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RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND FAMILY PLANNING

Sexuality among Students in the Internet Age

Sexual and social relationships
of German studentsn



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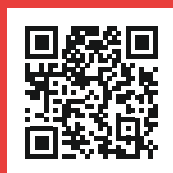
RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IN SEXUALITY EDUCATION AND FAMILY PLANNING

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Sexuality among Students in the Internet Age

Sexual and social relationships
of German students



**A study commissioned by the
German Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA)**

by Silja Matthiesen

with contributions by Maika Böhm, Arne Dekker,
Philipp Franz and Gesine Plagge

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Foreword

The “Sexual and social relationships of German students” study is the latest research by the Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) in this subject area. These studies investigate the attitudes and behaviours of adolescents and young adults in relation to sexuality education, sexuality and contraception, and have yielded reliable quantitative data over many decades. Students are a sexually active group. Quantitative information about their sexual and relationship behaviour has been fairly well researched. Since the 1960s, a number of representative surveys have investigated the ways in which students organize their sexual and social relationships and the values and expectations which guide their behaviour. Now we can also present qualitative data, collected on behalf of BZgA.

For the “Sexual and social relationships of German students” study, qualitative interviews about sexual behaviour were conducted with 85 female students (of whom 38 had been pregnant at least once) and 50 male students from 15 German universities between August 2012 and January 2015. The survey included questions about the importance of the Internet in finding romantic or sexual partners and arrangements for sexuality and intimacy in steady relationships. It also asked about the influence of sexualized media content, e.g. pornography, on the students’ sexual behaviour.

Another key focus of the study involved questions about reproductive behaviour. Other studies have shown that female graduates, in particular, often delay having children and planning their families because of the length of their studies. How are contraception, pregnancy and the desire to have children, or plans to start a family, influenced by the person’s academic situation?

This qualitative interview study provides comprehensive insight into the life-planning process of future graduates, their experiences of and attitudes towards sexuality and their views on combining studying with having a family. The results show that students' sexual lives are primarily conducted within steady relationships and that the survey subjects are media-savvy and critical consumers of sexual content on the Internet. It also appears that there is no "right" time to have a baby; combining studying with a family is seen as a challenge and this, inter alia, means that students delay starting a family.

The results of this study thus provide important pointers for the development and improvement of sexuality education concepts and information on sexuality education and family planning. Empirically validated data are important to in enabling BZgA to fulfil its mandate to develop target-group-specific services and materials on sexuality education and health prevention, tailored to the needs of the target group and appropriate to its life situation.

Federal Centre for Health Education, Cologne 2017

1



Introduction

Silja Matthiesen

Since the 1960s, student sexuality has been seen by the public as permissive, carefree and hedonistic. Is that really true?

There are two sides to the current public debate. On the one hand, there is the view that sexuality is becoming completely hijacked by the media, accompanied by sometimes measured, sometimes alarmist criticism of the media.¹ On the other hand, there is the verdict that society in general is becoming sexualized and infiltrated by pornography.²

The results presented here put these trends under the microscope. They follow on from the study by the Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA) investigating the sexual behaviour of adolescents in the Internet age.³

Silja Matthiesen and her team study three main aspects of the sexual lives of students in the Internet age:

- The social organization of sexuality and relationships, together with values, the prospects for these relationships and expectations;
- The issue of desire and frustration in the sexual lives of students, particularly in relation to the Internet; and
- Their handling of pregnancy, the desire for children and plans to start a family in the context of studying.

The qualitative interviews provide comprehensive insight into the life-planning process of future graduates and their experiences of, and attitudes towards, sexuality and combining studying with having a family.

1 Cf., for example, Czernohorsky 2011; Dammler 2011.

2 Cf., for example, Attwood 2006 and 2009; Paasonen et al. 2007; Sarracino & Scott 2008; Gernert 2010; Schuegraf & Tillmann 2012.

3 Cf. Matthiesen 2013.

1.1 Background: student sexuality since the 1960s

Since the 1960s and 1970s, students have been looked upon in Germany as the “avant-garde of sexual innovation”.⁴ They are a group that has been particularly thoroughly investigated in empirical sexual research: the large quantitative surveys of student sexual behaviour which provided material for the social history of sexuality in Germany began back in the 1960s.

The first study was designed by Hans Giese and Gunter Schmidt in 1966 and was initially intended to compare the respondents, as a non-clinical control group, with the patients of the then Department for Sexual Research at the psychiatric clinic of the Hamburg-Eppendorf University Hospital.⁵ However, in the tumult of the late 1960s, attention soon turned to the “contradiction between official moral values and sexual reality”.⁶ The book “Student Sexuality – Behaviour and Attitudes” was greeted as a kind of German Kinsey report.⁷ This study investigated a generation of students just before the time which later went down in history as the “sexual revolution”.

The students involved in the second survey, conducted by Gunter Schmidt and Ulrich Clement in 1981,⁸ had already been fully caught up in the liberalization discourse of the 1970s. The traditional sexual morality of the 1950s had become less influential, and old sexual taboos were loosening their grip. Previously deprecated ways of expressing sexual and relationship behaviour, particularly “sex before marriage”, became normal features of student life. In the same way, behaviour previously considered perverted, such as homosexuality, became “normalized”.⁹

In 1996, Gunter Schmidt conducted the third nationwide questionnaire survey, which included the new federal states for the first time.¹⁰ The data showed that the liberalization discourse still held sway, albeit now supplemented by the discourse of sexual self-determination. It is to the women’s movement, in particular, that we owe the realization that not all behaviour, which was permitted and accepted after the old sexual taboos had been broken, is necessarily fulfilling or enriching.

4 Schmidt 2000, p. 19.

5 Giese/Schmidt 1968.

6 Schmidt 2000, p. 10.

7 Kinsey et al. 1948 and 1953.

8 Clement 1986; Clement et al. 1984.

9 Cf. Schmidt 1998b.

10 Schmidt et al. 1998; Schmidt 2000.

One consequence of feminist criticism of the violation of sexual boundaries was the recognition of fundamental values, such as (gender) equality, consensuality and moral negotiation, which contributed to the development of sexuality and relationships in the 1990s.

But how are sexual relationships organized today? The fourth set of studies on student sexuality provides a unique opportunity to include a focus on sex-related use of the Internet in the year 2012.¹¹

1.2 Aims and methodology of the study

Against this backdrop, BZgA commissioned the research project “Sexual and social relationships of students” in 2012 – the first to collect in-depth information about students’ sexual behaviour through qualitative interviews. A total of 135 students from 15 German universities were surveyed.

The aim of the study is to collect reliable qualitative data about the ways in which students in 2012 organize their sexuality, and the values and expectations they have about sexual relationships. Naturally, the Internet plays a large part in young adults’ lives today, opening up new ways of dealing with sexual arousal, fantasy and communication, both within and outside steady relationships. The main issues here are the question of how much importance the Internet has taken on in meeting a romantic or sexual partner, what influence pornography use has on sexual behaviour among students and the role of online media in the organization of sexuality and intimacy in steady relationships.

Another key focus of the study involves questions about reproductive behaviour. Students are a particularly sexually active group; moreover, having children and planning a family are often delayed because of the many years spent studying. The interviews explore how students practise contraception within and outside steady relationships, what are the most common experiences of wanting children, failures in contraception and worries about unplanned pregnancy in this group, and what assumptions and desires about combining a family with a career influence the life planning of future graduates.

11 Cf. Dekker & Matthiesen 2015.

1.3 Methodology and data

The “Sexual and social relationships of German students“ research project was conducted between August 2012 and January 2015 by the Institute for Sexual Research and Forensic Psychiatry of the Hamburg-Eppendorf University Hospital and funded by BZgA. A total of 135 students (85 females and 50 males) were surveyed by means of qualitative structured interviews.

Collaboration with “Changing sexuality in the student population“

This study was conducted in close collaboration with the quantitative questionnaire survey “Changing sexuality in the student population 1966 – 1981 – 1996 – 2011”, also conducted by the Institute for Sexual Research of the Hamburg-Eppendorf University Hospital; it is led by Professor Arne Dekker and financed by the German Research Association (DFG). The main feature of the project is the partial repetition of three representative surveys on student sexuality, conducted in 1966, 1981 and 1996 in 12–15 German universities. These studies of Hamburg students provide an opportunity to analyse systematically the changes in sexual and relationship behaviour in Germany in the social group of young, highly educated women and men over a period of 45 years. For more information, see dfg.studentensexualitaet.de.

First survey phase: winter semester 2012/13

The survey was conducted in two phases: the first 100 respondents (50 women, 50 men) were selected in the winter semester of 2012/13. They were a random sample of the respondents to a quantitative questionnaire survey on “Changing sexuality in the student population”. Fifty women and 50 men were randomly selected from a pool of approximately 500 respondents to the questionnaire survey who had agreed to participate in another, qualitative interview. This sample should be seen as a self-selected sample, with quotas for sex, age and location of university. Fifteen universities from all over Germany were involved: Aachen, Berlin (Free University), Bochum, Bonn, Bremen, Dresden, Frankfurt am Main, Hamburg, Karlsruhe, Munich, Regensburg, Saarbrücken, Tübingen, Leipzig and Rostock.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face (n = 10) or by telephone (n = 90). For practical and logistical reasons, face-to-face interviews were conducted only in cities we could reach easily (Hamburg, Bremen, Berlin) and only with students who expressed a preference for this interview method rather than a telephone interview. Neither the duration nor the depth of the discussions were affected by the interview method. The interviews lasted between 42 and 135 minutes (average length 84 minutes) depending on the sexual and relationship experiences of the respondents and their willingness to talk. The interviews were conducted by project team members and students from the Hamburg universities trained by us for the purpose; female respondents were interviewed by women and male respondents by men. During the opening greetings at the beginning of the interview, all respondents were asked whether they preferred to be addressed using the familiar form “du” or the more polite form “Sie” (“Should we use ‘du’ or ‘Sie’?”). The majority of students opted for the familiar “du” form. All interviewees received a payment of €50 for their time.

The **interview guide** was designed in light of current research, reviewed in expert meetings and pre-tested. It comprised seven sections:

- A detailed chronological account of the respondent’s relationship and sexual history, beginning with the first significant sexual experience, or at age 13, whichever came earlier;
- The respondent’s current steady relationship or current single life; questions focused on the importance of fidelity and monogamy in steady relationships, experiences of casual sex and the search for a partner online;
- Sexual experiences to date, especially the most recent, same-sex sexual experiences and fantasies and sexual problems;
- Body satisfaction and experiences of solo sex and pornography;
- Current experiences of contraception within and outside steady relationships, contraception failures;

- Pregnancy, the desire to have children and attitudes to termination of pregnancy and to starting a family while studying; and
- Basic sociodemographic data.¹²

Our interviews do not systematically ask about students' experiences of violation of sexual boundaries or sexual attacks or violence. We did not want to overload the already very long questionnaire or demand too much of the student interviewers and respondents.

Second survey phase: summer semester 2013

One major focus of our interview study was, as stated above, the students' reproductive behaviour. However, among the first 100, randomly selected respondents there were only three women who had ever been pregnant and three men who had ever fathered a child (one of them as a sperm donor). This is roughly the number of women we would expect to have experienced pregnancy in this group. This very small number of cases reflects the fact that only around 5 %¹³ of all students have children and that most students delay starting a family until they finish studying, if possible (see Chapters 8 and 9).

However, the small number of cases meant that we could not reach any conclusions about the issues we wished to investigate. Accordingly, in a second phase of the study, we sampled an additional group of women who had been pregnant (n = 35). For this group, we looked for women who had been pregnant at least once while studying. The women responded to a direct request addressed to all those who had agreed to be interviewed,¹⁴ and were also recruited using the snowball method.

All interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted rather longer, on average 86 minutes (between 53 and 128 minutes). All students who had ever been pregnant were interviewed by female project workers and they too received a payment of €50 for their time. These women were surveyed in the summer semester of 2013, using a slightly amended questionnaire.

12 The interview guide is available from the author on request.

13 Middendorff et al. 2013, p. 75.

14 Cf. the self-selected sample collected from the collaboration with the study "Changing sexuality in the student population 1966 –1981–1996 –2011".

The interviews focused on the aspects of contraception, desire for children, experience of pregnancy, termination of pregnancy and childbirth and on experiences of combining a family with studying.

The above procedure for obtaining a random sample and conducting the survey was approved by the Hamburg data protection authorities. The interviewees' names have been changed for data protection purposes.

Data utilization and analysis

All 135 interviews were recorded, with the interviewees' permission, and subsequently anonymized and transcribed. The comprehensive body of data thus created was categorized by topic for the purposes of analysis. To make the analysis process less complex and the evaluation more manageable, only certain parts of the interviews, depending on the subject-matter, were analysed. The interview excerpts, sorted by topic, were input into the qualitative data analysis software package MaxQDA.¹⁵

The qualitative material was analysed using a qualitative content analysis methodology.¹⁶

¹⁵ Cf. Kuckartz 2012.

¹⁶ Cf. Mayring 2010.

Table 1-1
Description of random sample: basic sociodemographic data

	Women random sample n = 50	Men random sample n = 50	Women ever pregnant n = 35	Total n = 135
Age				
Mean age (M)	23.4	23.6	27.2	24.3
Standard deviation (SD)	2.4	2.4	4.7	3.4
Min.–Max. (years)	19 – 30	19 – 30	21 – 43	19 – 43
Marital status				
single	47	49	24	120
married (cohabiting)	2	1	10	13
divorced (married but not cohabiting)	1	-	1	2
Children				
no	49	47	18	107
yes	1	3	11	22
currently pregnant	-	-	6	6
Religion				
none	24	18	17	59
Protestant	12	13	12	37
Catholic	12	14	5	31
Muslim	-	1	-	1
other	2	4	1	7
Housing situation				
shared apartment (Wohngemeinschaft – WG)	21	24	6	51
with a partner in own apartment/house	14	14	22	50
alone	5	4	6	15
with parents	6	5	-	11
in student accommodation	4	3	1	8
Degree programme				
Bachelor's	25	26	11	62
Master's	9	11	8	28
Diploma/graduate degree	-	4	2	6
State examination	16	7	10	33
PhD	-	2	4	6

Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

The aim of the sampling, as is usual in qualitative studies, was to record as many different experiences as possible. This worked fairly well since we were interviewing students from different universities – with the proviso, naturally, that the statements we heard here were restricted to students, i.e. young, highly educated adults. We cannot extrapolate our results to other groups, e.g. those with a lower level of education or those from other age groups. Comparing the available sociodemographic data for our random sample (age structure, relationship status, housing situation, religion, etc.) with data collected in the social survey conducted by the German National Association for Student Affairs (Deutsches Studentenwerk – DSW), we conclude that our sample adequately reflects the mainstream of students studying in German universities. However, there is one exception (see Table 1-2): only a small number of homosexual students participated in our interview study.

Table 1-2
Description of random sample: basic sexual history data

	Women random sample n = 50	Men random sample n = 50	Women ever pregnant n = 35	Total n = 135
Currently in a steady relationship				
yes	35	39	25	99
no	15	11	10	36
Number of relationships				
mean (M)	2.3	3.3	4.3	3.2
number of sexual partners				
0	2	2	-	4
1 – 3	19	17	7	43
4 – 10	19	25	14	58
11 or over	10	6	14	30
mean (M)	6.5	5.9	12.3	7.8
Sexual orientation				
exclusively heterosexual	35	39	15	89
primarily heterosexual	9	10	13	32
bisexual	5	-	7	12
exclusively homosexual	1	1	-	2
other	-	-	-	-

Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

1.4 Structure of the study report

Part I of the report covers the way students organize their relationships and sexuality. Is there a student sexual culture? If so, what are the ideals, ideas and experiences that shape this culture? What part do gender and heteronormativity play in gaining and evaluating sexual experiences in young adulthood? How is sexuality organized and experienced within and outside student relationships? Specifically, **Chapter 2** explores the students' sexual and relationship histories: what is the role of fidelity and monogamy for students? **Chapter 3** goes on to explore experiences beyond monosexuality and monogamy. **Chapter 4** investigates whether casual sex is part of the student sexual culture and, if so, in what form.

Part II begins by considering how students experience sexual pleasure, including use of the Internet. The following issues are addressed in **Chapters 5 and 6**: what part do masturbation and pornography play in students' lives? How are these sexual experiences affected by gender or gender attributions? What part does orgasm play in sexual pleasure and satisfaction and how do partners negotiate this? **Chapter 7**, by contrast, deals with sexual frustration. What sexual problems do students have, and what are their needs as a group for education, counselling and services?

Part III investigates the way students view the topic of children and studying. **Chapter 8** focuses on family planning: which assumptions and desires to combine a family with a career influence the life planning of future graduates? **Chapter 9** details the process of decision-making in the event of pregnancy, whether planned or unplanned, while a woman is studying. How do students use contraception within and outside steady relationships? What are the experiences of this group as regards the desire for children, contraceptive failure and fear of unwanted pregnancy?

In Part IV, the results are brought together as hypotheses and conclusions for future research.

Part I

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Part II

Desire and frustration

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Part III

Children and studying

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Part IV

Results, trends and research

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I

Relationships and sexuality

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2



Staying faithful to “The One” – sexual and relationship histories of young adults¹⁷

Maika Böhm, Arne Dekker and Silja Matthiesen

¹⁷ A shorter version of this section was published earlier in the *Zeitschrift für Soziologie der Erziehung und Sozialisation*. See Böhm et al. 2016.

The combination of the terms “students” and “sex” has multiple and varied associations: to begin with, we remember the student movement of the late 1960s in which students were the representatives, the vanguard even, of sexual revolution and liberalization. Were German students back then particularly sexually, politically and ideologically liberated and open and experimental in sexual matters? Maybe. Are they still like that? Probably not. Nowadays we find ourselves asking questions such as: does the relative freedom and lack of responsibility of student life lead to sexually chaotic relationships? Or do such fears not apply to German relationships because studying in Germany requires so much work, because of inflexible expectations, the pressure to relocate frequently, financial worries and career demands, that a steady, stable relationship and a familiar sexual partner offer stability and security?

This chapter focuses on two questions:

- 1 How do students in 2012 organize sex and relationships?
- 2 What expectations, values and ideals are they guided by?

2.1 Between teenager and adult: emerging adulthood

Before we analyse student relationship and sexual histories in detail, we should first present a few observations about the lives and specific developmental tasks of young adults.

The norms of Western industrialized societies have changed considerably over recent decades: people are marrying and having children much later than they did even in the 1950s.¹⁸ Attitudes towards sex and relationships have become more varied and open,¹⁹ and people are undertaking vocational training and entering the workforce later.²⁰ A new stage of life has thus been created between youth and adulthood, which can be described as a stage specifically of transition and development, with its own challenges and potential conflicts. Some authors describe it as an extension of adolescence²¹ or propose a differentiation between early, middle and late adolescence.²²

18 Cf. Peuckert 2012.

19 Cf. Schmidt 2000; Schmidt et al. 2006.

20 Cf. Geißler 2008.

21 Cf. Hurrelmann & Quenzel 2012.

22 Cf. Feldman & Elliott 1990.

Emerging adulthood Because of the multiple developmental processes going on in the period between 20 and 30 years of age, the psychologist Jeffrey Arnett²³ disagrees with the model of extended adolescence. Instead, he introduces the concept of “emerging adulthood”. The emerging adulthood stage, he says, is a stage with its own specific developmental tasks: “Most young people now [spend] the period from their late teens to their mid-20s not settling into long-term adult roles, but trying out different experiences and gradually making their way toward enduring choices in love and work.”²⁴ This period can also be seen as a psychosocial “limbo” which precedes entry into adult life.²⁵ This limbo is characterized by an absence of and postponement of responsibilities, demonstrated by the lack of career and financial security of the (not yet) adults. The “greater institutionalization of sexuality [...] steady relationships [...] and children”²⁶ which accompanies the transition to adulthood also appears not to apply to this period (yet).

Sexuality in emerging adulthood On the contrary, there are signs that relationships and sexuality are experienced as casual and experimental: “Many emerging adults are likely to fluctuate between relationships or to be involved in short sexual and romantic encounters.”²⁷ Thus, in the third decade of life, exploration in the fields of career and finances may be accompanied by experimentation with “potential love objects in all possible combinations”.²⁸ Students, who are generally a sexually active group and experienced in relationships, probably experience the period of emerging adulthood particularly intensively, since mobility, flexibility and uncertain prospects are significant features of their study and work nowadays. How do students organize their sexual lives so as to balance stability and flexibility?

23 Cf. Arnett 2000; 2004; 2007.

24 Cf. Shulman & Connolly 2013, p. 29.

25 Seiffge-Krenke 2014, p. 392.

26 Stein-Hilbers 2000, p. 77.

27 Cf. Shulman & Connolly 2013, p. 29.

28 Seiffge-Krenke 2014, p. 392.

2.2 Overview of sexual and relationship behaviour among students

The majority (93 %) of the students we surveyed considered themselves to be exclusively or primarily heterosexual. In most cases, this fixing of sexual and emotional desire on one gender is lifelong; the sexuality researcher Gunter Schmidt also refers to this lifelong determination as “monosexual”.²⁹

Relationships At the time of the survey, some two-thirds of the students were in a steady relationship (see Table 2-1). The average number of steady relationships per person is high: students in their early years of study (aged 20–22 years) are, on average, in their second steady relationship, while those reaching the end of their studies (aged 26–30 years) are in their third such relationship.

Table 2-1
Experience of relationships (by gender)*

	Women	Men	Total
Currently in a steady relationship	67 %	58 %	64 %
Number of previous relationships (mean)			
All	2.4	2.4	2.4
20 – 22 years	2.1	2.0	2.1
23 – 25 years	2.3	2.3	2.3
26 – 30 years	3.0	3.0	3.0

* Students aged between 20 and 30 (= 1.848)

Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

Table 2-2 shows, for students currently in a relationship, information about that current relationship. The current relationships are relatively long-established, with an average duration of 40 months. The duration of the current relationship is associated with the age of the respondent, with the longest relationships, on average, occurring among those aged 26–30 years. Around one third of the male students and almost half the female students who were in a steady relationship were living with their partner. Many respondents were hopeful that their current relationship would prove to be a lasting one: around one-third of respondents believed that they would still be with their partner in five years’ time, and a large majority wanted to spend the rest of their lives with the current partner and to eventually have children with them (see Table 2-2).

29 Cf. Schmidt et al. 2006, p. 131.

Ideals of fidelity These attitudes are combined with traditional ideals of fidelity: both in general and in respect of their current relationship, a large proportion of respondents considered fidelity to be essential and/or required it from their partner. The students also lived up to these ideals in their own behaviour: only roughly one in 10 had been unfaithful to their current partner.

Table 2-2
Current steady relationship (by gender)*

	Women	Men	Total
Duration of current relationship in months (mean)			
All	41	37	39
20 – 22 years	28	28	28
23 – 25 years	42	36	40
26 – 30 years	58	51	55
Predictions for the relationship (%)			
probably still together in 1 year	87 %	84 %	86 %
probably still together in 5 years	71 %	64 %	69 %
I want this to be for life	74 %	61 %	69 %
I want (or have) children	77 %	74 %	76 %
I am "very happy" in the relationship	79 %	79 %	79 %
Living with relationship partner (%)			
All	46 %	35 %	42 %
20 – 22 years	29 %	17 %	25 %
23 – 25 years	47 %	32 %	42 %
26 – 30 years	66 %	60 %	63 %
Attitudes towards fidelity (%)			
I think fidelity is essential	78 %	71 %	76 %
I think fidelity is desirable	19 %	22 %	20 %
I think demanding fidelity is wrong	3 %	7 %	5 %
Requirement of fidelity in a steady relationship (%)			
I demand sexual fidelity from my partner	85 %	81 %	83 %
my partner demands sexual fidelity from me	89 %	87 %	88 %
Infidelity (%)			
I have been unfaithful in my current relationship	9 %	11 %	10 %

* Students aged between 20 and 30, currently in a steady relationship (= 1.176)
Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

Sexual experience Approximately 90 % of the students – slightly fewer men than women – already had experience of heterosexual intercourse (see Table 2-3). The majority, approximately 70 % of respondents, had had intercourse for the first time at the age of 18 years or younger. Despite their commitment to being in a relationship, most of the students had been sexually active while not in a stable relationship, and had therefore had more sexual partners than relationship partners. Women reported an average of six sexual partners and men an average of seven different sexual partners, although the number was highly dependent on the age of the respondent. Of the sexually active respondents, 62 % had experienced intercourse for the first time within a steady relationship; only 4 % had had intercourse with a person they had only just met.

Table 2-3
Sexual experience (by gender)*

	Women	Men	Total
Have ever had sexual intercourse	93 %	87 %	91 %
First had sexual intercourse at 18 years or younger	72 %	63 %	69 %
Number of sexual partners so far (mean)			
All	5.9	7.2	6.4
20 – 22 years	4.8	7.2	5.7
23 – 25 years	5.7	6.8	6.1
26 – 30 years	8	7.6	7.9

* Students aged between 20 and 30, currently in a steady relationship (= 1.848)
Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

Student sexual activity can be described more precisely, and separately from the student's relationship status, by considering the total number of sexual acts over the previous four weeks (see Table 2-4). When we add up the total number of sexual acts reported by the students over this period and classify them by the relationship context in which they took place, the picture which emerges is strikingly traditional: over 90 % of the sexual acts took place within a steady relationship, while single people accounted for fewer than one in 10 of them.

Table 2-4

Distribution of all sexual acts in the previous four weeks (by relationship status and gender, in %)*

	Women	Men	Total
Sexual acts with a steady partner	91.6 %	93.1 %	92.1 %
Sexual acts with casual partner/ affair partner	0.4 %	0.5 %	0.5 %
Sexual acts by single people	8.0 %	6.4 %	7.5 %

* Students aged between 20 and 30 (= 1.848)

Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

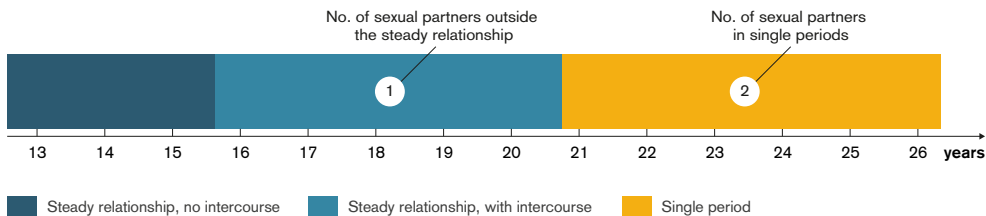
Preliminary conclusions Overall, we can say that students have considerable faith in the stability of their current relationship and report a high degree of commitment. As well as feelings of romantic love, they consider sexual and emotional fidelity as important values in a relationship and essential factors in its quality and duration. To a remarkable degree, students engage in sexuality within steady relationships. Sex is no longer confined to the institution of marriage, since that was the least common relationship status in all age groups in this survey. However, sexuality is firmly embedded in steady relationships, as is shown by the data on the settings in which sexual activity takes place. Single people, accounting for almost one third of the survey population, are not highly sexually active: they were responsible for fewer than one tenth of the sexual acts recorded over the previous four weeks.

2.3 Relationship histories, sexual activity and duration and sequence of relationships

Up to now, we have considered students' sexual lives through the lens of quantitative cross-sectional data. We can obtain a more differentiated picture by adding in qualitative data and considering the course and interpretation by the individual of his/her sexual history; average figures relating to relationships, sexual partners and sexual acts conceal widely varying stories. We call these "relationship histories",³⁰ meaning the chronological succession of relationships and periods as a single person between the person's 13th birthday and the date of the interview (approximately 10 years) (see Figure 2-1).

30 This term is also used by Matthiesen and Schmidt, who also identified patterns in the relationship histories of adolescent women who had been pregnant. Cf. Matthiesen & Schmidt 2009, p. 97 f.

Figure 2-1
Sample relationship history



Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

In the final analysis, there is an individual pattern for all respondents. Five patterns for different types of relationship can be identified (see Table 2-5). These can be further classified into three groups: serial, long-term and non-relationship patterns. The histories differ in the progression and duration of the relationship, and also in the sexual activities reported. We will describe these patterns with reference to selected cases.

Table 2-5
Five patterns of student relationships

	Sexually active only within a relationship	Sexually active as a single person and within a relationship
<p>Group 1: Serial relationship pattern</p> <p>Switching between single and relationship phases over time, at least two or more relationships, every relationship lasting over one year, sexually exclusive and agreed to be steady</p>	<p>(1) Romantic-love type</p> <p>"Sex without emotions is not the real thing"</p>	<p>(2) Open type</p> <p>"Much more experience in a much shorter time"</p>
<p>Group 2: Steady relationship pattern</p> <p>Case history shows continuity in relationships, relationship of over five years, current relationship the only one ever (with sex), sexually exclusive, steady, traditional values</p>	<p>(3) Traditional type</p> <p>"Imagining a shared future and traditional values like marriage and children"</p>	<p><i>In the steady relationship pattern, there is no sexual activity when the person is single</i></p>
<p>Group 3: Non-relationship pattern</p> <p>Case history shows a lack of relationships, little time spent in a relationship, long periods as a single person, (at least three years), usually currently single</p>	<p>(4) Abstinence type</p> <p>"I don't think much of just casual sexual contact"</p>	<p>(5) Hedonism type</p> <p>"Enjoy myself and experiment as much as possible"</p>

Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

Group 1: serial relationship pattern

A large majority – approximately two thirds (70 %) – of all relationship histories follow a pattern in which periods of being single alternate repeatedly with being part of a couple – we call this the serial relationship pattern. This pattern is characterized by a relatively large experience of relationships with different partners. The students had had at least two (or more) relationships; the most recent relationship was generally still ongoing at the time of the survey. Each relationship generally lasted one year or more, was sexually exclusive and considered to be a lasting one, as shown by the following typical example:

Suse, 24: “I had my [first relationship] at 17 and it was quite a disappointment, and I didn’t stay long with him. Then, with practice, it got better and better. Straight afterwards I got together with my second boyfriend, and that lasted around 18 months. Then I stopped for three years, because I was only just out of the teenage years and didn’t really know what I wanted. And my boyfriend now, I’m really very happy with him and we’ve been together for over a year, and it’s all going fantastically.”

In the serial relationship pattern, partners have two different ways of organizing their sexual activities:

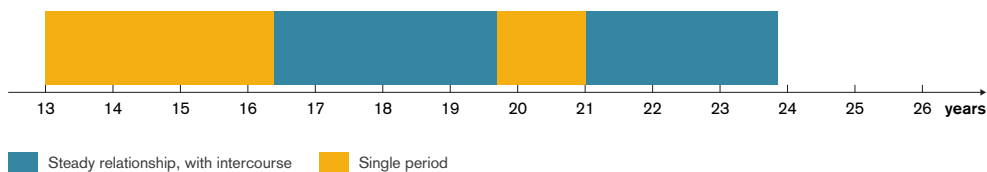
- In the first, sexuality is exclusively associated with feelings of romantic love and a committed view of relationships; sex therefore takes place only in steady relationships;
- The second subtype is almost twice as common; it takes a more open view of sexuality and sex takes place both within relationships and in the intervening periods as a single person.

Two cases are described here as examples of the two subtypes of the serial relationship pattern.

Sex closely linked with relationships, fundamental values: fidelity and continuity (Type 1)

Figure 2-2
Serial relationship pattern, romantic-love type

Paul (23), 2 sexual partners, 2 relationships



Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

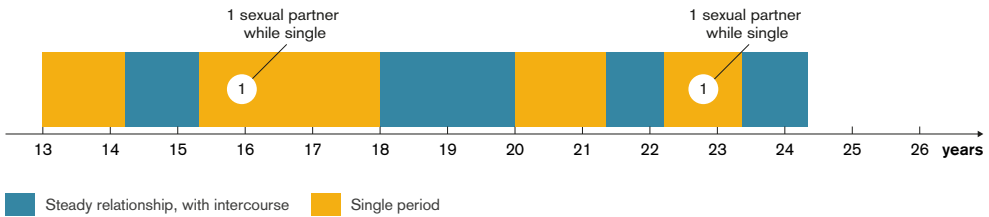
Case history: Paul (23)

Paul began his first relationship at the age of 16 and had sexual intercourse for the first time with that person. The relationship ended three years later, when he left his home town for university: *“It soon became clear that a long-distance relationship wasn’t going to work”*. After a year as a single person, during which he was not sexually active, he fell in love with his current girlfriend, who is studying the same subject. Three months ago, they moved in together. *“I don’t get much”* out of casual sex, says Paul. For him, sexual activity is closely linked to love and relationships. He explains: *“I’m now in my second steady relationship and I’m very happy. I find having sex with someone for the first time is a bit awkward. I find it better and more relaxed the longer I’ve been with that person.”*

Sexuality within and outside relationships, main requirement: trust and affection (Type 2)

Figure 2-3
Serial relationship pattern, open type

Joana (24): 6 sexual partners, 4 relationships



Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

Case history: Joana (24)

Joana had sex for the first time at the age of 14 with her then 19-year-old boyfriend, her first relationship. They broke up after about a year, and Joana was then single for some time, “*dating*” several men but sexually active with only one of them, a good friend. At 18, she began her second relationship, which lasted for two years and which she describes as “*sweet and very loving*”. This relationship ended because her partner “*straightaway/much earlier than me began to talk about getting married etc. and having children. For me at 18, 19, 20, all that seemed a long long way away [...]. I had no intention of getting married that early and having babies and being tied down.*”

In the time that followed, as a single person in her early twenties, she engaged in sexual activity with trusted friends, but never went as far as intercourse, because that seemed too intimate for such a casual relationship. She says about this period of single life: “*I partied a lot. I dated a lot of people and did a lot of kissing and petting. But I didn’t sleep with someone often because that seemed somehow too precious and intimate.*”

After about 18 months, she began her third relationship, with a man seven years older than herself, which lasted six months. After that, “*I was dating more again for a while, and had, well, not really a partner but someone I dated more regularly. And I did have intercourse with him.*”

This arrangement ended after a few months, when the other party wanted more commitment than Joana did. Around this time, Joana met her current partner in a university study group. They were friends for about a year before they both realized that they wanted to go further. She is “*really crazy*” about him, would like “*to see him a bit more often*” and hopes that their relationship will be a lasting one.

Group 2: Steady relationship pattern

The second basic pattern of student relationship histories is characterized by a single long-standing relationship, i.e. the respondents had only ever had one partner. Approximately one in 10 of the relationship histories falls into this category. Generally, the relationship had lasted over five years and was still ongoing at the time of the survey. Another feature of this relationship pattern is the common expectations for the future openly shared by the partners and traditional in their values.

Susanne, in the same relationship with a female partner for the previous six years – her only relationship to date – describes her situation as follows:

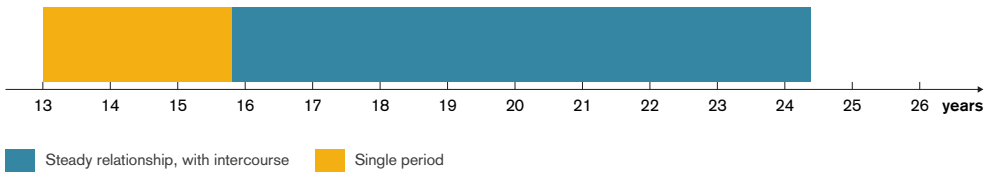
Susanne, (25): “We are planning a future together. We always knew that was how it was. She feels too that, if she embarks on a relationship, it has to be with someone who she can imagine a shared future and traditional values like marriage and children with [...] And another factor is that getting married, for instance, would make it much more likely that she would get a university place near me. Or the fact that a lot of my friends have got babies now. And thinking about when it would be the right time for us, and how we would manage it. We’ve already got quite specific ideas about it, and we’ve never really discussed it, it developed like that right from the beginning.”

In this relationship pattern, there is only one way of organizing sexuality, linked with the “one and only” relationship. The following case study is a typical example of the steady relationship pattern.

A marriage-like relationship, traditional values including children, a house, distribution of domestic tasks (Type 3)

Figure 2-4
Steady relationship pattern, traditional type

Anja, (24): 1 sexual partner, 1 relationship



Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

Case history: Anja (24)

Anja has been in her first – and so far only – relationship for eight years. She had intercourse for the first time at the age of 16 with this partner, and they became a couple shortly afterwards. At the beginning of their relationship, her partner was unsure of his feelings, and they separated for a short time. Since then, however, the relationship has been stable and sexually exclusive, and Anja is happy in it: *“We’ve known each other quite a long time now. We’re very good friends. And I’d say he’s pretty much my best friend as well. There’s a lot of love and trust and friendship there. And a lot of shared interests and mutual friends.”*

Anja still lives at home with her parents, and her partner is about to start university in a different city. She would like to spend more time with him and wants them to move in together. She expects them to have a future together and says: *“[In 10 years] I’ll probably have a couple of kids and own a house, and my boyfriend will be my husband”.*

Group 3: Non-relationship pattern

The third pattern, which applies to approximately 15% of these relationship histories, diverges from the clear focus on relationships seen in the other patterns. We call this a “non-relationship” pattern, and it is characterized by long periods as a single person, currently or in the past, lasting at least three years each time. Over the person’s lifetime, a remarkably short time has been spent in a relationship, ranging from zero to a maximum of three years.

Here Stefan, aged 25, who has been single for the past nine years, tells his story, which is typical of the non-relationship pattern:

***Stefan (25):** “When I first started at university, I thought a relationship, leading to love and a steady partnership, could give me a sort of inner closeness, but I didn’t go looking for it because I thought it ought to happen by itself. I mean – seeing somebody and getting to know her better at university, and thinking ‘Yes, she’s the one’, but I never did anything about it. Now I don’t really feel the need, as I said earlier, it makes me feel sort of free.”*

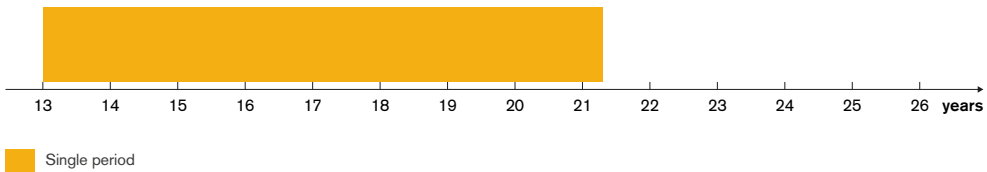
In non-relationship patterns sexuality is dealt with in two ways: either the case history shows no or very few sexual experiences, or the person is sexually active and pleasure-seeking.

The following two case histories demonstrate these very different ways of dealing with sexuality in a non-relationship-type situation.

