptions in a population of students for whom it can be presumed that given the nature of their studies they have more critical views of the social construction of sexuality, and that their perceptions of sexuality and partnerships are more reflected.

6 The participants who declared themselves homosexual had had a past heterosexual experience.

»Today, you can get sex anywhere. With romance it is different. It means at least that your partner means something to you. It is something more.« (Eva, 21)

»Well, it [note: one-night stand] is about curiosity and exploration ..., while with an existing partner ... he can serve you and the sex can last longer, it is another thing.« (Nuša, 22)

There is also some small degree of the idealisation of sex in a partner relationship:

»... Sex in a serious relationship is different and more beautiful because emotion is involved ... because it is your soul mate, well, in that moment in that relationship you are united...« (Sara, 23)

Reciprocity as the key element of egalitarian partnership is typically represented as an important characteristic within the hetero-sex and hetero-relationship. As for intimate relationships in general the reciprocity in sex is understood as the necessary part of sexual relationship; it is a condition for reflexive sexual relationship.

Reciprocity is also itself defined sometimes in reflexive way, e.g. it is about equality, respect, trust, effort, attention:

»... That you at least roughly know the desires of your partner, and also his limits; i.e. how far is somebody willing to go. And that you don't force him or even ignore ... and also that you do your best, as much as you can; for him and for yourself.« (Marta, 24)

Participants also described it as something that comes with knowing your intimate partner, as something which requires knowing one's partner and his preferences well. This indicates that reflexive partnership and sexuality become a social ideal that majority strives for and social imperative one has to follow.

However, at declarative level when participants were asked to define sexual reciprocity, they described it as equal giving and receiving, as 'quid pro quo' reciprocity, in terms of quantitative measure 50:50. They emphasized that they expect their sexual needs and desires also to be met.

»This means that you give and also receive. And that you know whom you give.« (Kaja, 21)

»... That both give and also both receive and that both also tolerate each other.« (Laura, 20)

This indicates a certain level of agency and autonomy that stems from new sexual morals, called interaction morals or morals of negotiation (Schmidt, 1995, 7), based on egalitarian and reciprocal sexual standards

(Vance in Braun et al., 2003, 239), that replaced a traditional sexual morals that was hierarchical and non-reciprocal and grounded in differential view on sexuality (see below). However, as it will be shown further, this does not mean reciprocity in terms of equality.

Reciprocity in the context of differential view on sexuality

Although participants explicitly define sexual reciprocity in terms of 'quid pro quo' or equal exchange of pleasures (especially orgasms) discussion about other aspects of sex/uality revealed more complex and sometimes contradictory picture of the perception of sexual reciprocity. This complexity mainly stems from gender differential view on sexuality (see Švab, 2010). It constructs female and male sexuality as essentially (biologically and consequently socially) different. Male sexuality is understood as conditioned by a strong sexual drive and oriented toward orgasm through coitus, and female sexuality seen as contrast to and subordinated to male sexuality, being passive and closely connected to reproduction (cf. Gavey et al., 1999; Weeks, 1986).

Within this context women see their own sexuality as different from their partners', especially in terms of sexual desire (drive). While on the one hand they express a demand for equal reciprocity and meeting their own sexual need and interests, the very perception of what constitutes female and male sexual pleasure is differential. In this sense reciprocity becomes differential; it becomes pseudo-reciprocity (Braun et al., 2003) or differential reciprocity.

One example of this constellation is positioning partner's pleasure before one's own. Majority of participants for example see partner's sexual pleasure at least as important as their own, if not even more. In this sense, female sexual pleasure is at least partly defined through giving pleasure to partner. This is therefore a 'relational' pleasure. This is somehow contradictory since male sexual desire, and especially orgasm, is understood as something certain, unquestioned and always present (in comparison to female sexual desire and orgasm) (see Švab, 2010).

»I think that giving pleasure to a partner is already half of your pleasure.« (Marta, 24)

»Sometimes I'm even more attentive to a partner than to myself, because partner equals sex with orgasm, while I don't need to achieve it to have a good sex. So, I'm sometimes more into that he is going to achieve an orgasm and this will be a good sex for him. ... [B]ecause I enjoy sex anyway and I don't need an orgasm for that, while my partner needs that ... I focus on that that it's more important to me that I satisfy him than that I'm satisfied.« (Nuša, 22)

These statements express female relational role; beside care for their own sexual pleasure, women also have a role of taking care for partner's pleasure and satisfaction.

Economy of reciprocity: investment, exchange, obligations

Differential understanding of reciprocity creates specific relations between partners in terms of exchange of pleasure and obligations that come with it. In this way, a specific economy of reciprocity is created. One example of differential perception of sexual reciprocity and economy that comes with it is that reciprocity is understood as a *process* and not only as an act of particular sexual encounter. It is a process and a sort of investment.

