

SAME OR DIFFERENT? — THOUGHTS ON SEXUAL PREFERENCES

Preference

Giving somebody distinct attention, advantage, special love. Its opposite is rejection, refusal or—less definitely—standoffishness and disinterest.¹ Preference means holding somebody or something in higher esteem than other people or things. For example: “I prefer Thai foods to Indian vegetarianism”.²

Starting point:

Sexuality is a *single-person* and intimate private matter.

Interpersonal sexuality (sexual intercourse) is the intimate private matter of *two individuals*. Third persons should express their opinions on it only if they have the authorisation of the two parties involved in it.

Given the rejecting and discriminative prejudices in certain societies, expressing certain sexual preferences is risky.

Sexuality is an important personality trait. Events affecting sexuality impact one’s psychosexual development; related experiences, therefore, become, directly or indirectly, parts of one’s identity.

The subject-matter of this paper

In the following, I will discuss sexual preference, its emergence, development and motives, knowing that no obvious evidence has been found for these yet. I will analyse the idea of social learning as well as unhampered and hampered psychosexual development—emphasising the psychic phenomenon that is characteristic of human sexuality: it is more than animal mating, copulation serving the survival of the species. Narrowing down the topic, I will discuss only two preferences: preference for the opposite sex (heterosexuality) and preference for the same sex, without distinguishing homosexuality from lesbianism. Finally, I will touch upon the prejudicial mindset against the above and its judgment.

Psychosexual development

The theory of psychosocial development discusses the development of cognitive, emotional and interpersonal skills together with somatic (bodily) development and looks at their interactions. It says that individual components do not develop in a predetermined way, and sometimes they do not develop in parallel either. Psychosexual development is a longitudinal development process consisting of subsequent periods. Skills become abilities by the end of each process, which are more or less related to age, and various psychosexual theories analyse this process. The best-known theory is Freud’s libido development theory saying that newborn sexuality is undifferentiated (“polymorph perverse”), it reaches development by the age of puberty. Freud’s theory was criticised by his contemporaries like Jung and Adler and was later supplemented by the comments of Horney, Fromm and Hartmann. We must mention Piaget’s cognitive development model as well as Erikson’s psychosocial theory. Regarding the latter, we must emphasise the effect of surrounding people and their group, the society, has on the development of one’s personality. Lastly, we must mention Berne’s so-called transactional analysis and script theories.

¹ It is not the same as aversion (hate, disgust).

² Vegetarianism emerged in ancient Greece (as a philosophy). Later, in India, it became a nutrition practice that strictly avoids meat and animal products. Nowadays, it has several forms depending on what other foodstuffs are prohibited beyond meat. Some varieties of vegetarianism allow deviation from the strict rules. While some prohibit the consumption of honey, others allow the consumption of eggs. I use the concept of “preference” with the above meaning when discussing sexuality.

Thoughts on human sexuality

Gratification—i.e. sex for somatic satisfaction—is not enough for keeping two people together in the long run; sexual dysfunction, however, can ruin and end even the best relationship. I call the human form of sexuality “*humanised*” *sexuality* to separate it from having sex only for bodily pleasure. In my view, the latter applies to one-night stands and casual sexual relations and resembles animal copulation (which is limited to mating seasons and is, therefore, also “casual”) if interpersonality and the shared experience are less important in having sex, and the partner’s (the “object’s”) needs are secondary. Humanised sexuality requires and is about trust. One partner gives himself/herself unconditionally to the other and accepts him or her unconditionally at the same time. This acceptance is based on mutual trust. Unconditionality does not exclude expectations; those, however, must be made clear in time. The key to a good relationship is trust.

Trust is faith in the positive development of circumstances. It is an interpersonal feeling aimed at a person whose integrity, right intentions and helpfulness we have made sure of. In the beginning, when one’s personality starts to develop, this person is the parent sprouting trust in the child. Trust is, therefore, a product of an interpersonal/intrapsychic process. According to Erikson’s (epigenetic) theory of eight stages of development, the mother’s behaviour in the first life year lays the foundation for trust. The subsequent seven stages build on this “proto-trust”.³ Trust becomes vulnerable if one cannot resolve the inevitable conflicts in the subsequent stages properly and close each stage with a positive outcome. Consequently, the psychosocial development process gets disturbed, and not only the current, but also preceding stages might become instable. The fifth stage (puberty)—when *trust in ourselves* (self-assessment and self-confidence) is necessary to build identity—is especially sensitive. Self-assessment and self-trust are important for building trust in others, because trust in others might imply risks and disappointment, and we need faith in ourselves and (self-)confidence to bear a risk like that. It is wrong to think that other people make us trust them. All our environment does is giving feedbacks, and we must interpret and select them as well as incorporate the result. The only exception from this is the first stage, in which maternal care lays the foundation for trust. Its further development and stabilisation, however, requires efforts during the subsequent stages.