Waiting patiently for Mr/Ms Right, who will be the first sexual partner (Type 4)

Figure 2-5
Non-relationship pattern, abstinence type

Bianca (21), 0 sexual partners, 0 relationships



Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

Case history: Bianca (21)

Bianca has never been in a steady relationship and is still a virgin. She had her first sexual experiences on holiday at the age of 18 and at a carnival party with a boy she knew. On both occasions, she established a clear boundary for sexual contact with the partner: *“I said I was still a virgin and we kind of agreed, without anything actually being said, that we wouldn’t go all the way.”*

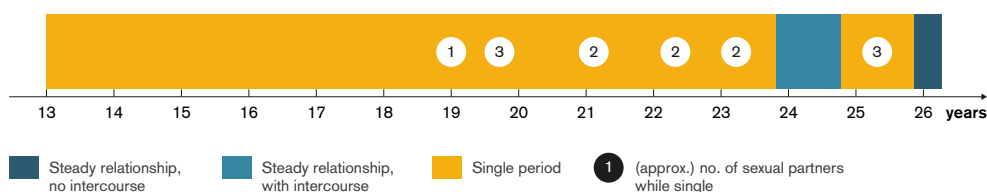
She wants her first time to be with a man she loves and is in a relationship with. She does not expect to find the right partner soon, but often feels lonely: *“Sometimes I wish I had a boyfriend so I’m not alone all the time, but then I think it would be more difficult while I’m studying. But most of the time I do want a boyfriend, so I do often feel lonely.”*

Bianca feels it is difficult to find the right partner: she does not want to go out or to meet someone online. Also, she moved from the country to a university in a big city, and wants to leave the city as soon as she can.

Sexually active and adventurous in casual situations, little experience of relationships (Type 5)

Figure 2-6
Non-relationship pattern, hedonistic type

Peter (26), 20+ sexual partners, 2 relationships



Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

Case history: Peter (26)

Peter had sex for the first time at the age of 19, with a childhood friend. Over the next few years, he engaged in a lot of casual sex; looking back, he estimates that he has slept with around 20 women. Most of his sexual and relationship experiences have been one-night stands: *“I got to know a lot of women at university, mostly on one-night stands [...] I wanted it like that, for a long time I didn’t want a relationship, I wanted to have fun. When you’re new to a place, and a student, you want to try everything, and I made the most of it. It took some effort, sometimes, you always had to go out and meet someone new, in a club or somewhere, but overall I thought it was all good. I was free, I could do what I wanted, I wasn’t tied down.”*

He began his first relationship at the age of 24. He met that girlfriend at university, but decided after about three months that she was not right for him, not *“the type of person I could imagine being with for a long time, so I ended it before it got any more serious”*.

Following the breakup, he *“didn’t go out much”* for two or three months, but then *“started to date again and met new women, and carried on much like before”*.

He has recently begun another relationship, although they have not yet slept together because his girlfriend is still a virgin. He can imagine *“something a bit more solid” with her, “but it’s only the beginning, we’ve only been together for a month, and I can’t say how long it’s going to last, or whether it’ll last at all – if you ever can tell that”*.

Preliminary conclusions It can be seen that the serial pattern of student relationships is by far the most common. Although most students had already explored their sexuality outside a relationship, their stories repeatedly stress the close link between partnership, sexuality and feelings of love. They express romantic ideals of love, centred on the combination of love, sexual passion, stability and sexual exclusivity.³¹ Both the respondents of the romantic or traditional type and those open to new experiences, who have had sexual experiences as single people, prefer this combination of partnership, sexuality and feelings of love. For the latter, a certain degree of intimacy and feelings of affection for the sexual partner are important in the casual setting, although much less so than for the traditional type. Only respondents from the hedonistic subtype of the non-relationship pattern are more eager to experiment and more open to emotionally uncommitted sexual experiences.

Although the case histories demonstrate different timescales, patterns and types in the development of sexuality and relationships, it is clear that students’ attitudes and ideals are very much focused on relationships, love and the desire for stability and permanence.

2.4 Nothing but honesty and fidelity?! Dealing with monogamy

Although individual case histories are all very different, there are many similarities in respondents’ attitudes to fidelity and the way they deal with it. One female respondent summarizes the views of the majority of students as follows: “Honesty and fidelity are the two most important rules” (Paula, 22). A large majority of our respondents have been faithful to their partner throughout all their relationships so far, and they expect the same from their partner. In many cases, this expectation is so self-evident and easily agreed that there is no need to discuss or agree it explicitly.

31 Cf. Lenz 2005.

Kristin (25): *“I think it works for us. From the way we behave, and with the passage of time, I think that has become increasingly clear.”*

Steven (25): *“We never sat down and discussed it. But I think we share the same views.”*

In other relationships, the partners talk about fidelity and reach an agreement. For instance, Svetlana (22), who has been with her boyfriend for 18 months, says:

Svetlana (22): *“He asked me once what I would consider as being unfaithful. I told him [...] And he said he felt the same, and he would go crazy if he saw me kissing another guy. Even if that’s all it was. We didn’t say ‘Promise, cross my heart and hope to die’, but we agreed on it. Then we both knew where we stood. How we needed to behave, so to speak.”*

Generally, as Svetlana’s story shows, the red line for infidelity, for our respondents, is kissing somebody else. However, some students recognize varying levels of infidelity:

Nadja (22): *“There’s physical infidelity, when you actually kiss or sleep with someone else. But there’s also emotional infidelity, when you begin to have feelings for someone else, but keep them secret.”*

Betrayal According to most respondents, any betrayal of individual beliefs about fidelity or an agreement between the partners inevitably leads to the end of the relationship.

Axel (22): *“If I’ve lost my trust in somebody, there’s no future in the relationship, because for me that’s what the relationship is built on.”*

Achmed (30): *“[The] only thing I can’t accept is infidelity.”*

Although fidelity is central to many desires and expectations for relationships, and is thus a central issue in students’ relationship histories, a small number of respondents have been unfaithful themselves. Mostly these infidelities were a “one-off”: monogamy was expected within the relationship, but real life intervened.

Sven (24): *“In theory, a lot of value is placed on [fidelity]. Of course, I crashed straight through that [laughs]. But all the same, I didn’t want to – to go against it. It’s asking a lot of myself to stay faithful. And a few times I haven’t managed it, and I’m angry with myself.”*

There is another, competing, interpretation: the “exit affair”, in which the respondent’s sexual infidelity is seen as a sign of a crisis within the relationship or its imminent breakdown. Carina, aged 24, looks back on her relationships:

Carina (24): *“I was unfaithful to two former partners. To me, that was a sign that the relationship couldn’t have been that important to me, if something like that happened. So I can’t say that fidelity wasn’t important to me at that time; it was rather that the relationship was no longer what it should have been.”*

Requirement of fidelity The biographical recollections and reflections supplied by the students show that the characteristic feature of monogamy must be added to the descriptions of both serial and steady relationships. Monogamy is a dominant feature of both the actual relationship behaviour of the respondents and their general requirements in terms of relationships and values. However, for today’s young adults, unlike their grandparents, fidelity is not linked with the institution of marriage, and it is not linked permanently to one other person. The requirement for fidelity – sexual and physical exclusivity – makes each romantic relationship unique. If this implicitly accepted or explicitly agreed condition is broken, it usually jeopardizes the relationship.

Negotiated agreements It is surprisingly rare for students to negotiate within a relationship and agree on what is possible and impossible in terms of sexual and emotional exclusivity. Their stories are characterized by wide-ranging agreement on a traditional concept of fidelity. Only a very small number of the students surveyed had experience of relationships which they had explicitly agreed were not monogamous (see Chapter 3.1). In most cases, the partners agreed that they would be transparent about any sexual experiences outside the relationship. For these respondents, open communication and a trustworthy agreement were the most important elements in the relationship.

Elias (23): *“I would define sexual fidelity as me keeping to the rules that we had both agreed on.”*

Roman (27): *“I don’t think I’m being unfaithful if I sleep with another woman when my girlfriend is involved too, or in the same room, or knows about it – when she sort of allows it and gives her permission. If you stick to [the rules], then I see that as proof of fidelity as well, a proof that you are sticking to the agreement and looking after the other person’s feelings.”*

We can see a shift in the meaning of “fidelity” here: the main focus is no longer on sexual exclusivity, but on ensuring that agreements relating to sexuality are trustworthy and that both partners keep to them.

2.5 Summary

As we have seen, serial monogamous relationships dominate at the student stage. Two realities coexist:

- The reality of relationship fluctuations, on the one hand; and
- The desire for monogamous, steady commitment, on the other.

The data also expand our understanding of the obvious diversity in case histories. Sexuality is handled differently in the various relationships: in some cases, sexual activity takes place only within a relationship, while in others it also takes place outside a steady relationship, in a period when the person is unattached. A small number of students go through stages of trying out non-monogamous types of relationship, in which they have sex with other partners alongside their relationship.

The students' sexual relationships are freely chosen and correspond to their personal values and wishes for a relationship. Restrictions are being lifted, individual space has been created, gender-specific disadvantages are beginning to disappear – which means that both sexes are now feeling a new pressure to be sexually competent and successful. However, despite the relaxation of social pressure and regulation in favour of personal freedom of decision over recent decades, the range of observed sexual behaviour has remained well below its potential. Relationships have changed in duration, degree of institutionalization, relations between the sexes and distribution of roles, and in the significance attached to these, but it is still true to say that, to a remarkable degree, heterosexuality is organized within steady, exclusive relationships.

3



Something else!? – Student relationships beyond monosexuality and monogamy³²

Maika Böhm

³² The title "Something else" is taken from the children's book of the same name by Kathryn Cave and Chris Riddell. A shorter version of this chapter has previously been published in the anthology *Pushing Sexual Boundaries. Perspectives of a New Sexology*. Cf. Böhm 2015.

Compared with the 1960s, young people become sexually active much earlier now; the sexual rights and choices of men and women have become more closely aligned, perceptions of sexuality and relationships have become more varied, and marriage and parenthood are less common and entered into much later in life.³³ Lewandowski and Koppetsch said about sexual and gender research that there is “a broad consensus about increasing plurality in sexual matters and the expansion and increasing visibility of an unprecedented variety of legitimate sexual lives and experiences”.³⁴ However, the question of whether this increased variety in sexual practices and gender relationships is in fact reflected in reality is not an easy one to answer.³⁵

- Are these social changes also leading to normative shifts in actual sexual and relationship behaviour and to new constructs of gender, desire or relationships?
- Are these social transformations spawning “neosexualities, neogenders and neoalliances”³⁶ in the forms of sexuality, gender and relationships?

Lewandowski and Koppetsch conclude, rather, that a conservative trend is gaining ground within the majority of society,³⁷ and our earlier remarks do not seem to support the theory either: we have seen that the university stage of life is mostly characterized by a preference for relationships and a distinct tendency to romanticization and exclusivity. This is accompanied by a strong link between sexuality and love relationships – most of the sex that students have occurs within a relationship. The great majority of student relationships are serial and monogamous, heterosexual and monosexual; they are based on the fundamental values of fidelity and permanence. Most students’ relationship histories are therefore remarkably similar, surprisingly unambivalent and fairly conventional.

33 Cf. Schmidt et al. 2006.

34 Lewandowski & Koppetsch 2015, p. 7.

35 Lewandowski & Koppetsch 2015, p. 20.

36 Sigusch 2013a, p. 229.

37 Lewandowski & Koppetsch 2015, p. 121 f.

However, looking more closely at the relationship histories, we see some stories of “something else” that reveal a break with fundamental values and a move away from the predominant relationship and sexual practices.

On the one hand, we see alternative types of relationship and sexual practices that go beyond the concepts of social hegemony. They include relationship experiences in which monogamy seems to be less crucial and relationships in which a monosexual fixation on one gender is overturned. Other case histories tell of sexual practices which are inconsistent, or partly inconsistent, with social sexual norms.

At the other end of the spectrum, we find restrictions or specific challenges that shape sexual and relationship histories in particular ways. These include both the experience of migration, in which different cultural perceptions of sexuality must be negotiated, and health conditions (e.g. physical or mental illness or physical limitations) that affect the successful enjoyment of sexuality and relationships. These unique sexual developments, destinies and life journeys will be discussed in the following chapter.

3.1 Beyond serial monogamy

It is very rare to find among today’s students the same renunciation of the ideal of a lifelong, monogamous love relationship that occurred among politically aware students in the late 1970s.³⁸ In fact, the importance attached to fidelity and steady relationships has actually increased in recent years, and sexual activity outside a steady relationship has become the exception. Nevertheless, alongside this ideal, which Pieper and Bauer have called “mononormativity”,³⁹ with monogamy dominating as the “unchallenged pattern of sexual orientation and organization”,⁴⁰ there exist alternative, non-monogamous ways of life.

38 Cf. Clement 1986.

39 Pieper & Bauer 2014.

40 Pieper & Bauer 2014, p. 2.

Since the late 1990s, the term polyamory (poly from the Greek “many”, amore from the Latin “love”), which first became current in English-speaking circles, has become better known in Germany. Polyamory refers to types of relationship in which a number of sexual and emotional connections are maintained in parallel – negotiated openly and amicably, so that “all those involved in a relationship are aware of its non-monogamous nature and basically approve”.⁴¹ The term “open relationship”⁴² is used for relationships which are sexually open, but where a romantic connection is maintained with a single partner.⁴³ One variant of the sexually open relationship is “swinging”: sexual contact with any number of other people, either with or without the participation of the partner.

Non-monogamous relationships Parallel sexual or romantic relationships – i.e. non-monogamous patterns – are the exception among students: one woman and three men were sexually active outside their current relationship, or had been while in a previous relationship, having come to an agreement with their partner and together developed an alternative understanding of fidelity. Only one respondent referred to his relationship as an “open relationship”, and no one used the term “polyamory”. Various motivations and interests were represented in these agreements on non-monogamous types of relationship: one student engaged in swinging with his female partner; for another, a sexually open relationship was his response to a (female) partner’s infidelity in a previous relationship; a third stated that an earlier relationship had become an open one after some years because both partners wanted new and different sexual experiences. The case history of Inga, aged 21, gives an insight into her current sexually open relationship.

41 Klesse 2007, p. 317.

42 Cf. Boehm 2012; Clement 2010.

43 The scientific literature on polyamorous and open relationship types shows clearly that these concepts cannot be easily distinguished. According to Klesse, it is “not possible to define polyamory unambiguously”. Cf. Klesse 2007, p. 319.

Case history: Inga (21)

Inga has been with her current partner for over two years; this is her second, and so far longest, relationship. The couple met in a summer camp run by a political youth organization. She *“flirted with him for several days”* until he responded and they *“sort of got together”*. Both the relationship and their sex life were slow to develop. Inga says: *“He didn’t want to do anything sexually at first [...] It took us a while to get going [...] And it was really me who got us sleeping together”*. From the start of their relationship, the couple agreed that it would be a sexually open one. However, it is important to both of them that their relationship should be emotionally exclusive. *“Openness”* meant *“really only sex or a fling”*. For Inga, the boundary where infidelity begins is something *“sexually ongoing, or if they meet very often, or it turns into a relationship or love”*. Inga sees this open relationship and the possibility that her partner will be sexually active with another woman as emotionally risky: *“I really wouldn’t know how to handle it if my partner did this”*, she says. She and her partner therefore agreed on the following rule: *“We don’t talk about it, so it doesn’t get too difficult emotionally. Rationally, we can both see that it really has nothing to do with our relationship, but emotionally there’s probably a whole other side to it.”* Inga herself has only once taken up the opportunity to be sexually active outside her relationship: a few months previously, she had a one-night stand with someone she knew and, abiding by their agreement, she did not talk to her partner about it. It taught her that she can keep her sexuality and her relationship *“separate”*, but she doubts whether her partner can do the same, and says: *“If he sees that he can’t keep them separate, we will have to talk about it again”*. Up to now, however, she does not think her *“partner has had sex with anyone else”*, to her relief. In summary, she says she is *“basically happy with our rule”*, which she feels provides clear advantages and freedoms: *“Because it gives me a lot of space. I’m 21, if I said now that I had to be completely tied down, it would be too stifling. So I’m glad that I have a relationship now, maybe one that could go somewhere, but that I also have the space to try things out and have new experiences.”*

Analysis of this case history The main feature of this open relationship is the clear distinction between emotional and sexual fidelity. The agreement that sex with other people, if it happens, should be kept secret from the partner is a mutually agreed self-protection strategy to prevent emotional hurt. However, this strategy is not consistent with the basic idea of polyamory, namely to handle sexual and emotional relationships openly and without secrecy.⁴⁴ At the level of circumlocutions of language, the interview demonstrates a rather conventional view of fidelity, for instance when Inga says that she was *“sort of unfaithful recently”* or that she did not know how she would react if her partner *“strayed”*. This latter concern demonstrates a traditional possessive way of thinking which is the foundation of traditional concepts of monogamy. Although Inga regularly discusses with her partner the possibility of having sex with someone outside the relationship, *“to check whether that is still the situation”*, the two of

44 Cf. Klesse 2007; Easton & Hardy 2009; Boehm 2012.

them have not, or only rarely, taken up the option of an open relationship. It appears that the theoretical possibility of a sexually open relationship between them is more important to them than actually creating such a relationship in reality.

Preliminary conclusions A common feature among respondents who had experience of non-monogamy was that fidelity should be defined by the individuals concerned, by negotiating and adhering to jointly agreed rules governing sex with other partners. For these students, detailed discussion and regular joint reappraisals of these agreements form the basis for a sexually open relationship. Unlike in monogamous relationships, in which the mutual requirement for fidelity is often taken for granted, non-monogamous relationships prioritize negotiations between the partners about sexuality and relationships. Sexuality researchers such as Schmidt and Sigusch describe this as “negotiation” or “consensus” morality, remarking that now “it is not sexual acts/practices [that are judged], but the way in which they happen, i.e. the interactions”.⁴⁵ Relevant issues in these negotiation processes include awareness of one’s own and others’ boundaries, self-reflection and reflection on the interaction. Another similarity in the case histories is that they report neither parallel love relationships nor frequent or regular sexual contacts outside the relationship. The emotional uniqueness of the love relationship is a fundamental feature of all the stories, so there can be no question of polyamory here.

45 Schmidt 2014, p. 9; cf. also Sigusch 2013a, p. 410 ff.

3.2 Beyond historic monosexuality

In addition to the norm of monogamy that is dominant in society, a further “mega-rule of our sexual order”⁴⁶ can be seen in the requirement of monosexuality. In this concept, sexual desire is determined by the gender of the partner, and is fixed on one gender throughout one’s life. Moreover, monosexuality is closely linked with the idea of a fixed heterosexual or homosexual identity: “It is clear that one can be homosexual – or, conversely, heterosexual – only if it is for life, and one must be one or the other, whether one is a man or a woman.”⁴⁷

There are no reliable data showing how many people in Germany from specific age or social groups consider themselves to be definitely heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual. As far as students are concerned, we know that, now as in the past, a large majority describe themselves as exclusively or primarily heterosexual.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, at least at the level of orientation and self-perception “among young men and, particularly among women [there are] signs of a relaxation of this monosexuality – at least in their heads”.⁴⁹ This openness is not yet reflected at the level of sexual behaviour: only a small minority of heterosexual students had had sex with a member of their own sex in the year preceding the survey.⁵⁰

Our own results also confirm this primarily heterosexual and monosexual orientation in student sexuality: five female students and four male students had had at least one sexual experience with a member of the opposite sex and at least one with a member of their own sex in the past.⁵¹ These experiences can be classified into two groups:

- In one group, the same-sex experiences took place longer ago and only during childhood and puberty;
- The second group continues to find both sexes sexually attractive and chooses sexual partners irrespective of their sex.

46 Schmidt 2007, p. 139.

47 Schmidt 2007, p. 138

48 Cf. Matthiesen & Dekker 2015a.

49 Schmidt 2007, p. 147 (emphasis in original).

50 A total of 0.3% of male students and 2% of female students aged between 20 and 30 who described themselves as exclusively or primarily heterosexual had had sex with a member of their own sex in the year preceding the survey. Cf. Matthiesen & Dekker 2015a.

51 In addition, one female student and one male student had had sex in a threesome with one person of the opposite sex and another of their own sex. These students have been excluded from the analysis which follows, since they considered themselves to be exclusively heterosexual; the threesome should be seen as a sexual practice within a heterosexual relationship rather than a departure from the norm of monosexuality.

However, very few respondents could imagine beginning an emotional as well as sexual relationship where the sex of the partner was not a factor. The case history of Johannes, aged 21, is presented here as an example.

Case history: Johannes (21)

Johannes has been with his female partner for almost four years. It is his first relationship and he had sexual intercourse for the first time with this partner. Sexually he is attracted “*more to women*”, but he tells of several sexual contacts and episodes of “*petting*” with men when he was younger. Looking back to his primary-school days, he remembers sleeping over at schoolfriends’ houses and having his first sexual experiences there “*quite playfully*”. At that time, he spent a lot of time with a neighbour’s son. Sexual contacts took place and became more intense as time went on. At first each boy explored the body of the other under the bedcovers: “*We only touched, we didn’t look, we did it as inconspicuously as we could*”. Johannes goes on: “*Later [we both] grew braver. We started just ducking under the covers and looking at what we were touching and seeing how our penises were different.*” Later, inspired by porn magazines, Johannes says, this was followed by the “*famous blowjob*”: “*we thought there must be something in it, so naturally we tried it too.*” He had further same-sex experiences while he was younger, including some with a slightly older, sexually experienced cousin: “*He told me about a few things, and I wanted to try them. He was embarrassed, but I said: ‘Come on, nobody’s going to know’, [laughs] and so we tried it. I think, since you have to take the penis in your mouth to make anything happen [...] that was my first experience of ejaculation.*”

His most recent same-sex experience occurred at the age of 17, on a weekend away with a friend. They had both been drinking and looking at the porn channel in their hotel (“*then we got ourselves going a bit by watching the porn channel in the hotel*”). Johannes gives details: “*At some point, he said ‘Do you want to do something to me?’ and I said: ‘Yes, and will you do it to me too?’ – ‘OK.’ And at another point I said: ‘Shall I go down on you?’ and he said: ‘No’, and I said: ‘Go on’, and he said: ‘OK then’. And it did work, but ... we never mentioned it afterwards, it was the only time it happened.*” When asked whether he could imagine having pleasurable sexual experiences with men in the future, Johannes agrees he could, but makes it clear: “*But no anal sex. As I said, I have some experience of oral sex and I always found it very exciting, and I’d still want the feeling of holding another man’s penis.*” However, he could only see sex with another man as “*a purely casual thing, just done for fun*”; he is not interested in a long-term emotional or sexual relationship with a man.

Analysis of this case history Johannes' story can be interpreted as "temporary homosexuality among heterosexual adolescents",⁵² as Schmidt calls it. This form of sexuality was more common among male adolescents in the late 1970s than it is today. This can be partly attributed to the "breakdown of homosocial structures in childhood and adolescence" and the associated "loss of intimacy with one's own sex".⁵³ Johannes talks about repeated episodes of physical and sexual contact with other boys when he was younger. His story makes clear his own role in initiating these sexual contacts: clearly his own sexual curiosity and openness were the deciding factors in the creation of this sexual situation. However, Johannes does not equate these pleasurable experiences with a homosexual identity. He does not exclude the possibility of further same-sex experiences in the future but, like the great majority of the students in this group, he emphasizes the "*casual, fun*" nature of these sexual experiences.

Preliminary conclusions In general, among students who have already had sexual experiences with both their own sex and the opposite sex, and thus have a non-monosexual history, the fundamental "verbal openness" (which is also found in other students) is matched by actual sexual acts. Here, not only attitudes but actual sexual practices have shifted: the gender of the partner has lost its primary significance in the process of choosing a partner. The idea of a lifelong fixation of sexual desire on one gender or the other may thus have become less significant. Nevertheless, it is rare for these experiences to show an enduring openness to sexual and relationship experiences with both men and women.

3.3 BDSM practices – beyond sexual normality?

Bondage, dominance, submission and sadomasochism (BDSM) and practices bordering on these⁵⁴ have aroused greater media interest in recent years, partly because of novels such as *Fifty Shades of Grey*.⁵⁵ However, does increased media presence also imply greater liberalization and greater "normalization" of forms of sexuality previously considered to be "deviations"? Whereas Schmidt has spoken of the "disappearance of perversions", and Plummer as far back as the 1990s saw a pervasive "supermarket of sexual possibilities", Wagner opposes the liberalization theory and believes "that forms of sexuality which were previously considered deviant are the subject of controversy and discussion, both in academic debate and elsewhere".⁵⁶ For instance, it is debated whether (BD)SM is a lifestyle or a dysfunction and to what extent

52 Schmidt 2000, p. 321.

53 Schmidt 2007, p. 143.

54 From now on we will use the broader term BDSM, which also covers sadomasochism (SM).

55 Cf. Schulz 2015; Illouz 2013.

56 Wagner 2014, p. 11; cf. also Schmidt 1998b; Plummer 1996.

these practices influence the self-perception of a culture or an individual.⁵⁷ Berner et al. call for more, particularly interdisciplinary, research on “the enigma and fascination of the link between pain and desire”.⁵⁸

In our interviews, too, some respondents expressed an interest in “soft SM” or “bondage”, with occasional references to inspiration from *Fifty Shades of Grey*;⁵⁹ for instance, wanting to try sex “using a riding crop”. In almost all cases, this was a sexual fantasy or wish that had not been realized in reality. Three female and three male students reported sexual practices they had carried out which they themselves described as (BD)SM. Only two respondents had BDSM as a central feature of their sexuality, going beyond occasional use. One of these is Heike, aged 23.

Case history: Heike (23)

Heike is a student of literature studies, and has been single for five years. She is currently engaged in casual affairs and liaisons and is happy with that situation. In the past, she used to want a relationship more and says, looking back over her relationship history, that she “*just couldn’t handle men*”. At the moment, she is happy being single: “*I’ll just [wait], perhaps somebody will turn up, what will be, will be.*”

Heike knew from the age of about 19 that she was interested in SM. It began with a “*weakness for fetish clothing*”, she enjoyed wearing PVC and latex. She then realized that she was particularly aroused by pornographic material depicting SM practices, and joined the SM scene herself. She finds sexual partners at SM parties or among her friends, and also looks online sometimes because of her preference for SM. However, she specifies: “*Not ordinary hookup sites, I used to use dollclub.de and now I use Sklavenzentrale.*” Heike has tried various BDSM sexual practices, including: “*Lots of different forms of corporal punishment – spanking, caning, whipping, tying up with a rope, handcuffing, blindfolding, gagging, clamping*”. She has also played games involving urine, sperm and saliva, and had sex using special equipment, such as a vaulting horse or St Andrew’s Cross. Across all these sexual settings, the distribution of roles is the same. Heike says: “*I’m always the sub, with a man who acts dominant, ties me up, hurts me or is just verbally dominant*”. Heike is also attracted to women, but has had SM sex with only one female partner. She tells of a sexual fantasy involving a woman that she would like to experience for real (“*to be sort of humiliated and beaten by a woman*”). She would also like to have sex with two dominant men, giving them the following roles: one should “*maybe [look after] me emotionally a bit more, while the other looks after the physical side*”.

57 Cf. Hill et al. 2008.

58 Cf. Berner et al. 2008, p. 272.

59 James 2012.

Although she has had many positive sexual experiences of BDSM, there was one occasion when someone she knew was very insensitive and ignored her boundaries. She tells of her strategy at the time of “*blocking it out*” and her enormous relief when he was “*done*”. The experience stayed with her for a long time, particularly since her sexual partner then spread rumours about her on the BDSM scene and she felt “*judged by a lot of people who go to the same bars as I do*”.

Analysis of this case history Heike’s insightful handling of her own BDSM experiences and desires is striking. Although her preferred sexual practices would until recently have been considered deviant, and their legitimacy is still questioned by society, she expresses no concern in her interview about being “*abnormal*” and no obligation to compare her own preferences with “*normal sex*”. She says she has “*a good attitude to sexuality, I’m really very happy*”. Obviously, she moves in subcultural contexts where her “*something else*” is not so different after all. Consensuality and mutual agreement, whatever the setting or the manner in which they arise, are crucial features of her sexual encounters.

They can, therefore, be seen as an element of moral negotiation⁶⁰ and a “*democratization of sexuality [...] in which roles and practices are not fixed, but are constantly negotiated and re-negotiated with a requirement for equality between the negotiating partners*”.⁶¹ This also relates to the code which has been used on the SM scene for many years, “*safe, sane, consensual*”, which combines consensuality in sexual encounters with the principle of safety and sound mind. The flouting of sexual boundaries that Heike experienced is a definite breach of this code. Heike did not seek support after the incident.

Preliminary conclusions Some students are interested in experimenting with BDSM-like sexual practices. However, many of them explicitly distance themselves from SM and stress that they do not want to try anything really “*hard*” (i.e. causing lasting pain). Only three female and three male respondents had actually engaged in BDSM practices, and for most of them it only happened once. All this shows that BDSM is still on the “*sexual periphery*”.⁶² The few BDSM practitioners in our sample place more emphasis on the potential for sexual growth in subcultural settings than on potential ambivalences and conflicts in their sexual and relationship lives.

60 Schmidt 1998b.

61 Wagner 2014, p. 24.

62 Wagner 2014, p. 336.

3.4 Migration – a double challenge?

Sexuality and relationships, as our first three case histories have made clear, are framed by social norms and are subject to “cultural influences to a very high degree”.⁶³ On the other hand, however, they are also the product of social interactions. Therefore, “the capacity for sexual experience and sexual desire [...] is primarily the result of learning processes”.⁶⁴ According to King and Koller, adolescence can be seen as “a modification phase”,⁶⁵ creating a possibility space from which new things can emerge. The resources and burdens of this possibility space depend greatly, however, on family, institutional and social factors.

This possibility space is also affected by experiences of migration, whether one’s own or one’s parents’. The transformations that go along with both adolescence and migration can be seen as “a double transformation challenge”⁶⁶ since, in both cases, the person undergoes “separation and remodelling, which in this sense constitute a double challenge, the transformation associated with migration and the transition from childhood to adulthood”.⁶⁷

In the sample considered here, four respondents have a story involving migration, although in three cases this only became apparent at the end of the interview during collection of sociodemographic data. Two respondents immigrated to Germany with their parents as children, and two came to Germany to study.

63 Stein-Hilbers et al. 2000, p.10.

64 Stein-Hilbers et al. 2000, p.11.

65 King & Koller 2009, p. 11.

66 King & Schwab 2000, p. 209 ff.

67 King & Koller 2009, p. 12.

Only one respondent spontaneously alluded to her migration experience from the very beginning of the interview.⁶⁸ Ming, aged 29, tells of her experiences of sexuality and relationships in China and in Germany.

Case history: Ming (29)

Ming came from China to study in Germany six years ago. She has already obtained a BSc in chemistry and is now studying for a master's. Ming's experience of relationships has been influenced by her upbringing as the only child of Chinese parents and by her migration experiences. At the beginning of the interview, she says: *"My home country is in Asia. There, if you want to start a relationship, your parents will agree to it and, if they don't, it won't be considered an official relationship."*

Her first relationship was unofficial, and began when Ming was in her early twenties. The relationship was one of friendship and not sexual, partly because both partners still lived with their parents. Neither set of parents approved of the relationship: *"I liked him, but my mother didn't like him much, so it didn't last long, around a year"*. After the relationship ended, she complied with her mother's wish that she should go and study in Germany. While she was at university there, she met her second boyfriend, who was Chinese like herself. The two sets of parents approved of this relationship and it therefore became official: *"My mother thought he was wonderful and his mother approved of the relationship, and so we even got married"*.

However, Ming was unhappy in the marriage, which lasted around 18 months: for one thing, there were financial problems – they *"didn't have much money"* but still had to pay back debts incurred by the husband. According to Ming: *"Every month, around half of all our money went on his credit card payments"*. The husband also had sexual difficulties and could not, or would not, have sex with her. Looking back, she tells of many attempts to talk to him about these problems, *"but he wouldn't listen"*, until at a certain point she decided to separate from him. It was difficult for Ming that her parents disapproved of the separation, because they were unaware of the couple's problems: *"Of course, they weren't at all pleased that we had separated"*. The process of dissolving the marriage was lengthy and full of problems. Her mother provided no support: *"My mother didn't want me to leave my ex-partner and wouldn't give me any money, so I couldn't afford to find a new apartment"*. For a while, the couple continued to live in the same apartment for financial reasons, until her ex-partner found out that she had met another man and *"threw me out the next day"*.

68 Clearly, our respondents have very different views of the significance of their own migration and their upbringing in potentially different cultural and social circumstances. The majority of respondents with experiences of first- or second-generation migration do not discuss it when looking back at their sexual and relationship experiences. We cannot say for certain how far the sample is biased in that it did not reach respondents whose origins or migration experiences are crucial factors in their sexuality or relationships.

Ming got together with her new partner, who is German, a few months after her departure. At the beginning of the relationship, Ming says: *“My mother strongly disapproved. My mother said to me: ‘You can’t even get on with someone Chinese, how are you going to get on with a German?’ She said the cultural differences were just too great”*. However, Ming was able to convince her mother that her *“new boyfriend was very nice”* and cared for Ming, so the relationship is now accepted and the couple can be officially together. Ming has a very conventional relationship with her new partner, corresponding to Western norms: they have a regular sex life and want to stay together forever and marry and have children soon.

Analysis of this case history When Ming looks back on her relationship history, we are struck by the considerable influence exerted by her mother, whose wishes have shaped Ming’s life and relationships up to now. The distinction between official and unofficial relationships, made by the parents and shown in Ming’s remarks about her mother, are common in China and can be seen as a cultural norm for relationships.

Although Ming, looking back, emphasizes the important role played by the parents in her first relationship, she gradually freed herself from her mother’s control while she was studying in Germany. Her first relationship after migrating led – thanks to the influence of her distant parents – to a hasty marriage, although Ming did not say much about any personal connection with or love for her partner during her interview. It is clear that, at this point, Ming still had a close connection with her family of origin and its value system. In her further remarks about the separation, which she instigated and carried out against her mother’s wishes, we can see a growing use of the “expanded adolescent possibility space”.⁶⁹ In her late twenties, Ming begins a relationship with a German man. She persists, even though her mother initially treats the relationship as an unofficial one, and stands by the man until the relationship is accepted.

In Ming’s case history, we can see a “double transformation challenge” or a twofold “emancipation process”: one resulting from the cultural framing of sexuality and relationships, and the other from the familial and maternal attacks on the way she constructs her life and relationships.

69 King & Koller 2009, p. 21.

3.5 Dealing with health constraints

Perceptions of health and disease are framed by social norms, “since in every society normal is automatically seen as healthy”.⁷⁰ Sexual health, in particular, is highly valued in Western societies and is considered important, not only in terms of sexuality, but also for overall quality of life.⁷¹ As well as social norms, subjective perceptions and interactions between the partners are also important in this area: what is relevant is what the individual feels is appropriate and/or pleasurable for himself or herself and the outcome of negotiations with a (sexual) partner. Sexual dysfunctions are currently described in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and the International Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders (ICD-10). It is true of all sexual disorders that “there is an interplay between mental, somatic and social causes, i.e. sexual dysfunctions are biopsychosocial and therefore determined by multiple factors”.⁷²

Seven female students and four male students reported various health conditions which restricted their activities, and described their effects and the individual strategies which they had employed to overcome them. The problems reported were mental disorders such as depression or borderline personality disorder, through somatic constraints such as obesity and chronic or relapsing conditions such as multiple sclerosis or genital warts, to clinically defined sexual dysfunctions (vaginismus, erectile dysfunction, loss of libido, etc.). As an example, we present the case of Anselm, aged 21

Case history: Anselm (21)

Anselm Anselm is studying electrical engineering. He got together with a girl from school when he was 16. This first love relationship has lasted until the present day. They have been together for almost six years and share an apartment. Anselm describes his situation like this: “Fairly untypical in that I got involved and moved in with someone so very early”.

However, a steady relationship is one of his fundamental values: he sees this relationship as “an all-in package, really great” and is proud that “we have our own flat and have been running our home for over a year and manage our relationship the way we do”. Anselm is much less satisfied with the couple’s sex life. Both partners had their first sexual contact in this relationship. They slept together for the first time after approximately six months. For him, sex with a partner was “completely new territory”, and initially it was accompanied by insecurity and excitement. Anselm

70 Vetter 2008, p. 17

71 Cf. Vetter 2008, p. 28.

72 Vetter 2008, p. 67.

says of the curvature of the penis he was born with that he “*never found it strange*” before he was in this relationship, “*It’s a bit bent, about 40 degrees, and from where I’m looking you can hardly see it*”. His girlfriend, however, found it very disturbing. She was afraid it would hurt during sex and asked whether it was “*normal*”. At that point, for the first time, Anselm began to notice the curvature of his penis. Looking in the mirror, he thought: “*Wow, okay, it is bent!*” The couple’s sex life was problematic from the start. In the first four years they were together, they slept together five or six times. The last time they had sex was almost a year ago.

Anselm finds the situation psychologically stressful. For some time, he worried that he or the curvature of his penis were “*to blame*” for their sexual difficulties. A few months ago, he sought medical help. He went to “*a clinic that deals with these problems, and they more or less confirmed that correcting it would only be a cosmetic measure – medically there’s no need*”. Anselm cannot currently see why he should have the operation done. There are various reasons for this: the risk of “*impotence and being in pain for six months*” and the cost: “*as much as a small car, so 18 000 euros*”. A remark by a doctor, that the operation is mostly done at the request of a partner, confirms his thinking: “*Ninety-seven per cent of men come here not for themselves, but for their partners. And that would be the only reason for me to do it!*”

The fact that “*sex doesn’t work so well*” for the couple placed such a strain on the relationship for a while, that they separated briefly. During that time, Anselm had a one-night stand, which he found extremely liberating because “*it wasn’t complicated*”. Because of this experience and the information he received from the clinic, Anselm attributes the unusual problems in the couple’s sex life not to the curvature of his penis, but to the lack of libido and interest of his girlfriend: “*She says herself that she has no idea about sex. And that’s surprising [...] that there should be somebody who doesn’t find sex important*”. Therefore, masturbation is currently Anselm’s only sexual activity. His girlfriend knows about it and accepts it. Very occasionally, he can even persuade her to watch while he masturbates. His main concern is to “*just feel somebody close to me, to know that someone is there [...] and increase our love [...] maybe even [...] strengthen our relationship*”. However, even in these situations, his girlfriend shows her lack of (sexual) interest, and would rather not be there: “*She gets irritated because it takes time, time that she could be spending on something more useful, and I can always tell: ‘Come on, get on with it, I’ve got such-and-such and such-and-such to do’*”. Despite the difficult sex life, Anselm is not currently thinking about ending the relationship. However, it seems unlikely to him that they will have a future together, mostly because their plans for a family are very different.