»... That you don't just give in pointless way, but that you will someday ... perhaps not just today, receive it back.« (Kaja, 21)

»Well, sometimes only one of the partners is satisfied, but this is totally ok, because you know that there will be another sex, and both will make an effort, so that it will be somehow balanced.« (Laura, 20)

This process also includes specific *relations of rights and obligations* between partners which are further framed within the construction of the »usual« sexual encounter. In discussing which activities constitute the usual sex participants described what is known as »common-sense version of how hetero-sex happens« (Braun et al., 2003, 242), where coitus and male orgasm have the central role of sexual encounter. Although participants stated various sexual activities and practices (most often coitus in different positions, oral sex, manual stimulation, and sometimes anal sex), the course of sexual encounter was in practically all cases the same: various activities intended for a woman to achieve an orgasm(s) (most often manual stimulation, cunnilingus) followed by coitus and male orgasm that marked the end of sex.⁷

The construction of hetero-sex through coitus is promoted by the so-called coital imperative within which coitus is considered to be the most natural expression of heterosexual activity, with its key element and goal leading to sexuality being equated with coitus. Thus, the idea is maintained that men have a strong sexual instinct that aspires to experience coitus (Jackson 1984). In this construction of hetero-sex male orgasm represents an ultimate goal and end of hetero-sex. At the

same time, as female orgasm is promoted by the permissive sexual culture, female orgasm is not only a woman's *right* but also a man's *obligation*. The result of this constellation is seen in the usual course of hetero-sex.

In this context, female orgasm is perceived as something which depends on male functioning and competence.⁸ Men are seen as those who have the role (and duty) to »guide« the woman or »prepare« her for orgasm.

»That a man guides you to orgasm; this in itself has its charm.« (Nuša, 23)

»... Whether the man is able to prepare the woman to achieve orgasm ...« (Nena, 23)

»That somebody is taking you to ecstasy ...« (Manja, 24)

Furthermore, economy of sexual reciprocity is also framed within the so-called »orgasmic imperative« (Potts, 2000). First of all, sexual reciprocity is often articulated through orgasm and especially an exchange of orgasms (cf. Braun et al., 2003). The following statements are answers to the question what participants understand as sexual reciprocity:

»That both achieve an orgasm.« (Eva, 21)

»If we really talk about good sex, then, I think, it is that both have to achieve an orgasm.« (Tina, 21)

This implies that not only is sexual reciprocity defined through achievement of orgasms (for both), but that it is a standard by which good sex is evaluated. These examples show presence of orgasmic imperative (Potts, 2000), in which orgasm is understood as the goal of hetero-sexual activity for both, men and women. Orgasm is constructed as ultimate goal and final point of »natural« sexual encounter and it has a status of the ultimate pleasure. Orgasmic imperative dictates that all individuals are able to achieve orgasm and that orgasm is necessary for sexual health (Potts, 2000).

However, in describing reciprocity through exchanges of orgasms situatedness of reciprocity in differential understanding of sexuality is evident in two ways. The first was already mentioned, i.e. the construction of sexual activities within the »usual« sexual encounter in which the course of sexual encounter is defined by position of female and male orgasms, where female orgasm before male and male orgasm as symbolic denotation

7 Similar results were gathered in study in New Zealand (Braun et al., 2003).

8 For social construction of orgasm in female students see Švab (2010).

the end of sexual encounter. In this relation reciprocity as exchange of pleasure (i.e. orgasms) is defined through establishing rights (woman's right to orgasm) and obligations (man's responsibility for female orgasm) (Braun et al., 2003). Sequence of orgasms (female orgasm before male) creates pseudo-reciprocal relations: it is a man's duty to lead his female partner to orgasm and then he is entitled to his own.

Another example of differential reciprocity is evident through the idea, that female orgasm is not a condition of either sexual reciprocity or female sexual satisfaction, which is clearly in contradiction with orgasmic imperative. For majority of participants the achievement of orgasm in every sexual encounter is not a condition for sexual reciprocity but is »compensated« through other aspects of sexual encounter (tenderness, physical closeness, coitus as an intimacy, feeling of unity etc.)

»This is not to say that it is not very nice if you reach it, but I also take great pleasure in sex itself and I do not need to have an orgasm to have good sex ... For me it is normal that I do not always experience orgasm during sex.« (Nuša, 22)

»To me the very harmony is more important than orgasm itself. And the feeling of unity, not just the sexual one, but also the mental, emotional ...« (Nina, 21)

In the context of established common-sense pattern of the course of sexual encounter, this can create certain pressures both, on men and also, vice versa, on women. The »absence« of female orgasm namely puts into question male sexual competency and in return these pressures are put on women who express not only care for male sexual satisfaction but also concern regarding the idea that they do not need orgasm for successful heterosex.

»Yes, perhaps it is that women are afraid to say no to sex, in the sense of declining sex for any reason. I think that most of us do feel guilty about it.« (Marta, 24)

»Because I know guys who think it was not good sex if I did not come, and this is what I have in my head, that only through this can I prove to him, though it is not the point at all ... So that at the back of my mind there is constant pressure to not make him think that I did not enjoy it.« (Nuša, 22)

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results of a qualitative study revealed a complex set of relations as far as egalitarian and reciprocal aspects of intimate relationships are concerned. It could be said

that at the one hand demands for equal and reciprocal relationships show a shift toward reflexive pure relationships as presupposed by theory of transformation of intimacy (Giddens, 2000), while on the other hand there are some aspects of more traditional understanding of sexuality present that put a different light on late-modern characteristics of intimate relationships.

