

Enjoying Life

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Sexual interaction represents one of the most important dimensions of interpersonal contacts. Yet sexual needs are unique among mankind's biological needs, in that they are shaped by such powerful cultural and social factors

Sexual relationships help people satisfy their need for affection, interpersonal bonding, and emotional contact. Sexual life constitutes an important component of marriage and a prerequisite for procreation. Yet none of mankind's elementary needs, or means of satisfying them, is subject to as much normative, moral, religious, and legal regulation as sexual behavior.

Under Western influence, Polish society has been growing ever more modern since the late 1990s, and traditional values that associate sex with procreation and marriage (in line with Catholic Church teachings) have begun to openly compete against views that understand and respect sexuality as an intrinsic value and an important component of interpersonal relations – not just within marriage, and not just with a heterosexual orientation. Important factors hastening the liberalization of views on sexual matters have undoubtedly included the rise of the sex industry, unleashed by the country's market economy reforms, and the now ubiquitous presence of sexual content in the media and advertising.

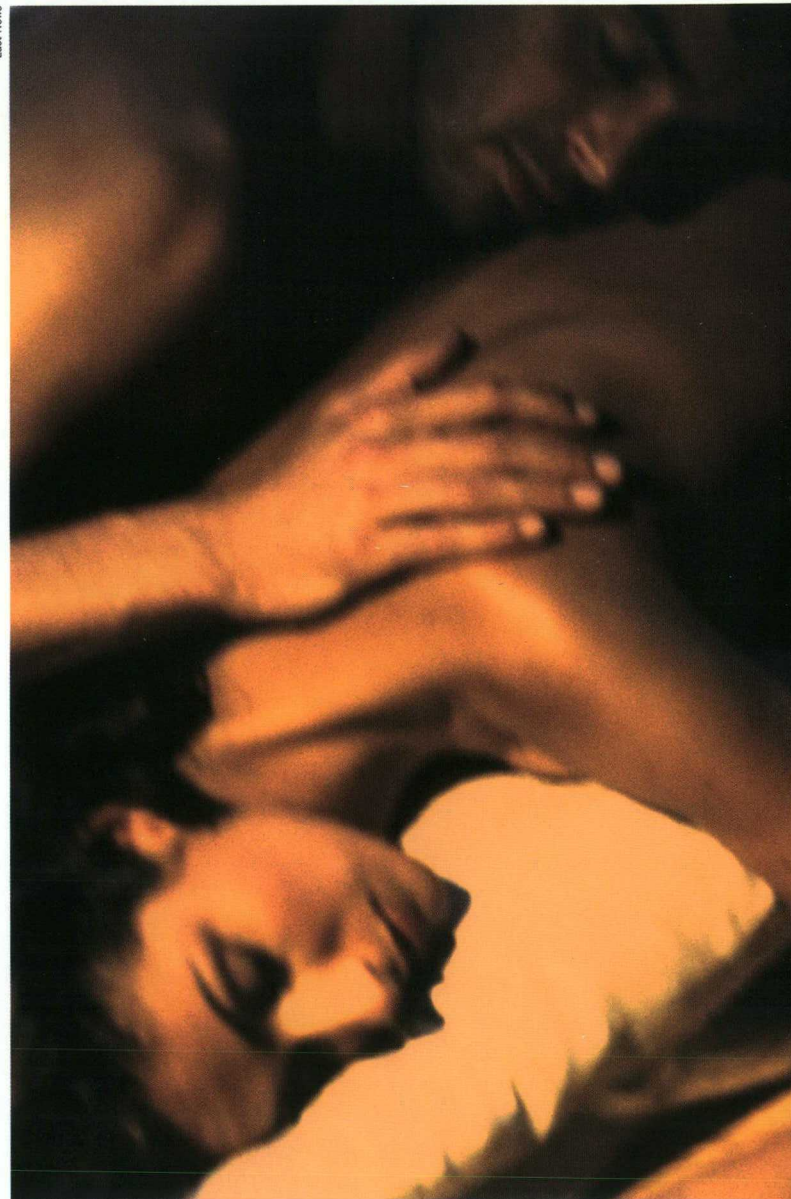
Tempora et mores

This raises the question of whether the portrayal of sex to be found on colorful magazine covers and billboards has truly had an impact on what really goes on behind bedroom doors in Poland. To help answer this question, sociological research data collected in 2001 can be used to reconstruct the models of Poles' sex lives. The representative sample used here consisted of individuals aged 15–49, who were therefore among the age groups just beginning their sexual life or characterized by the greatest sexual activity.

We will start by presenting a few facts evident in the data. Even though men on the whole reach maturity later, they undergo sexual initiation at an earlier age.

According to our research, 9% of girls but 21% of boys have had intercourse by the time they turn 16. Such figures continue to favor males among individuals aged 18 (at 47% and 63%, respectively), only to level out at age 20. Initiation at a later age is more frequently accompa-

East News



Sociological research noticed that the greatest sexual activity is evident in the 25–39 age bracket, during the period when basic material stabilization has already occurred

Studying sexual behavior in Poland



Wojciech Surbitiel/Agencja Gazeta

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nied by feelings of love, while earlier sexual contacts are more frequently inspired by curiosity, fleeting fascination, or a need to feel “modern” or adult.

An earlier onset of sexual activity is clearly conducive to having a larger number of partners throughout one’s life, whereas a later onset more frequently correlates with a long-term or exclusive relationship with a single partner. The age of sexual initiation does not, however, have an impact either on the intensity of sexual activity in the future, or on one’s sense of sex life satisfaction. Sexual initiation involves feelings of love more frequently for girls than for boys. Women’s relationships with their first partner are long-term or end in marriage in 56% of cases, a figure that stood at 30% for men.