Analysis of this case history The “something else” in Anselm’s story seems to be the need to find alternative arrangements for his own sexual wishes and ideas about a relationship because of physical or sexual difficulties. Despite the couple’s sparse sex life and their inability to deal with their sexual difficulties, Anselm is not choosing to end his current relationship. Instead of potentially meeting his sexual and emotional needs in a different relationship, he is sticking to the current arrangement, although he is sexually dissatisfied and burdened with self-doubt. He manages his psychological stress, which in clinical terms would be a relevant criterion for diagnosing and treating a sexual dysfunction, in a compensatory way by engaging in solo rather than couple sex and, despite his Catholic values, predicting that this relationship will be of limited duration. Another noteworthy feature is the shift he describes in the problems: whereas, in the early years of the relationship, his curvature of the penis was “to blame” for the couple’s sparse and unsatisfactory sex life, the problem at the time of the interview is his partner’s lack of interest in sex. Anselm himself sought medical advice on the somatic problem, the curvature of the penis. He makes no mention of any psychological or counselling support in respect of his girlfriend’s lack of interest in sex and the lack of frequency of sex, which for him is too infrequent.

Preliminary conclusions The interviews with students with health constraints yield various coping strategies: some of these stories make clear that, in the interests of positive development of the couple’s sexuality and relationship, it is particularly important for the partners to share their own wishes, worries and emotions. Whenever this sharing does not occur, it becomes more likely that the partners’ individual attempts to compensate will land wide of the mark, resulting in unsatisfactory sexual and relationship experiences. A joint search for alternative ways of acting is considered positive, for instance if the couple are unable to have vaginal sex for a while because of a sexually transmitted infection. In addition, in some cases, “leaving the relationship”, i.e. separation, is described as a strategy to solve the problem. All the case histories, despite – or because of – their wide-ranging content, demonstrate the great value that sexual health represents over time and the burden that disease or restrictions impose on the quality of sexuality and the quality of life in general.

3.6 Summary

The sexuality and relationship histories presented here fluctuate between individual capacity for action and sociocultural and health constraints. They represent an experiential space between choice and destiny – the boundaries between them are fluid.

Freedom of choice The first three case histories provide an insight into non-monogamous forms of relationship, non-monosexual self-positioning or sexual practices outside the norm. In these cases, the respondents can choose and are active players in their own sexual and relationship stories. In this process of development, the basic instrument and moral frame of reference in all cases is agreement between the partners, in the sense of moral negotiation. These examples can definitely be seen as an indication that “heterosexuality is no longer the undisputed model for a proper sex life”⁷³ and that now there is scope for “something else” in sexuality, gender relations and relationships. Nevertheless, sexual variety has not yet become a matter of course, as the stories clearly show: when we look at the conceptual worlds and value orientations of the students, we see that the sexual and relationship practices that we have analysed here go beyond “normal” developments and normalized conceptions, and continue to be based on ideas of hegemony and heteronormativity.

Limiting factors The last two case histories, moreover, make it clear that the “differentness” of student histories must be considered not as a choice, but as “destiny”. For instance, constraints imposed by the individual’s past, such as migration or health constraints, may restrict the “possibility space”⁷⁴ of the individual. Increasing choice, less coercion in sexual and other matters and the demise of the old sexual morality, which “has been transformed into a morality shaped by, and the responsibility of, the individual”⁷⁵ encounter limiting factors that, as the case histories make clear, contradict the ideas of liberalization and can hamper sexual self-expression.

73 Sigusch 2013a, p. 547.

74 King/Koller 2009.

75 Sigusch 2013b, p. 24.

4



Hookup culture and one-night stands – students and casual sex⁷⁶

Gesine Plagge and Silja Matthiesen

⁷⁶ A shorter version of this chapter has previously been published in the anthology *Pushing Sexual Boundaries. Perspectives of a New Sexology*. Cf. Plagge & Matthiesen 2015.

In Germany, there has so far been little research into the various types of casual sex among students. However, given the particular role played by German students in the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the available studies on the changing face of student sexuality,⁷⁷ it seems likely that German students, as a group, are liberal, permissive and willing to experiment. The logical next step is to take a comparative look at the hooking-up phenomenon.

According to studies from the United States, a “hookup culture” can be observed at many American universities:⁷⁸ a widespread practice of casual “pickups” characterized by sexual permissiveness based on a concept of the University period as a time of sexual experimentation. The term usually refers to any form of “casual sex”,⁷⁹ i.e. the term “hooking up” can be used for any form of sexual activity short of a steady relationship, from kissing to full intercourse.⁸⁰

The main focus of the American research on hooking up is usually on potential risk factors and the potentially negative emotional, social and mental effects of casual sex.⁸¹ Often, only the negative aspects are investigated: for example, some research describes poor contraceptive practices and the associated risk of unwanted pregnancy and/or sexually-transmitted infections.⁸² Some focus on drug and alcohol misuse.⁸³ Other studies focus on sexual harassment and violation of boundaries.⁸⁴

Unanswered questions in hookup research The subject of hookups therefore has almost entirely negative connotations. Because research interest has been confined to potential hazards, casual sex has often been seen from a purely risk-based perspective and construed in line with repressive sexual morality. This leaves no room for a different way of investigating the phenomenon: how can we describe the hookup culture, with its sexual permissiveness, as part of an overall student sexual culture? Such an approach leaves open the possibility that students may be gaining positive experiences from it.

77 Schmidt 2000; Clement 1986; Giese/Schmidt 1968.

78 The English phrase “to hook up with someone” means “to meet up with someone”, used in this context in a sexual sense.

79 The term covers various types of casual sexual activity outside a steady relationship. It includes both one-night stands and regular sexual encounters (e.g. booty calls, affairs and “friends with benefits”). Cf. Paul et al. 2008, p. 379.

80 Lewis et al. 2013; Shulman & Connolly 2013.

81 Lewis et al. 2013.

82 Charnigo et al. 2013.

83 Gilmore et al. 2013

84 Eshbaugh & Gute 2008.

Also, gender aspects have not been adequately addressed in the research to date: gender differences, in the form of sexual double standards or the application of a different morality to the assumptions made about oneself and others, have been recorded in isolation but not systematically investigated. In American sexuality research, the hookup culture is considered to be a widespread pattern of sexual behaviour among students,⁸⁵ and it also receives considerable attention in popular literature.⁸⁶

Are American results transferable to Germany? The arguments against an uncritical application of American research results to German students include structural differences (e.g. students' connections with their campus and their average age are different) and differences in sexuality education and sexual socialization.

In order to determine the significance of casual sex for this group of young, highly educated adults, the student interviews were analysed in terms of the students' attitudes. In the section of the interview dealing with past sexual experiences in steady relationships and as a single person, the respondent was asked about past experiences of casual sex:

Interview guide

“Have you ever had a one-night stand or any other kind of ‘casual sex’? For instance, an affair, sex with an ex or ‘friends with benefits?’” The associated supplementary questions were: “What do you think of casual sex?” “How do you like it? Does it go well for you?” “Are there different kinds of one-night stand? How are they different?” “Is it the same for men and for women?” “Do you think experiences like this are part of being a student?”

85 Cf. Garcia et al. 2012.

86 Examples: *The Rules of Attraction* (Bret Easton Ellis, published in German in 2001), *I am Charlotte Simmons* (Tom Wolfe, 2004) und *The Marriage Plot* (Jeffrey Eugenides, 2011), all dealing with sex, especially promiscuous sex, on campus.

The following presentation of the data analysis focuses on three sets of questions.

- 1 Are one-night stands the exception or the rule in the sex lives of German students? How do students organize casual sex?
- 2 How do students feel about these types of casual sex, and what do they say about them? What expectations, values and ideals are the students guided by in this process?
- 3 Is casual sex equally common among women and men?

The statements come from students who describe themselves as exclusively or primarily heterosexual.⁸⁷

4.1 Definitions: what is casual sex and how common is it?

The hookup culture is understood as a natural and widespread engagement in casual sex, in which neither partner has any expectation of a steady relationship.⁸⁸ It includes one-off sexual encounters (one-night stands) and occasional (booty calls⁸⁹) or longer-term or regular sexual activities (affairs, liaisons).⁹⁰ The definitions of casual sex in this specialist literature are classified into the following categories:

- Type of sexual practice (does kissing count as casual sex, or only full intercourse?);
- Time dimension (is this a one-off or a repeated experience?);
- How well the partners know one another (intimacy, shared activities and/or displays of emotion?)

87 Of our 100 respondents, one woman described herself as lesbian, five women as bisexual and one man as gay. It is a different question whether respondents have ever had a same-sex sexual experience. Here we have six women who have had sex at least once with another woman, and six men who have had sex at least once with another man. Nevertheless, the great majority of sexual experiences reported by the students are heterosexual ones.

88 Cf. Monto & Carey 2014.

89 A booty call is an impromptu meeting intended purely for sexual activity.

90 Cf. Wentland & Reissing 2011, p. 76.

When we try to reach a definition of casual sex, it quickly becomes clear that, while it may take fundamentally different forms, the distinguishing feature common to all the various approaches is their non-binding nature (as in the English term “casual” – “without commitment, non-binding”).

Our data show that students do not consider kissing a form of casual sex. Accordingly, in this report we define casual sex as a sexual episode taking place outside a steady relationship and involving manual (stimulation of the genitals with the hand), oral, vaginal and/or anal sex. Table 4-1 shows the prevalence of casual sex in our random sample: around half the women and half the men have engaged in casual sex at least once while at university. We should note that this almost always occurred at a time when the person was not in a relationship.

Table 4-1
Prevalence of casual sex (by gender and life stage, no. of cases)

Experience of casual sex	Women n = 50	Men n = 50	Total n = 100
While at university	27*	27**	54
Before university	9	11	20
Never	14	12	26

* In three cases: without full intercourse.

** In two cases: when visiting a prostitute.

Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

Categorization of casual sex by the individual

The following examples are intended to show how varied casual sex can be and how wide the spectrum of experiences covered by the term:

Carola (23): “You could say it was a one-night stand. We must have met four or five times before, but no more.”

Inga (21) “One of them was definitely a one-night stand, while the other was a friend, and it was a drunken mistake.”

Merle (25): “Once it was a complete cliché: I was suffering from a broken heart, went out with my friends, drank a lot, met somebody out on the town in Hamburg, took him home, and the next morning I thought: Oh God. But that really was the only time. It was a one-night stand, yeah, we met up three times in all. But only for one thing. Nothing else.”

Jörg (22): *“The last time was sex with my ex-girlfriend. I don’t know whether that counts as a one-night stand, because we did know each other already. It was a bit weird, I thought. The day before Christmas, she sent me a text: ‘Hi, how are you, yadda, yadda, yadda, I want sex’. So I texted back: ‘OK by me’, and we had sex, and that was it.”*

Pascal (23): *“There are one-night stands where you don’t even know the person’s name. You take them home from a party or something and have sex with them. And then there are one-night stands with people you do already know.”*

Sascha (27): *“That year, I had two, well, friends, so to speak. With one, it lasted maybe three weeks, and with the other it really was just the one time.”*

We can see from these few quotes that the students themselves have difficulty in finding a precise definition of casual sex. They are most likely to judge by whether the event was a one-off or repeated, or whether the sexual partner was previously known to them or not. There can be multiple variations of a repeated experience: it includes both “friends with benefits” and affairs, liaisons and “fuck buddy” arrangements based exclusively on sex. There can also be enormous variations in how well the partners know one other, as shown by the contrast between “sex with an ex” and a “fuck buddy” arrangement.

The closest match to the American research on the hookup culture is provided by the statements about one-off episodes of casual sex with someone who was previously unknown to the respondent. “Going out” and “parties” and the associated alcohol consumption are always a major factor in these accounts. However, this stereotypical picture of a one-night stand, publicized by the media and dominating the American research, accounts for only a small proportion of the many different scenarios. A much more common pattern is several episodes of casual sex during the process of testing and getting to know a person, the main aim of which is to determine whether there is any prospect of a steady relationship. Often, repeated episodes of casual sex are a conscious choice and alternative to sex within a relationship for those who do not want a steady relationship, but do not want to give up sex altogether.

If, in a casual relationship, one of the partners wants sexual exclusivity, a monogamy conflict may arise in which the partners must decide whether they will have sex only with one another, or potentially also with other people. Here Kerstin describes the typical development of such a monogamy conflict. She had had sex occasionally with a man she knew over a period of three months, while both had also had other sexual partners:

***Kerstin (23):** “I kind of asked myself why he had to have this other woman, why not just me [...] But I didn’t want to get into a relationship with him. Then, of course, he said that, if I wanted him to be faithful, I had to be in a proper relationship with him [...] And that was the end of it as far as I was concerned.”*

If the desire for greater commitment and exclusivity continues to be felt by only one of the partners, it normally spells the end of the sexual relationship.

4.2 Gender differences: is casual sex the same for everyone?

Allison and Risman note that gender-differentiated opinions of casual sex have become less frequent in recent years, but have not entirely disappeared.⁹¹ We asked all our students whether casual sex was the same for women and men. We wanted to know: do women have different experiences? Do they undergo different risks? Do different rules, moral standards, social judgements or restrictions apply to them? The responses can be classified into four groups: statements that assert that, for women and men, casual sex is:

- 1 The same;
- 2 The same, but judged differently by society;
- 3 Not the same;
- 4 Not the same, because women are more emotionally involved.

⁹¹ Allison & Risman 2014.

Some students assert that casual sex is not the same for men and women, because the risk (of pregnancy) falls only on the woman, or because women and men engage in casual sex with different, gender-typical intentions.

Malte (21): *“Men just want to shoot their load. Women aren’t as capable of having orgasms as men, they want closeness and a bit of fun.”*

Sabrina (24): *“It’s riskier for a woman than it is for a man. If she gets pregnant, then it’s her headache.”*

Many female students assume that women are more emotionally involved.⁹² For instance, Nadine believes this, although she has had no experience of casual sex during her time at university so far. Berenike, aged 22, thinks differently. She has engaged in casual sex with a total of 11 male and female partners during periods when she was not in a relationship. However, she can see that society judges women and men differently.

Nadine (23): *“[I think] that [casual sex] can be the same for both partners, but that men can deal with it more easily, because women maybe find more often that their feelings are involved”.*

Berenike (22): *“I really don’t think [...] that when women have sex, a little light goes on marked ‘emotions’. That just doesn’t happen [...] What other people think about it is another matter. It’s typical: women quickly get written off as sluts, whereas for men, having experience forms part of their portfolio, so to speak.”*

Here Berenike refers to something that most of the students, particularly the women, objected to: the judgement of society allows men to have casual sex but makes it more difficult for women.

92 The frequency of this assumption varies not so much by gender, but mostly by the extent of the respondents' own experience of casual sex: more experienced respondents were less likely to report gender stereotypes.

Women who often engage in casual sex run the risk of social condemnation, embodied in the frequently cited and dreaded label “slut”. For men, terms with positive connotations such as “sex god” or “ladykiller” are mentioned. This leaves both sexes with a feeling of injustice and inequality of treatment unsuited to the modern age.

***Svetlana (22):** “I’ve always thought it was unfair! These are things women get slated for, that aren’t ‘proper’ for women, while the men are the big studs.”*

Only two students made no explicit distinction between society’s judgement and their own. They condemn casual sex by women, but see it as part of a legitimate and significant process of gaining experience for young men. Both use the metaphor of a “lock and key”, which Leon explains as follows:

***Leon (22):** “If you have a key that fits in every lock, you have an amazing key; if you have a lock that [takes] any key, you have a fucked-up lock.”*

Preliminary conclusions Our respondents’ statements testify to a major sexual double standard that is still prominent in social discourse. They encompass the concept that “as far as tolerance, expectations and permissions are concerned”,⁹³ there are different sexual standards for men and women. Even though a large majority of students explicitly opposed this gender-differentiated judgement, it is clear that sexual double standards persist, at least in the form of social prejudices; they have not been entirely dismantled in the course of sexual liberalization. Our respondents’ statements can, therefore, be interpreted as both an echo and a subjective reworking of social stereotypes and dominant gender constructs.

93 Bamler 2008, p. 11.

4.3 Sexual culture: is casual sex part of university?

Relationships among German students since the 1990s have been characterized by serial monogamy and the high value placed on fidelity.⁹⁴ Quantitative studies show that sex outside steady relationships is the exception rather than the rule and that casual sex of various types takes place mostly in periods of singledom – i.e. in the periods between relationships.⁹⁵ Some 20 years ago, in the large US empirical study *The Social Organization of Sexuality*, it was stated: “Couples committed to enduring affectionate relationships dominate the sexual landscape”.⁹⁶ This sociological diagnosis from the 1990s is still valid today. The authors of a German study on sexuality and relationships over three generations conclude that sexuality is largely a monopoly of relationships.⁹⁷ Since external relationships are rare and single people of all ages have a fairly sparse sex life, sexuality is confined, to a remarkable extent, to steady relationships: “Sex may no longer be confined to marriage, but it is still firmly in the grip of the steady relationship.”⁹⁸

Although casual sex is rare overall, it is of great importance for the university stage of life. The students judged this type of sexuality positively at an explicit level, emphasizing that it was an opportunity to gain sexual experience. They refer particularly to the prominent student party culture and to meeting lots of young people. Around half the students think, like Joana (24), that “it’s kind of part of it”. Some of them feel that such experiences are an inherent part of university life.

Heike (23): “Having sex for the first time is part of your schooldays and, in a way, having your first one-night stand is part of university, I think. So, yes, I do think it’s part of it.”

Other students see experiences of casual sex as separate from the status of student, belonging much more to a particular stage of life. For them, these experiences are part of becoming an adult, which includes finding one’s own sexual identity.

94 See Chapter 2 and Schmidt 2000; Matthiesen & Böhm 2013.

95 Cf. Schmidt 2000.

96 Cf. Laumann et al. 1994, p. 546.

97 Cf. Schmidt et al. 2006.

98 Schmidt et al. 2006, p. 114.

Nadja (22): *“[It’s not] necessarily [part of] student life, but I do think it’s part of becoming an adult. You should be able to try things out. Then you can find out what you like and what you don’t.”*

Having casual sex is considered a stage of freedom, marked by trying new things and having fun, before the “serious part of life” begins. This is clear from Pascal’s statement, for instance:

Pascal (23): *“They always say ‘university is the time to have fun’. You finish studying and start work. Relationship, family, children – of course, most people want to stay faithful and don’t feel they have to live it up any more then. If you can try things out for a while first, and decide what you like and what you don’t like, then you can take all those experiences with you into your permanent relationship.”*

Preliminary conclusions Many students have obviously got a clear plan for their own sex lives: university is a time to try out new things and gain experiences. This is followed by the long-term, reliable relationship which is the basis for founding a family. Both hedonistic motives (“have fun now”) and learning approaches (“gain experience now to use later”) are cited. Even more striking is the concept of organizing sexuality by specific life stages (“uncommitted now, committed later”).

In respect of students in 2012, we see neither the image of a particularly experimental and liberal sexual avant-garde (as there was in the 1960s, perhaps), nor that of a sexually deprived environment (as in the US studies) dominated by casual sex.

4.4 Risks and risk management in casual sex

American hookup research investigates the links between casual sex and drug and/or alcohol abuse⁹⁹ and the potential risks of poor contraceptive practices¹⁰⁰ and violation of sexual boundaries.¹⁰¹ This gives rise to a construct of casual sex in which sex takes place only under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs, leading to failures in communication and of contraception (to prevent unwanted pregnancy and protect against HIV/STIs) and to frequent violations of sexual boundaries. As we have already seen, this stereotypical image of casual sex has little validity for the experiences of students in Germany. We should therefore not be surprised that our respondents did not discuss casual sex primarily in terms of health risks or experiences of drugs, alcohol or of drugs, alcohol or violence.

Drugs and alcohol

Drugs are hardly mentioned in our respondents' answers, but in some of the interviews there are statements about the part played by alcohol in casual sex. Here we should clearly distinguish between one-off and repeated casual sex: in one-off casual sex, alcohol often plays a large part and the associated loss of inhibitions significantly encourages sex; however, this effect is much less significant in repeated forms of casual sex, e.g. affairs. In this setting, alcohol is one of the parameters of a sexual experience which is "normal" in our culture. It is the exception for alcohol consumption to be cited as the only reason for a one-night stand, as Inga does below.

Justus (20): "I don't quite know how it happened. It was after a party, and alcohol levels had something to do with it. We just felt attracted to one another and then it just sort of happened."

Inga (21): I didn't know one of my one-night stands at all. I think, if I'd been sober, I would never have done it. Alcohol – a lot of alcohol – had a lot to do with it."

99 Gilmore et al. 2013.

100 Charnigo et al. 2013.

101 Eshbaugh & Gute 2008; Paul et al. 2000.

Sören (26): *“They were people I just met, usually in a bar or at a party, and alcohol was usually involved. Everything moved really quickly and was over really quickly, and I never saw them again.”*

Contraceptive behaviour

Although alcohol consumption can clearly be a factor in one-night stands, we can find no systematic connection between alcohol consumption and poor contraceptive practices. Overall, the student responses demonstrate responsible and reliable contraceptive behaviour in the context of casual sex. Often, contraception is not explicitly discussed or negotiated; one of the partners simply reaches for a condom. Our respondents' answers suggest that there is a wide-ranging consensus that a condom should always be used during casual sex.

The following examples are intended to show how authoritatively and self-evidently condoms are included in the sexual situation.

Nadja (22): *“If I had a one-night stand at my place, there were always condoms by the bed. If I was travelling or at someone else's place, the man usually had one. Once, I did say: ‘Before we go any further, have you got a condom?’ And he said: ‘Sure, hang on, I'll go and get it.’”*

Katrin (26): *“He was the one who got up and fetched the condoms. There was no need to say anything. I stopped for a moment, and he got straight up.”*

Heike (23) *“Before it gets to full sex, I reach for a condom or, if I don't have one on me, I ask him whether he's got one and say I'm not doing it without.”*

Hilde (24): *“When we're fooling around, foreplay and so on, and more or less undressed, and it looks as if we really are going to have sex any minute now, then I say: ‘We have to use a condom.’”*

Rainer (22): *“I make it pretty clear that I feel strongly about using contraception and it's important to me. In other words, I want to avoid any bad fallout from sex. There shouldn't be any regrets.”*

Nils (26): *“If I don’t know the partner, then I’d definitely use a condom.”*

Gregor (25): *“The most important thing [in a one-night stand] is that people make sure to protect themselves. I’ve always made sure to use a condom.”*

We have found that most students have an appropriate awareness of risk and use contraception as a matter of course. However, we can also see that young adults would prefer not to use a condom during sex – adolescents are known to feel the same.¹⁰² If protection against unwanted pregnancy is assured (because the woman is on the Pill), and both participants consider their own sexual health and that of their partner to be good (for instance, because test results are available or the partner regularly donates blood), condom use appears to be negotiable. As shown by the examples below, there is a verbal negotiation or agreement which may end with the condom not being used.

René (21): *“In fact, I do always [use] a condom. Although I’m not a fan, to put it mildly. I’m a blood donor so I know for sure that I don’t have any diseases – or at least that there are a lot of diseases I don’t have. I prefer it if she is also a blood donor and is on the Pill.”*

Axel (22): *“I find [condoms] a nuisance, because [in a way] you’re getting all excited and everything and then [you have to say] ‘Hold on a minute while I get the condom’. Then you have to put the thing on, and it takes forever, and it completely ruins the moment.”*

Astrid (23): *“I’m afraid I have to admit that, since I’ve been on the Pill, I assume that my partners are healthy and just have sex with them. Usually, anyway. Then I ask myself whether he’s got HIV or some other disease. After all, I know I’m healthy. And yeah, I must admit, I don’t do it [use a condom].”*

Tamara (24): *“Mostly I get the impression that men don’t think much of condoms or whatever. It’s enough for them that I’m on the Pill. It’s always been me who said: ‘Let’s use a condom.’”*

102 Cf. Matthiesen et al. 2009, pp. 94 ff.; Matthiesen 2013, pp. 55 ff.

We have noticed a small difference between women and men in the subjectively perceived need to use a condom in casual sex. Nevertheless, neither female nor male students reported situations in which there was any disagreement or dispute. If the partners wanted different things, it was clear that the person “who said No” would decide.

Lars (22): *“That’s how it is: If she says No, then I can’t force her. If I say No, she can’t just jump me. It wouldn’t work. The one who says No usually wins. When they simply say: ‘No, I’m not doing it.’”*

In general, students think about contraception and try to act responsibly. We can find no indications that, as a general rule, casual sex among German students is characterized by irresponsible contraceptive practices.

Violation of sexual boundaries

Here, too, we can find no parallels with the results obtained by American researchers. There were a few stories of pressure exerted by the sexual partner to go further than the respondent wanted – but these are rare exceptions. Two students – one woman and one man – told of situations in which their sexual self-determination was massively violated. Both stories are reproduced here:

Heike (23): *“I’d always thought he was very nice and very sexy. We met up one evening, and one thing led to another. We went back to his place. He knew I was quite into SM, but I must say he was very insensitive. He did some things, where I said: ‘No, please stop’. He beat me until I bled and, even when I asked him to please stop, he didn’t give a shit. I [was] very happy to get away from there and felt quite bad about it for several days afterwards.”*

Fabian (22): *“It’s difficult for guys to talk about rape. But giving someone drugs to get control of them, that I did have. I was in a nightclub and a woman a bit older than me gave me something, and I can’t remember much after that, although I didn’t really drink any more. It wasn’t exactly knockout drops, but liquid ecstasy or something like it. I’d call it [involuntary sex] in mysterious circumstances.”*

These are the only two reports of violation of sexual boundaries in the context of casual sex. Since, as Heike's story shows, these experiences may create a sense of shame, it may be that not all respondents shared relevant experiences. The available data do not definitively show how many students have suffered violations of their sexual boundaries by others

Unwanted sexual practices Much more frequently, we heard about situations in which female students did not adequately perceive and communicate their own boundaries and desires. Even if, technically, no coercion or explicit pressure were exerted, some young women clearly did not consider their own sexual needs and wishes to be as important as those of their sexual partner. Consequently, they engaged in sexual practices which they did not want, but went along with to please their sexual partner, or had sex when they did not want to. In this context, female students also report experiences in which they reach a subjectively perceived "point of no return" and feel practically obliged to have sex. They regret these situations afterwards, as the following examples show:

Katrin (26): *"The last time I had casual sex and regretted it, the thing was that I had feelings for him. He felt nothing for me at all. Somehow I let myself be talked into it, because I felt I had to try – he obviously found me attractive. And then I felt somehow obliged to sleep with him. I thought maybe something would come of it. It wasn't good, when I felt I had to do it."*

Sabrina (24): *"Every now and again there was something that, looking back, I would rather not have done. That I only [did] for the man. One thing was a fetish and another was having sex when I really wasn't in the mood. [...] I was quite submissive in those days and always focused sex on the man, because I always thought the man had to be satisfied."*

Mareike (22): *"One of my casual boyfriends didn't care how sex was for me. Several times, I said to him [in bed] that I couldn't come [from vaginal sex] and that he needed to do something else, use his fingers or something. And he said he didn't see why he should, ordinary sex should be enough. And of course it was enough – for him."*

The social pressure to be sexually interested, open-minded and eager to experiment is partly due to the fact that casual sex is generally regarded as an important part of gaining experiences and is considered a social norm. In answer to the question: “Have you ever regretted a sexual experience?”, we find major differences between the sexes. None of the few male students who reported feeling regret after a sexual experience cited violation of their own sexual boundaries or social pressure. Instead, they regretted the sexual experiences because, for instance, they regretted their choice of partner, had betrayed their current relationship partner or had engaged in sexually risky behaviour:

Max (23): *“[I regret] the experience of having intercourse with a woman too soon. Afterwards, it turned out that she had hepatitis B, and I had been immunized so long ago that I was no longer properly protected. I went straight to the doctor and had three injections one after the other.”*

Sven (24): *“When I had an affair, it was really very stressful: on the one hand, of course it was wonderful while I was in the middle of it. But of course, it was always going round in the back of my mind that I was doing something completely negative, defying taboos, and I was a complete bastard.”*

As we can see, German students too have experiences of the risk areas of contraception, alcohol and violation of sexual boundaries, although these are the exception rather than the rule and cannot be seen as an inherent part of student sexual culture.

4.5 Summary

Female and male students both feel equally strongly that they are part of a specific student sexual culture. This feeling is not due to a political demand for sexual liberation or revolution, as it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s; instead, it is seen primarily as a life stage determined by age. Following adolescence and preceding the steady relationship and family that are planned for the future, there comes the stage of young adulthood, which involves trying out new things and gaining various sexual experiences, whether the person is a student or not. Serial monogamy is predominant during this stage, with casual sex being understood and positioned as belonging to the sex life of a single person. However, with the liberalization which has taken place at the practical level (“you can”), a new social norm has been introduced through the backdoor of “you must”. Political conviction is thus replaced by a new social standard – the sexually experienced, competent and self-confident individual.

Unlike the situation one would expect from the US research, our respondents rarely cite health risks or experiences involving drugs and violence as problems of casual sex. Instead, it is clear that the challenge is to bring the normative requirement to be sexually experienced in line with the individual’s own wishes and boundaries. This creates a potentially contradictory situation for the individual, who is permitted to, but also to some extent obliged to, live out the new freedoms.¹⁰³ There is a kind of obligation to organize one’s life in a certain way, but there is also a contradiction between norms of sexual culture.

One noteworthy feature is the derogatory references to women who engage in casual sex. This shows how widely sexual double standards are still applied. Although they are described by female students as social norms from which they explicitly dissociate themselves, they do use the same derogatory terms and attributions themselves, albeit sometimes in a context of criticism. Their symbolic vocabulary indicates that they are affected by subliminal social stereotypes, even though the respondents explicitly condemn the extent and impact of social sexual double standards. It is not clear whether this counts as merely reproducing social stereotypes or subjectively processing them.

103 Sielert 2004.

III

Desire and frustration

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5



Between pleasure and anxiety – how do students use pornography?¹⁰⁴

Maika Böhm, Philipp Franz, Arne Dekker and Silja Matthiesen

The use of pornography by minors has been the subject of heated and controversial debate in Germany in recent years. The main concern, both in public debate and in many research studies, was the potentially damaging effects of freely available pornography on the Internet.¹⁰⁵ From this perspective of risk, three main fears have been discussed:

- That the use of pornography may escalate to the point of addiction (“porn addiction”);
- That the sexualization caused by pornography use may lead to widespread sexual activity among children and adolescents (“sexual degeneration among youth”); and
- That the uncritical adoption of porn scripts into their own sexual practices will lead to the pornographization of (young people’s) sexuality, promote traditional male sexual desires and disseminate misogynistic images of women (“pornographization of society”).

However, various studies are now available showing that many of these fears are based on scant empirical evidence.¹⁰⁶ It turns out that many adolescents are quite capable of keeping “porn sex” where it belongs and integrating it into their everyday sexual lives. One Swedish study sums up the situation as follows: “Our findings suggest that most of our participants had acquired the necessary skills of how to navigate in the pornographic landscape in a sensible and reflective manner.”¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, although the pornography debate has now become much less alarmist, there has been scarcely any research into the potential positives of pornography use – potential effects such as gaining and disseminating knowledge, sexual pleasure, diversifying sexual practices, breaking down prejudices and broadening the range of sexual fantasies and behaviours.¹⁰⁸

105 Cf. Matthiesen 2011 et al., p. 309.

106 Cf. Matthiesen et al. 2011; Schmidt & Matthiesen 2011a, b; Schetsche & Schmidt 2010; Döring 2008, 2011a, b, c; Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson 2010; Grimm et al. 2010.

107 Cf. Löfgren-Mårtenson & Månsson 2010, p. 579.

108 Cf. Hill 2011; Klein 2010; Döring 2008.

Study methodology The students we surveyed in 2012 belong to the first generation to be faced with Internet pornography in the course of their sexual socialization. We wanted to answer two questions:

- 1 Does the nature of pornography use change during the transition from adolescence to adulthood?
- 2 Do increasing age and sexual experience influence the enormous gender differences which are so marked in adolescents' ways of using pornography and in their attitudes?

One unusual feature of our study is that we did not seek information about experiences of and attitudes to pornography in isolation, but in connection with the respondent's sexual development to date. We provided no definition of pornography in interviews; instead, we went by the respondent's own definition. By using this approach, we acknowledge the fact that definitions of pornography are different, context-dependent, socially disputed and always imbued with moral judgements.¹⁰⁹ Our respondents cited the usual definition of pornography which – as Döring writes – also covers “softcore” materials. Thus we are dealing here with a wide-ranging “soft” concept of pornography, which means that we have tended to estimate the prevalence of pornography use as rather higher than studies in which the definition of pornography tends more towards the hardcore.

The analysis below focuses on the following issues:

- Use of pornography and masturbatory behaviour; and
- The significance of pornography in student relationships.

The analysis begins with an overview of pornography use among students and its function. Because of the considerable gender differences in experiences of pornography and the respective frequency of use, our analysis of the qualitative data on pornography use is presented separately for female and male students. The analysis is intended to provide a deeper understanding of pornography use, including anxieties, ambivalence, subjective interpretations and emotions.

109 Cf. Starke 2010; Döring 2011b; Schetsche & Lautmann 2012.

5.1 Pornography use among students: an overview

We get the first inklings of the place of pornography in students' lives when we ask whether, and how often, the students have used pornography in the previous four weeks. Table 5-1 shows whether, and how often, female and male students had used pornography.

Table 5-1
Pornography use alone and with a partner in the previous four weeks
(by gender, in %)*

	Women	Men	Significance
Occurrence			
I have viewed porn in the last four weeks	23	85	.000
I have viewed porn in the last four weeks and masturbated while viewing	20	82	.000
I have viewed porn in the last four weeks with my partner	5	7	ns
I have viewed porn in the last four weeks with my partner and had sex during/afterwards	4	5	ns
Frequency (of pornography use only)			
Never	80	18	.000
1–3 times (rarely)	14	19	
4–7 times (occasionally)	3	20	
8–29 times (regularly)	3	38	
30 times or more (daily or more often)	-	5	
Mean (pornography use only)	0.9	8.8	

* Students aged between 20 and 30 (= 1.848)

Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

ns: not significant

Even these few figures show three striking trends:

1 There are considerable gender differences in pornography use

Over 80 % of men, but barely one quarter of women, had viewed pornography in the previous four weeks. However, if we compare these figures with those for adolescents, we see that the gender difference in the older age group is much smaller.¹¹⁰ As a comparison: among girls aged 16 to 19, the proportion of those who had viewed pornography in the previous four weeks was only 8 %.¹¹¹ We can therefore say that the categorical rejection of pornography, very typical among girls, relaxes somewhat with increasing age and sexual experience.

2 Pornography use and masturbation are closely linked for both sexes

The viewing of pornography is frequently accompanied or followed by masturbation. However, the link is much closer among men than it is among women. This is demonstrated by two simple figures. The ratio of masturbation frequency to pornography use is $r = .72$ for men and $r = .42$ for women. In other words: the proportion of acts of masturbation “supported” by pornography over the four weeks preceding the survey was 25 % for women and 70 % for men.

3 There are marked gender differences in pornography use

This is true not only of pornography use in general, but also of the frequency of use: Only 3 % of women, compared with 43 % of men, reported very frequent use (eight times or more) in the previous four weeks. The group of students who viewed pornography once or more per day consisted exclusively of men – although the group is small, at 5 %. For male students, the average frequency of pornography use was around twice per week, while for female students the figure was considerably lower (around once per month).

Are these figures high or low? We asked the students themselves what they thought. Table 5-2 shows what the “active” group thought of its own pornography use. By the active group, we mean those who had actually used pornography in the previous four weeks (alone or with a partner).

110 A study by Caroll et al. in the United States yields comparable figures: 87% of male students and 31% of female students aged 18 to 26 used pornography at least once per week (see Caroll et al. 2008, p. 16). According to a study of Croatian women and men aged 18 to 25, published by Sinkovi et al. in 2013, 79% of men and 34% of women had viewed pornography at least once per month over the previous year; cf. Sinkovi et al. 2013, pp. 633 ff.

111 Matthiesen et al. 2011, pp. 332 ff.

Table 5-2
Assessment of own pornography use (by gender, in %)*

	Women	Men	Significance
Assessment of frequency (previous four weeks)			
Too often	17	38	
Just right	81	60	.000
Not often enough	3	2	
Worries about pornography use			
I have felt I had trouble controlling my porn use	9	35	.000
I have tried to cut down on my porn use	25	52	.000
Need for help			
I have thought about asking for help	-	1.2	
I have gone for help to a doctor or therapist	-	0.5	

* Students aged between 20 and 30; only the active group, i.e. those who had used pornography in the previous four weeks
Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

In line with their higher usage rates, men are much more critical about the frequency of their pornography use: 38 % of the active group think that their own pornography use over the previous four weeks was too high (17 % of women say this). Indeed, it is very common for men to see pornography use as a problem: half the male students have already tried to reduce their own pornography use; one third have felt in the past that they “have trouble controlling” their use. However, it is the exception for these worries to lead the students to seek professional help – 1.2 % of male students had considered it, but only 0.5 % had actually done so.

5.2 What do female students do with pornography?

The function of pornographic materials and the experience of using them depends to a large extent on the social setting in which they are used. Among female students, we find two main settings, the first of which is explored below:

- 1 Pornography use in the solo setting, for sexual arousal during masturbation;¹¹² and
- 2 Pornography use in the couple setting, with a partner and within a steady relationship (see Chapter 5.4).

Pornography as a "sex toy" in female masturbation

Female students use pornography primarily during masturbation, and access it – as male students do – mainly from the Internet. However, in contrast to men of the same age, solo sex and pornography use are less closely linked: for women, pornography is not part of the typical solo sex situation (see Chapter 6). Women mostly masturbate in bed, usually at night before going to sleep or in the morning when they wake up. Masturbation is often accompanied by sexual fantasies. Quite a few women have used aids such as vibrators or dildos in the past, and some respondents also use erotic stories or films for sexual arousal. For some women, pornography provides an additional way of organizing solo sex, and its use depends on their own desire and their individual needs.

Tamara (24): "Then I start to get in the mood and I either get my vibrator or, if I want to, I watch a porn film".

Conny (19): "I lie on my front usually, and watch something, on my phone or laptop, and my finger starts to move".

Heike (23): "I put on some porn film and watch it, and after half or three-quarters of an hour or so, depending on how long I want to make it last, I come by rubbing myself with my hand."

112 We use the term "solo sex" for both sexes. It covers various forms of sexual activity with oneself in the solo setting. Cf. Böhm 2013, p. 302. [Translator's Note: The German footnote explains that two different terms, "Masturbation" and "Selbstbefriedigung", are used for men and women, respectively, both in the interview guide and in the present report. The English version of the present report uses "masturbation" for both.]