In this sense, there is no unified perception of reciprocity; instead, we could talk about multi-layered, the so-called differential perception of reciprocity. Egalitarianism and reciprocity are *conditio sine qua non* of sexual and intimate relationships, which is an indicator of a trend toward the so-called pure relationships. However, since reciprocity is also embedded in gender differential perception of sexuality as such, i.e. male and female sexuality being essentially different, reciprocity is *a priori* »condemned« to be »non-reciprocal«.

This construction of reciprocity and understanding of sexual and intimate relationships are result of influences of several discourses that cohabit together although being embedded in different sexual cultures. At one hand there is a permissive sexual culture, which promises equality, reciprocity and above all freedom in sexual expression and decision-making (limited only by respect for others), but on the other, some elements of traditional sexual culture, especially the gender differential perception of sexuality, are still present. Although it seems that permissive sexual culture and culture of reflexive individualism imply individual freedom in forming and practicing sexual relationships, they both actually create several obstacles. Some of them were also revealed by this study. It could be argued that as an effect of changes in the sexual cultures (from traditional, restrictive sexual culture to permissive sexual culture), there are also changes in understanding of sexual reciprocity: reciprocity became a norm of (successful) sexual relationship – but there is also change in obligations in this respect: reciprocity produces obligations for both genders. This puts pressures not only on women but on men as well. This was also confirmed by a study done by Štefančič (2010) with male students.

The research revealed rather contradictory characteristics which are however only two sides of the same story; the story of late-modern social and cultural organization of sexuality, which is imbued with traditional/restrictive as well as permissive elements that often complement each other but sometimes also contradict each other on the social and cultural level as well as on the personal level. In the context of individual biographies (reflexive project of the self) female students seem to be stretched between social demands and individual autonomy and also forced to choose between multiple choices and by far not unique meanings in the field of sexuality. Probably the most obvious limitation in the field of late-modern social and cultural organization of sexuality that was revealed by this study are the

demands of permissive sexual culture and reflexive project of the self, put on individuals in everyday life. It seems that reflexive sexuality transformed into a social imperative, which guides perceptions (and standards) on sexuality and intimate relationships in young women. Sexual reflexivity and above all demand for reciprocity

became a social »instruction« that has to be followed, and this puts pressures on young women and men as well. This has probably important consequences for quality of sexual and intimate life of young people in general.

PERCEPCIJE SEKSUALNE RECIPROČNOSTI PRI ŠTUDENTKAH V SLOVENIJI

Alenka ŠVAB

Univerza v Ljubljani, Fakulteta za družbene vede, Kardeljeva ploščad 5, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija
Univerza na Primorskem, Fakulteta za humanistične študije Koper, Titov trg 5, 6000 Koper, Slovenija
e-mail: alenka.svab@fdv.uni-lj.si

POVZETEK

Članek predstavlja rezultate kvalitativne raziskave o percepcijah seksualnosti pri študentkah s posebnim poudarkom na percepciji seksualne recipročnosti v partnerstvu. Namen članka je analizirati načine, s katerimi študentke konstruirajo svojo percepcijo recipročnosti, in kako je le-ta utemeljena v različnih družbenih kontekstih ter diskurzih, ki imajo implikacije za njihovo seksualno in intimno življenje (kvaliteto te). Ker je recipročnost razumljena kot osnovni element in pogoj poznomodernih partnerstev, je pozornost usmerjena v to, ali je recipročnost pri študentkah definirana na takšen način, ter kako je recipročnost kot taka skonstruirana. Koncept recipročnosti je vzet kot indikator refleksivnosti seksualnih in intimnih partnerstev. Raziskavo je vodila ideja, da so percepcije seksualnosti študentk utemeljene v naslednjih ključnih družbenih kontekstih: refleksivnem individualizmu, spremembah v intimnosti in partnerstvu ter v permisivni seksualni kulturi, in da bodo značilnosti teh družbenih kontekstov prisotne v percepciji seksualnosti na splošno in še posebej seksualne recipročnosti. Vendar pa so prisotni tudi ostanki tradicionalne seksualne kulture, še posebno tisti, ki se nanašajo na razlike in neenakosti med spoloma v polju seksualnosti. Seksualna recipročnost, kot jo razumejo študentke v raziskavi, se kaže v treh značilnostih percepcije recipročnosti: prvič, recipročnost je razumljena kot osnovni element in pogoj (refleksivnega) partnerstva in seksualnosti; drugič, recipročnost je tudi uokvirjena v širšem razumevanju seksualnosti (še posebno v percepciji razlik med moško in žensko seksualnostjo); tretjič, ustvarja se določena ekonomija recipročnosti, ki pomene recipročnosti in intimnih ter seksualnih razmerij naredi kompleksne.

Ključne besede: seksualnost, študentke, seksualna recipročnost, permisivna in tradicionalna seksualna kultura

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