Almost all adults and only two-thirds of those individuals who had not yet reached the age of 18 had already undergone sexual initiation. More than 80% those who had begun their sex lives had a stable sexual partner – with almost one in 10 having more than one such partner. The greatest sexual activity was noted in the age

bracket of 25–39, during the period when basic material stabilization has already occurred.

Do Poles enjoy their sex lives?

Sex plays an important role in Poles’ lives: only 9.5% report that it is not important to them, while one in five individuals reported it as being very important. Satisfaction with one’s own sex life is likewise relatively prevalent, as is a conviction of one’s own sexual attractiveness and considerable skill. However, does this mean that the average Pole’s sex life is truly varied and rich in experience?

The results obtained in the study do not point to such a conclusion. Indeed, the impression they give is that various elements of foreplay (aside from kissing on the lips) are not widespread, that the sex act itself proceeds quite routinely, and that seeking and discovering new experiences and impressions is not a common phenomenon. And so it seems that despite the deluge of sexual content and symbols to be found in the cinema, on television, and in popular magazines, which stimulate the imagination and

offer new ideas about sex and eroticism, Poles' love lives are in fact not very sophisticated. Moreover, a comparison of practiced and preferred forms of activity indicates that the most satisfying experiences are those of the "taker" rather than the "giver" variety. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that greater frequency of intercourse goes hand-in-hand with more varied sexual play and the use of more diverse techniques. A "quantitatively" richer sex life is therefore in general "qualitatively" richer as well.

Certain social groups show a greater affinity for taking pleasure in refined caresses, varied sexual stimuli, and diverse forms of sexual interaction. This stems from the interaction of various cultural norms and models connected to one's place in society, one's attitude towards religion and the Church, and also - we can surmise - a specific emotionality that chiefly differentiates men and women. A fondness for more refined caresses is more characteristic of women than men, and increases in tandem with one's level of education and the size of the city or town in which one lives. It therefore represents an element of a more intellectual and big-city "sexual lifestyle." Religiousness and respect for the sexual norms set by the Church, on the other hand, were seen to be less conducive to an affinity for varied caresses and stimuli. Religious individuals treat sex life as inextricable from its procreative function, attach lesser significance to hedonistic aspects of sex, and we may anticipate that they consider certain practices indecent or improper. Nonetheless, it is a widespread view that physical contact such as cuddling and kissing, regardless of whether it is connected with a sexual act or not, represents an important component of everyday relations between individuals who are close to one another.

Tradition vs. postmodernism?

This thorough analysis of specific aspects of Poles' sex lives points to the coexistence of two fundamental models of behavior. The first model, more widespread, concentrates on stable partnership. This model consists in established, generally frequent sexual relations, and also a conviction that sexuality contributes important values to the partners' lives - a conviction that stems from knowing each other well and adapting to each others' abilities and preferences in a longer-lasting relationship. That this model entails stability or even a certain routinization of sexual behavior may be signaled by a tendency for regular or even systematic intercourse - predominantly once a week, on the weekend, most frequently on Sundays. This model might be dubbed the model of "domesticated," chiefly conjugal sex, based on traditional experiences and a stable relationship. It is most consistent with traditional social norms regulating sexual life.

The other model identified encompasses behavior that attests to wide and varied sexual activity. This model consists in: early sexual initiation, multiple partners both

in the past and currently, and diverse forms of sexual activity. Here, sexual experiences are not rooted in stable interpersonal relationships and are not linked to positive assessments of either one's own sex life or one's relationships with partners. The sex act is here an aim in and of itself, a consequence of contacts with many, frequently changing, casual partners. Within this model, no priority is laid with sexuality and emotional commitment as an important value in life - yet interestingly, in this model individuals likewise lack a high assessment of their own sexual abilities and skills.

Sexual activity in line with the first model, due to its prevalence, does not show any clear-cut social differentiation. Couples who follow this model can be encountered practically everywhere, in all the segments of social structure, although they are indeed somewhat more frequent among individuals up to 35 years old who have achieved a certain level of wealth and professional stability. The practice of the more liberal, second model, on the other hand, is distinctly shaped by certain social and cultural variables. It is above all strongly determined by gender, clearly being more of a male model, and it also occurs more frequently among residents of larger cities. A secular outlook is also a significant factor conducive to the practice of this model. One's level of education or financial stability, on the other hand, were not shown to be of significance here.

Sex plays an important role in Poles' lives: only 9.5% report that it is not important to them, while for 20% it is very important

Although these two models are difficult to reconcile in their ideal forms, in practice we do nevertheless encounter mixtures of the two. The fact that both these models coexist in Polish society is a reflection of the various values, orientations, and lifestyles that are present among Poland's inhabitants. By the same token, it demonstrates the diversity of social needs which sexuality helps satisfy. Stable, monogamous sex, in line with the model of traditional morality and mores, offers a greater opportunity to satisfy the individual's needs for coexistence and community. Diverse sexual activity, on the other hand, helps satisfy the need for spontaneity, adventure, and a lack of conventional inhibitions. The latter model most clearly reflects the "postmodern," consumerist attitude towards life. We may conclude that these two types of needs will coexist alongside each other in the future, diversifying our sex lives as well, although of course the proportions between them may differ. ■

Further reading:

Izdebski Z., Ostrowska A. (2003). *Sex, Polish Style - Sexual Behaviors as an Element of Poles' Lifestyles* [in Polish]. MUZA S.A., Warsaw.