Sometimes the sexually explicit material becomes part of the respondent's sexual fantasy world, to be played back repeatedly "in their head", as necessary. *"I've got a lot of fantasies now that I didn't have before"* says Lisa, aged 25. Bianca, aged 21, says: *"I like watching bentais, Japanese porn, and that's where I get my fantasies from"*.

Women appear here as active and interested consumers of pornography. They use pornography quite naturally to stimulate their own desire – without shame or guilt. The violent rejection of pornography which is typical of young girls, with the corresponding linguistic distancing (*"yuk!" "boys' stuff"*)¹¹³ is not reflected in the female students' statements. The stage at which a categorical rejection of pornography enabled them to support and consolidate their growing female heterosexual identity seems to be over.

Using pornography selectively

Even when pornographic material is considered sexually arousing, not all pornography is equal: female students are selective about their material, and usually find only certain types of pornography sexually interesting.

Marlene (24): *"It's exciting when the actors are good-looking and there's nothing extreme"*.

Conny (19): *"I really only like heterosexual stuff"*.

Katja (30): *"I just like looking when nice, good-looking people are having sex – quite ordinary sex [laughs] in lots of funny positions. But all quite normal."*

113 Cf. Matthiesen et al. 2011.

This remark of Katja's summarizes the things that are important to the majority of female respondents. When they go into detail, the respondents say that they find gay and, to some extent, lesbian pornography less interesting; and they reject porn with unusual sexual practices and illegal or violent content: "nothing with peeing or shitting", "no anal sex", "no children or animals" and "no genuine violence". In almost all their stories, it is clear that "everyday fantasies and depictions"¹¹⁴ and some familiarity with the content are the main things required to arouse sexual interest. Inga explains:

Inga (21): "It has to have a good atmosphere and work like normal sex. I mean, there has to be some development to the story, some foreplay, and the feeling that it has some connection with reality. Although, of course, I know it's probably not real at all. They need to be a bit realistic."

The female students use the Internet skilfully in their search for appealing pornography, and choose it to match their sexual preferences and fantasies: "Of course, there are thousands of sites, but I have one site I look at for porn", says Svetlana (22).

In addition to its content and function,¹¹⁵ another important criterion for the selection of pornographic films is the way they represent the sexes. The women want films in which the sexes are equal and the female actors are clearly enjoying themselves and showing their desire:

Jana (23): "Porn where the woman is just used and, of course, tries to make out she's enjoying it, does absolutely nothing for me. I like it when you can see the woman is really enjoying it and you can see her come."

A large number of critical comments are made about unarousing or repulsive images. Frequently cited reasons for rejecting a film include: "[Anything] that is demeaning to women", "if I feel someone is being forced" and "when men come on women's faces". The students' stories are characterized by a high level of reflection on the content level of the pornography. The frequently expressed wish for films with more equal treatment of both sexes also clearly shows that ethical considerations are important to women – more on this later.

114 Döring 2011b, p. 18.

115 *According to the content and functional definition, pornography is characterized by a highly direct depiction of naked bodies and sexual activities (content level) and is produced and received for the purpose of sexual stimulation (functional level).* Cf. Döring 2011b, p. 23.

Attitudes to pornography

We find four different sets of attitudes among female students, ranging between positive, rejecting and ambivalent positions.

Rejection These students – some of them with little sexual experience – have no or very little experience of pornography. If they do have any experience of it, they did not find porn arousing. Annika, aged 19, is an example of this attitude. She has never watched a porn film and would find it difficult if her partner did so.

Annika (19): “I can’t help myself, I have a real dislike of porn. I find it a strange idea to watch people having sex [...] I’d be embarrassed.”

Positive attitude These respondents are regular pornography users and always say positively that they find porn sexually arousing and use it for solo or couple sex, as required. They have a pragmatic attitude, which they describe in a style reminiscent of male students. As an example of this attitude, Astrid says:

Astrid (23): “I have to say, I like [porn]. It excites me and, yeah, sometimes I just need it, because I don’t have anyone else. I just kind of need it. It’s more appealing than just doing it on my own.”

Liberal attitude This group consists of students who are relatively “inexperienced” with pornography and have not found pornographic material particularly sexually interesting in the past. Although pornography use by men is considered natural and accepted, there are varying attitudes to the use of pornography by women. Some respondents never want to use pornography again, while another group is open and interested. The following statement by Nadja, aged 22, is typical of the liberal attitude.

Nadja (22): “I’ve only done it two or three times, but I don’t condemn people for watching porn, either men or women. Although men do watch more porn than women. I don’t mind, if they need it, they’re welcome to do it.”

Ambivalent attitude Often, female students are ambivalent in their attitude. These women have already viewed porn and found it sexually arousing. At the same time, however, they also find porn “shocking”, “tacky” or “stupid” and they are critical of aspects such as gender image (“demeaning to women”), sexual practices (“always coming in the woman’s face”) and the porn industry (“the production conditions [are] usually very questionable”). Melanie, aged 21, who used to use pornography for masturbation before she began her current relationship, is typical of this attitude.

Melanie (21): “The shocking films are the ones where women are totally used as sex objects [...] I don’t have to watch sex that’s completely callous. I find the films much more exciting when you can see it’s equal.”

As we can see, women find pornography sexually arousing but – as will become even clearer when we compare with the men – they are much more conflicted. The statements by the women in the ambivalent group, in particular, confirm that, as a genre, pornography is associated “with sometimes intense physical sensations such as arousal, fear, deep emotion, etc.”¹¹⁶ Which individual processes of appropriation and confrontation in respect of pornographic materials can be identified from the respondents’ stories?

Strategies for managing ambivalence Particularly in the case of pornography users with an ambivalent attitude, we wondered about the strategies they use to manage the tensions inherent in the fact that pornographic material arouses sexual desire but is also the vehicle for content and images of women which they reject.¹¹⁷ The students describe three ways out of the dilemma created by sexual arousal pitted against emotional and cognitive rejection: firstly, to give up pornography altogether; secondly, to focus on selected and familiar films; and thirdly, to look for alternative pornography.

Hilde has given up using porn. She found it sexually arousing but, at the same time, “completely unrealistic”. She describes her attitude to porn as follows:

Hilde (24): “The problem is usually that the body gets excited, but the brain says: ‘No, what you can see there is completely stupid’. The brain has to get something out of it too.”

¹¹⁶ Williams 2009, quoted in Hofer 2012, p. 206.

¹¹⁷ Earlier exposure studies, in which female and male students were presented with sexually explicit images, films or texts in an experimental setting, showed only small differences between the sexes in their emotional and sexual reaction to these stimuli. However, the reactions and judgements of the women were more ambivalent and conflicted than those of the men. Cf. Sigusch & Schmidt 1970; Schmidt & Sigusch 1970; Schmidt 1975.

Sabrina rarely views porn. If she does want to – alone or with a partner – she goes back to films she already possesses and knows well, avoiding constant confrontation by films on the Internet with content she dislikes.

Sabrina (24): “I found three or four films and downloaded them. I wouldn’t want to start looking every time from scratch.”

Inga still uses porn in solo sex, despite considerable ambivalence. Her solution is to look for alternative films, for instance queer films or ones produced specially for women. If she cannot find these, she watches mainstream films, accepting that she will feel conflicted:

Inga (21): “[I] find them difficult from a social point of view, because they impose the role of the woman as a consumer item and as being oppressed. And the filming conditions [are] usually very questionable. So I always find them difficult to watch, but I do still watch them.”

Preliminary conclusions In summary, we can conclude that today’s female students are hardly the “passive victims of the all-powerful influences of pornography”.¹¹⁸ In fact, they are active and creative recipients of sexually explicit material. Quite clearly, they possess the “set of knowledge and skills” defined by Döring¹¹⁹ that makes it possible to manage pornography competently: they have sufficient media skills to use the Internet well. At the same time, they have media awareness, i.e. they are conscious of the constructed functionality of pornographic material. They use pornography critically and with enjoyment. Criticism of and reflection on pornography are considerably more important to female students than to male students.

118 Döring 2011b, p. 249.

119 Döring 2011b, p. 249.

5.3 What do male students do with pornography?

As we have already seen, pornography use among male students is widespread and very frequent, averaging twice per week, and even daily for a small group. We also know that the main purpose of pornography is to aid sexual arousal and masturbation. The two are closely connected among both male students and adolescent boys.¹²⁰ Masturbation does take place without pornography, after a dream or sexual fantasy or if “you wake up in the morning and have an erection anyway”. However, pornography use unaccompanied by masturbation is rare, and students do not see the point of it, as Johann says.

Johann (28): *“I don’t watch porn without masturbating as well. I know some people do, but it seems kind of strange.”*

The following section describes exactly how pornography use fits into the student’s everyday life, which pornographic content is viewed and when it becomes a problem.

Settings for masturbation

The question of how male students use pornography can be reduced to a simple formula: *“In front of the laptop with a porn film off the Internet”*, as Alexander, aged 24, describes the most typical and frequent setting. The main precondition is for the student to be alone and undisturbed, as Felix, aged 25, explains: *“I only do it at home, when I’m alone”*. Usually, the students watch porn on a laptop, tablet, etc., at a table or in bed in their own bedroom, room in a shared apartment or own apartment and masturbate while they watch. They mostly stream free films on the Internet. Occasionally, they will use pornography that they have downloaded to their own computer, as Michael, aged 24, explains: *“Sometimes I download things [...] to ‘save for later’, so to speak”*. The students switch back and forth between different porn films, and pick out certain scenes or short clips showing particularly exciting positions. Often the masturbation associated with pornography use occurs at specific times of day, for instance at night before going to sleep or in the morning after waking up. The main thing is not to be disturbed.:

Paul (23): *“Usually in the mornings, while I’m still in bed, and then in the evening I’ll watch another film. The laptop’s always there somewhere, within reach, and that’s how it happens.”*

120 Cf. Schmidt & Matthiesen 2011b, p. 360.

Sven (24): *“A typical situation would be at night, with me still on the PC and my girlfriend in bed, and I think: ‘Yeah, why not?!’ and turn on some porn.”*

Max (23): *“It needs to be a situation where I’m more or less undisturbed, because I live in an easygoing house-share, and we don’t all lock our doors. In any case, it needs to be when my housemates aren’t there, or I can’t let myself go.”*

The settings for pornography use described by the men are highly dependent on their life situation: if they are in a steady relationship, they generally use pornography less, without stopping altogether. For students living with a girlfriend, the opportunities for pornography use are fixed primarily by the times their partner is out of the house:

Jonas (27): *“When she [my girlfriend] is out with the child or gone shopping”.*

Florian (25): *“The big plus is that my girlfriend likes to sleep in. If I get up earlier, I have peace and quiet and no risk of her bursting into the room”.*

Robert (23): *“Usually, I only do it when I’m physically separated from my partner”.*

Relaxation and reward In contrast to the times in everyday life that are dependent on external circumstances and require time, space and quiet in order to masturbate while using pornography, some students describe spontaneous, less prescribed settings. Frequently, everyday work or other activities are interrupted for a short period of relaxation or as a small reward. *“If I sit and masturbate at my computer, it’s usually because I’m bored”*, says Johannes, aged 25, describing a frequently occurring phenomenon. Working, i.e. studying, on the computer and a disinclination to complete certain tasks are often the pretext for a short excursion into the world of pornography, only a click away. Tim paints us a picture of what happens.

Tim (25): *“[...] You surf a bit. You need to do something for university, you need to study, but you don’t feel like it, so you surf around a few websites. And usually there are links to some girls or other.”*

It is precisely the similarity between the student's working environment and the "typical" setting for pornography use, both of them generally involving a laptop on a table, that makes it so easy to step away from the project report or term paper, at least for a moment, as an act of procrastination.¹²¹ Such an interruption is, as Rainer (22) says, *"ultimately not much different to blowing your nose"*.

Pornography as a reflection of one's own sexuality

When searching for pornographic material, students go to sites such as "YouPorn" and other free Internet streaming sites and select specific content which suits their sexual tastes. Online pornography can be classified into an infinite number of categories.¹²² Despite the wide variety on offer, students mostly select films and clips with sexual activities that they describe as *"normal"* and *"hetero"*, usually involving a heterosexual couple:

Sven (24): *"What I do myself, so normal sex, and hetero of course"*.

Julian (21): *"Sex with an experienced woman, because I've never done that. There's a certain spice about it, looking to see whether it really is different from sex with an inexperienced woman, I mean women of my own age."*

Malte (21): *"Mostly for all the things the porn industry is despised for. The man gets what he wants straight away from topless, big-breasted women who let him do anything he likes with them."*

The pornography the students watch is very similar to their own sexual practices, and usually extends into pornographic sex scenes featuring one man and more than one woman ("three-some") or several people having sex together ("group sex"). However, it is important that the female actor should correspond to the viewer's own "erotic imaginings" and that she should – at least apparently – be enjoying herself. The seemingly endless availability and variety of online pornography does not lead to a great variety of consumer behaviour among the students. The students' stories about their pornography habits include references to, mainly, "weird stuff", "underage" or "gay porn", as examples of differences from their own heterosexually based pornography use and intended to legitimize the latter:

121 The Latin origin of the word "procrastination" means to put off important tasks until tomorrow. In everyday life, a more enjoyable task is preferred over a less enjoyable task, and the latter is postponed.

122 Cf. Lewandowski 2003, pp. 301 ff.

Daniel (22): *“To generalize: no gay porn, and nothing with old people, and nothing that comes close to SM or whatever. So, really, natural things with young people.”*

The range of pornographic content viewed by the male students overlaps considerably with the content used by male adolescents.¹²³ As with the female students, they mainly choose typical scenes from the heterosexual mainstream. No pattern of pornography use that descends into increasingly hardcore, more extreme content has been observed.

Critical reflections on pornography

Not only the female students, but also some male students make critical remarks about pornography at the content level, its social environment and its production conditions. These thoughts cover a wide range of topics, ranging from reservations about the porn industry and the working conditions there, through the potential effects of the super-honed bodies it presents on the viewer’s self-image, to conventional social and moral views of pornography and the poor quality of porn films. Here are some typical examples:

Thomas (24): *“I’m supporting an industry built on misery, because girls of 18, 19 or 20 are only there to spread their legs, and can’t get another job, unless they’re lucky.”*

Max (23): *“Often, they’re someone with an unusually large penis, or really thin but still a C or D cup because they’ve had a boob job, and that can jar a bit, and of course it’s not that good for your self-image. And it can mean that you might not feel so comfortable with your own partner, because you think he wants all the same things the media are suggesting to you.”*

Justus (20): *“Porn always gets you sexually excited, so it does what it’s supposed to, but it usually has a fairly basic effect on me and doesn’t appeal to me as a film.”*

123 Cf. Schmidt & Matthiesen 2011b, p. 355.

Nevertheless, these critical remarks do not influence the respondents' actual viewing. They seem to be based on a social, ethical, political or artistic discourse and to occur in the form of a temporary bout of guilt, which soon disappears and has little effect on pornography use

At certain stages or at all stages? When students are asked to estimate their current pornography use, they usually compare it with stages of more frequent use in the past. The life stages at which high pornography use is reported are puberty and adolescence, the period up until the first relationship, and periods as a single person. Some respondents describe a steady decline in pornography use since puberty, while others report an increase:

Johannes (21): *"It was at the time when I didn't yet have a girlfriend. It was regular, from 16 to, yeah, 18."*

Michael (24): *"If you were to draw a graph, it would look like this: when I began, it was quite frequent and then gradually declined. Very slowly though. There was a dip at one point, and it stayed like that for a while, and then got more again."*

Simon (26): *"At first, when I was 12 or 13, I didn't do it so much [laughs], I could manage without, but from 15 or 16 I watched a lot of porn, although not as much as I do now, not every single time."*

Intensive pornography use is, in some cases, attributed to physical separation from a partner in a long-distance relationship, to moving out of the parental home or having access to a high-speed DSL Internet connection for the first time. Military service, intermittent use at exam times or boredom at school are also cited. Periods of frequent pornography use thus alternate with periods of little or no use. Only a few students describe a constant frequency of use from the first time to the present day. For instance, Dirk, aged 20, says: *"Since I started looking at porn, I've always done it regularly"*. Although the public debate about pornography use among young men is usually expressed in terms of risk, problematic use and potentially risky consequences,¹²⁴ overall the students' stories suggest a relaxed attitude to pornography use, even if it is more frequent at times.

124 Cf. e.g. Klein 2010, p. 167 ff; Schetsche 2010, p. 320 ff.

Loss of control and self-imposed abstinence As we have seen, quite a large proportion of students see their pornography use as a problem; they are particularly concerned by the frequency of use. Nevertheless, the data also show that there are very few cases where these concerns are considered so serious that the student actually seeks professional help. The following section shows how these concerns arise, what they are and the strategies the students devise to deal with them.

Some of the students worry about the frequency of their pornography use: if they masturbate while using pornography once or more per day, they think “*it’s a bit frightening*” and are concerned that it might be “*too much*”. Concern about the level of pornography use is often accompanied by vague fears that the respondent might lose interest in real sex, because “*maybe you’ve seen too much*”, as Sascha, aged 27, puts it. An internal conflict about the frequency of pornography use can be seen when pornography is perceived as imposed from outside, mechanical and out of the respondent’s control. In some cases, this is associated with difficulty in “*cutting down on and stopping*” pornography use.

Johann (28): “*That it was too much with the porn, even I thought so. That I ought to be able to manage without porn.*”

Johannes (21): “*At one point I realized how much I had, when I cleared my computer history. And I said to myself, is it normal to have that much? Am I addicted?*”

Holger (28): “*I had the impression that it was a mechanical act, difficult to control. And sometimes you feel manipulated. That it’s being done to you, rather than you deciding it for yourself.*”

Dennis (23): “*Now and again, I stopped quite deliberately for a few weeks, just to make sure I wasn’t addicted to it. Then I stopped viewing porn altogether. After maybe nine months, so when I was 19, I said: right, I’m going to stop. And I never started again.*”

Here, Dennis describes the main strategy students use when they are concerned about their pornography use: they stop altogether for a while, to reassure themselves that they are not psychologically dependent on it. After a while, when they are sure that they are not addicted, they begin to use pornography again, usually less frequently. This self-imposed abstinence succeeded in all the cases described here in reducing the behaviour to a level where it was not a problem and to relieve the temporary psychological stress. In our small, non-clinical random sample, there is not a single case that meets the criteria for “hypersexuality” or “pornography addiction” that are currently the subject of so much debate.

Sexual performance and fear of physical damage

As well as the fear of losing control, students are concerned about possible adverse physical effects. Some of these are the actual physical consequences of frequent masturbation; for instance, Florian, aged 25, says that he “*wrecked himself wanking*”. Generally, however, these fears of loss of sexual function are imaginary:

Niklas (20): “For example, I thought I might get irritation from rubbing my penis and it would be very painful, or that I maybe wouldn’t be able to get an erection at some point, because I had done it so much”.

Pascal (23): “I had read research that said watching too much porn wasn’t good for your relationship in general. Because the man gets the idea suggested to him that he should come straight away, although that is actually a problem if you’re having sex with a woman and want her to have an orgasm too.”

Max (23): “I got worried about what I saw and how different it was from what I could manage myself and what my sex life looks like.”

The concerns the students describe range from outdated fears of the kind expressed in the moralistic anti-masturbation campaigns of the late 19th century to worries about negative effects on their sex life as a couple. The young men’s experience of being able to reach orgasm every time during solo sex conflicts with their expectations of their sex life as a couple, in which they want to demonstrate their sexual prowess to their partner. Likewise, the portrayal in pornography of virtually unlimited sexual performance is seen as the standard against which the couple’s sex life should be measured, and this causes stress. The ensuing tension is only resolved when the young man’s sexual performance, even though he also masturbates and uses pornography, is seen to satisfy the partner.

Preliminary conclusions Overall, we can say that for male students, the masturbation associated with pornography use is widely employed as an efficient way of achieving sexual release at almost any imaginable moment. Content, frequency of use and motivation are little different from those of adolescent boys. After a surge in pornography use during adolescence, it settles down in young adulthood – generally at a lower frequency of use, but with possible periods of higher frequency at times when the man is single. In most cases, pornography use clearly does not seriously conflict with work or relationships. Instead, it is perceived positively, as a distraction and reward in everyday life; particularly during work time, it is also used to postpone tasks.

Despite the widespread use of pornography by students, the interviews did not reveal a single case that could be classified as clinical pornography addiction. In fact, the interviews indicate that the students have adequate pornography competence¹²⁵ and the capacity to use their own critical skills to assess pornography use which they consider problematic; in this way, they can continue to use pornography enjoyably in solo sex and with their partner.

Cf. Döring 2011c, p. 228.

5.4 Pornography use in student relationships

The data at the beginning of this chapter show that, after masturbation, the most frequent context for the use of pornography by students is the couple setting:¹²⁶ around 5 % of the respondents had viewed porn with a female or male partner in the previous month, and almost all had had sex while viewing or afterwards. The students' stories show how students today negotiate about pornography, how heterosexual couples use pornography together and what influence pornographic material has on the students' sexual scripts.

Secret or acknowledged – what does the partner know?

Do student couples exchange information about the extent or content of their pornography use? How willing are they to exchange information, and how curious are they; what information are they willing to share, and what do they prefer to keep private? In this area, too, there are differences between the sexes: male students rarely talk completely openly with their partner about their pornography use. They are aware of the gender-specific differences in views about pornography and are afraid of a negative reaction. Therefore, many of them prefer to say little or nothing to their girlfriend about their solo pornography use.

Johann (28): *“We haven't talked about it yet”.*

Sascha (27): *“We do talk about me looking at porn, but I don't always admit how much I do it”.*

Gregor (25): *“At first, she needed a bit of time to get used to it. She thought: ‘Okay, you have me, you have sex with me, why do you need to look at that stuff?’ It took a while for her to like the idea.”*

The men's lack of inclination to talk about their own pornography use is matched by gaps in the information they have about their partner's use. They often assume that their girlfriend does not view porn, but declare themselves tolerant: it wouldn't be a *“big problem”* if she did. Only a few students have more precise information about their partner's actual pornography habits. These students are generally tolerant, on the principle of equal rights for everyone, as the following examples show:

¹²⁶ Daneback et al. asked heterosexual Norwegian couples aged between 22 and 67 about their pornography use. Fifteen per cent of the couples had viewed porn together in the previous 12 months, although the majority did not consider using pornography together as part of their sex life as a couple. The authors come to a conclusion similar to that reached in our study of German students: “Pornography is [...] primarily a solitary activity for most Norwegians”. Cf. Daneback et al. 2009, p. 752.

Elias (23): *“I know she uses porn. But I also know she does it much less often than I do.”*

Malte (21): *“I’m okay with it. I pretend to get mad about it, but I can hardly tell her not to do something I do myself”.*

Roman (27): *“It’s absolutely no problem, if I do it, why shouldn’t she. I can imagine she sometimes does it more often than I do.”*

Female students are more interested in their partners’ pornography use. Most of them think that it is “normal” for men to use pornography and that, as Nina (22) says, “it would be strange if he didn’t”. Female students accept it as natural that pornography use is part of male solo sexuality; they do not see it as “infidelity” or as a rival to their relationship. Here are some typical statements:

Inga (21): *“I’m okay with it. I watch porn, so why shouldn’t he.”*

Suse (24): *“I’m not jealous any more. We’ve talked about it a lot, and he’s very realistic about it, he knows it’s only a film, and in real life, with me, he no longer tries the tricks from the porn films, when we’re having sex.”*

Conny (19): *“If he has a wank and watches something while he’s doing it, I don’t have a problem. I don’t see it as being unfaithful or anything. For example, part of our relationship is that he always cooks for me. And it’s not being unfaithful if he watches a cookery show. That’s the kind of comparison I see.”*

Some female respondents assume that their partner does not view porn. In these cases, either the male partner had been asked and “said he didn’t”, or the female partner assumed that she would “know if he did” in a shared apartment – pornography is not a big issue in these relationships, however. In most cases, both female and male students react to their partner’s pornography use not with negativity or jealousy, but liberally and tolerantly.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ A recent US study of college students confirms the generally liberal attitude towards pornography use in couple relationships: over 70% of male respondents and 45% of female respondents say that they accept pornography use (alone or in the couple setting) and do not see it as infidelity. Only one quarter of the students said that they had problems with pornography use within a relationship. Cf. Olmstead et al. 2013, p. 628.

“Keeping that world and our world separate”

When talking about their own pornography use, as we have seen, male respondents are less forthcoming, while female respondents are more open and curious. When they are asked about content, this trend appears again: female students are interested in knowing more about the pornography used by their partner, and want to watch with him the films that he uses alone. When this has been discussed, however, the partner has usually said no:

Inga (21): *“I keep trying to find out what kind of porn he watches, but he will never say. I’d like to know what he’s so interested in, but I can’t find out ... I’m not allowed to know.”*

Lisa (25): *“[I’d] like [...] us both to watch what he watches. I’d really like to see what he sees. But he doesn’t want to show me. That’s not a problem, but he’s kind of ashamed to watch his fantasies with me.”*

Suse (24): *“Honestly, I’m curious to know what it’s like, watching porn with a partner. Maybe he’s embarrassed about watching or having watched. But I know, it’s a fact, that men watch porn. But it seems he wants to keep that world and our world separate.”*

At this point, we can only speculate as to whether it is shame and embarrassment that prevent men from giving their girlfriends an insight into their personal porn world, as the girlfriends assume, or whether this male reluctance is aimed at preserving the privacy of their sexual fantasies. However, it is striking that shared pornography use within a couple relationship is clearly not expected to be only a simple, pleasurable experience, but is seen as requiring a certain degree of risk management. Rather more frequently, it is the woman who suggests that the couple should view pornography together. One important factor in a successful porn evening à deux is the specific choice of film. For instance, Kai, aged 21, relates how his girlfriend told him one day to “pick out a good [porn film]”, and Elias, aged 23, says that, when sharing porn with his female partner, “the aesthetic aspects [are] even more important. You have to create the right atmosphere.”

Some female students worry whether they and their partner share the same preferences. They take the precaution of choosing the films themselves, and choose material that they themselves find sexually arousing:

Svetlana (22): *“I choose them! Maybe I’m afraid what my boyfriend might go for. He knows what I go by when choosing a film, he asked me. I’m just afraid that he might choose a film that I really don’t like, one that would put me off immediately.”*

Paula (22): *“I’d say that I choose them more often. But I also often say: ‘Go on, you choose something you like, I want to see something you like’, but I often find that he chooses something I would never have gone for.”*

Pornography use within a couple relationship seems to require a renewed management of ambivalence.¹²⁸ As in the solo setting, confrontation with sexual or ethical turn-offs has to be avoided – this applies particularly to women, who are more critical of and sensitive to the depiction of certain issues. As far as couple dynamics is concerned, it is also necessary to negotiate the “lowest common denominator”:¹²⁹ women open up by revealing what they find sexually appealing, and are interested in seeing their partner’s favourite films. For men, the opposite often applies: revealing what they find sexually stimulating seems risky. They therefore choose films for shared use that they think their girlfriend will like, or leave her to choose them. Potential conflicts over pornographic material that one partner or the other dislikes are excluded; the “process of erotic agreement follows the rule that the only good choice is what we both want”.¹³⁰

128 Olmstead et al. likewise find that the specific conditions of pornography use within a couple relationship are extremely relevant, for women more than for men: “Perhaps the largest differences between men and women in this group emerged when identifying the conditions for pornography use. Women more frequently discussed necessary conditions to make viewing acceptable.” Cf. Olmstead et al. 2013, p. 629.

129 Cf. Clement 2004, p. 74.

130 Cf. Clement 2004, p. 75.

Pornography as stimulation in couple sexuality

To what extent do images and scenes from pornography affect couple sexuality? Are “porn-typical” scripts taken over, to become part of the sexual practices of student relationships? In fact, many students do report getting ideas for their sexual relationship from porn films. These students can be divided into two groups. The first group is made up of students who have already taken ideas from porn films and used them within a relationship: most frequently, they talk about “positions” or “different positions”, with occasional references to oral or anal sex or the use of sex toys. The respondents generally say that taking over these ideas is not a major departure, describing it as “nothing special, or major, or whatever”. The second group cites a wide range of sexual inspiration derived from pornographic material (e.g. “threesomes”, “group sex”, “bondage”, “sex under water”, “sex in unusual places”, “with older or Asian women”), but states that these ideas have so far only added to their sexual fantasies and have not – yet – been realized in the couple’s actual sex life. Surprisingly few students report that porn films have encouraged them to try anal sex in their couple relationship. There is little experience of this sexual practice either among young women or among young men, and only occasionally are they interested in including it in the couple’s sex life in future.

Joana (24): “Yes, I did use something. But not anything extreme, it wasn’t weird at all. It was just a new position that I saw in the film.”

Katja (30): “Before I actually had anal sex for the first time, I had seen it in a porn film and thought, I’d like to try that. Bondage, too, the first time I saw that was in a porn film and I thought, yeah, I’d like to do that.”

Ralf (26): “I’ve done and seen a lot of things that I’ve tried out with my girlfriend or girlfriends afterwards. I was a good teacher, I think [laughs]. How you could, or would, or should, perform oral sex on a woman. Or, well, fetish things, I mean, feet ... or bum or armpits. Not quite the usual stuff, maybe.”

However, another group experienced in pornography use is eager to stress that it does not get ideas for couple sexuality from pornography. These respondents stress the difference between the fictional sex of pornography and real sex within a relationship, and explicitly refuse to adopt sexual practices from porn films.

Michael (24): *“I’ve seen lots of types of sex, but I wouldn’t necessarily want to copy any of the things I’ve seen.”*

Kristin (25): *“I already knew about all the things I’ve seen. So I don’t need to get any ideas from there.”*

Johann (28): *“Sex with my girlfriend is quite different from the way sex goes on in the films. Porn isn’t often about togetherness or intimacy or anything like that. That’s why I can’t say that there’s anything in porn that I would want to try myself.”*

Other arguments put forward against taking inspiration from porn are, on the one hand, the students’ own past experiences or, on the other hand, the unrealistic nature of pornographic images. This group’s stories support the idea, suggested by Gagnon, of peaceful coexistence of a virtual sex world and a real sex life¹³¹

Just as sexual fantasies are only rarely realized in couple sexuality, ideas taken from pornography are only occasionally included in a couple’s sex life. As also described by Stulhofer et al. in their study of pornography use among Croatian students, our data show no indication of a growing “pornographization” of sexual scripts due to pornography use.¹³²

131 Cf. Gagnon 1998.

132 Stulhofer et al. 2009, p. 12.

Preliminary conclusions Our data on pornography use in student couple relationships indicate convincingly that a tolerant attitude to pornography use by the partner is usual among both sexes.

Pornography use is acknowledged as part of the partner's solo sexuality and is only very rarely the cause of jealousy or conflict in the relationship. Students do get ideas from their solo pornography use, but these serve mainly to feed their own sexual fantasies and have only a secondary effect on sex within the couple.

Those students who have tried out ideas, such as different sexual positions, obtained from pornographic material in their sex lives as a couple talk about them casually and self-evidently. It seems to be more difficult for students to disclose their own individual preferences in pornographic material within the couple: *she* wants to watch what *he* watches; *he* does not want to reveal what he watches alone; *she* takes on the choice of material and this determines the content; *he* chooses films that he would find uninteresting in the solo setting but which he assumes *she* will find stimulating. This process of negotiation often ends with an agreement on the lowest common denominator as a risk minimization measure.

There were only a few respondents for whom shared pornography use becomes a kind of sex toy, used in the couple's sex life when the mood is right in the same way as other specific sexual practices.

5.5 Summary

The findings presented here show that pornography use during the university stage of life differs between the sexes: whereas some of the women who had been largely inexperienced with pornography in their adolescence have gone on to become active users in young adulthood, pornography use among men remains quite constant through adolescence and into adulthood.

The motivations for pornography use have converged: for both sexes, pornography is mainly used to aid masturbation. Both female and male students prefer ordinary, familiar sexual content. Despite this convergence, we still find empirical differences between the sexes, particularly when we look at the considerably higher frequency of pornography use among men, compared with the more ambivalent and unstable processes of appropriation of pornography by women.

Both sexes display a high level of competence in pornography use, although it is expressed in different ways: although men do criticize and reflect on their own pornography use, they focus mainly on the frequency of use, which they sometimes consider a problem, and on the negative effects they fear it will have on their own sex life or that of their relationship. Among women, critical and reflective remarks and meta-communication are more strongly focused on ethical judgements relating to pornography, which also have a more marked effect on their usage behaviour.

Although one might not think so from the risk perspective described at the beginning of this chapter, our results show a great deal of potential and many opportunities arising from the use of pornography by students: students consciously integrate sexually explicit material into their solo sex life and their relationships. They use pornography in the pursuit of sexual pleasure, choosing selectively and carefully from the wide range of material available online.



Solo sex? – Certainly!¹³³

Maika Böhm and Silja Matthiesen

Attitudes to solo sex¹³⁴ have changed considerably over recent decades in Western industrialized societies: sex with oneself, i.e. masturbation, has “lost its function as a substitute over the last 30–40 years”¹³⁵ and is now, according to Schmidt, the most common form of sexual behaviour during adolescence.¹³⁶ Among adults, too, solo sex is a “widespread, individually relatively stable sexual practice, albeit one strongly influenced by social factors”.¹³⁷

In the following chapter, students, as the experts in their own experiences of solo sex, get the chance to speak. Firstly, we present their experiences of solo sex to date, its prevalence and its frequency, typical settings and individual motivations, for both women and men. Secondly, we analyse solo sex from a sexual-history perspective and reflect on its differing significance when the person is single or in a relationship. Here we investigate the extent to which students see solo sex as a separate and equally valid form of sexual behaviour, even when they are in a relationship.

In a separate section, we clarify the significance of the orgasm in solo and couple sex, with particular reference to the female orgasm, which is characterized by the fact that it is often “easier” to achieve in the solo setting than in the couple setting. Here we investigate the burden on the couple dynamics (Whose responsibility is the orgasm? How important is it for both partners to achieve orgasm? How do they communicate about it?), as well as the assumptions of learning theory (is someone who has practised on themselves really at an advantage?).

6.1 Solo sex through the ages

The enormity of the changes that have taken place with respect to solo sex can be seen by taking a look at the past:: beginning in the 18th century and continuing into the 20th century, a brutal anti-masturbation campaign was conducted throughout the European region, which sought systematically to combat “onanism” among children and adolescents.¹³⁸ As well as theological warnings about the “sin of impurity”,¹³⁹ medical warnings were also taken to heart. In a medical treatise published in 1760, the Swiss doctor Samuel-Auguste Tissot declared that masturbation could cause “immense damage to the health”¹⁴⁰ and warned of adverse effects

134 In this chapter, the terms “solo sex” and “masturbation” are used as synonyms; further details of the terms used for solo sex and a critical analysis of the terms “onanism” and “masturbation” can be found, *inter alia*, in Böhm 2013; Schetsche & Schmidt 1996.

135 Sigusch 2013a, p. 506.

136 Schmidt 2004.

137 Driemeyer 2013, p. 26.

138 Cf. Schetsche & Schmidt 1996; Böhm 2013.

139 Cf. Schetsche & Schmidt 1996, p. 2.

140 Schetsche & Schmidt 1996, p. 3.

such as erosion of the spinal cord. Educational measures, such as binding children's hands at night and surgical interventions on the foreskin, vulva, etc., were intended to prevent onanism among children and adolescents.¹⁴¹ In the early 20th century, mental effects became more central in the discourse of masturbation; for instance, Freud warned in 1905 about potential mental disturbances as one of the consequences of masturbation. Right up to the 1960s and 1970s, masturbation remained "for experts in various disciplines[...] both a dangerous phenomenon and one which required explanation".¹⁴² in sexuality education materials, it was described as "cheap self-deception" or "an egotistical illusion".¹⁴³ Two editions of the young people's magazine Bravo dealing with masturbation were placed on the List of Media Harmful to Young Persons issued by the Federal Review Board for Media Harmful to Minors.¹⁴⁴

Attitudes to masturbation today

In contrast, today's sexuality education media, teaching materials on sexuality and guidance for adolescents and adults emphasize the positive aspects of sexual self-exploration. Dodson, for instance, describes masturbation as "the ongoing love affair that each of us has with ourselves throughout our lifetime".¹⁴⁵ Loveline, the BZgA Internet portal for young people, describes masturbation as "a way to discover your body", which helps "to prepare you for sex with a partner".¹⁴⁶ A current book of sexuality education for adolescents makes the following comparison: "Masturbation is a bit like learning to swim. You practise on land first and then you're ready to dive in [...] If you've already practised on yourself, then you're at a clear advantage."¹⁴⁷ The "dangerous onanism' interpretation"¹⁴⁸ hardly seems current today; it has been replaced by sexually positive educational encouragement. Solo sex seems to be considered by both adolescents and adults as a "separate form of sexuality"¹⁴⁹ which has lost its character as a substitute and is now presented as a legitimate means of sexual satisfaction.¹⁵⁰

141 Cf. Bloch 1998, p. 540.

142 Schetsche & Schmidt 1996, p. 5.

143 Fischer 1969.

144 Böhm 2013, pp. 301 ff.

145 Dodson 1999, p. 9.

146 Selbstbefriedigung [Masturbation] (undated), www.loveline.de.

147 Henning & Bremer-Olszewski 2012, p. 18.

148 Aude & Matthiesen 2013, p. 233.

149 Sigusch 2013a, p. 506.

150 Cf. Dekker & Schmidt 2003, p. 47.

However, a recent US study indicates that discourses on taboos of masturbation are still effective and that, in the sexual socialization of young adults, solo sex is still moving between stigmatization, taboo and normalized, pleasurable sexual practice – for young women much more than for young men.¹⁵¹ These clear gender differences are also found in the attitudes of German adolescents: while masturbation quickly becomes a “normalized” sexual practice for male adolescents, the attitudes of female adolescents vary, ranging from “rejection and disgust to curiosity and enthusiasm”.¹⁵² As well as gender, age is a factor in potential “reservations about masturbation”: 40 % of 14-year-old adolescents, but only 20 % of 17-year-olds, say that they feel guilty about masturbating.¹⁵³ To date, there are no specific studies in German-speaking countries covering possible gender differences in this area or the significance of solo sex in the sexual and relationship histories of young adults from a qualitative point of view.

