Lower-Class Sexuality: Some Emotional and Social Aspects in West German Males and Females

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Emotional and social aspects of lower-class sexuality in West Germany are examined on the basis of results of interviews with 150 male and 150 female, single, 20–21-year-old, unskilled or semi-skilled workers from six large cities. Particular attention was given to the relation between sexuality and love, the significance of fidelity and virginity, partner mobility, mutuality of sexual relations, attitudes to marriage and family, double standards and gender roles, emotional reactions to coitus, as well as the experience of orgasm in the female. A comparison between American and Scandinavian patterns of lower-class sexuality shows that the West German pattern is largely congruent with the Scandinavian pattern.

INTRODUCTION

The few investigations which have thus far appeared on lower-class sexuality throw considerable doubt on the existence of a uniform pattern of sexual behavior in the lower classes of the Western industrial societies. On the basis of results reported and discussed elsewhere (Schmidt and Sigusch, 1971), at least two culture-specific patterns of lower-class sexuality can be differentiated. Similar to Christensen's study (1966) of premarital sexuality among students, these patterns can be classified as the American and Scandinavian patterns.

The American Pattern

In the USA there are apparently considerable differences in sexuality between the lower and middle classes. Although lower-class men and women engage in coital relationships much earlier compared to members of the middle class (Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953; Gebhard et al., 1958), they experience in the emotional and psychosocial sphere much greater sexual uncertainty and deprivation before as well as within marriage (Whyte, 1943; Rainwater, 1960, 1964, 1965, 1966; Komarovsky, 1964;
Clark, 1965; Hammond and Ladner, 1969). Their sexual relations are often devoid of emotion and mechanical in nature; the mutuality of the interpersonal relationship is nearly absent or disturbed, and with it sexual communication as well. According to Rainwater (1965, 1966) this sexual segregation is a special form of the general social segregation of lower-class couples. In the end, an extreme double standard results from the especially strong internalization of gender-role stereotypes: women regard themselves and are regarded as “asexual” or at the least “hyposexual.” Correspondingly they show little interest in sexual relations, look at sexuality as a duty, experience it without desire and pleasure, and often have difficulty achieving orgasm.

The Scandinavian Pattern

According to available Danish and Swedish investigations we find only minimal class-specific sexual variations (Jonsson, 1951; Hertoft, 1968, 1970; Zetterberg, 1969; Israel et al., 1970). “Romantic love ideology” is widespread in all social levels and determines a pronounced partner-centered sexual behavior directed toward mutuality. Sexual relations are decidedly satisfying and positive experiences for both men and women. Attitudes of the double standard type occur extremely seldom. Contrary to the American, the Scandinavian lower classes appear to be oriented largely toward the sexual norms of a “liberal bourgeoisie.”

In the following, a report will be given on an investigation of young West German male and female workers. This investigation is the first study of lower-class sexuality carried out in West Germany. On the basis of our data we want to discuss emotional and social aspects and explore the question of whether the sexuality of West German workers is to be classified under the American or Scandinavian patterns of lower-class sexuality.

METHOD

A detailed description of the method is given elsewhere (Schmidt and Sigusch, 1971), and we can limit ourselves here to the following points:

The sample encompassed 150 female and 150 male workers. All were unskilled or semi-skilled, single, 20 or 21 years old, lived in six larger cities of West Germany (Hamburg, Essen, Cologne, Frankfort, Stuttgart, and Munich), and worked in concerns with at least 50 employees. In every case half of those questioned were Protestant and half Catholic. The selection was made according to the quota technique. The sample can be regarded as sufficiently representative of the target population of young, single, semi-skilled or unskilled, urban workers born in 1947 or 1948.

The data were secured through personal interview. We carried out the field work in 1968 and 1969 together with an institute for motivation research. All interviewers were men between 25 and 40 years of age and were specially trained by us for this investigation. The structured interviews were carried out by means of a questionnaire, which was developed by us and tested in a pilot study.

The questionnaire contained some 300 single questions. The following thematic areas were covered in this sequence: spare time; heterosexual development, first