Students’ experiences of and attitudes to masturbation were elicited using the following questions:

Interview guide

“Have you ever masturbated? When did you start? How often have you masturbated in the last four weeks? Describe a typical situation. What happens? Do you always have an orgasm when you masturbate? How long does it take you to come to orgasm? What does masturbation mean to you? What does masturbation mean to you, if you are in a relationship? Do you ever watch porn?”¹⁵⁴

151 Kaestle et al. 2011.

152 Cf. Matthiesen 2013, p. 243.

153 BZgA 2003, p. 79 f.

154 The questions put to the male respondents were slightly different. The top-level questions were as follows: “How old were you the first time you masturbated? How often have you masturbated in the last four weeks? Describe a typical situation. What happens? Do you watch porn while masturbating? How long does it take you to come to orgasm? What does masturbation mean to you, if you are in a relationship?”

6.2 Gender differences: from "rarely" to "often"

Earlier research found enormous gender differences in the prevalence and frequency of masturbation.¹⁵⁵ These gender differences have reduced markedly over recent decades. However, recent results from international surveys of adolescent and adult sexuality show that they have not disappeared completely.¹⁵⁶ In the United States, Petersen and Hyde found, in a meta-analysis of gender differences in sexual behaviour, that the greatest differences existed in the areas of solo sex, pornography use and casual sex, compared with 30 other sexual activities and attitudes.¹⁵⁷ This finding is also confirmed by more recent studies in German-speaking countries: for instance, young men begin masturbating earlier than women.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, the frequency of masturbation varies much more among women than among men, whereas men masturbate more frequently overall.¹⁵⁹ Although the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and the various stages of the women's movement from the 1960s to the 1980s led to "greater equality between the sexes in terms of sexual choices, rights and behaviours",¹⁶⁰ in relation to solo sex gender differences have great significance even today.

Prevalence and frequency of solo sex

What do we know about the prevalence and frequency of solo sex among the students in our survey? From the question looking back to the students' age the first time they masturbated, we see that the male respondents generally took up solo sex some years before the female respondents. While most female students masturbated for the first time at an age between 13 and 15 years, most male students said that they had done so at the age of 12 or younger. By the time they reached the legal age of adulthood, all the young men had masturbated, while a small group of young women did not take up solo sex until the age of 19 years or older.¹⁶¹ Some respondents found it difficult in retrospect to specify the date when they first masturbated: they remembered childhood experiences, although they did not interpret them as so "sexual" in the adult sense. Although the first solo-sex experiences of all the male students took place before the first sexual experiences as a couple, the same is true for only around three quarters of the female students.

155 Cf. Kinsey et al. 1953; Masters et al. 1979; Clement et al. 1984.

156 Cf., for example, Gerressu et al. 2007; Hyde 2005; Dannenbeck & Stich 2005; Bancroft 2003; Boeger & Mantey 1998.

157 Petersen & Hyde 2010.

158 Cf. BZgA 2010; Matthiesen 2013.

159 Cf. Driemeyer 2013; Dekker & Schmidt 2003.

160 Schmidt 2013, p. 10.

161 Two female students had, at the time of the interview, never masturbated.

The gender difference also persists in the current prevalence of masturbation. Approximately 70% of female students and 90% of male students had masturbated in the previous four weeks. The majority of male students masturbated daily or several times a week, while most female students masturbated once or more per month. On average, the male students had masturbated 16 times over the previous four weeks, while the female students had done so five times. The students gave the following replies when asked about the frequency of solo-sex activities.

Florian (25): *“Pretty high. So, sometimes, every day.”*

Sven (24): *“Often: it’s a regular thing for me. The number is naturally very high but, really, I do it every day.”*

Tim (25): *“Sometimes I don’t do it for a week, and then, if I need to, I do it twice in a day”.*

Patricia (25): *“It’s quite rare when I’m in a relationship”.*

Kerstin (23): *“It depends whether I feel like it, and how much time I have, in a way. I need to be in the mood, and there needs to be nobody around to walk in on me.”*

Preliminary conclusions We can see, therefore, that the first masturbation, for both female and male students, usually occurs before the first time of sex in a couple relationship or the first time of sexual intercourse – i.e. that both sexes have their first (conscious) sexual experiences with themselves and their own body.¹⁶² In addition, both sexes also engage in solo sex during young adulthood (a time when they are usually active in couple sex). Despite these similarities, solo sex is dominated by gender differences, relating to the younger “starting age” of boys and the resulting greater experience of young men with time, and to the much higher frequency of masturbation. Our data thus confirm the results from other studies,¹⁶³ showing that gender is still important in solo-sex experiences and that solo-sex behaviour, even today, is still noticeably different among men and women.

162 Of course, most people have their first sexual experiences much earlier, in childhood. A number of studies on the prevalence of masturbation in early childhood are available. Professor Bettina Schuhrke summarizes them as follows: “Self-stimulation in early childhood is often associated with arousal, but not necessarily with orgasm. The studies cite very different numbers of children who self-stimulate; in some cases, the proportion is over 50% [...] Girls may use their sense of touch more when finding the way to their own genitals; boys have the advantage that their genitals are clearly visible. Cf. Schuhrke 2015, p. 165.

163 Cf., for example, Gerressu et al. 2007; Matthiesen & Hauch 2004b; Schmidt 2000; Laumann et al. 1994.

6.3 What do you need? – Settings, aids, reasons and motivations

Solo sexuality is linked with certain settings and situations. Here, too, differences can be observed between the genders. Another closely associated issue is why people resort to solo sex in a particular situation.

Settings and aids

Female students Of the 31 women who had masturbated in the previous four weeks, almost all said that they had typically done so in their own bed, usually at night. Most of them said that they had stimulated the clitoris manually, with around half saying that they sometimes used vibrators or dildos for additional stimulation. There were only a few cases where the students cited the shower or bath as their preferred setting, where they used the shower spray to stimulate themselves. Some students deliberately employed visual materials – not necessarily a porn film on the Internet, but also erotic literature or a romantic film – to create the right mood before or during masturbation. The majority report having sexual fantasies during masturbation: they remember their own previous sexual experiences and also sexual contacts with strangers or in unusual situations.

***Jana (23):** “I’m at home in bed, usually at night, because I don’t have time during the day. Often I know I can’t get to sleep, so I start.”*

***Nadja (22):** “Usually I’m at home in bed ... sometimes I deliberately decide to do it, and say: ‘Ah, yeah, I could do it now’. But sometimes my mind wanders, and then it fixes on something, and I think: ‘Oh, yeah’. It’s subconscious. I feel like masturbating then and usually I use my vibrator.”*

***Carina (24):** “I do it when my partner isn’t there, and usually before I go to bed, to relax and sleep better. With my hand [laughs] [...] I imagine people having sex, or I imagine my boyfriend having sex with me.”*

Katja (30): *“Usually I’m in bed. And I read something or look at something that arouses me sexually [...] I have several vibrators, quite normal ones, looking like a big finger, quite smooth. And I have one that has a funny attachment, and somehow it rotates [laughs]. And then I have a kind of clitoral dildo. You put it against the clitoris and it vibrates – very thrilling. If I use something, it needs to vibrate [laughs].”*

Male students Around half the male respondents who had engaged in solo sex in the previous four weeks described a similar typical solo sex setting: they masturbated before going to sleep at night or when they woke up in the morning, in their own bed. However, unlike the female respondents, the other half reported that they typically masturbated at their desk or in front of their computer while viewing a porn film (see Chapter 5). Some respondents alternated between these settings, according to their mood. In fact, almost all male respondents used pornography, at least sometimes; only four of them described their typical solo-sex setting as being without pornography. The young men described very few sexual fantasies that had not been inspired by pornographic material.

Holger (28): *“At home, in bed, with porn, at night”.*

Simon (26): *“It’s always in my bedroom and the time varies a lot, it might be in the morning, or the evening, or in the middle of the day. So, okay, on days when I’m working, it’s more likely to be morning or evening, but otherwise, if I’m at home during the day, it can be the middle of the afternoon. At my desk or in bed.”*

Michael (24): *“I’m sitting at the PC, doing something, surfing, and then I suddenly realize that I’ve got porn on the PC, or at least I can get at it fairly easily. Then I realize I’m getting horny [...] and one thing leads to another. And the second most likely is, quite often, for getting to sleep or when I wake up in the morning and my mind wanders and I find myself fantasizing.”*

Niklas (20): *“I really only do it at home. I’m always alone in my room, and typically I’m in bed. There are some situations where I’m already sexually aroused. And there are also situations where I think, that would be a good thing to do. And I just start.”*

Preliminary conclusions We can see that many young women and men engage in solo sex in similar settings: in bed at night, in their own rooms, without fear of interruption. Although female students talk about sexual fantasies during masturbation and about various sexual aids, male students rarely or never do so. In addition, a large number of male students have another typical setting, which female students barely mention: the men masturbate in front of the computer or laptop while viewing porn. The considerably more frequent combination of solo sex and pornography use among young men reflects a marked gender difference in solo-sex settings as well.¹⁶⁴

Reasons and motivations

We can hear a number of different motivations and triggers in the descriptions of typical solo-sex settings. Studies of the reasons why young adults masturbate point to a wide range of motivations, including the desire for orgasm or relief of stress.¹⁶⁵

Relaxation The most common motivation for masturbation cited by the students is relaxation. For many respondents, this is combined with the desire to “clear my head” or “get rid of stress”. Others use their evening masturbation sessions to “switch off”, i.e. as a “way of getting off to sleep”.

Marlene (24): “I enjoy it. It’s a way of doing something good for yourself and feeling good afterwards, it’s a wellness thing.”

Malte (21): “It’s mostly to relax. To switch off and feel better, just for the hormone boost, mainly.”

Sexual arousal Sexual arousal is the second most commonly cited motivation for solo-sex activities, with this motivation being emphasized rather more by male students than by female students. The desire is awakened by “a pleasant dream overnight”, “erotic images” or “sexual fantasies”, and is then satisfied through masturbation – if the necessary time and space are available. It is striking that, in this context, all female respondents and some male respondents specify that they would prefer to have sex with their partner if possible.

164 Cf. also Böhm et al. 2015.

165 Cf. Young 2006; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila 2003.

Alexander (24): *“If I have sexy thoughts for some reason, and feel horny, and I’m alone at home, then sometimes I do something about it”.*

Henrike (24): *“Sometimes you’re horny, and your partner isn’t around, or doesn’t feel like it. Or you just feel like masturbating. I feel it’s an acceptable thing to do, and very important.”*

Reducing sexual tension Another motivation, seemingly similar at first glance but mainly cited by men, is the need to reduce sexual tension. The motivation of sexual arousal is derived from a sexual situation which is pleasurable and freely chosen, while the motivation of sexual tension is driven more by the “urge” arising from “a build-up of horniness” or the need to “release tension”. The preference for couple sex rather than solo sex is even clearer in these statements.

Justus (20): *“To let off steam, simply to satisfy desire. I don’t find it particularly fun or enjoyable. But if you haven’t had sex for several weeks, it can relieve the pressure, both physically and mentally.”*

Annelene (21): *“Only occasionally, when I felt I had to release it somehow, this tension. Masturbation does feel good, but I don’t find it as satisfying as doing it with someone else. So it’s really always a back-up.”*

Passing the time Another motivation for masturbation, cited mainly by male respondents, is as a way of passing the time. The main feature is that of “having nothing to do” and using masturbation as a way of “distracting myself” or taking a short “break”, particularly while doing university work at the PC.

Lars (22): *“Often it’s out of boredom. When you’re at home, with nothing to do, then you just do that.”*

Kai (21): *“For instance, when I’ve been studying and can’t concentrate any more. After I masturbate, I’m OK, I can start again, I can think.”*

Exploring one's own body A less common motivation, cited only by female respondents, is that of exploring one's own body. These women want to “*get more in touch with my own body*” or find out “*what I want, where I need to touch myself*”. This gives the young women greater assurance, especially in relation to their (future) sexuality within a couple.

Patricia (25): “*I think it's really, really important. Both when you're young and just getting to know yourself, and later*”.

Rebecca (22): “*I got to know myself much better, and it gives you a certain self-confidence. You know much better what you like or how your body works. And knowing that I can do it for myself is always good.*”

Resistance Overall, the students' attitude to solo sex is relaxed and natural. Only a few female students were negative or defensive, justifying why they did not masturbate. Two of them had tried masturbation but had not found it pleasurable and had distanced themselves from it. The others had given up solo sex or only rarely engaged in it. They found that solo sex gave them unpleasant feelings or was not sexually satisfying.¹⁶⁶

Carola (23): “*I thought about it, and tried it, but I thought it was stupid. It did absolutely nothing for me. I was bored, and I never tried it again.*”

Jenny (24): “*It did nothing for me, not really, and I wasn't very interested, and it was kind of weird. I'm sure that's because I'm not 100% happy with my own body.*”

166 The men cited no comparable feelings or objections.

Preliminary conclusions In line with other studies of the reasons why young adults masturbate,¹⁶⁷ our results point to a wide range of motivations, only partly dependent on gender. Both female and male respondents cite the desire to relieve stress and to relax, and also the desire for a direct way of finding sexual satisfaction. The aim of passing time, cited by male students rather than female students, seems to be closely associated with their more frequent use of pornography. The messages of encouragement imparted in sexuality education are echoed in the motivation of exploring one's own body, cited only by female students.

It is striking that both female and male students often associate their motivations for masturbating with their sex lives within a couple – existent or non-existent, satisfying or unsatisfying. Accordingly, we now consider in more detail the significance of solo sex within a couple relationship.

6.4 Peaceful coexistence of solo and couple sexuality?

The fact that masturbation is now an accepted practice for both men and women, even within a steady relationship, is demonstrated by the results of a survey of sexual and relationship histories over three generations¹⁶⁸ and a repeat survey among students.¹⁶⁹ While a clear association can still be seen between couple sexuality and solo-sex behaviour in the older generation,¹⁷⁰ the survey confirms that, in the younger generation, a great deal of sex in steady relationships is not conducted with others, but with oneself: 38 % of the sex that young men in a steady relationship had had in the previous four weeks, and 24 % of the sex that young women in a steady relationship had had during the same period, was solo sex.¹⁷¹ According to the authors, masturbation is thus “now more often practised ‘alongside’ the relationship and seen as a separate form of sexuality”.¹⁷² Dekker and Schmidt, too, found in the study on student sexuality that masturbation and couple sex now coexist peacefully within relationships.¹⁷³ Their data show that the frequency of solo sex is not dependent on whether the person is single or in a relationship. Younger adults' views on solo sex have also changed: a large majority of the students surveyed in the mid-1990s said that they considered solo sex to be a separate form of sex.¹⁷⁴ The sexuality expert Volkmar Sigusch points out that: “the quantitative

167 Cf., for instance, Young 2006; Kontula/Haavio-Mannila 2003.

168 Schmidt et al. 2006.

169 Dekker & Schmidt 2003.

170 Schmidt et al. 2006, p. 115 f.

171 Cf. Schmidt et al. 2006, p. 116.

172 Schmidt et al. 2006, p. 130.

173 Dekker & Schmidt 2003, p. 36.

174 Cf. Dekker & Schmidt 2003, p. 36.

increase in masturbation is practically independent of the nature and quality of the respondents' sexual and relationship lives overall" and "is clearly no longer primarily a back-up or release mechanism,"¹⁷⁵ A recent interview study by Matthiesen et al. confirms this simultaneous engagement in solo and couple sex within a relationship for adolescents as well, although it notes that those respondents who were in a steady relationship often described solo sex as a "backup" or "second-best": "both sexes agree that they prefer sex with a partner".¹⁷⁶

Abstinence from solo sex while in a relationship

If we now look at the relationship between solo sex and couple sex in the students in our survey, we immediately notice that the group (six male students and 11 female students) that had previously had solo-sex experiences but had not masturbated in the previous four weeks consists entirely of respondents who are currently in a steady relationship. A common factor in this group is that they cite their relationship as the main reason for abstinence from solo sex.

Male students The male respondents all refer to their fulfilling and satisfying sex life as a couple. For example, Benjamin, aged 22, says "*if you're getting enough sex, you don't necessarily need it*". Tobias, aged 22, emphasizes that "*overall I don't feel the need to do it*" and that "*it just isn't as enjoyable*" as having sex with his girlfriend. The case of Justus can be seen as representative of the six men living without solo sex:

Case history: Justus (20)

Justus has been with his girlfriend for just over three years and finds their sex life very satisfactory. In the previous four weeks, they had sex 11 times and he always reached orgasm. He talks about the open and experimental attitude to sexual desires and ideas within the relationship. Justus masturbated for the first time at the age of 14; during periods as a single person, he masturbated two or three times a week, sometimes using pornography. When he is in a relationship, solo sex counts as "*functional*" for him. He wants to "*let off steam, just satisfy my desire*". In the last four weeks, he has not masturbated, saying "*I avoided masturbation in favour of sex, because I find sex much more enjoyable*". He engages in masturbation occasionally as "*it relieves the pressure, both physical and mental*" if he has gone some weeks without having sex with his partner. In general, however, he enjoys couple sex more and sees solo sex as an occasional substitute if couple sex has not happened often enough.

175 Sigusch 2007, p. 21.

176 Matthiesen 2013, p. 243.

Female students One quarter of female students feel the same as their male counterparts: they had not engaged in solo sex in the previous four weeks and generally prefer couple sex to solo sex. For instance, for Merle, aged 25, solo sex is “*very, very unimportant*” while she is in a relationship. Jessica, aged 24, explains: “*Now we are together, I would rather have sex than masturbate*”, and Kristin, aged 25, sees masturbation “*as an alternative when my partner isn’t around*”. Joana’s story is a good example of the attitude of women who abstain from solo sex.

Case history: Joana (24)

Joana has been in a happy relationship with her current partner for six months. She masturbated for the first time at the age of 16, and continued to do so around once per week while she was single. She is open about the subject and has talked with her girlfriends and her partner about it. She thinks that solo sex is “*important in general*”, but specifies “[...] *I don’t find it so great now. If I felt I needed it, I would do it, but it’s not that important to me.*” She has not masturbated in the last four weeks because, since she has been in a relationship, she prefers sex with her partner: “*Certainly not just now, because I have the choice of saying, I’d rather share that with my partner or have sex with him, if I feel horny. Because I just enjoy it more when my partner does it. Just because then it’s a shared thing.*”

Our data indicate that female students not only consider solo sex less important when they are in a relationship, but that they also engage in it less often. This contradicts the findings of Herbenick et al.,¹⁷⁷ which indicate that the prevalence and frequency of solo-sex activity among women are relatively independent of the couple’s sex life and relationship status. For male students, we confirm the findings of Dekker and Schmidt¹⁷⁸ that the more satisfying men find their couple sex, the less frequently they tend to masturbate.

177 Herbenick et al. 2010.

178 Dekker & Schmidt 2003.

Solo sex in a relationship and in single periods

In both the cases outlined above, the relevance of the student's case history can be seen: for many students, masturbation when they are single means something different from when they are in a relationship. For example, Tamara, aged 24, very clearly explains the different significance of solo sex at different stages of life.

Tamara, (24): *"If I'm single, it's more important and I do it more often than if I'm in a relationship. If I'm in a relationship and I get horny, I want to have sex with my partner."*

A majority of female and male respondents described how the importance of solo sex changes for them when they are in a relationship. Solo sex *"naturally takes a back seat"* when one is in a relationship, as Hilde, aged 24, puts it. In a relationship, couple sex takes precedence and solo sex is seen as an alternative or an appropriate solution if the partner is not around or does not feel like sex.

Oliver (22): *"It is important, but less important, because you're getting more sex. I'd say I don't need to masturbate if I've had sex earlier."*

Tobias (21): *"I hardly ever do it, because I'm genuinely really satisfied. So I don't feel the need to do it, really."*

Henrike (24): *"I don't masturbate so much any more. Because I get my pleasure from sex with my partner. The other isn't so important any more."*

Independent of the relationship A small group of students see their solo sex life as *"independent of the relationship"*, as Sven, aged 24, puts it. For these respondents, the desire to masturbate and the frequency with which they do so bears no recognizable relation to their sex life as a couple.

Sven (24): *"For me, it's independent of the relationship. I would do exactly the same if I wasn't in a relationship, it really makes no difference. It's never happened that I had a wank during the day and then didn't want sex with my girlfriend in the evening."*

Inga (21): *"In fact, I do it completely independently of my partner. I could never live out the fantasies I have in my relationship. We both masturbate completely separately."*

Preliminary conclusions We can confirm from our data that there can be peaceful coexistence between solo and couple sex, although the two are rarely considered equivalent. The findings from research into adolescent sexuality, that both genders in a relationship prefer couple sex to solo sex,¹⁷⁹ is supported by our students' statements. For many students, solo sex becomes more important when they are single, as a simple way to meet their own sexual needs. When they are in a relationship, however, solo and couple sex are not equal in importance.

6.5 Solo sex, couple sex and orgasm

Today, the orgasm can be seen as the fundamental benchmark of a successful sex life and a measure of sexual satisfaction and the quality of sexual interaction. According to Walter, we can speak of an “orgasm paradigm”¹⁸⁰ that structures sexual reality and sexual experience in modern societies. Lewandowski likewise states in an article on the social function of orgasm that: “The orgasm paradigm serves to create a point of coherence in the multiplicity of behaviours, enabling them to be observed as sexual behaviours”.¹⁸¹ In a study in the United Kingdom on young adults' experiences of orgasm, the authors observe an “orgasm imperative” which is an extension of the “coital imperative” (only intercourse is “real” sex) and thus marks the orgasm as the “gold standard” – the goal of intercourse in a couple relationship.¹⁸² However, we see considerable gender differences in this area, too: for example, women reach orgasm less often than men in couple sex, and they rarely orgasm through vaginal intercourse without additional manual and/or oral stimulation.¹⁸³ Young women report problems in reaching orgasm over the previous 12 months four times more often than young men (see Chapter 7). There may also be problems in reaching orgasm through masturbation, again occurring more frequently among women than among men, although much less often than during couple sex.¹⁸⁴ In the following section, we present students' experiences of their own and their partner's orgasm in the solo and couple settings.

179 Cf. Matthiesen 2013, p. 241.

180 Walter 1999, p. 26.

181 Lewandowski 2001, p. 212.

182 Cf. Opperman et al. 2013, p. 2

183 Cf. Lloyd 2005; Matthiesen & Hauch 2004b.

184 Cf. Laumann et al. 1994; Matthiesen & Dekker 2015b.

Solo sex and orgasm

Male students Our study and others show that young men almost invariably reach orgasm when masturbating. However, the timescale varies: some students say they need a few minutes, up to a maximum of a quarter of an hour, to reach orgasm. They see it as “a sort of routine” that goes “very fast”. Usually, however, the students report a more flexible timescale, that can last up to an hour – “depending how you feel”. These students deliberately make time for solo sex and manage the time required according to the external circumstances:

Gregor (25): *“It varies a lot. If I’m in the shower, it goes quite quickly. But if I really say, I’m going to take my time, I’ve got some peace and quiet, then between 20 minutes and half an hour.”*

Holger (28): *“It depends what I want, to be honest. If I’m in a hurry to watch a good film, it might take five minutes. If I have nothing else to do, it can take half an hour.”*

Robert (23): *“If all I want is to come, it can literally be just a few minutes. Usually, though, I take half an hour.”*

Female students Two thirds of the female students report that they reach orgasm regularly and without difficulty when masturbating¹⁸⁵ – often in less than 15 minutes. They too perceive the length of time taken to masturbate in terms of the situation and their own desire:

Hilde (24): *“I don’t watch the clock. But I know that it really can vary. Sometimes [it’s] not even five minutes, sometimes it’s longer.”*

Nadine (23): *“It really varies, it depends how I feel. If I really take a long time, because I want to finish the adventure going on in my head, it can take up to an hour. Otherwise, it really goes quite quickly, just a few minutes. If I really put my mind to it.”*

Svetlana (22): *“If I do it quickly, just to unwind, it takes six or seven minutes. But sometimes, when I really feel horny and the only problem is that I’m on my own, I can make it last 15 or 20 minutes.”*

A few female students can never, or only rarely, reach orgasm in the solo setting. They describe how they cannot relax properly, or they feel after a while that they could “go on for an hour like this and still nothing would happen”. Nevertheless, we can see a relaxed attitude and a positive view of solo sex:

Henrike (24): *“Sometimes I’m not calm enough. I’m really aroused and enjoy touching myself. But somehow I can’t switch off. And at some point I just give up.”*

Kerstin (23): *“It depends, sometimes I feel I don’t absolutely have to do it, I only want a bit of masturbation, and soon I’ve had enough, and I don’t feel like going on forever.”*

For both male and female students, the picture is one of relaxed management of the orgasm in the solo setting. For men, and almost all women, the orgasm brings the sexual situation to an end. A small group of female students who are unable to orgasm during solo sex still report a positive attitude to masturbation.

185 Includes only those female students who were already actively practicing solo sex.

Couple sex and orgasm

Male students The majority of male students also reach orgasm every, or nearly every, time during couple sex. This statement by Lennart, aged 25, is typical of their confident, natural assumption that they will achieve orgasm: “*I could count the times when it didn’t work on the fingers of both hands, more or less*”. It is only occasionally that male students report that they are unable to reach orgasm every time during sex with their partner, because they were distracted by “*something stupid*” or “*stressed*” or “*couldn’t manage it again*” a second or third time on the same day. The following statements show the extent to which the orgasm is perceived and experienced as the goal and benchmark of a couple’s sexuality:

Axel (22): “*Basically, I think that both the man and the woman have to reach orgasm. That’s the aim, as far as I’m concerned, and we want to achieve it!*”

Tobias (21): “*Because it rounds it all off. It brings everything to a high point, that you can both enjoy together, it’s a wonderful moment. And you don’t feel so horny afterwards, and you’re not left hanging.*”

Florian (25): “*If it’s not working, I get put off. If I don’t reach orgasm, I get in a bad mood [...] It’s not finished somehow.*”

Only a few male respondents separate their view of the couple’s sex life from their own orgasm and distance themselves from the idea of the orgasm as the goal or highpoint of the sexual interaction, as Peter does here.

Peter (26): “*It’s good to be close, cuddling’s very important, and being close to your partner. Then you don’t necessarily need to have an orgasm. The thrills beforehand, getting a bit excited, sometimes that’s enough.*”

In general, however, the idea of the orgasm as the goal of successful couple sex is a widespread one. The young men’s statements confirm the understanding, described above, of the orgasm as the “gold standard” in sexuality, as Opperman et al. defined it for adolescents in the United Kingdom.¹⁸⁶ This goal-oriented or success-oriented view of male sexuality is completely taken for granted by most male students, and is hardly questioned at all.

186 Opperman et al. 2013.

Female students Whereas men almost always reach orgasm through intercourse, the same is not true of women: around half the female students always or sometimes reach orgasm during sex, while the other half never or rarely do so. The orgasm is generally not achieved through intercourse alone, but beforehand, afterwards or during intercourse through additional manual or oral stimulation – by the partner or the woman herself. Most female students are aware from talking to others and from the media that women reach orgasm through intercourse more rarely than men, and are matter-of-fact about their experiences:

Inga (21): *“I’ve never known anything else, it still feels good and so I don’t mind if I don’t have an orgasm during vaginal sex. I don’t know anything else, and I still want to have sex, because it’s good and very intimate.”*

Tamara (24): *“I’m not disappointed. I know that it’s more difficult for women than for men, and that it doesn’t work that often. So I wouldn’t necessarily say that it was bad sex if I don’t have an orgasm.”*

Conny (19): *“I always reach orgasm, but not during intercourse [...] I like it better if I come afterwards. I can concentrate better [...] And it’s good to get your own special treatment.”*

Annelene (21): *“Normally, if I don’t do something to help myself, then I don’t come at all. Not in any position. Not at all. But if I help myself out with my hands, then I do. It’s fairly easy in those positions where I can come. And I know what they are now.”*

Female students have very varying views about what orgasm means for their feeling of sexual satisfaction. Some think it is “*very important*”, others that it is “*not hyper-important, but it ought to happen*”, and some that “*it isn’t that important*”. Many of them state clearly that they do not need to reach orgasm every single time and that, for them, it is the emotional aspects that make for a successful sex life within the couple. As Alina says, it is not orgasm that defines “*whether the sex is good or not*”.

Alina (23): *“I wouldn’t use that as a definition of whether the sex is good or not. It can be good even if I don’t have an orgasm. They’re not quite the same thing, as far as I’m concerned.”*

Joana (24): *“Because it can feel really, really intense, even if I don’t come; it’s nice if it happens, and if it doesn’t, that’s OK too”.*

Jessica (23): *“It’s not as good as it is when you have an orgasm, but it wouldn’t put me in a bad mood. It’s OK, I don’t have a problem with it.”*

Masturbation, it is clear from the interviews, is sexually more “effective” and satisfying for the female students than intercourse with a partner – if the focus is only on achieving orgasm. For many female respondents, however, the emotional closeness, loving feelings and tenderness of sex with a partner compensate for the lack of orgasm. For these women, successful couple sex is not defined by reaching orgasm. Many students value couple sex without an orgasm over solo sex with an orgasm. Suse, aged 24, describes the relationship between the two:

Suse, (24): *“Sometimes you long for the sensation that comes with an orgasm, which I often don’t get with my partner, and [solo sex] makes up for it. Sex with my boyfriend is more important than masturbation, definitely. But I masturbate too, to get that sensation of orgasm.”*

We can see that female students associate their own orgasm less closely with the image of the “gold standard” of couple sexuality. They are also relaxed about reciprocity – they do not necessarily need to come as often as their partner.

Responsibility for the woman's orgasm – couple dynamics and communication

Most male students have an idea how often and through which sexual practices their female partner reaches orgasm. They have differing views about the importance of the female orgasm to themselves. Most often, they speak of it in terms of success, with their “ego” or “masculinity” depending on whether they can “satisfy” their partner. If the woman does not orgasm, this is sometimes seen as “frustrating”, “disappointing” or even “a failure”.

Alexander (24): *“I think there must be something lacking in the sex for her. And of course it makes me doubt my skills as a lover.”*

Markus (24): *“More often, it gets to me afterwards, when it hasn't quite worked. Sometimes it's a kind of blow to my masculinity.”*

Equally as frequently, there is a hierarchization of the female and male orgasm, i.e. a consideration of which is the more important. Some men consider their partner's orgasm to be just as important as their own; others consider their partner's orgasm even more important and say that they set their own sexual needs and interests aside if there is any doubt (e.g. Lars, Jörg). However, in many cases, men are casual about the female orgasm. Often, after the sexual activity, the partners discuss how they enjoyed it, so that the men know what their partner finds sexually pleasurable. However, they do not feel responsible, or not very responsible, for the woman's orgasm, and stress that their partner has it all under control.

Lars (22): *“She comes every time, really. I think we are honest enough with one another that she would tell me if she didn't have an orgasm, so we could solve the problem one way or another. If she said that, I would do things differently, of course.”*

Jörg (22): *“My own isn't so important, it's much more important that she should come.”*

Johann (28): *“Of course, I think it's important that she enjoys herself and gets something out of it. But it's rather more her responsibility to make sure she enjoys it. I think she does. So, if she doesn't have an orgasm, it's not great, but it's not a disaster.”*

Holger (28): *“I don’t put any pressure on myself about it [...] She doesn’t want me to have sex with her only to give her an orgasm, because that puts pressure on her and then she finds it more difficult. She just wants me to do what I want. That’s what she likes best, and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t.”*

Occasionally, male students report that it is a dispute within the couple that leads to a discussion with the partner, for instance if they notice that the partner has faked orgasm and challenge her on it. They very rarely appear to be uninformed about or indifferent to the female orgasm. Most female students also report that the female orgasm is very important to their partners in their shared sex life. The women are often aware of a certain “pressure to succeed”, for instance that the male partner “feels inadequate”, that it is “frustrating for him” or “bruises his ego” if they do not reach orgasm. This male “focus on the orgasm” is not fully consistent with the women’s idea of a successful shared sex life, and they need to talk reassuringly and explain in order to clarify these differing interpretations. This description by Annika, aged 19, shows how the man’s assumption of responsibility for the orgasm can be a challenge for the couple:

Annika (19): *“He always seems a bit dejected and blames himself and thinks he hasn’t done enough. But it’s not always easy. If I’m stressed and can’t concentrate, then I just don’t have an orgasm. However hard he tries. I still find sex enjoyable, but it doesn’t work, and he always finds it a bit difficult to accept. He keeps thinking of new things to try [...] I think he sometimes tries too hard in our relationship. After all, you don’t necessarily have to have an orgasm during sex.”*

Preliminary conclusions While we can say, with Tiefer, that male students have a certain “target fixation” or “orgasm mindset”,¹⁸⁷ which they also project onto their partners, we find this phenomenon much less among the female students. The latter recognize “his performance – and orgasm-based idea of satisfaction”¹⁸⁸ but often distance themselves from it in their own attitude to their sexual desire. In particular, the female students feel that talking about stimulating sexual practices is important. They talk about what stimulates them sexually, without abdicating responsibility for their own sexual desire and orgasm to their partner. They stress that both partners have the same right to a fulfilling shared sex life, even if the ways of achieving that seem different.

187 Tiefer 2000a.

188 Tiefer 2000a, p. 351.

6.6 Summary

Overall, our data enable us to describe a largely undramatic and relaxed attitude, free of taboos, in relation to solo sex in the lives of German students. However, like other national and international studies, our results show that the gender dimension continues to play a part in solo-sex experiences and activities. On the one hand, the solo-sex behaviours of men and women are still noticeably different even today, as we see from parameters like frequency or practices – but on the other hand the gender gap between the sexes has narrowed: women, in particular, admit to earlier and more numerous experiences than those in previous student surveys.¹⁸⁹

Looking at relationships, we can recognize a link between solo sex and couple sex in the lives of these young adults. For a large proportion of our respondents, solo sex is part both of periods as a single person and of their relationships. The “peaceful coexistence”¹⁹⁰ of these two forms of sexuality, as Dekker and Schmidt put it, seems to apply to most students. Nevertheless, the value placed on solo sex is altered when the person is in a relationship. It is seen as a separate, but subordinate, form of sexuality, of lesser value than couple sex. It is also described by some students as a back-up or substitute for times when the preferred option of sex with a partner is temporarily unavailable.

Only a few respondents – young women inexperienced in solo sex – mention the negative connotations that masturbation used to have in the past. In some cases, however, they reflect critically on their own attitude and point out that “female sexuality was a taboo subject” when they were growing up. The encouragement of masturbation, which has been part of sexuality education for many years, is echoed only in the few interviews that mention discovery of one’s own body. The right to create sexual pleasure and satisfaction for oneself is taken for granted by today’s generation of students.

189 Cf. Schmidt 2000.

190 Dekker & Schmidt 2003.

7



Sexual problems – how do students cope?¹⁹¹

Silja Matthiesen and Arne Dekker

191 A much-abridged version of this chapter was previously published in the Zeitschrift für Soziologie der Erziehung und Sozialisation (ZSE). Cf. Matthiesen & Dekker 2015b.

The university period is not known as a time of particular sexual difficulties. Indeed, it is assumed that any initial difficulties, such as might be expected among adolescents, will have been overcome by late adolescence,¹⁹² and that health problems, which primarily affect older people, will not yet be a significant issue.¹⁹³ Moreover, the sexual challenges associated with the birth of children will not yet be acute, since students generally postpone having children until they have finished university.¹⁹⁴ In fact, we know surprisingly little about the prevalence and frequency of sexual difficulties or sexual dysfunction among students, and even less about the way they feel about such difficulties and how they deal with them, as a couple or individually.

Sexual difficulties At the same time, it is known that sexual difficulties are very common among the general population. *The Global Study of Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors (GSSAB)*,¹⁹⁵ which investigated adults aged between 40 and 80 years in 29 countries, was published in 2005. The survey concluded that the most common sexual difficulties among women across the world were lack of libido (26–43 %), orgasmic dysfunction (18–41 %) and problems of arousal (16–38 %). The most common difficulties among men were premature ejaculation (12–32 %), lack of libido (13–28 %) and erection problems (13–28 %).

Sexual distress Since then, it has been assumed that sexual difficulties are common among adults and that they affect more women than men. A large representative study of more than 15,000 subjects in the United Kingdom has recently confirmed this view. This detailed survey can be summarized as follows: “Among individuals reporting sex in the past year, problems with sexual response were common (41.6 % of men and 51.2 % of women reported one or more problem)”. However, this high prevalence is immediately put into perspective by the finding that only 9.9 % of men and 10.9 % of women reported that they view these difficulties in their sex life as a problem.¹⁹⁶

192 Cf. O’Sullivan et al. 2014.

193 Cf. Hayes & Dennerstein 2005; Hinchliff & Gott 2011.

194 Cf. Gnirss-Bornet 2007; Middendorff 2003, 2008; Middendorff et al. 2013.

195 Laumann et al. 2005.

196 Mitchell et al. 2013, p. 1817.

In the investigation of sexual problems today, we automatically distinguish between *problems which cause sexual distress* and *problems which do not*. This is partly due to the fact that the GSSAB and similar studies have proved extremely controversial. On the one hand, this pathologization of large sections of the population was strongly criticized as stemming from the interlinked interests of research and the pharmaceutical industry.¹⁹⁷ On the other hand, it was pointed out that the high prevalence of sexual experiences such as “not wanting sex often enough” or “problems in getting aroused” did not, by itself, indicate that these experiences were a burden on the respondent or his/her relationships, or that the respondent suffered as a result.¹⁹⁸ From this point of view, even if their prevalence is high, such experiences may be a more or less trivial part of an otherwise active and satisfactory sex life. Bancroft, Loftus and Long provocatively asked: “When does a sexual problem become a sexual dysfunction?”, pointing to the urgent need for differentiated terminology.¹⁹⁹

Focus on heterosexual relationships In this study, we analyse the sexual difficulties of a specific group – young, highly educated adults. We have studied only respondents who are currently in a steady heterosexual relationship, since we know that the sex lives of single people and students in steady relationships are comparable to only a very limited extent²⁰⁰ and that most single students are only rarely and irregularly sexually active.²⁰¹

197 See, for example, Moynihan 2003, 2010; Tiefer 1996, 2000b.

198 Cf. Matthiesen/Hauch 2004a.

199 Bancroft et al. 2003.

200 Cf. Schmidt et al. 2006; Matthiesen 2013, pp. 73 ff.

201 Cf. Schmidt 2000, pp. 128 ff.; Matthiesen & Böhm 2013.

7.1 Definitions: what are sexual difficulties?

In this study, we speak of “sexual difficulties” if the respondent answers “yes” to at least one of the following statements with reference to the previous 12 months:

- “I didn’t want sex often enough”;
- “I wanted sex more often than (...)”;²⁰²
- “I had problems reaching orgasm”;
- “I came too quickly”;
- “Sex was painful”;
- “I wanted sexual practices/acts that (...) refused to do”;
- For men only: “I had problems getting an erection”;
- For women only: “I had problems getting aroused”.

We speak of a “sexual problem” if respondents reported one or more sexual difficulties and experienced them as a (serious) problem *and/or* had already sought medical assistance or psychotherapy because of sexual problems, or at least had seriously considered doing so.

In the section that follows, we discuss only sexual difficulties in heterosexual relationships.

202 The ellipsis here was explained to the respondents before they filled in the questionnaire: “Please replace the ellipsis (...) in your head with the name of your partner”.

Capture of sexual difficulties in the study

In the quantitative questionnaire survey, the sexual difficulties listed above (in the context of the current steady relationship), sexual distress and solicitation of professional help were covered in a total of three questions. In the guided qualitative interviews, the issue of “sexual problems” was covered two-thirds of the way through the interview. We asked:

Interview guide

“Is there anything that sexually distresses or weighs on you?” and “Have you ever had sexual difficulties or problems?”

If the respondent answered “yes” to either of these questions, supplementary questions were asked to explore the issue further. Difficulties with erections and orgasm were not the only sexual difficulties described in the qualitative interviews. However, they were the ones most frequently cited and the ones described in the most detail. They are therefore analysed here as a representative sample, to provide examples of and insights into the experience of sexual difficulties and the way couples deal with them in our study group.

The analysis below investigates in the first instance the prevalence of sexual difficulties in heterosexual relationships. In accordance with the research literature, we pay particular attention to gender differences. We then record the sexual distress associated with these experiences and the respondent’s desire to change the situation and/or seek professional help. In the second section, we explore whether sexual activity and the prevalence of sexual problems vary with the duration of the relationship. In the third section, we describe in detail the erection difficulties suffered by men and the difficulties in achieving orgasm experienced by women, on the basis of our qualitative information. This qualitative description is intended to provide a more detailed understanding of experiences and management of sexual difficulties, including ambivalence, emotions and wishes involving the partner.

7.2 Sexual difficulties in heterosexual relationships

We asked students who were in a steady relationship about sexual difficulties in their current heterosexual relationship over the previous 12 months. The questions related to five difficulties experienced by the respondent himself/herself and two difficulties related to the partner (see Table 7-1).

Table 7-1
Which of the following sexual problems or difficulties did you have with (...) in the last 12 months? (by gender, in %)*

	Women n = 744	Men n = 399	Statistical significance**
Personal difficulties			
I didn't want sex often enough	46 %	15 %	.000
I had problems reaching orgasm	45 %	13 %	.000
I reached orgasm too quickly	6 %	49 %	.000
Sex was painful	40 %	7 %	.000
I had problems becoming aroused/ getting an erection	39 %	15 %	.000
Difficulties involving the partner			
I wanted sex more often than (...)	17 %	47 %	.000
I wanted sexual practices that (...) refused to do	2 %	23 %	.000

* Only students currently in a steady heterosexual relationship.

** Statistical significance of gender differences: all significances were calculated using the chi-square test.

Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

We find high rates of sexual difficulties, fully consistent with the international population surveys. The gender differences are the most striking feature of the difficulties related to the respondent himself/herself: female students in steady relationships complain about difficulties in their sexual experiences much more frequently than their male partners. Women complain more frequently of problems of desire, orgasm and arousal and of pain during sex. Men complain more frequently about reaching orgasm too quickly and say that their partner does not want sex often enough and is less receptive to certain sexual practices.

What is the distribution of sexual difficulties?

Another indication of the extent of sexual difficulties is the question of how many students have only one of the five personal difficulties listed above, and how many have more than one. In order to answer these questions, we calculated a sum score for personal sexual difficulties, ranging from zero to 5. Table 7-2 shows that approximately four out of five of the female students and two out of three of the male students had experienced at least one sexual problem at least once in the previous year.

Table 7-2
Sum score: frequency distribution of sexual difficulties in the previous 12 months (by gender, in %)*

	Women n = 744	Men n = 399
No sexual difficulties	21 %	35 %
1 sexual difficulty	28 %	41 %
2 sexual difficulties	22 %	18 %
3 sexual difficulties	17 %	5 %
4 sexual difficulties	12 %	2 %
5 sexual difficulties	<1 %	<1 %

*Statistical significance of gender differences: .000; all significances were calculated using the chi-square test.
Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

One half of women and one quarter of men reported experiencing two or more sexual difficulties in the previous year. Those are astonishingly high figures. They are probably partly due to the “soft” formulation of the questions. However, they also raise the fundamental question: could it be that students’ everyday sex lives are shaped much more by the vicissitudes of their sexuality and the experiences of their own sexual failings than has hitherto been recognized?

What is the level of subjective sexual distress?

A crucial issue in this context is the way in which women and men classify and rate their sexual difficulties, i.e. whether these experiences fall within the overall range of general sexual experience, or whether the respondents suffer because of them. Table 7-3 presents subjective sexual distress and the proportion of respondents who have ever sought professional help for sexual difficulties, or have considered doing so.

Table 7-3
**Sexual distress and requirements for assistance with sexual difficulties in hetero-
 sexual relationships in the previous 12 months (by gender, in %)**

	Women	Men
I experience my sexual difficulties as a "serious" or "very serious" problem		
All*	14 % (of n = 744)	6 % (of n = 399)
Respondents with at least one sexual difficulty*	20 % (of n = 590)	8 % (of n = 258)
Respondents with one sexual difficulty	9 % (of n = 206)	6 % (of n = 165)
Respondents with two or more sexual difficulties	26 % (of n = 384) .000	12 % (of n = 93) .07
I have already sought professional help for my sexual difficulties, or have thought about doing so.**		
All*	24 % (of n = 744)	11 % (of n = 399)
Respondents with at least one sexual difficulty*	29 % (of n = 590)	16 % (of n = 258)
Respondents with one sexual difficulty	17 % (of n = 206)	10 % (of n = 165)
Respondents with two or more sexual difficulties	35 % (of n = 384) .000	25 % (of n = 93) .003

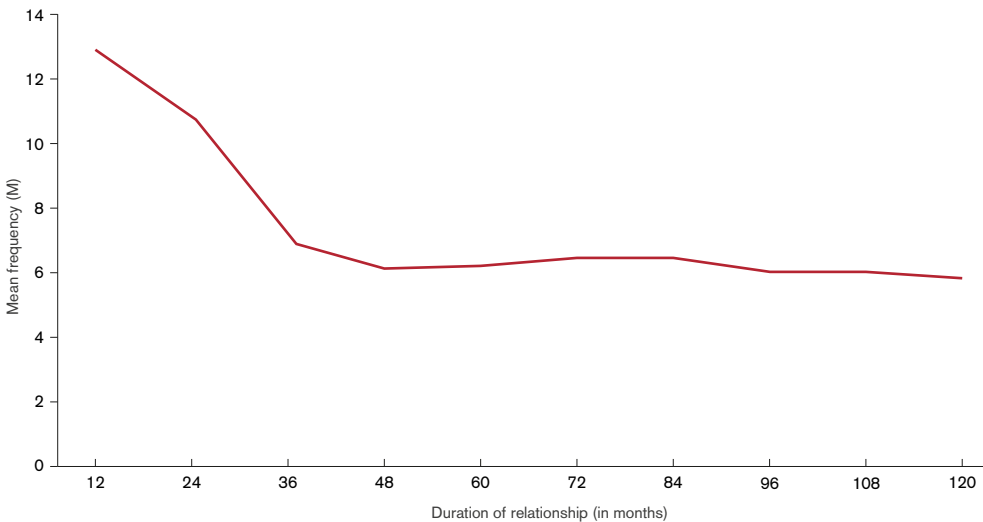
* Statistical significance of gender differences: .000; all significances were calculated using the chi-square test.
 ** The two categories "I have sought professional help" and "I have thought of seeking professional help" were combined. Of all respondents (women and men, n = 1,143), 11 % had thought of seeking professional help, and 8 % had already done so.
 *Professional help" was defined as medical assistance and/or therapy.
 Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

The data in Table 7-3 can be interpreted in several different ways. Firstly, they put into perspective the alarming fact that almost half of all women report that they experience sexual difficulties. Difficulties accompanied by extreme personal sexual distress are much less common: they affect 14 % of all women and 6 % of all men. This also means that sexual difficulties are clearly a "normal" part of students' everyday sex lives and that most of them have the necessary resources, personally or within the relationship, to manage such temporary difficulties effectively. However, this still leaves quite a large group: of all female students in steady relationships, one in seven has a sexual problem and is suffering as a result; one in four has considered seeking medical assistance or therapy or has actually done so. For male students, the figure is much lower: one in 20 has a sexual problem and is suffering as a result, and one in 10 has considered seeking medical assistance or therapy or has actually done so. The suffering experienced as a result of personal sexual problems and the respondent's readiness to seek help are greater among respondents experiencing more than one sexual difficulty.

7.3 The influence of relationship duration

It is a common truism that, in many long-term relationships, sexual activity will decline at some point. There is now a wide range of therapeutic approaches to combat this phenomenon and reconcile “passionate sex” with “long-term relationships”.²⁰³ For a long time, it was assumed that the decline in sexual activity was an effect of biological ageing;²⁰⁴ however, more recent studies employing multivariate analysis have concluded that the effect of age on the frequency of intercourse, at least before the age of 45 years, is smaller than that arising from the duration of the relationship.²⁰⁵ In the age group in our study, namely 20-to-30-year-old students, the duration of the relationship has an appreciable effect on the frequency of sex²⁰⁶ in steady relationships, while age has none. Since the gender differences here are small, the following account combines the figures for women and men.

Figure 7-1
Mean frequency of sex (M) in the previous four weeks, by duration of relationship, 20- to-30-year-old female and male students



Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

203 See, for example, Schnarch 2009; Clement 2004.

204 See, for example, Kinsey 1948; Laumann et al. 1994

205 Bajos et al. 2008, pp. 414 ff.; Bozon 1998, 2001; Johnson et al. 1994, p. 155; Klusmann 2000, 2002; Kontula & Haavio-Mannila 1995, p. 99; Schmidt 1998a; Schmidt et al. 2004; Schmidt et al. 2006.

206 In earlier studies, we used the term “frequency of intercourse” at this point. Since, in this questionnaire, we did not wish to restrict sexual activity to intercourse (coitus), we talked about “having sex” instead.

The figure shows that the frequency of sex declines markedly in the first three years of a steady relationship. This decline is not constant; instead, there is a marked decline in the first three years, and the frequency then stays more or less constant until the tenth year of the relationship. In the first year of the relationship, sex occurs approximately twice as frequently as in the fourth to tenth years. In other words: the frequency is particularly high while the partnership is being established, and is lower, although constant, in established partnerships.²⁰⁷

Generally, the lower frequency of sex in established partnerships is attributed to declining sexual tension due to routine and to the increasing demands of children or work. These assumptions are plausible, but this explanation merely begs the question why long-term partners “do it so rarely”, thereby unwittingly dismissing the latter’s sex lives as substandard and presenting the higher frequency of sex at the stage of relationship establishment as fundamentally desirable. If, on the other hand, we (also) ask why partners who have not been together long “do it so often”, it becomes clear that sex obviously has a different significance at different stages in the relationship, depending on whether the couple:

- Is in the early stages of the relationship; or
- Has lived together for some time.

At the stage where the relationship is becoming established, sex provides the main opportunity to experience and express intimacy, build up an intimate relationship and explore whether this is possible with this particular partner. Frequent sex contributes to the weaving of the relationship through mutual discovery.²⁰⁸ It thus contributes to the heightened emotions which are typical for this stage. Established couples have made the decision to stay together; they have a stronger bond, a common history, greater certainty and a large stock of togetherness, commitment, closeness and security to share. External circumstances, such as a shared home, mutual friends, plans for the future, children, make these relationships more difficult to leave. Frequent sex becomes less important to keep the relationship intact, but a sustained sex life is still generally important to define the partnership as a “couple”, distinguish it from other close relationships and act as a marker of “specialness”. This specialness is clearly marked even if the partners have sex only occasionally. According to Bozon, sex as a maintenance ritual does not require the same high frequency of intercourse as a foundations-building activity.²⁰⁹

207 For the interpretation of both the cross-sectional and the longitudinal data, cf. Klusmann 2000, p. 138.

208 Cf. Bozon 2001, p. 16.

209 Cf. Bozon 2001, p. 17.

Major difficulties in long relationships?

What impact does the duration of the relationship have on the prevalence of sexual difficulties? To investigate this question, we created two subgroups: “short” relationships, which had existed for up to 36 months at the time of the interview, and “established” relationships, which had existed for between 37 and 120 months.

Table 7-4

Which of the following sexual problems or difficulties did you have with (...) in the last 12 months? (by gender and duration of relationship, in %)

	Women		Men	
	Up to 36 months n = 392	37 – 120 months n = 322	Up to 36 months n = 232	37 – 120 months n = 165
Personal difficulties				
I didn't want sex often enough	32 %	62 % .000	13 %	18 % ns
I had problems reaching orgasm	46 %	42 % ns	17 %	9 % ns
I reached orgasm too quickly	6 %	4 % ns	48 %	51 % ns
Sex was painful	39 %	42 % ns	9 %	3 % .02
I had problems becoming aroused/ getting an erection	33 %	48 % .000	20 %	7 % .001
Difficulties involving the partner				
I wanted sex more often than (...)	19 %	16 % ns	36 %	62 % .000
I wanted sexual practices that (...) refused to do	3 %	2 % ns	21 %	25 % ns

Source: DFG dataset, Changing sexuality in the student population, 2012

Table 7-4 shows that the duration of the relationship is the most important factor in female students' complaints that they “do not want sex often enough” and the male students' complaints that their partner “does not want sex often enough”. This is not surprising, since we have already seen (cf. Figure 7-1) that sexual activity declines significantly in long-term steady relationships. We can now refine this finding further: sexual activity clearly declines because women have less desire for couple sex as time goes on. Difficulties in reaching orgasm and pain during sex do not change over the course of a relationship, and problems of arousal among women actually increase with the duration of the relationship, while erection difficulties among men become less common.

7.4 Experiences and management of erection difficulties

As we have seen, many students occasionally have erection difficulties. These temporary difficulties are often “*due to alcohol*” and often occur early in a new relationship. Often stress, examinations and the workload of studying are involved. Some students report problems associated with condom use, when “*I lose my erection after putting on the condom*”. Most male students are relaxed about these difficulties, which are rare and easily explained. They consider them “normal” and dissociate themselves from the image of a man for whom sexual function is all-important. Roman, aged 27, gives a typical answer to the question whether he has ever experienced sexual problems.

Roman (27): “Well, yes, of course. I do get those sometimes, I think everyone does [laughs]. I don’t like the idea that men have to be stallions in bed. Of course there have been times when I came much too soon or didn’t have a proper erection.”

Many male students are relaxed about temporary erection difficulties. They do not worry about them, and feel that the problem will go away by itself. Here are some examples to illustrate this attitude:

Tim (25): “Erection problems, so that it’s a permanent problem, no, I haven’t had that. Only when I was really exhausted, tired, or pretty drunk. Then [laughs] it has sometimes happened that I wanted to do it, but my body wouldn’t play ball. But it was only temporary.”

Lennart (25): “When my girlfriend dumped me, and the exams were on and that was mentally depressing, everything happened together. I didn’t feel like sex at all and that’s why I had erection difficulties.”

Malte (21): “I only had [problems] when I’d been drinking. I did get an erection, but it wasn’t hard, and I lost it the minute I tried to do anything with it.”

Michael (24): “It sometimes happens with my current girlfriend that I can’t feel much and lose my erection. But it’s often that I’m stressed or don’t feel well.”

Internal pressure: "I've got to make it work"

As well as these occasional erection difficulties, which do not cause concern, some men feel pressure, or feel they are put under pressure, during sex with their partner and experience – as they say themselves – “*psychosomatic erection difficulties*” or “*a mental block*”. These are accompanied by considerable nervousness and tension during sex, and can occur in various situations. Some men report emotional pressure and the feeling that they have specific demands to meet, particularly early on in a new relationship, when they are in the first flush of love. Others find that the frequency of erection difficulties changes when it becomes clear that a casual relationship is likely to turn into a long-term one. Johann, aged 28, has found on several occasions that, at times like these, “*my mind bolted the door on my sex life*”. That leads to situations in which the men are “*over-thinking it*” during sex. This is not conducive to good sex, as the following examples clearly show:

Lars (22): *“Then I occasionally had problems getting an erection, because I was really afraid I would hurt her, and feeling insecure, and not really concentrating. I was thinking about all sorts of things all the time. Then she asked: ‘What’s the matter, what’s wrong?’ And: ‘Am I doing something wrong?’ And then you get even more nervous, because you think: ‘OK, I’ve got to make it work now’. As soon as you think you’ve got to make it work, it’ll never work. You put pressure on yourself. And then nothing works.”*

Steven (25): *“I get erection difficulties particularly often the first time I have sex with a new girlfriend. I suppose it’s the excitement or that I’m over-thinking it. As I’ve said already, I think a lot about whether she’s enjoying herself.”*

Here the male students are not so much describing an inability to maintain sexual arousal and tension in a loving relationship, but rather a very strong desire to get everything right in a relationship setting that is emotionally important and significant to them. The pressure they experience arises internally, from their own conviction that sex should be reciprocal, i.e. that both partners should get pleasure from it.

External pressure: “She wanted it all the time”

We hear a different story from some young men, who feel pressured by sexually demanding women or ones who often take the initiative. In these situations, the men sometimes feel a pressure to perform and develop a fear of failure, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and leads to erection problems. Here are some examples:

Max (23): *“[My girlfriend] wanted sex all the time. Normally, [it was] the other way round. I was always the one who initiated it. But suddenly it was her, and it unnerved me so much that I got kind of scared and thought, I can’t do this any more. And because I was scared, I couldn’t do it, I mean I didn’t get an erection.”*

Ralf (26): *“My girlfriend wants me to be a bit more dominant. I feel pressured. And also, at the moment, she wants to do it really often and I don’t want it as much as I did at the beginning [...]. I always had problems getting hard. Mostly because of the pressure of wanting, and having, to satisfy the woman. When I start thinking that, it’s all over.”*

Julian (21): *“With her, I was somehow scared that I wouldn’t be able to satisfy her, and then it all stopped working. [...] I never had a problem with any other girl, either before or afterwards. I definitely think one of the reasons was fear. The fear that I wouldn’t be able to satisfy her sexually [...] She was quite depraved in bed, quite dirty, and I was afraid I wouldn’t manage to satisfy her.”*

Erection difficulties are accompanied by negative feelings such as shame, embarrassment and frustration. Since our sample did not include chronic problems, most of the young men managed to stay relaxed. Tim, aged 25, says that he was *“a bit bothered about it at the time, but I’d forgotten about it by the next day”*. Other students recall that they were *“pretty ashamed”* or *“embarrassed”* and felt *“feeble”*, and had remembered the situation as *“an odd experience”*. Nevertheless, not one of them expressed serious doubts about his own virility or lasting concerns about his sexual health. Most of them, like Johann (28), reacted reasonably and said to themselves: *“Forget it”*:

Michael (24): *“It wasn’t dramatic in that sense. At some point I noticed that the sex had faded out in the same way it had started, very slowly. It wasn’t that I said: ‘Oh God. Oh, shit, we’ve got to stop!’ We just went over to stroking and kissing and so on.”*

Sören (26): *“It wasn’t embarrassing, but it was a very, very unusual situation for me. She said it didn’t matter, these things happened. And we waited until the next morning. There wasn’t a lot of discussion about it at the time.”*

Johann (28): *“It [wasn’t] a dent to my ego or anything like that; I said, OK, why didn’t that work, that’s never happened before: let’s forget it.”*

The partner’s response

The men’s comparatively unemotional response is matched by an understanding response from their partners. Only one student, Max (23), recalls a response from his partner that he considered completely unjustified: she complained aggressively that he *“wouldn’t be able to do anything for her now”*. All the other men describe the understanding, consideration and willingness to talk shown by their female partners. Any negative feelings the partner had of being offended, rejected or disappointed generally disappeared quickly.

Niklas (20): *“My current girlfriend was understanding. We talked about it. She said she sometimes also had times when she didn’t feel like it or it just didn’t work, she didn’t get wet enough. So she completely understood that sometimes it doesn’t work the way you expect.”*

Lennart (25): *“Of course, [my girlfriend] wasn’t happy. I got the feeling that she was very inexperienced and that maybe she even felt she was a bit to blame for it. After a few minutes, it was actually all OK. She didn’t say anything or give me any funny looks, we just went back to sleep.”*

In our small, non-clinical sample, the students were able to reconcile a temporary inability to maintain erection with their masculine self-image and with their relationships. They do not describe the bugbear of sexual therapy, the vicious circle of “fear of past failure, increasing insecurity, avoidance of sex leading, eventually, to avoidance of all physical contact”²¹⁰ Instead, our respondents’ feelings of self-worth and identity seem to be strong enough to cope with the not infrequent phenomenon of erection difficulties.

210 Hauch 2006, p. 39.

7.5 Experiences and management of difficulties in reaching orgasm

As we have seen, the fundamental principle of sexual activity for students is mutual desire and satisfaction. This expectation attributes crucial importance to the achievement of orgasm by both partners, as a recognized sign that both have genuinely felt desire and satisfaction. As Sven Lewandowski convincingly describes in his article on the social function of the orgasm (paradigm), the orgasm is now a crucial measure of a successful sex life and shapes what people “see as proper sex”.²¹¹ However, we also know that young women rarely reach orgasm during sex with a partner, and even more rarely during vaginal intercourse, without additional manual and/or oral stimulation.²¹²

The majority of the female students we surveyed find that they can reach orgasm quickly and easily by masturbating. When having sex with their partner, however, reaching orgasm is not a given for women. The man almost always orgasms during intercourse, while the woman reaches orgasm through additional manual or oral stimulation before, afterwards or – more rarely – during intercourse. The experience that women reach orgasm during sex more rarely than men is confirmed for female students by discourse – discussions with their female friends, books and the Internet – showing that the experience of orgasm is very variable for women. They know “*that [it] depends a bit on the way you’re made*”, they have learned that “*it works much better if you use your hand*” and they have read that “*it’s more difficult for women than it is for men*”.

Intimacy is fine – orgasm makes it better

The students express different opinions about the gender-specific frequency of orgasm: on the one hand, most female students do not consider having an orgasm to be an essential element of good sex – or, to put it another way: sex can be good even without an orgasm if it “*is enjoyable*” or provides “*physical contact, intimacy and closeness*” or if, simply, “*we were together and it was good*”. On the other hand, most of the young women explicitly adopt the position that Kerstin, aged 23, expresses so clearly: “*An orgasm makes it better!*” Here are some typical answers to the question of how young women feel when they do not have an orgasm during sex with their partner:

211 Lewandowski 2001, p. 209; Lewandowski 2004.

212 Cf. Lloyd 2005; Matthiesen & Hauch 2004b; Wallen/Lloyd 2011.

Heike (23): *“If I masturbate, then of course I have an orgasm. But if I have sex with a partner, I find the sex satisfying enough by itself. I don’t necessarily need to have an orgasm.”*

Suse (24): *“I want to have an orgasm often from sex with my partner, but I don’t mind if I don’t. I feel a bit sad for a moment, that’s all.”*

Rebecca (22): *“I can feel satisfied even without having an orgasm, if it felt good. But it’s an intense sensation, and I really like it. If I never had it, I would feel I was missing out.”*

Anja (24): *“It’s no big deal. It happens sometimes [that I don’t have an orgasm] and at first I’m a bit fed up. But I don’t really mind. [...] It’s very important to him that I should reach orgasm. But it’s not that important to me.”*

Most female students do not find it a problem if they occasionally do not reach orgasm. They only begin to worry if they never reach orgasm during sex. Mareike (22), who had this experience over several months, recalls that she “got frustrated at some point”, and Laura (22) says explicitly: *“If I never had one, I wouldn’t be happy”*. Indeed, some women see this as a question of equality. They explicitly dissociate themselves from an altruistic image of women and an understanding of sexuality that is primarily based on satisfaction for the man:

Svetlana (22): *“I couldn’t live only by being happy that he has had an orgasm”.*

Melanie (21): *“If he’s going to get his fun, I want to get mine”.*

Paula (22): *“If it’s only sometimes, it’s OK, I put up with it. But overall I want to come as often as he does.”*

Difficulties due to pressure and stress

Despite these emancipated declarations, young women do find that there are times when it is difficult for them to reach orgasm during sex with their partner, either because they themselves or their partner do not provide the necessary manual or oral stimulation correctly, or at all, or because they themselves cannot concentrate. As also happens with male erection problems, they have difficulty at times of great stress, examinations or a heavy workload of studying. Here are some examples:

Marlene (24): *“I have difficulty reaching orgasm without clitoral stimulation. Without it I just can’t come. And if the man’s too rough. You can’t just fumble around and expect it to work. Also, if the man’s drunk [grins] it doesn’t work.”*

Annelene (21): *“It bothers me a bit that I can’t come unless I help myself along a bit. It does bother me. It’s a shame and I wish it wasn’t like that, but I don’t know what to do about it.”*

Jenny (24): *“Usually I’m my own worst enemy. I’m the sort of person who really wants to keep control over their own body, their own muscles, everything. I think I just find it more difficult to let go: probably, I usually don’t reach orgasm at all, in any way, because I just can’t let go.”*

Annika (19): *“But sometimes, sometimes it just isn’t easy. If I’m stressed and can’t concentrate. It’s not been like that recently, but it will probably get difficult again when the exams come. Then I just can’t have an orgasm. However hard he tries to make it happen.”*

Nadine (23): *“I put myself under a lot of pressure, because I can’t have one [an orgasm], and I make problems for myself. Sometimes I feel I over-think it while having sex.”*

Preliminary conclusions We can conclude that the orgasm does, indeed, play an important part in the validation of sexual performance in student relationships: for most female students, it is not enough if they only rarely reach orgasm during sex with their partner. For them, it is a question of equality to ensure that the female orgasm is not considered less valuable than the male orgasm. Almost all the women surveyed here reach orgasm regularly and easily through masturbation. They therefore do have the mental and physiological capacity to achieve orgasm; the reasons for their difficulties are to be found in the social context (stress), the dynamics within the couple or their own internal experiences.²¹³

213 See also Hauch 2006, p. 25 ff.

7.6 Summary

A surprisingly high number of female students complain of a lack of libido, difficulty in reaching orgasm and problems with arousal, and of pain during heterosexual sex with a partner. Just as many male students complain that they reach orgasm too quickly and say that their partner does not want sex “often enough”. In these results our survey confirms two findings of international research in the group we are investigating, namely German students: firstly, a high prevalence of sexual difficulties and, secondly, a greater prevalence among women.

We also confirm the need to differentiate clearly between the concepts of sexual difficulties and sexual problems or dysfunctions, and to define the threshold between temporary difficulties and clinical problems requiring treatment on the basis of the subject’s subjectively experienced sexual distress. This is because, if we ask the students about the distress they experience as a result of their difficulties, the alarmingly high number of complaints is reduced to a more realistic level; most of our respondents are relaxed about sexual difficulties in their relationships. We may conclude from this that many couples clearly have resources, within the relationship and individually, which prevent difficulties from becoming chronic and leading to sexual dysfunctions in the clinical sense which would require treatment.

Nevertheless, 14 % of female students in steady relationships report that they suffer “seriously” or “very seriously” as a result of the sexual problems in their relationship, while for male students, the figure is 6 %. In such a young group, this is an indication of considerable insecurity and dissatisfaction with couple sex. These findings remind us that sexual difficulties are less attributable to the effects of age than is often assumed, and that they occur in all age groups and at all levels of education. In terms of promoting sexual health, the need for age-appropriate information services becomes clear. In addition, a small number of young adults require appropriate assistance and prevention services to enable them to deal with their sexual problems and the associated distress.

As we have already stated, one point which must be borne in mind in interpreting the high prevalence of sexual difficulties is the “soft” formulation of the question about sexual difficulties in our survey tool. Current screening tools for sexual dysfunction (using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition – DSM-5) ask, for instance, about both the frequency of occurrence of the dysfunction (rarely, sometimes, usually, always) and its duration (at least six months).²¹⁴ They therefore use much “harder” criteria than we have done in our questionnaire survey. This is because our investigation focuses less on clinical care for people with sexual dysfunctions, and more on the sexual behaviour of this specific group.

214 Cf. Hoyer et al. 2015, p. 39 ff.

How can the results be classified?

At first glance, the findings seem contradictory. On the one hand, we see a high level of complaints and dissatisfaction. On the other hand, a detailed analysis of specific problems (here, for example, erection difficulties among men and difficulty achieving orgasm among women) reveals a high capacity to cope with temporary difficulties, effective communication between the partners and a high level of skills and self-awareness in the expression of sexual desires and needs. Clearly, both female and male students often come face to face with the impossibility of controlling sex in heterosexual relationships. Sexuality represents “the unavailable, the unknown and the inaccessible”, as the psychoanalytical theorist of sexuality Ilka Quindeau puts it.²¹⁵ To put it rather more simply: everyday sex in a steady relationship is not always mind-blowing. There are pitfalls for both sexes: difficult life circumstances, stress, lack of time, illness, contraception problems, fears and expectations and many other inhibiting factors can get in the way, and clearly they often do.

In addition, we have shown that sexual activity declines with the duration of the relationship. This is because sex fulfils varying functions in both psychodynamics and couple dynamics at different stages. This declining sexual activity is accompanied by a gender-specific sense of loss associated with the dominant discourse relating to sexuality – in other words, because a compelling imperative is applied to sexual experiences (it’s good to want sex), wanting sex less often is perceived as a failing. Thus many women and men find that it is the woman who more and more frequently, in the course of the relationship, does not want sex “enough”.

The question then follows of whether “not wanting much sex” should be seen as fundamentally pathological or at least dysfunctional, or whether the formula “not wanting sex often” actually conceals a feeling of “I don’t much want the sex I have”. The description of women’s difficulties in reaching orgasm clearly shows that the assumption that all women can reach orgasm through intercourse alone is as widespread as it is unrealistic. In this connection, the Canadian sex therapist Peggy Kleinplatz²¹⁶ makes the interesting suggestion that a low level of sexual desire should be interpreted as a sign of good judgement and a refusal to “settle for lousy sex”.²¹⁷ According to Kleinplatz, having not more sex, but “sex worth wanting” is a worthwhile goal for both women and men.

215 Quindeau 2012, p. 26.

216 Kleinplatz 2012.

217 Cf. Clement 2014, p. 10.

III

Children and university

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8



No children during university? – students' attitudes to family planning

Philipp Franz and Silja Matthiesen

The phenomenon of the many female graduates in Germany who are childless, by choice or otherwise, has been occupying the media, politicians and social scientists for over 10 years.²¹⁸ The context in which this phenomenon is discussed is the continuing expansion of education, the growing proportion of female graduates in German society and the fact that, since the mid-1970s, Germany has been a “low-fertility country”,²¹⁹ i.e. the number of children born in the country is consistently much lower than that required to “maintain” the population level. The media are horrified not only at the fact that Germans could “die out” but also, more recently, that groups with lower levels of education have more children than female graduates do.²²⁰ In other words, in Germany, the level of someone’s educational qualifications determines their probability of remaining childless. Over 30 % of highly qualified women do not have children, compared with only 18 % of women who did not complete high school.²²¹ The problem of childlessness among women with higher educational qualifications occurs “particularly among West German graduates”.²²²

8.1 Starting a family while studying – opportunities and risks

The issue of childlessness – wanted and unwanted – among female graduates has now been the subject of numerous studies, which have focused on the possibility of starting a family while studying, with its associated advantages and disadvantages.²²³ In addition, there are political moves to make Germany, and particularly German higher education, more child-friendly, thereby encouraging students to have children while at university. In particular, Chapter 2, paragraph 4, of the Higher Education Framework Act lays down the obligation to consider the “particular needs of students with children”. Since 2002, “Family-Friendly Universities Audit”²²⁴ evaluations of child-friendliness have been carried out in German universities.

218 Schröder 2012; BZgA 2005; Stiegler 2006; Konietzka/Kreyenfeld 2013.

219 Cf. Ruckdeschel/Dorbritz 2012, p. 6.

220 Cf. the cover of Spiegel magazine, issue 13, 1975; cf. Bujard 2012, p. 10f.

221 Cf. Dorbritz/Ruckdeschel 2013, p. 256.

222 Böhnke 2013, p. 82 (emphasis in original).

223 Middendorff 2003; Helferich et al. 2007; Middendorff 2008; Dippelhofer-Stiem 2012.

224 “Berufundfamilie Service GmbH”, a service set up by the Hertie Foundation, conducts the Family-Friendly Universities Audit in Germany. Cf. audit familiengerechte hochschule.

Years of education – delayed family

However, the large majority of students continue to deal with the dilemma of reconciling a long period of academic training with the desire to have children by consciously postponing starting a family. The long duration of study in German universities and the resulting “institutional effect”,²²⁵ means that female graduates are older than non-graduates when they have their first child. The average age for university-educated women to become mothers for the first time is 31 years.²²⁶ According to the classic “stage model”,²²⁷ which had (and has) a particular influence on socialization in the old West German federal states, the university period is seen as a training period, coming before the stages of work and family. For many students, both female and male, a steady job is seen as an essential precondition for starting a family.²²⁸ In today’s “portfolio careers”,²²⁹ characterized by the subjectification, blurring of boundaries and increasing flexibility of working life,²³⁰ delaying starting a family becomes a problem when the long duration of studying means that the graduate does not become established in his/her career until very late on. The desire to be “responsible” about having children²³¹ then comes up against the woman’s biological “window” for childbearing. This often leads to “delayed” parenthood of a single child.²³²

Women with a technical college or university education have 1.31 children per woman on average,²³³ which is below the widespread norm in Germany of two children.²³⁴ For the majority of these women and men, their family is not complete with a single child; instead, their desire for children does not decrease markedly until they have had two or more children.²³⁵

225 Higher education or training involves longer attendance at educational institutions and a later entry into the world of work, thus delaying starting a family. See, for example, Wirth 2013.

226 Cf. Statistisches Bundesamt [Federal Statistical Office] 2013, p. 22.L

227 Cf. Wehner 2009.

228 Cf. Middendorff 2003, p. 14.

229 For the term “portfolio career” and the replacement of the “normal biography” by the “choice biography”, see Beck 1986; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1994.

230 Cf. Keupp et al. 1999.

231 In the responsible parenthood model, the decision to have a child is based on a stable life plan and a corresponding sense of responsibility in the future parents. Cf. Henry-Hutmacher 2014, p. 7.

232 To enable women to postpone their desire for a child until even later, some employers, such as Facebook and Apple, offer their female employees the possibility of “social freezing” of the women’s unfertilized eggs, so that they do not have to interrupt their careers during the biological window of opportunity.

233 Cf. Dorbritz & Ruckdeschel 2013, p. 256.

234 Cf. Statistisches Bundesamt [Federal Statistical Office] 2011, p. 13.

235 Cf. BZgA 2005, p. 31.

The environment for families at university

Starting a family earlier, while they are still studying, is nevertheless something that the majority of students still avoid. For over 25 years, the proportion of students with children (in this biologically fertile and sexually active group) has remained constant at between 6 % and 7 %.²³⁶ There are only minimal differences in this low birthrate between female and male students and between the old and the new federal states.²³⁷

Quantitative studies investigating the low percentage of student parents emphasize the sociodemographic differences, e.g. greater age and educationally disadvantaged background, between female students with a child and those without. These data allow us to draw conclusions about the difficulties of studying with a child in German universities.²³⁸ The universities usually allow a pregnant student to take two semesters' leave. Daycare facilities attached to universities often provide flexible childcare, including late afternoons and evenings, and at many universities there are special grants for students with a child/children. Most financial support is, however, provided by State allowances, e.g. parent's allowance, child allowance or grants from charities for pregnant and single student mothers, which are not connected with the university.

The Bologna process, launched in 1999 to create a unified European higher education area which distinguishes bachelor's and master's qualifications, has further increased the difficulty of studying as a parent. In fact, the efforts to harmonize educational qualifications means that students spend a shorter time at each university and often have to change university for their master's course, which has to be organized around the partner and plans to start a family.

236 See, for example, Giese & Schmidt 1968; Clement 1986; Schmidt 2000; Middendorff 2008; Helfferich et al. 2016.

237 Cf. Middendorff et al. 2013, p. 481; Helfferich et al. 2016, p. 71 ff.

238 Cf. Heublein et al. 2003; Dippelhofer-Stiem 2012; Middendorff et al. 2013.

In the following chapter, students, as experts in their own situations, get the chance to speak. Based on an analysis of 135 qualitative structured interviews, we investigate the attitudes of this group to starting a family while studying. We divided the students into two groups.

- We surveyed 38 women who had been pregnant at least once while studying. Our evaluation of their experiences is described in the chapter “Pregnant at university” (see Chapter 9).²³⁹
- We also surveyed students who had never been pregnant or never fathered a child, as applicable (n = 94; 47 women, 47 men). The attitudes of this group were elicited from the following questions:

Interview guide

“What would happen if you got pregnant now?”; “Have you ever wanted a child?”; “Can you imagine having a child while studying?”; “What would be the ideal time for you to have a child?”

8.2 “Nothing’s settled yet” – negative attitudes to starting a family at university

Given that the number of students with children has stayed consistently low since the 1960s (at approx. 6 %),²⁴⁰ it is no surprise that a majority of our respondents were against starting a family while at university. The main reasons cited were financial insecurity and dependence, summed up in the equation “no money = no child”. Many students are worried that their budget would not be sufficient to feed a family. They are also afraid that they themselves would be even more financially and structurally dependent than they already are. Here are a few examples showing common concerns about financial burdens and dependence on family:

Emma (22): “I want to finish my master’s as quickly as possible so that my parents don’t have to support me any longer, since I don’t get the BAföG [State-funded maintenance grant]. I want to stop being a burden on my parents as soon as possible. So I don’t necessarily want to have a child while I’m still at university.”

239 We surveyed three male students, each of whom had fathered a child. Two of them are fathers in both a biological and a social sense, but the third sees himself as an unofficial sperm donor and is not involved in the child’s upbringing. The individual biographical features of these three isolated cases have little in common with the stories reported by the female students who had gone through pregnancy; for this reason, they were not included in our wider evaluation.

240 Cf. Giese/Schmidt 1968.

Henrike (24): *“At the moment, our financial situation is so dire that I think to myself, I wouldn’t want to bring a child up like this. I just don’t have enough financial security.”*

Tobias (21): *“It would be better if I wasn’t dependent on the BAföG and stuff like that”.*

Lars (22): *“First I want to be pretty much set up, financially and with work [...], so that the child can have a happy childhood. Say what you like about security, a loving mother, a loving father: if there’s no money, children have a shit childhood.”*

If students have a child while at university, they often become dependent for longer on their own parents, their grandparents or State benefits. For many, financial security seems essential before they can start a family, which represents a move away from the family of origin. At the same time, some statements (e.g. that made by Lars) display a questionable sense of hierarchy: financial security for the family is considered much more valuable than emotional care. More men than women are concerned by this idea, which indicates that the male students may see themselves in the traditional role of breadwinner and provider.

Fear of a double or triple burden

In their turn, more female students than male students say that combining having a child, studying and engaging in gainful employment would impose multiple burdens on them. They are afraid that they would be unable to cope with this double or triple burden and would fail to meet the demands imposed by these various roles and demands. The following quotes illustrate various dimensions of this dilemma:

Martina (19): *“I just couldn’t do it [...], both jobs at once, not properly. I would finish up abandoning one job and prioritizing the other, and it would have to be either the child or the studying, and my studying is really important to me.”*

Nina (22): *“I’ve got quite enough on my plate already, with just life and studying. [...] For example, I was in theatre all day on Tuesday, and it was absolutely exhausting. When you get home, all you want to do is eat and go to sleep. The thought of having to pick the child up and entertain it ...”.*

Stefan (25): *“Because studying makes demands on you, just like a full-time job [...]. There isn’t much time left to look after a child properly.”*

The main fear for female students is that they will fail to cope with the double burden and will have to choose between the work of a mother and that of a student. These young women anticipate (sole) responsibility for the hands-on, everyday care and nurturing of the child, at least while it is young, and these caring responsibilities make them doubt whether it is possible to combine studying with motherhood. Both sexes emphasize the extreme lack of time arising from a heavy study workload: studying is described as equivalent to full-time work, which would necessarily be subject to unwanted interruptions if there was a child. For some students, their particular courses of study, involving laboratory work, strict attendance requirements or numerous traineeships which make them completely un-child-friendly, are just not compatible with having children.

University as “me-time”

Despite the heavy workload, many students also see their time at university as “me-time”, i.e. as a stage in which they can discover themselves and have space for personal development, and also for new experiences and fun. The desire for these things contrasts sharply with the responsibilities involved in bringing up a child. Constraints and having to give up potential new experiences do not fit easily into their current life plans, as shown by the following statements:

Carola (23): *“I’d just like to have the freedoms I have now. In the summer, we went on a long trip, backpacking through Europe. You couldn’t do that with a child.”*

Nadine (23): *“I’m at an age when I’d like to experience all sorts of things myself, without having to look out for another human being. [I] just want to live my own life.”*

Conny (19): *“I feel this is still my me-time [...] [You] have to give up a lot for children.”*

Julian (21): *“You don’t have time to finish university properly. You can’t live your life as you want to. Travelling, visiting friends, a child just gets in the way.”*

The ideal time to start a family is, here, firmly situated after university. Having a child during the university period is perceived as an unwanted restriction on personal freedom and a barrier to personal development.

For many students, the more flexible requirements of university life create uncertainties which make it seem impossible to start a family. The transition from bachelor's to master's courses or entry into the workforce mean that students are subjected to multiple individual demands and uncertainties involving their living situation, the question of where they or their partner are going to find work or a traineeship, and also the strength of the relationship.

Doreen (22): *“I [am studying] here in L. while my partner [is living] at home. We would need to move in together – our living situations would have to change too.”*

Ralf (26): *“That you don't know where you're going to end up. You could move abroad [...]. There is no real-life stability. Everything could change at any minute.”*

Tim (25): *“It all needs to be settled somehow. My girlfriend trained for a job and is working already. But until I get a job ...”*

René (21): *“You would need to have been together for a long time and just be sure about the future”.*

Preliminary conclusions The ever-increasing and ever-changing demands of university life conflict with the student's sense of responsibility and associated desire for stability in his/her own life. The system of bachelor's degree and master's degree courses requires adaptability and mobility; it does not always allow couples to study in the same place. Male students, in particular, feel an obligation to offer security to any future child, but do not feel capable of doing so in their current flexible life situations. Certain preconceptions relating to gender-specific roles, responsibilities and division of labour enter into planning a family:

- Women are cast in the role of everyday carer;
- Men are given the responsibility for financial security; and
- A stable couple relationship and a shared home are seen as basic prerequisites for starting a family.

Students are afraid that they will fail on all three counts.

8.3 “Ideal, because you get plenty of support” – positive attitudes to starting a family at university

Only a very small group of our respondents were open to the possibility of having a child while at university, citing the positive aspects of starting a family early. The main point emphasized here was the institutional support on offer, such as financial State-funded benefits or direct support from universities, including creche or kindergarten places:

Sascha (27): “I think it’s ideal to have a child while you’re at university, because you get a lot of support. Even the universities provide additional contributions for you.”

Svetlana (22): “There’s a combined creche and kindergarten right across the road from the university. It gets bigger every year. You can take the child in every morning, pop in and see it between lectures, and so on.”

Susanne (25): “I [was] surprised at how much help is available. Two of my girlfriends are better off financially now they have a child than when they didn’t.”

Paula (22): “Our university really supports you, there are even university childcare facilities.”

Many students are familiar with the support offered by their university in general and the specific facilities offered for childcare. Some of them think that their financial situation would stay the same if they had a child, or even improve. Many more female students than male students think about the childcare offered by the university. This indicates that women make more effort to investigate the support available, doing more to prepare themselves, at a theoretical level, for the possibility of a planned or unplanned pregnancy while they are at university.

Better now than when you’re working

A few female students²⁴¹ saw having a child while at university as a good way of avoiding interruptions in their future working lives and pursuing their career goals more effectively. The transition time between a bachelor’s and a master’s degree or the period between finishing university and starting a traineeship can be put to good use for starting a family:

241 The three students concerned were women aged between 21 and 24 years, who had all grown up in the new federal states. Two of them are studying IT and veterinary medicine, respectively, and the third is training to be a secondary school teacher.

Inga (21): *“Maybe, too, I’m in a job where I want to move somewhere up the career ladder, and then [...] taking a year out because I can’t get childcare, I [...] I can’t really see myself doing that.”*

Anna (22): *“The way it is, after finishing your exams you have to wait six or eight months before you can start your traineeships. If you’re sitting at home for eight months anyway, that could work out quite well.”*

Having a child while still at university is seen here as a career strategy, arising from fears of potential damage to the career caused by starting a family during the employment phase. Having a child while studying seems to make it possible to pursue personal career goals without restriction, provided that it is possible to fit having the child seamlessly into specific times in the university period. These ideas represent a gender-specific strategy: they are expressed only by female students. Male students expressed no concern that a child might oblige them to interrupt their careers or restrict their career planning.

Positive associations: young parenthood

More frequently, respondents express the wish to become parents while they are young. They see advantages in the smaller age difference between parents and children, which they hope will bring greater emotional closeness and give them things in common:

Roman (27): *“My mother was 23 when I was born. I always liked having young parents, and it’s something I want for my own children.”*

Anselm (21): *“You don’t want to be too old when you become a father or start a family [...]. If you are younger, the age difference isn’t so great and maybe that means you can build up a better relationship with the children.”*

Susanne (25): *“Because, as a typical socialized product of East Germany, I know a lot of young mothers. My parents had children by the time they were 25, as well.”*

The students’ own socialization history is decisive in this ideal of young parenthood: most students who express the wish to have children young come from the new federal states, and their own parents started their family while they were still at university. Positive experiences from the respondents’ own childhood are projected forward on to their relationship with their own future children, and are associated with the idea of greater intergenerational closeness.

8.4 Summary

Students usually avoid starting a family while at university because of concerns about the associated financial burden and long-term economic dependence on others. These fears correspond with the reality experienced by the small number of student parents, who generally feel burdened by their financial situation.²⁴² It should be noted that student parents usually come from backgrounds of only average levels of education and generally have parents who can afford to contribute relatively little in terms of financial support.²⁴³ As a result, one third of students with a child are also in gainful employment, although there are large gender differences: 74 % of student fathers are in gainful employment, compared with “only” 45 % of student mothers.²⁴⁴ This traditional distribution of the roles of breadwinner and carer helps us to conclude why concerns about the family’s economic situation should be more common in the statements made by male students. In contrast, female students are more concerned about the potential double or triple burden involved, particularly about having to take time away from studying. These interruptions usually mean that student parents spend longer at university, living “an existence in three worlds”²⁴⁵ made up of studying, child-rearing and gainful employment.

As well as these gender-specific concerns, which are shaped to a remarkable extent by traditional gender roles, students without children feel unanimously that the time at university is a separate stage of life which comes *before* having a family. The main reasons for this view are, on one hand, the great demands placed on the students and, on the other, their desire for space, self-realization and “me-time”. These are perceived as being incompatible with starting a family. Starting a family is associated with the desire to finish studying first and to become financially independent by beginning gainful employment, which will happen in the near future. Until they are able to achieve this independence, having a family and studying are irreconcilable with one another.

242 Cf. Dippelhofer-Stiem 2012, p. 424.

243 Cf. Middendorff 2008, p. 20.

244 Cf. Middendorff 2008, p. 28.

245 Cf. Dippelhofer-Stiem 2012, p. 419.

Some students consider that having a child while at university can be a useful career strategy, associating this idea with a positive view of the support available to them. The idea that they can avoid interruptions in their working life and thereby benefit their career is a very plausible one. However, their positive view of the support available is not borne out by the reality experienced by most student parents. Instead, student parents are often unable to combine studying with having a child in the long term owing to the lack of childcare facilities in universities. This makes it more likely that they will abandon their studies.²⁴⁶

The main reason why students are open to the possibility of having children while at university is their belief in the advantages of young parenthood. The general desire to have children while young is seen here once again. If there was some improvement in the barriers to starting a family while at university, it could be made into an incentive for students to have children while studying.

246 Cf. Heublein et al. 2003, p. 89.

9



**Pregnant at university –
start a family or have a
termination?**

Philipp Franz and Silja Matthiesen

As we have already seen, both sexes have many reasons for not having children while at university and commonly express a wish to finish studying before they have children. It is interesting to contrast these motivations with the decision-making process among those female students who have gone against the trend and become pregnant while at university, deliberately or otherwise. We interviewed 38 female students who had been pregnant at least once by the time of the interview.²⁴⁷ The analysis of their statements is intended to answer the question of what makes it possible or impossible for students today to have a child.

In the analysis below, we consider the following questions:

- 1 How do pregnancies while at university happen?
- 2 What are the decision-making processes associated with the question whether to start a family while at university?

This process can have quite different starting points: it may start with a shared desire to have a child or with a failure of contraception that goes unnoticed. It may be planned and highly organized, or be accompanied by enormous ambivalence and conflicts of an economic, moral, relationship, family or life-planning nature. The child's conception may be conscious and planned or unnoticed and unwanted; it may also, however, be provoked by unconscious motives. A positive pregnancy test may be shared with the partner as a moment of great joy – or experienced alone as a complete disaster. The pregnancy may result in a birth, a miscarriage or a termination. Any of these may cause grief or relief – or both simultaneously.

These few keywords alone reveal the high degree of individuality and complexity in the decision-making processes involved in a pregnancy while at university. Our respondents were divided into three groups, according to the stories behind the occurrence and progression of the pregnancy (see Table 9-1). All pregnancies that resulted in either a live birth or termination fit into these groups.²⁴⁸

247 These 38 young women report a total of 51 pregnancies. Of the 51 pregnancies, 25 resulted in the birth of a child, 10 in pregnancy terminations and 10 in miscarriage. Six women were pregnant at the time of the interview.

248 A total of 10 of the women in our survey had had a miscarriage in the past. In the case of six of them, this was the current or most recent pregnancy, for the other four the miscarriage occurred in the past. Since the following analysis is concerned with the decision-making process related to wanted or unwanted pregnancy while at university, the miscarriages were not systematically evaluated.

Table 9-1
Four-fold schematic of pregnancies (n=38)*

	Planned	Unplanned
Pregnancy		
Wanted	Type 1 (n = 11) "The pregnancy was systematically planned and actively pursued"	Type 2 (n = 13) "We founded a family following an unplanned pregnancy"
Unwanted		Type 3 (n = 8) "The pregnancy was unplanned and unwanted and ended in a termination"

* The figures refer to the latest or current pregnancy, excluding those women whose most recent pregnancy had ended in miscarriage (n = 6).

Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

In the following analysis, we define and describe the three types. Each time, we begin with a sample case history and a diagram showing the main chronological stages of the decision-making process. We analyse the processes of communication between the partners, contraception practices, the couple's sex life (in the context of conception, birth and pregnancy termination) and the outcome of the pregnancy.

9.1 Project baby: the wanted child and university

All Type 1 pregnancies (n = 11, "the pregnancy was systematically planned and actively pursued") were specifically planned to take place during the university period. The process of founding a family begins with communication between the partners and a mutual, negotiated agreement to have a child while at university. This joint decision is followed by cessation of contraception with the aim of achieving conception at the optimum moment. In all cases, pregnancy occurred between two and six months after the woman stopped taking the Pill. Since the decision to have a child had been taken before conception, there was no consideration of the pros and cons of going ahead with the pregnancy and no ambivalence about the much-wanted creation of a family. The case history of Hanne is an example of Type 1.

Case history: Hanne (31)

Hanne is studying educational science and was 31 when she deliberately began to plan to have a child while at university. At that point, the couple changed their method of contraception from the Pill to condoms, and later abandoned all forms of contraception, because Hanne “knew from a lot of my girlfriends that it doesn’t always work as soon as you stop the Pill. [...] It was five months after I stopped, I think, before it worked.” They changed their method of contraception “because we wanted to start planning.” At the same time, Hanne wanted to “postpone the pregnancy a bit”, because “I wanted to play until the end of the volleyball season and then ideally move seamlessly over [...] to being pregnant”.

On the day the child was conceived, she noticed: “Here we go, my temperature’s going up again” and it was clear that “we really need to have sex today”. Because Hannah had been monitoring her own temperature and seen that “my temperature had been over 36.8 degrees C for 18 days”, she took a pregnancy test with her partner there. They both “lived through the next three minutes together”, until “the little lines on the pregnancy test showed it was positive”.

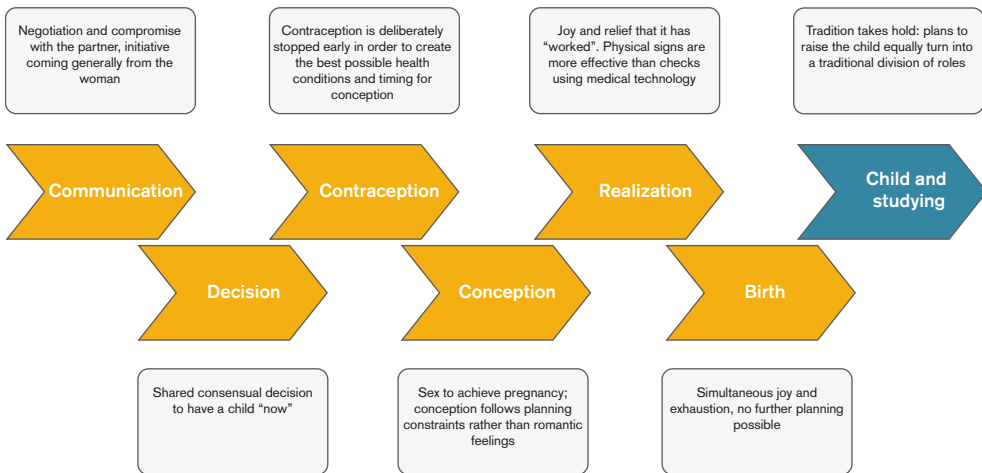
Hanne and her partner had been thinking about having children for some time. However, since it was “never the right time because of my partner’s work situation, I said ‘I want to do it when I’m 30 anyway’”. Hanne believes that, “anyway”, there is never a “perfect time” to have a baby. Hanne sees herself as the driver of the family planning process: “It came more from me, it was me who said: ‘It really is the right time now’. [I’d already been] looking at every baby I passed and longing for a child.”

Course of the pregnancy and decision-making process

Figure 9-1 is a graphic representation of the separate steps in the process of planning a pregnancy while at university; the steps and decisions involved are explained below.

Figure 9-1

The pregnancy was systematically planned and actively pursued (Type 1)



Source: BZgA, "Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age", 2013

Agreement between the partners that they want a child is the necessary first step towards the deliberately planned creation of a family while at university. The communication and negotiations beforehand are generally instigated by the woman.

Elina (29): "After my mid-20s, I got broody and it got stronger and stronger until it actually hurt [...]. I explained it all to [my partner], because he wanted to know how I thought we could actually do it. Then he thought about it for two months and talked to other people about it, not to me. Then at some point, he said: 'OK then, let's go for it.'"

Luisa (24): "We'd already talked about what children and marriage would be like. We [said], let's have the child first, because it fitted in well for me, between my exams and my traineeship."

The starting point of the decision to have a child is based on it being a time perceived as convenient during the student's time at university or on a strong desire for children. The partner would generally prefer to wait, so negotiations may last some time. It is important that the decision to have a child while at university is taken at this initial stage and is a joint decision with the partner.

Optimized contraception and sex with a purpose

The partners take a long-term view when planning the pregnancy. This is shown by the fact that contraception is taken less seriously, or stopped altogether, for some months beforehand. This is explicitly agreed with the partner and cleared by the woman's gynaecologist. It is intended to ensure that the woman is as healthy as possible. For women, therefore, detailed planning of the pregnancy begins months in advance:

***Franziska (27):** "I think it was August when we stopped using hormonal contraception, and we used condoms until October so that I would have returned to a normal, or more or less normal, cycle."*

***Sara (26):** "Because it had happened to friends of ours. They had taken quite a long time to get pregnant. I thought, OK, that's not going to happen to us. I don't want to be under any pressure. The person I talked to about it was my general practitioner. I [...] then sorted out some of my own health stuff, so that I was starting out from as good a position as possible. I bought folic acid from the pharmacist's, and vitamin B12, and [...] took vitamins to prepare myself."*

The women particularly emphasize the effects of hormonal contraception. They aim, in consultation with and on the recommendation of their gynaecologist, not to take hormones for a time before becoming pregnant. Their desire to fit the pregnancy in at a convenient time in their lives leads them to draw up a detailed plan which is executed unemotionally and with medical advice and support. Realizing the dream of having a child becomes a project, and they feel some pressure to carry through the pregnancy successfully and on schedule.

Sex for the purpose of conception The sometimes painstaking preparations and the active efforts to determine the timing of the pregnancy are not always successful – the moment of conception cannot be entirely freely chosen, even with the best possible preparations. The students' descriptions of the conception and their sex lives while they are trying for a baby are hardly romantic or passionate. Instead, during this time, sex becomes the means to an end – conception.

Sara (26): "Then we worked out when the baby needed to be born, because we wanted to have it while we were still students. So the time came, we needed to do something about it, and we stopped [contraception]. Five or six months later, I was pregnant."

Svenja (26): "We wanted a baby, and we had a try, we looked at the calendar, so to speak. We weren't obsessive about it, [...] but we did try to push it a bit. We were quite sad [...], a bit disappointed, that it hadn't worked yet. But then, in December, when we really weren't expecting it, [...] that was when it worked."

The students do not want conception to be delayed, since that would jeopardize their plans to fit the pregnancy into a carefully calculated window of time. Sex is therefore "pushed" on the fertile days when a child can be conceived, thereby gaining a new reproductive dimension in addition to its existing dimensions of passion or intimacy.

Self-perception before and after childbirth

The female students generally realize they are pregnant because of physical symptoms such as a missed period or swollen breasts. For confirmation, they conduct a pregnancy test, either privately or as part of a gynaecological examination:

Svenja (26): "Because I had had a miscarriage, I tried to be a bit more relaxed about it, in case it happened again. So I wouldn't be quite so disappointed and could let it go. So this time, I didn't do a pregnancy test, but when I noticed I'd missed a period, [...] I did begin to wonder."

Luise (24): *“Then we began to think for the first time, ah, maybe I’m pregnant. That was Easter Saturday. He went and bought the pregnancy test. Then, early on Easter Sunday, we did the test. We did it together. I woke him up – I was on early shift – I woke him up at three o’clock in the morning, we went downstairs together and did the test. And it was positive.”*

We see that the students first become aware of the pregnancy through intuition and awareness of physical changes; only then do they take a pregnancy test to confirm whether they are pregnant. Partners are generally involved at the time of the pregnancy test, if not before.

Challenges of life immediately after childbirth The birth of the child is greatly welcomed, although this stage of life, and particularly the time immediately after the birth, is described as extremely difficult. During this period, the woman suffers mainly from the physical effort and after-effects of the birth. Looking after the newborn, who needs constant care, is equally tiring. It is valuable and supportive for the partner to take several weeks off work after the birth and share these labour-intensive tasks, which extend over both day and night:

Silke (26): *“I really wasn’t well afterwards. I can say that for two weeks afterwards I really wasn’t well, so [...] that part, at least, really was very difficult. My son cried all the time in the first few months, because he had colic. So all I did was carry him around. All the time, in a baby sling. For all of the first six or seven months.”*

Sara (26): *“I felt well, but it was a bit strange, because of course suddenly having a baby there is a whole new world. We wanted the baby and everything, but it’s completely different when it’s actually there. You can’t prepare for it.”*

The exertion of the birth and the physical effects on the mother or child often take the women by surprise. While the pregnancy has been planned in the minutest detail, new responsibilities arise shortly after childbirth, and only a limited amount can be done to prepare for them. The young women find themselves under enormous pressure and immediately have to develop efficient procedures for caring for the child, in cooperation with their partner. Women are almost exclusively responsible for caring for the child in the newborn period, as partners generally take only a short period of leave.

Sexuality in pregnancy and after childbirth

Sexuality changes in pregnancy and after childbirth in two stages: while most female students are more interested in sex during pregnancy and experience more intense pleasure, sexual desire and activity initially decline sharply after childbirth:

Svenja (26): *“I really feel that this really intense desire, when you really could do it twice a day, that it comes from the pregnancy.”*

Franziska (27): *“During pregnancy, at the point when my belly wasn’t so big, I found it very enjoyable. In particular, my orgasms were much more intense.”*

Diana (26): *“We gradually started having sex again about six months after the birth, and naturally – or maybe not naturally – it still doesn’t happen very often.”*

Elina (29): *“I had the problem that sex was terribly painful, and I never really got wet. Although I did actually want to have sex. After that, it was in my head, I was always scared beforehand and kept putting it off. With the tiredness and all the things you’re thinking about, that relaxing, that letting go, was somehow just not there any more.”*

Immediately after the birth, the young women go through a phase of sexual abstinence because of the physical demands that have been made on their body. Generally the pace of physical recovery determines the period of sexual abstinence, which may last from several weeks to one year. In addition, the daily challenges of caring for a newborn baby may impose a mental and physical burden which adversely affects the couple’s sex life. After the phase of sexual abstinence following the birth, the couple’s sex life generally resumes, albeit at a much lower frequency than before the pregnancy.

University with a child – a dream come true

Women who become mothers while studying find that, after the challenging early period, a new everyday reality arises. It affects them in different ways: some women are very positive about this new stage in their lives, while others find that caring for the child conflicts with the demands of studying:

Silke (26): *“I’m very happy. I did it this way on purpose, so to speak. I wanted to get pregnant while I was a student. Anyway, there are lots of advantages. Beginning with the free cafeteria meal pass for children [laughs].”*

Diana (26): *“I think it’s perfect, really. I’m studying for the state examination, not a bachelor’s or master’s, because I can set my own timetable, and so this semester I’ve not taken many classes.”*

Elina (29): *“I did two major seminar units in the winter semester [...]. That winter semester was very, very hard, because P. [her child] was ill every two weeks, and of course it was me who had to miss all my classes. I was under a lot of pressure.”*

Life with a child while at university has many challenges: for some female students, individual freedom (e.g. flexible study assignments and statutory benefits) make studying with a child a positive experience. For others, events such as the child falling ill mean that they have to miss classes, which can lead to conflicts with their own and the university’s expectations and to stress and frustration. There is a lot of potential for conflict created by high expectations and the associated pressure to get good marks in one’s degree or the subsequent master’s programme.

9.2 “It never turns out the way you think ...” – an unplanned family at university

The pregnancies classified as Type 2 (n = 13, “We founded a family following an unplanned pregnancy”) were not planned specifically for this time. They occurred because contraception was either not used properly, or failed. Some of the female students had already discussed starting a family with their partner to a greater or lesser extent, while others had not talked about it at all, because the relationship was too new or there had been no opportunity to do so. It was only after the pregnancy was confirmed, often coming as a surprise, that they could begin to make a decision. Most of the young women did not find the decision an easy one, and only a few of them had a clear idea of what they wanted to do as soon as the pregnancy was confirmed. The partner, family members or best friends were involved in the decision-making process, but the woman generally made the final decision herself. After a more or less difficult process of deliberation, all the women decided to continue with the pregnancy. Larissa’s story is an example of successful integration of an unplanned pregnancy into university study.

Case history: Larissa (33)

Larissa is studying medicine and lives with her 20-month-old daughter in a student hostel. Her accommodation is cheap, near the university and has an arrangement with a creche, but it is cramped. She is currently in a weekend relationship with the father of the child. When he visits at the weekend, all three of them share her small room.

Before Larissa became pregnant, she says, they were *“friends with benefits”* and neither of them felt *“any kind of commitment”*. The pregnancy happened because neither of them used contraception. *“We said: ‘Well, if it happens, it happens’. And it happened. I was a bit surprised, but I felt OK about it.”* Since her 30th birthday, Larissa had felt a strong desire to have children, and also the need to take a break from studying after five years: *“I really did want to finish studying first. Maybe I just needed to make changes in my life. I don’t know any more.”* When she suspected she was pregnant, she took a pregnancy test, which came out positive. She was happy about the pregnancy, *“because I thought, oh how cool, this, now”* and had the feeling that *“now you can stop for a while, you don’t have to keep on studying”*. She was immediately determined to keep the child. *“I couldn’t say I was going to get rid of it. I was 31, almost too old to have a child, in my opinion. [...] For me it was actually a good time, better at university than when I was starting my career.”*

Larissa took two semesters off for the pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding; during this time, she lived on the Hartz IV unemployment benefit. She hoped to start a relationship with the father of the child as a result of the pregnancy. However, her partner would not give up his plan at the time, which was to move to the Caribbean, in order to found a family. *“I’d hoped he would stay, that now I was pregnant it would all be wonderful and romantic and fabulous [laughs]. But it didn’t work out like that.”*

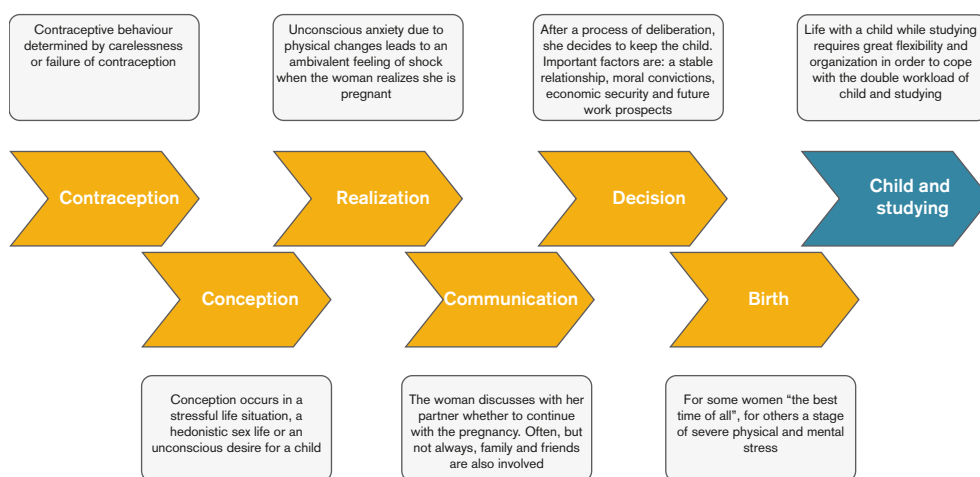
At the time of the interview, Larissa describes herself as a single parent. Her daughter’s father is studying in a different city and they are in a long-distance/weekend relationship, along with the child: *“When I’m at university, during the week, I’m the mum. He gets a lift here on Friday evenings. By the time he gets here, the little girl is already in bed. [...] It all starts the next morning, when she wakes up and I bring her into bed with us, and then we’re parents together. We have a cuddle, we look at a book, we do all those parent and child things.”* For Larissa, this weekend family model is tolerable, but it is not what she would like: *“I always thought it would be different. Having a child and having a family, quite traditional, with you both together and everything shared. I’d rather share everything with him: the work and the good times as well.”*

But it isn't going to happen. He has to keep studying in I., And I can't study there because they don't offer my course." Larissa's daily routine as a single parent is tiring; combining childcare and the demands of her studies is a daily test of strength. Her daughter goes to the creche every day, but despite the extended hours Larissa can barely manage to attend all her important classes.

Course of the pregnancy and decision-making process

There are various stages in combining an unplanned pregnancy with university study. The diagram in Figure 9-2 explains the various steps and decisions.

Figure 9-2
An unplanned family at university (Type 2)



Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

These unplanned families start with the failure of, or intermittent failure to use, contraception. Some women are aware of the risk of pregnancy, while others ignore it. In certain sexual situations – after a fight, or on holiday – the couple does not use contraception; sometimes, the reason is merely that “*we didn’t feel like it*”. Contraception failures range from a misplaced or torn condom, through failure to take the Pill consistently, to situations in which the women do not use contraception on one or more occasions. Some women do not know afterwards how the pregnancy happened.

Sina (27): “*We don’t think it was the Nuva Ring [vaginal contraceptive device] itself, because the Nuva Ring always worked really well.[...] I washed it with soap once, because I dropped it in the toilet by mistake, and you’re not supposed to wash it. So maybe it [was] something like that.*”

Rita (27): “*I did take the Pill, but I was so haphazard about it that it didn’t protect me – at least in that relationship and at that time. We never used a condom ever, I don’t think, I can’t remember.*”

Ricarda (26): “*Every now and again, we didn’t bother with contraception, funnily enough. There were times when I thought I couldn’t have children at all. [...] I think we’d had a fight and had sex afterwards, without using contraception, and that was probably when I got pregnant.*”

Daniela (25): “*At that time, we did try to use contraception, but if there was some problem, or we didn’t feel like it at the time, we didn’t bother.*”

Occasionally or temporarily failing to use contraception makes it possible to satisfy a potential unconscious desire for children without having to weigh up the pros and cons in the way required by “responsible parenthood”.

The beginning of the pregnancy

With hindsight, the women can remember the exact time of conception with varying degrees of accuracy; however, it is often possible to fix the approximate date. Female students who can no longer remember when conception took place blame stress or their chaotic lifestyle at the time. At these times, they have a predominantly hedonistic attitude to sex. Possible consequences, such as pregnancy, are not taken seriously, or the risk is considered small.

Mara (27): “We used a condom as well, except just the once. That must have been the one that hit the jackpot.”

Ulrike (43): “It was a moment of recklessness, playing with fire [...] I can’t say now what made us do it. At that moment, I never thought I would get pregnant.”

Rita (27): “I talked to my sister and my girlfriend about it, casually, saying I’d forgotten to take my Pill. My friend said: ‘You ought to get the morning-after Pill’. But it was such a crazy time.”

Maria (39): “At that time, our sex life was so different. It was as if we were both quite different people then. We used to play these S&M games and do lots of things from his fantasies. At that time, we didn’t use condoms, and I got pregnant.”

Daniela (25): “We had just [come home] from a party and we’d had a really good time. We were both on cloud nine all the way home and, somehow, we just didn’t use any contraception.”

These statements show that not using contraception can give extra emotional depth to sex. All the women were positive about contraception-free sex; fears or concerns about possible pregnancy were mentioned only in passing.

Realizing they are pregnant The women first became aware of the pregnancy through physical changes. Sometimes, however, they did not realize for some time, or found out about it by chance during a visit to the doctor. Usually they took a pregnancy test to confirm their suspicions. When the pregnancy was confirmed, their unconscious anxiety turned into an ambivalent state of shock, combined with the question of what they should do next.

Mara (27): “First of all, I felt pleased that I’d been right, and then I [felt] quite happy. It was a mixture of ‘oh, God, what a situation’ and feeling happy all the same.”

Rita (27): “I had a pregnancy test done, and there it was. On the ultrasound, you could already see it [...] I was very, very torn, because I didn’t feel ready. But I was still happy.” The happiness was a bit spoiled by all these questions of what I was going to do now.”

Sina (27): “Oh, God, I was in total shock. I was alone at home, and I called my best friend straightaway. I couldn’t talk straight, and [I had to] calm down a bit first.”

Daniela (25): “I was at the gynaecologist’s because I’d had a urine infection and wanted him to check me over. And he said: ‘You’re not pregnant, are you?’ And I said: ‘I’m not sure’. So he did the test and confirmed it.”

Kim (29): “At first, I thought the world had ended and I burst into tears [...]. Even though we’d said it wouldn’t be that bad, it was suddenly really bad; [...] I was really, really torn about this pregnancy.

There is a wide range of spontaneous reactions to the pregnancy: these range from happiness and excitement to enormous conflict. Despite their severe shock, some of the women are happy about the pregnancy and keep this positive attitude over the time that follows

Pregnant – what now? Weighing up the pros and cons

Confirmation of the pregnancy is followed by a process of deliberation, when the woman decides whether she should continue with the pregnancy or not. For some women, this decision takes just a few days, while for others it takes several months. The arguments for and against continuing with the pregnancy particularly concern the issues of studying with a child, the state of the relationship and the woman’s spontaneous feelings. Moral considerations and the woman’s fundamental attitude to pregnancy termination are also mentioned here. All these thoughts are accompanied by practical considerations.

Kim (29): “We had all sorts of things for and against. Why we should do it, and why we shouldn’t, and for me there were several things: my illness, on the one hand, I mean the effects of my drugs on the child [...] and the worry that it might be born with a disability because of these drugs. And I was worried about how I would finish my PhD.”

Mara (27): “The next day, I went to my gynaecologist, and [my partner] came too [...]. When I went to the gynaecologist, I’d already pretty much decided [...]: I’m going to keep it.”

Greta (34): “I’d already thought I could get rid of the baby, decide not to have it, but somehow things were too good for that. The relationship was too good, and we were about to move in together; it would have been ... to me, it’s murder.”

Sina (27): *“I wouldn’t think of having a termination, for moral reasons. And I think we are old enough now. I’d almost finished my master’s, and he was pretty much finished at that point and knew he’d got a PhD place.”*

At first, the women were anxious and frightened by the unplanned pregnancy; they generally discussed the pros and cons with their (sexual) partner. Although none of the pregnancies had been planned at the time, they were all “wanted” pregnancies in the sense that the women decided to continue with them.

Total stress or really easy – life straight after childbirth

After the birth, a new everyday routine is created, with new challenges. Women experience their time with a newborn very differently. For some women, their new life is free of anxiety and stress, while others emphasize its difficulties and stress how difficult they found it, both physically and mentally:

Luzie (23): *“Really easy [...] he woke up to feed, and that’s all. He fed and slept. That’s all he did, [...] it really wasn’t difficult. He slept through the night right from the beginning, without any problem.”*

Mara (27): *“It was great, I was completely in love with the child and the whole situation. I got out of hospital and went home after three hours, and we were at home right from the beginning. He looked after me and made me breakfast and made up the bottles, because we had to do supplementary feeding with J. right from the beginning; he had severe jaundice and breastfeeding didn’t go well. So it was perfect, really fantastic.”*

Rita (27): *“It was very difficult at the beginning, really very difficult. I was trying to do everything right. I was determined to breastfeed [...] but to start with it didn’t work. It was really bad, but I expressed some milk and tried everything I could think of.”*

Greta (34): *“I did the antenatal course, put a nappy on a doll, and thought, yep, I’ve got this sorted, great. And then you have your own child, it’s screaming like a banshee, you’ve just changed the nappy and got it dressed, then it fills its nappy and you have to start all over again, and you burst into tears. It’s just total stress.”*

Kim (29): *“On the second day, I got a real bout of the baby blues, that lasted for 10 days. I cried for hours and hours, and my boyfriend, he slept for hours. I still remember that, from the photos at least [laughs], he’s there asleep all the time, with our baby lying on him. We were completely exhausted.”*

Various factors determine whether the newborn period is difficult. While economic security is conducive to an anxiety-free and positive experience of the early days with the child, most young women have problems with the round-the-clock care that the child requires. If there is no partner to provide help and support after the birth, the sole responsibility for and care of the baby can be an enormous burden.

Sexuality in pregnancy and after childbirth

Sex during pregnancy is remembered by some female students as a time of liberation and frequent sexual activity, while others describe a reduction in sexual activity due to physical problems or problems in the relationship. In the time following the birth, there is a reduction in sexual activity because of physical and psychological problems arising from the birth, or relationship problems:

Maria (39): *“We had sex a lot throughout the pregnancy. That was why I got pregnant, because we had sex a lot.”*

Daniela (25): *“About three months before the birth, I started to get contractions when we had sex. It was quite difficult. I wanted sex, and I felt even more like it when I was pregnant, strangely, but in practice it didn’t work out, because every time, even in the missionary position, I got these contractions afterwards. So we had to have sex a lot less often. I sometimes got a bit frustrated.”*

Greta (34): *“If you have children, sex just gets worse, because you’re completely stressed out [...]. If you have to keep getting up in the night, and you’re tired, and you don’t have time to make yourself attractive any more, there’s bound to be less sex.”*

Kim (29): *“Yes, six or eight weeks after the birth [we had sex again], but it didn’t go well. My body still didn’t really belong to me, and I could feel hardly anything. I felt as though the child’s head had come out of there and it still hadn’t got its shape back. It was quite slack, anyway, so I didn’t enjoy it so much. So we waited a while before trying again.”*

Most women attributed the reduction in sexual activity after childbirth to the stressful first days after the delivery. Conflict within the couple may still occur, and this also has a negative effect on sexual interaction. The young women also refer to the changes in their own bodies caused by pregnancy and childbirth. They describe a temporary negative body image. They do not feel comfortable in their bodies and avoid sex for that reason.

Adapting to a new situation: living with a child while studying

The first days after the birth, generally perceived as a difficult time, are replaced by a new everyday reality – having a child while studying. While some respondents found it easy to combine studying with a child, thanks to considerable flexibility and multiple opportunities for support, others found the complete opposite. Some of the young women thus have to cope with a daily routine that requires considerable effort to organize, if they are to manage both the child and their studies:

Daniela (25): *“I do enjoy the time flexibility, not always having [to] watch the clock. Instead, I actually have a bit of time in the mornings. I can start the day relaxed. And in the afternoon, I actually have enough energy, and simply the time, to spend with my son. And some time for me, and for my partner, and everything else.”*

Ricarda (26): *“One disadvantage is that we can never make ends meet financially. Never. But otherwise I think the student support system isn’t bad at all; it gives me security and stability. In L., in particular, it was very family-friendly, with the childcare, and the food, and all the facilities at the uni, and of course the contact with other students who had children.”*

Kim (29): *“We have quite a complicated system. In theory, each of us is responsible for our son in turn, and we swap every second day. Say it’s my turn on Monday, Wednesday and Friday one week. That means I take him to daycare and pick him up afterwards. So I have to leave work earlier. But then the next week it’s my turn on Tuesday and Thursday, so I work less time on those days and longer on the other days. It means we both work about the same hours.”*

Mara (27): "Before having a child, of course I had that sense of freedom much more, about studying as well. And there was less pressure. I studied because I enjoyed it [...] And now I feel I need to get it finished. This pressure to finish studying makes it simply less enjoyable, or maybe it comes with having a child. I don't feel like a real student any more."

Female students who cope well with life with a child while studying generally have favourable study conditions on their course and receive support from the university. They cite the timing of classes and a certain basic flexibility in the structure of their course as positive factors. Courses that require long hours of attendance often impose a considerable burden, particularly if the woman is looking after the child on her own for most of the week. Parents manage to divide this burden fairly between them and avoid falling back into unwanted traditional patterns of care by means of complicated weekly schedules which fairly divide the responsibility for their child. The students see an advantage in the basic flexibility of studying, compared with work. However, work offers the financial independence they long for. Therefore, many students with children adopt a strategy of finishing their studies as soon as possible in order to gain the financial independence which they see as part of responsible parenthood.

9.3 "Choosing freedom" – having a termination while studying

The pregnancies classified as Type 3 (n = 8, "the pregnancy was unplanned and unwanted and ended in a termination") occurred because of failures in contraception and ended, after a period of deliberation, in termination. The decision-making process took various forms: while some young women decided to seek a termination as soon as the pregnancy was confirmed and found the decision liberating, others spent days or weeks deciding and, in some cases, underwent serious psychological suffering. Katrin's story is an example of the possible course of events in the termination of a pregnancy while studying.

Case history: Katrin (23)

Katrin was studying development policy and was 23 when she had an unwanted pregnancy. In the university holidays, she visited Daniel, with whom she had a short-lived affair, in the USA. When they had the sex that led to the pregnancy, they did not use contraception: *“I thought the guy was wonderful, and somehow it didn’t work with the condom. And I [thought]: ‘OK, don’t say anything’. Which is actually really stupid. So [I] went off straight away to get the morning-after Pill.”*

In spite of the *“morning-after Pill”*, Katrin found out when she got back to Germany that she was pregnant. She says: *“Eight weeks later, [I] realized that my period hadn’t come. I did a pregnancy test, and another, and another, and I was pregnant. And there I was back home, completely alone, having to deal with it.”* She describes the situation as *“the worst moment I’ve ever lived through”*. This unwanted pregnancy completely overturned her previous ideas about what she would do in such a situation. *“I was in the middle of university and [I] had to make it work. Before that, I used to think: if you got pregnant and had to bring the child up alone, it wouldn’t matter, the main thing is to have a child. I absolutely did not feel like that any more. When the moment came and I looked at the pregnancy test, [it was clear]: I don’t want to do this alone. I actually can’t do this alone.”*

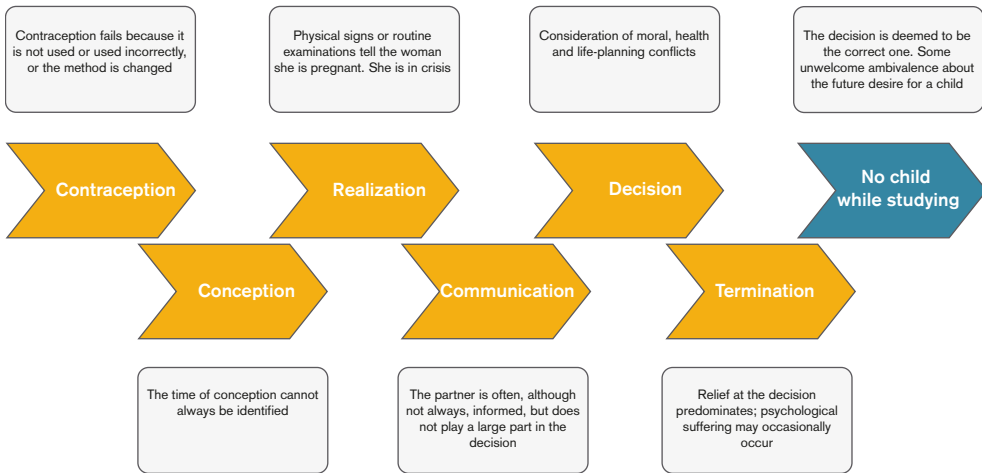
At this point, Katrin had no contact with Daniel. She did not tell him about the pregnancy and is convinced that he would not have been of any help to her: *“Even if I’d called Daniel and said: ‘hey, I’m pregnant’, he would never have said: ‘great, I’ll come and live with you’. Or: ‘come to America and we’ll get through this together’. It was quite clear that I was on my own.”* Katrin soon decided that she did not want a child in her current situation. Although her family was supportive, the pregnancy conflicted with her life planning, her desire for a family, her plans for study and work and her self-image. *“My mother said: ‘No problem, I’ll move in with you, I’ll help you, [we’ll] do it together’. All I thought was that I don’t want my mother bringing up a child with me. And I suddenly realized, I’m not ready. I’m in the middle of my studies. I’ve got no money, I don’t even have a degree. And then, how it looks from the outside. I would have been the only one of my friends who – even if it was an accident – was suddenly a single mother. I didn’t want that. That’s not how I imagined it happening.”* Katrin decided to have a termination. Before the termination, she felt terrible, but afterwards, she says: *“I was incredibly relieved”*.

Course of the pregnancy and decision-making process

The diagram below shows pregnancies among students which were both unplanned and unwanted and describes the relevant steps and decisions which ended in the termination.

Figure 9-3

The pregnancy was unplanned and unwanted and ended in a termination (Type 3)



Source: BZgA, Evaluation of the qualitative survey on sexuality among students in the Internet age, 2013

The decision-making process begins with the failure of contraception: while most of the women had some idea why their contraception failed, a few had no explanation. Contraception fails because of incorrect usage, an (intermittent) cessation of use or a switch to a new method:

Amelie (21): “I always took [the Pill] at the right time. I wasn’t sick or anything. Usually, I’d say, I used it correctly.”

Lia (24): “I took the Pill on and off, and then went back to the Nuva Ring, and during the changeover we [...] used condoms as well, because I was over-cautious. And then the condom tore.”
“

Linda (25): *“I looked for the condoms, but I couldn’t find them in the chaos of moving house. So we had sex anyway. At the time, [...] I didn’t give it another thought.”*

Yolanda (27): *“Then I didn’t take it for two weeks. I needn’t have bothered starting the Pill, the few times I took it”.*

Failures in contraception are a one-off in some cases, but in others they indicate a structural failure of contraception over a long period. Although all women describe their contraceptive behaviour as reckless and risky in hindsight, this thought does not occur to them in the actual situation.

Conception and awareness of pregnancy

Conception occurs at very different times in the students’ relationships. While some of them have been in a relationship for some time, others have just begun a new relationship or are between relationships.

Britta (31): *“I had my own little apartment and we didn’t live together. We hadn’t been together long, only six weeks.”*

Yolanda (27): *“We [had] sex incredibly regularly at that point. It really was at the same time every day; that wasn’t such a good thing [laughs] after all.”*

Anita (32): *“It was soon after the beginning of my second relationship. It was probably his, although it might have been my first boyfriend’s [...] since I was still having sex with him, yes, I was, [...] then at some point I got pregnant.”*

If the respondent does not remember the exact point of conception, it may be evidence of her life circumstances and contraceptive behaviour at that time, or of an attempt to block out the failure in contraception. Some women seem to see no point in identifying the time of conception. As well as inconsistent contraception, this stage is characterized by very active, frequent sexual activity

Realizing they are pregnant The women become aware of their unplanned pregnancy in a number of ways. Some consult their doctor because of a missed period, others know through physical sensations that they are pregnant. Some of the women learned that they were pregnant during a routine medical examination:

Britta (31): *“I had a routine examination, and she told me I was pregnant [...]. I thought it was a bad joke. They put me in a small room, and I cried, for hours.”*

Yolanda (27): *“It was a feeling of ‘oh, my God, it’ll never work out’, [...] but it wasn’t a tragedy. It was shit, but it wasn’t tragic; it wasn’t a matter of life or death, it wasn’t that my whole life depended on it. It was: ‘Shit, it’s happened, but I can deal with it, I can find some solution.’”*

All the women experienced their pregnancy as an unwelcome surprise, and many of them were in shock at first.

“Choosing freedom”

All the women made their choice to have a termination after much reflection and careful consideration of their wishes and future prospects. There are clear differences in both the decision-making process and the motivation:

Amelie (21): *“I had absolutely no idea what would happen if I told my future employer, because I’m being sponsored to study, and so whether I could start later or whether I would lose the job altogether [...] wasn’t clear. What was clear was that I couldn’t have started work the way I wanted and had planned to.”*

Lia (24): *“I was clear right from the start that the relationship I was in – especially when you’ve only been in a relationship for a month or two, it was completely wrong. I’d been taking some medicines, and I knew that they could have serious effects and that you shouldn’t take them if you’re pregnant [...]. That’s when I thought: ‘OK, you can’t do this, from a health point of view.’”*

Yolanda (27): *“A child just isn’t part of my life plan at the moment, it was as simple as that, crystal clear, it just isn’t part of the life plan now. Later, yes, of course, even with this man, obviously, great, I know now that I can get pregnant, that’s sorted.”*

Linda (25): *“The main reason was that I didn’t decide against this child, but I decided for my life and a certain freedom. I felt I really had the freedom to choose the best option for me, because I would manage financially in any case if I decided to keep the child, maybe with the help of my parents or grandparents. I’ve got a good social network and I would get support from that. In the end, [I] chose freedom.”*

The reasons not to continue with the pregnancy vary greatly: often, the student wants to keep her personal freedom and plans for the future, is concerned about losing her university place or realizes that pregnancy is not compatible with her current relationship.

After the termination

After the termination, most of the women experienced a feeling of relief. Some were not affected either mentally or physically and carried on their lives without interruption. Others, although basically relieved about the termination, had some periods of psychological suffering:

Yolanda (27): *“On the day, I asked him to come home with me. ‘Please get me something to smoke, I want a joint and I want a Chinese meal and I want the whole world to leave me alone.’ So that’s what we did, and after that it was all alright again.”*

Amelie (23): *“Really ... really, I was relieved and I was glad. But it was a strange situation, it was an experience you have to go through entirely on your own. And that was difficult, and I didn’t quite know what to do with myself.”*

Britta (31): *“Straight afterwards, I spent three months living at the police college. I was busy from morning till night. And that worked. My thoughts were occupied all day.”*

Sabrina (24): *“Afterwards, of course, I was quite relieved that the whole thing was over, but above all I knew: it’s time for me to go into therapy, because I thought to myself, how did I ever come to this. How could something like this happen.”*

The women's main strategy for the time immediately following the termination is distraction. This enables them to get back into the routine of studying. The experience of termination is perceived as a burden if there is no possibility of talking about it with the partner, friends or family. The experience of termination has varying effects on the young women. In isolated cases, the termination prompts the woman to want to go into therapy.

Sex after a termination Sex after a termination varies greatly, depending on the effects of the intervention: some women see no effect on their sexuality or relationships, while others abstain from sex for a while because of physical problems. In one case, the termination brought about the end of the relationship:

Linda (25): At first, I was definitely more sensitive, but otherwise, yes, I think it all settled down relatively quickly.

Amelie (23): "I always knew that I didn't want to at first. But I don't know when I started to want to again. It came back at some point."

Lia (24): "I bled for quite a long time, three weeks I think it was. And then we split up anyway."

Sabrina (24): "I've got very strict. Now, if I don't have it [the Pill] with me, because I unexpectedly spend the night away somewhere, then I won't have sex for the rest of my cycle. And I [wouldn't] have sex only using a condom. Sex with a condom and nothing else is no longer part of my life."

The termination did not cause any of the women to give up sex for long periods. As soon as the physical symptoms of the termination had resolved, sexual behaviour resumed as it had been before the pregnancy. In one case, it was the next day, while for most of the women it was a few days to a few weeks. In all cases, the women changed their contraceptive behaviour after the termination: they either changed to a hormonal method of contraception or started to use two methods simultaneously, assuming this to be more reliable. The young women describe their subsequent contraceptive behaviour as more consistent and careful; they are aiming to protect themselves against another unwanted pregnancy, which they wish to avoid at all costs.

Studying without a child: the right decision

None of the young women in our survey regretted their termination. However, their way of dealing with the memories of the event can be very different. Some women had no problem with their experience, but others are ambivalent. One of the students has suffered emotionally since the termination, and has a special day when she remembers what happened:

Anita (32): *“It was absolutely the right decision. If I’d had a child then, I would probably have found some way of managing. But I’d have had no qualifications, and we would probably be on benefits now. I think it was absolutely the right decision. As I said, I’ve even forgotten the date. I hardly ever think about it.”*

Lia (24): *“It’s become even clearer to me now that I don’t want children at all, and that, when you look at it like that, they’re a burden on you [...]. Overall, anything to do with the whole business of having babies and getting pregnant, it’s all a bit difficult for me.”*

Linda (25): *“I never thought at any point that it was the wrong decision, and in the same situation I’d do the same again. I recently came up against it again, quite harshly, and I was able to be sad about it for the first time. And in the end it was a really good thing, I was able to give the whole thing some space. It was good for me, and I saw that I could let it happen, that I do have some ambivalent feelings about it.”*

Britta (31): *“There are a few days; I’d calculated the due date. On that day I always light a candle, and on Christmas Day too. That’s the day of unborn children, and I put a candle in the window. For when I feel bad, I’ve made myself a special place to grieve in.”*

The women see the termination as the correct decision, because a pregnancy would have changed their life situation and also created financial worries. For many of these young women, their self-reflection on the termination is part of a process of dealing with the experience. The chance to grieve is seen as a way of relieving their feelings.

9.4 Summary

The three types depicted in the four-fold schematic of pregnancies (cf. Table 9-1) are very different as regards the origin of the pregnancy and the decision-making process.

The wanted child and university

All the women who systematically planned and actively pursued pregnancy while at university had consciously chosen the point in their lives when they wanted to have a child. This approach requires effective consultation between the partners and painstaking, long-term planning of contraception and sexuality. The major planning effort that the young women employ to ensure that the child is born at the best possible point in their lives is connected with their wish:

- Not to be too old to have a child;
- To make it easier to transfer from studying to work;
- To make optimum use of certain time windows, such as the time before examinations or traineeships; and
- To actively combine their desire for children with their life and career planning.

This shows the capacity that social scientists call “the rise in planning thinking”:²⁴⁹ women are trying to render controllable the risky freedoms²⁵⁰ whose negative consequences can be perceived as insecurities by the individual. They draw up their plans for the future in accordance with their individualized ideas.

The desire for pregnancy while at university is fuelled by the realization that there is no ideal time to have a child. If responsibility is transferred to the individual, the consequence is that women themselves feel responsible if they miss the opportunity to found a family. If they are not to fail in this task, they must actively plan for it.²⁵¹ They do this when planning to have a child while at university, through what they hope will be the “organization of smooth processes”,²⁵² driven by the fear that, by the time they finish studying, they will be beyond the ideal age to have children.

249 Beck-Gernsheim 2000, p. 59.

250 Cf. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1994.

251 Cf. Beck-Gernsheim 2000.

252 Villa 2011, p. 11.

Planning for “risk reduction” Another motivation for having a child while at university is the women’s fear that they will not be able to have as many children as they want if they do not start before they finish their studies. In addition, some women consider that having a child at this point is advantageous from a time-management point of view. This stems from the idea that, in their future careers, they will have less freedom and less time flexibility than they currently have at university. Thus the “pregnancy” project follows the economic logic of the “entrepreneurial self”²⁵³ as another project in life that needs to be planned and managed in parallel with the project of university study.²⁵⁴ The confidence in medical and technological procedures, which we have described in connection with planning pregnancy, and the solicitation of expert opinions are consistent with the demand for “one-hundred-percent risk reduction, as far as possible”²⁵⁵ which many women have now internalized. The self-determined planning of pregnancy and childbirth can be seen as a practice of physical self-empowerment which was, and remains, “a crucial feminist, critical and anti-authoritarian position”.²⁵⁶

An unplanned family at university

An unplanned pregnancy while at university sparks off a crisis in which the young women or couples have to decide whether to proceed with the pregnancy. The unplanned pregnancy is initially greeted with ambivalence and shock since, in some cases, the failure of contraception goes unnoticed and, in other cases, the couple assumed that the woman would not get pregnant. The positive pregnancy test creates a conflict in which the decision about the outcome of the pregnancy is initially left open.

Other studies have also identified pregnancies that were unplanned but not unwanted: inconsistencies of this kind are obviously very common in family planning.²⁵⁷ In the case of the unplanned creation of a family, however, students act contrary to the widespread assumption that the decision to have a child today is made consciously and agreed between the partners.²⁵⁸ In fact, the partners give up control by failing to use contraception and enabling pregnancy to occur, without planning their family in detail in advance. In this way, couples avoid the pressure of having to decide on the “right” moment in their lives to start a family. Through this inconsistency in their contraceptive behaviour, they give away part of their power to plan, and thus abdicate their responsibility.

253 Bröckling 2007.

254 Cf. Villa 2011, p. 12.

255 Villa 2011, p. 12.

256 Villa 2011, p. 14.

257 Cf. Helfferich et al. 2016.

258 Cf. Miller & Pasta 1996.

Pressure to decide An unplanned pregnancy requires a decision. In the absence of a clear emotional impulse, a long process then begins, in the form of a cost-benefit analysis involving various factors, such as the quality of the relationship, the woman's stage of university study and her financial situation. Discussion with the partner, friends and family helps her to reflect on the possibilities for continuing the unplanned pregnancy while studying.

Parental roles, flexibility and income In the period following the birth, the burden of caring for the child, which is borne by the individual, is of great importance. The changed responsibilities of the young parents become gradually more prominent,²⁵⁹ and the division of roles and tasks must accordingly be renegotiated and consolidated. Everyday life and study with a child involves a loss of freedom for some, but others see the great flexibility of studying as a positive factor.

The loss of freedom, in which having a baby results in less free time under the individual's own control, is seen, empirically, as a phenomenon often experienced only by mothers.²⁶⁰ Conflicts arise in relation to the insecurity of the family's financial situation since, without a "stable, independently earned income" as a "basis for long-term provision for a family",²⁶¹ this situation is experienced as precarious: economic insecurity contradicts the socially established concept of responsible parenthood.²⁶² The only solution is to aim to finish university quickly, which will relieve this responsibility at the emotional level.

259 Cf. Reichle & Montada 1999.

260 Cf. Eckhard & Klein 2013, p. 322.

261 WBfF 2011, p. 14.

262 Cf. WBfF 2011, p. 14.

Termination of pregnancy while at university

Students who terminate an unplanned pregnancy are the exception rather than the rule. From a representative random sample of all women of childbearing age, Helfferich et al. found that more than one in two unintended pregnancies were carried to term.²⁶³ The women were plunged into crisis by their unexpected pregnancy. Pregnancies due to incorrect or careless use of contraception are diametrically opposed to the accepted image of responsible sexuality, in which “the active prevention of conception is the norm”.²⁶⁴ Standard practices to prevent pregnancy, such as taking the Pill regularly or carrying condoms “just in case”,²⁶⁵ were ignored.

Residual risk as a natural side-effect However, not all unwanted pregnancies can be put down to “carelessness or incompetence”²⁶⁶ In sexually liberal societies, in which young people are sexually active for many years before they want to start a family, there will always be unplanned and unwanted pregnancies. There is a residual risk even when contraception is practised carefully over many years, because sexual activity cannot always be planned: emotions and urges may get in the way, and contraceptives may fail even if they are used properly. It is important to distinguish between avoidable risk and residual risk, thereby acknowledging that unplanned and unwanted pregnancies are not always due to carelessness or incompetence but are also a “natural side-effect” of sexual activity.

Dynamics of decision-making The women’s main concern now is how they should deal with the unplanned pregnancy. The decision-making stage is very active and very tense. The situation is seen as a particularly serious crisis when the pregnancy is not only “unplanned, but also unwanted”.²⁶⁷ The decision to terminate the pregnancy may be immediate or may be reached after a lengthy process of reflection and consideration. The termination is intended to forestall far-reaching life changes. It is expected that life with a child will be incompatible with the woman’s life, relationship and education situation. It seems “too early” to have a child, and the woman rejects the associated loss of freedom and autonomy to make plans for the future.

263 Cf. Helfferich et al. 2016.

264 Foltys 2014, p. 67.

265 Beck-Gernsheim 2000, p. 66.

266 Schmidt et al. 2006, p. 347.

267 Foltys 2014, p. 67.

Potential for conflicted feelings after the termination A second stage of the crisis arises for a few women after the termination. Although they are committed to the decision and feel that it was the right one, ambivalent feelings and psychological problems may arise later.²⁶⁸

Just as a couple relationship may be strained by pregnancy and birth,²⁶⁹ a termination may also cause problems and disruption for the young women and their partners. These conflicts and potential crises arise because the reasons why the termination was chosen need to be readdressed, for instance if the relationship was not considered strong enough to justify founding a family.

Often, the story behind the unplanned pregnancy is critically reviewed in hindsight. The process which led to the pregnancy, for which the couple itself was responsible, is not simply written off, but appears as a specific psychological problem in the form of “guilt questions”. The women experience a loss which they need to grieve and work through, “despite the decision, which they consider to be the right decision, not to continue with the pregnancy”.,²⁷⁰ Psychological suffering is mitigated by reflecting on feelings of guilt and allowing oneself to grieve, for instance by going into therapy or devising personal grieving rituals.

268 Statistically speaking, however, these psychological problems are not any more frequent than they are in women who have carried through an unplanned pregnancy. See the report of the American Psychological Association Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion (APA 2008).

269 Cf. Fthenakis et al. 2002.

270 Knopf et al. 2000, p. 24.

Termination and future life planning Women who are less negatively affected by the termination raise other issues when reflecting on their experiences. Having a child at this stage of life is associated with decreased quality of life due to the thwarting of personal and career goals. A clear emphasis is placed on completing one's education, and the women's position is that "participation in education and parenthood are difficult to reconcile" and that a child gets in the way of "gaining important resources (in the sense of human capital) for future life planning".²⁷¹

Most female students have a positive attitude to children, but they want to choose for themselves when to have them and at which stage of their lives. The decision to have a termination must, therefore, not be seen as a rejection of plans for children and family. It is more that the women are appropriating two crucial aspects of the history of family planning: the right to a dignified termination and the right to have a child at a time chosen by oneself.²⁷²

271 WBfF 2011, p. 13.

272 Cf. Weller 2003, pp. 39-44.

IV

Results, trends and research

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10



Hypotheses and conclusions for research and practice

Silja Matthiesen

In our study, we investigated 135 students (85 females and 50 males) from 15 universities throughout Germany, including 38 women who had been pregnant at least once. We deliberately opted for this number of interviews, although it is unusually high for a qualitative study. We wanted to build up as wide and varied a range as possible of different sexual experiences and reproductive decisions. This was the only way to do full justice to the variety of sexual behaviour, types of relationship, relationship ideals and attitudes to having children while studying. In this we succeeded relatively well – with two important exceptions relating to the following groups:

- Students with experiences of migration, and
- Homosexual, transsexual, transgender, intersexual, queer or asexual students.

Students with experiences of migration Clearly, fewer of these students took part in our study. Fewer than 10% of our respondents have experiences of migration in the first or second generation. This figure is much lower than the comparable figure in the current social survey conducted by the German National Association for Student Affairs (23 %).²⁷³ Our sample is thus more culturally homogeneous than the overall population of students in Germany. Moreover, it is striking that the majority of students with experiences of migration did not spontaneously refer to this during the interviews. We assume that these respondents have a very different attitude to their migration and to growing up in a potentially different cultural and social environment, and therefore attach a different significance to this topic. Nevertheless, we do not know whether their reluctance to take part in an interview on their own sexual and relationship histories is due to factors which have nothing to do with sexuality (e.g. language difficulties). We cannot exclude the possibility that students with a migration history organize their sex lives and relationships differently from the ones in our survey. They may also have a different answer to the question about starting a family while studying. A valid empirical study on these aspects would be extremely desirable – particularly in view of the current debate on the integration of people who have sought asylum in Germany.

273 Middendorff et al. 2013, p. 535 f..

Homosexual, transsexual, transgender, intersexual, queer or asexual students These students likewise did not participate in our study, or in only very small numbers. This is very regrettable, and means that our results represent young women and men who overwhelmingly identify themselves as heterosexual and cissexual.²⁷⁴ This leaves important questions unanswered: non-heterosexual students probably use the Internet differently, and perhaps watch different pornography. We do not know the extent to which the Internet provides students who can be classified under the acronym LGBTQI²⁷⁵ with specific information, or whether these groups use particular sex-related online material. Nor can we make any statement about the way in which the Internet is used to find sexual and relationship partners, or whether it is a way of achieving self-acceptance, emancipation and empowerment. The important and largely unresearched issue of sexual problems in same-sex relationships remains open. Unfortunately, we are unable to make any statement about same-sex couples who start a family while at university. Nevertheless, we can assume that the university period is a time for exploring and finding oneself and therefore important for gaining experience of a non-heterosexual lifestyle. A dedicated, differentiated empirical study on this topic, too, would be worth conducting.

Nine statements about sexuality among students in the Internet age

Despite the high number of cases, this is a qualitative study. Nevertheless, in many chapters, we have preceded our results with data from the representative quantitative study on “Changing sexuality in the student population”.²⁷⁶ This unique combination of quantitative and qualitative data enables us to do the following:

- On the one hand, we can make statistically representative statements on the prevalence and frequency of particular sexual behaviours,
- On the other hand, we get individual reports from the respondents about what they do, how and why they do it, and how they feel about it.

The strength of this study is its capacity to describe student social behaviour and student sexual culture as a whole. We are less able to differentiate and describe specific student subcultures. Therefore, the results summarized below are only partially generalizable; they are not equally applicable to all students and their status is that of empirically justified hypotheses relating to students in Germany in 2012.

274 The term “cissexual” denotes persons who identify with the gender that matches their biological sex at birth.

275 LGBTQI is the standard acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer und intersexual persons.

276 Cf. Dekker & Matthiesen 2015.

Statement 1: Student relationships are serial, monogamous and committed to fidelity

Until now, there has been a lack of empirical findings relating to the development of sex and relationships among young adults in German-speaking countries. Our data show that students' romantic relationships are generally serial and monogamous. Although these relationships regularly fail, student relationships are characterized by the desire for monogamy and permanence. On average, the students are in their second steady relationship when they begin university, and in their third by the time they leave – in other words, they generally finish one relationship while they are at university. The current relationships are relatively long-established, with an average duration of over three years. Many respondents hoped that their current relationship would last: one third of them believed that they would still be with their partner in five years' time, and a large majority hoped to spend the rest of their lives with their current partner and to have children together.

These attitudes are combined with traditional ideals of fidelity: a large proportion of respondents considered fidelity to be essential and required it from their partner. The students lived up to these ideals in their own behaviour: only roughly one in 10 had been unfaithful to their current partner. Monogamy is a dominating feature of both the actual relationship behaviour of the respondents and their requirements for relationships and their values. The requirement for sexual exclusivity makes each romantic relationship unique. If this implicitly accepted or explicitly agreed condition is broken, it usually threatens the relationship.

Our data show that the potentially infinite possibility space provided by the online world of sex is known and familiar to our group of students, but does not threaten the way in which they organize sex in steady relationships. Although the sexual revolution and the breakdown of sexual taboos and religious and moral restrictions in the 1970s brought about a marked change in sexual behaviour among students, the digital sexual revolution has not had nearly as much influence. Far from it: it almost seems that the desire for security, connection and dependability is once more on the rise.

→ Chapter 2

Statement 2: Students' sexual lives are primarily conducted within a steady relationship

Periods as a single person while at university are normal and to be expected. The phenomenon is due, on the one hand, to the relatively high fluctuation in relationships in young adulthood: the single periods are temporary interludes between two relationships, characterized by recovery from the previous relationship and the search for a new one. Being single is also an important part of a specific student sexual culture. In contrast to the political demand for a sexual revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s, today's students see this phenomenon as an age-specific life stage. The period of young adulthood comes between youth and the family which is wanted in the future. It is a time to experiment and gain various sexual experiences.

This includes experiences of casual sex outside a steady relationship. They are focused on sexual desire and curiosity, but also on finding one's own sexual identity. Casual sex is perceived as a space for trying new things and having fun. The university period is therefore known as a time of sexual permissiveness and liberality. However, only a few students find the single life sexually fulfilling and exciting. The proportion of students engaging in casual sex in affairs or sexual relationships "external" to the steady relationship is small.

Although casual sex is rare overall, it is important for the university stage of life. Students are extremely positive about this type of sexuality, referring particularly to the prominent student party culture and the opportunity to meet lots of young people. However, we cannot speak of a distinct student singles culture in Germany, or of an increasingly risky and abusive form of sexuality such as that discussed under the name "hookup culture" among American college students.

→ Chapters 3 and 4

Statement 3: The new norm of sexual competence is applied differently to each sex

Following the increasing liberalization and permissiveness of the student environment, a new social norm of sexual behaviour has arisen: “you can” has been replaced by “you must”. On one hand, admittedly, sexual restrictions have been lifted and individual space has been created; even gender-specific disadvantages are beginning to disappear. On the other hand, both sexes are now feeling a new pressure to be sexually competent and successful.

The new social standards for the sexually experienced, competent and self-confident individual make new demands on everyone: the individual’s own wishes and boundaries should be known, matched to the specific situation and clearly and confidently communicated. Self-determined sexuality and the new freedoms not only may be experienced, therefore, but they become a social imperative – a kind of obligation to organize one’s individual sexual life despite the contradictory nature of norms of sexual culture.

Our respondents’ statements testify to the major sexual double standards which are still prominent in social discourse. They encompass the concept that, as far as sexual tolerance and social expectations are concerned, there are different sexual standards for men and women. To put it simply, for women there is a very narrow line between the requirement for sexual experience and competence, on the one hand, and the derogatory label “slut”, on the other. Even though a large majority of students explicitly opposed this gender-differentiated judgement, it is clear that sexual double standards persist, at least in the form of social prejudices; they have not been entirely dismantled in the course of sexual liberalization. Our respondents’ statements can, on the one hand, be interpreted as an echo of social stereotypes and dominant gender constructs and, on the other hand, as a subjective reworking of the same.

→ Chapter 4

Statement 4: Female students are media-savvy in their use of pornography, although they are more critical and use it less often than male students

Female students are active and creative users of sexually explicit material. They use pornography quite naturally and confidently to stimulate their own desire and as an inspiration for sex in their relationship – without shame or guilt. They choose selectively and carefully from the wide range of material available online. Quite clearly, they possess the knowledge and skills that make it possible to manage pornography competently: they have sufficient media skills to use the Internet well, and also have media awareness, i.e. they are conscious of the constructed fictionality of pornographic material. They use pornography critically and with enjoyment. They want films in which the sexes are equal and the female actors are clearly enjoying sex and showing their desire.

Criticism of and reflection on pornography are considerably more important to female students than to male students. This difference is linked with the ambivalent and unstable processes of appropriation of pornography by women. Their much lower frequency of use is the other marked gender difference in pornography use.

→ Chapter 5

Statement 5: Students are self-critical and controlled in their use of sexual media

Male students use the masturbation associated with pornography use as an efficient way of achieving sexual satisfaction. If they are in a steady relationship, they generally use pornography less, without stopping altogether. Content, frequency of use and motivation are little different from those of adolescent boys. After a surge in pornography use during adolescence, it settles down in young adulthood – generally at a lower frequency of use, but with possible periods of higher frequency at times when the man is single. In most cases, pornography use clearly does not seriously conflict with work or relationships. Instead, it is perceived positively, as a distraction and reward of everyday life; particularly during work time, it is also used as a means of procrastination.

Despite the widespread use of pornography by students, the interviews did not reveal a single case that could be classified as clinical pornography addiction. Nevertheless, a not inconsiderable proportion of male students see their own pornography use as a problem and are concerned about their frequency of use. These concerns are very rarely so serious that the student actually seeks professional help. Much more often, the student displays the ability to self-regulate and limit his use if it becomes a problem.

Both sexes show a high degree of competence in pornography use, although it is employed differently: men mainly use their own critical skills to assess the frequency of pornography use, which they sometimes consider problematic. They are also afraid of negative effects on their own sex life or that of the couple.

An attitude more strongly focused on experiences and opportunities, as shown in the students' statements, may help to de-escalate some of the drama arising from the very narrow media focus on the potential risks of pornography use.

→ Chapter 5

Statement 6: Solo sex is taken for granted by today's generation of students

Overall, we can describe a largely undramatic and relaxed attitude, free of taboos, in relation to solo sex in the lives of German students. However, the gender dimension continues to play an important part in solo-sex experiences and activities. Although the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and the various stages of the women's movement from the 1960s to the 1980s led to greater equality between the sexes in terms of sexual choices, rights and behaviours, this equality is still limited in respect of solo sex. Nevertheless, the gender gap has narrowed: women admit to much earlier and more numerous experiences than those in previous student surveys.

For a majority of respondents, solo sex is important both during single periods and in relationships. Nevertheless, the significance of and value placed on solo sex are changed when the person is in a relationship. It is seen as a separate, but primarily subordinate, form of sexuality, and is considered to be of lesser value than couple sex. It is also clear how strongly the orgasm is seen, particularly by young men, as the fundamental benchmark of a successful sex life. While, for a large majority of young women, masturbation can be expected to lead to orgasm, the same is true much less often in the couple setting.

The right to create sexual pleasure and satisfaction for oneself is taken for granted by today's generation of students.

→ Chapter 6

Statement 7: Sexual difficulties are common, despite good communication between the partners

For the first time, our survey investigated the following topics among students in Germany:

- The prevalence of sexual difficulties in steady relationships;
- The influence of relationship duration on sexual activity and sexual problems;
- The distress associated with sexual difficulties;
- The subjective experience and management of selected sexual difficulties (erection and orgasm problems) in student relationships.

Our data show that sexual difficulties are common: women complain more frequently about a lack of desire (46 %), difficulties in achieving orgasm (45 %) and problems of arousal (39 %), and of pain during sex. Men complain that they reach orgasm too quickly (49 %) – and that they want sex more often than their partners (47 %). Most of them are relaxed about these difficulties and display a high capacity to cope with and communicate about temporary difficulties.

Nevertheless, 14 % of female students in steady relationships report that they find the sexual problems in their relationship to be “serious” or “very serious”; for male students, the figure is 6 %. In other words: of all female students in steady relationships, one in seven has a sexual problem and is suffering as a result; one in four has considered seeking medical assistance or therapy or has actually done so. For male students, the figure is much lower: one in 20 has a sexual problem and is suffering as a result, and one in 10 has considered seeking medical assistance or therapy or has actually done so.

In such a young group, this is an indication of considerable insecurity and dissatisfaction with couple sex. These findings remind us that sexual difficulties are less attributable to the effects of age than is often assumed, and that they occur in all age groups and at all levels of education. In the interests of promoting sexual health, the need for age-appropriate information and services is clear.

→ Chapter 7

Statement 8: It seems difficult to combine university with a family

Since the number of students with children has stayed consistently low since the 1960s (5–7 %), it is no surprise that a majority of our respondents were against starting a family while at university. The main reasons cited – especially by men – were financial insecurity and the perpetuation of economic dependence. Women are primarily afraid of the double or triple burden of child, study and gainful employment and fear that they would fail to cope with these various roles and demands. Both sexes emphasize the extreme lack of time arising from a heavy study workload and the associated demand for great flexibility and mobility: studying is described as equivalent to full-time work, which would necessarily be subject to unwanted interruptions if there was a child.

The project of starting a family brings high expectations of oneself and the relationship and preconceptions relating to gender-specific roles, responsibilities and division of labour: women are cast in the role of everyday carer, while men are given the responsibility for financial security. A stable couple relationship is seen as a basic prerequisite for starting a family. Often, students feel that they do not meet these three conditions.

Thus, most students see the university period as a separate stage of life which comes before having a family: high performance expectations and the desire for space and self-realization are the main priorities. If possible, students wait until after university to start a family.

Women who become pregnant despite using contraception carefully, or because of contraceptive failures or inconsistent contraceptive behaviour, often opt for termination. They feel it is “too early” to have a child, and reject the associated loss of freedom, education and autonomy to make personal and career plans. The decision to have a termination does not, therefore, represent a fundamental refusal to have children at all, but is based on the right to have a child at a time chosen by oneself.

→ Chapters 8 and 9.3

Statement 9: For university-educated women, there is no optimum time to have a child

Students become parents at university in two very different social and emotional contexts: a small group of students embark on the project of “a wanted child while at university”. These women make the decision as part of their career strategy, combined with a positive view of the available, well-known possibilities for support for when starting a family early. By means of effective consultation between the partners and long-term planning of contraception and sexuality, these young women aim to time the birth of their children at the best possible stage of their career. The decision is also based on their wish not to be too old to have a child (or children), to make the transition from university to work easier and to actively combine their desire for children with their life and career planning.

Another group, likewise small, has an unplanned pregnancy and decides to keep the child while studying, after a process of reflection and consideration which is sometimes difficult.

Women who cope well with life with a child while studying generally have favourable study conditions in their course and receive support from the university. They cite a certain basic flexibility in the structure of their course as a positive factor. Courses that require long hours of attendance often impose a considerable burden, particularly if the woman is looking after the child on her own for most of the week. Parents do not always succeed in dividing this burden fairly between them and may fall back into unwanted traditional patterns of care. The students see an advantage in the basic flexibility of studying, compared with work. However, work offers the financial independence they long for. Therefore, many students with children adopt a strategy of finishing their studies as soon as possible in order to gain the financial independence which they see as part of responsible parenthood.

→ Chapters 8.2 and 9

11



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Silja Matthiesen and the Hamburg Research Team, July 2015

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Since 1992, the central responsibilities of the Federal Centre for Health Education (BZgA)] have included sexuality education and family planning. The BZgA's statutory obligation to develop concepts imposes a special duty on the organization to conduct and promote an interdisciplinary discourse on sexuality, contraception and family planning. This is also an important part of quality assurance in this area. Through its various publications, the BZgA contributes to information and debate on these topics.

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Three main aspects of the sexual lives of students in the Internet age are investigated here:

- The social organization of sexuality and relationships together with values, relationship perspectives and expectations,
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