After the theoretical considerations, let us see a metaphor for trust-based relations. The metaphor will be a *door* which opens and closes from the inside as well as the outside—with a key. This door is closed in the beginning of a relationship. The person approaching the door will require some courage, because he or she does not know if he or she is knocking on the right door or has come to the right address. But he or she trusts that he or she won’t be sent away if this is the right address. The person opening or closing the door on the inside requires more courage than that—although he or she has the key labelled “trust”. But this person does not usually open the door to strangers. Although he or she can see the other person knocking on the door, he or she does not know anything more about that person. He or she needs trust to decide. He or she could let the other person in, but that person could also be the repairman whom somebody else suggested as a good but not reliable professional. Letting the other person in could be a hasty thing. But as he or she is already there, the person standing inside could talk to him or her and show him or her what the job would be. The visitor could do that job or, if he is truly incompetent, then he should be sent away, and another repairman would deal with the machine. That was all about the metaphor of trust, risks, acceptance and rejection. But let us not forget: closed doors open from the inside and can only be broken in from the outside, and this never brings a result. If the key is missing or nowhere to be found, then a locksmith—a psychotherapist—is required.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erik_Erikson

Berne writes that sexual union is the highest level of intimacy. His statement sounds much better with a minor amendment: *emotionally founded* sexual union is the highest level of intimacy; it is, therefore, called *making love*.

Balanced and peaceful development—conditions and goals

Personality development is determined by the emotions, thinking and behaviour parents express in the primer group. The child's personality is established and develops in the family where its parents do not only bring it up through verbal explanation and teaching but also through their behaviour, metacommunication and their own (personal) attitudes. The better the parent-child relationship is, the more the parents' attribute becomes an example. When the child starts to understand that its parents are not infallible and do not always say the truth (and only the truth) and maybe conflict themselves, nonverbal parental (meta-level) information becomes increasingly important and keeps it exemplary role just like (or more than) verbal and paedagogical instructions do. Parental upbringing is combined with *institutional development* in the kindergarten and the school; the institutionalised educational system can, however, not be expected to lay the foundations which were not laid in the primer group. Although the kindergarten can still correct potentially occurring deficiencies by laying the emphasis on the foundations (and drawing the parents' attention to what still needs to be done); the school's primary focus is, however, acquiring factual knowledge which gradually becomes priority as the years go by and the child advances to higher grades. All this is combined with the fact that with age, the child gets to regard the opinion of the peers as more significant than that of adults; the influence of "friends" could, therefore, overwrite parental instructions.

Sex drive show its signs in early child age already. This undifferentiated instinct is made human by social learning in the psychosexual development process: the child acquires what it experiences in its environment through (unconscious) learning by imitation and then selects: it identifies itself with and rejects some of what it has learnt. It chooses a model by interiorising what it has identified itself with and enters into relationships based on that model.

Environmental experience (such as mass communication, the internet, television) affects the development of sexual markers characteristic of the biological sex. The child imitates and then acquires, moreover incorporates, what it perceives through latent learning. A balanced relationship between the child and the parents, the parents' open, honest, tactful communication that can compensate information that flow to the child from the environment and is not always reliable are indispensable for the healthy development of personality. It is important that the parent acknowledges the child's need for keeping events associated with its age and personality development as intimate secrets.

Social learning may produce unexpected events. Even the best parental intention can cause disturbance if a child studying abroad—misunderstanding the parents' goal—interprets his or her situation as his or her parents have exiled him or her; or a single (abandoned, widowed) mother prevents her child from developing its autonomy by being (over)protective; or a child raised up in a bigot and conservative environment and told that sexuality is sinful becomes anxious from events including sexuality; but the opposite extremity where the parent overstimulates the child sexually by acting as a peer could also cause problems—just to mention some of the potential obstacles.

Sexuality has different development patterns in case of boys and girls: psychic factors become prominent earlier in case of girls, while somatic factors become prominent earlier in case of boys. The past decades have seen sex life start increasingly earlier, and emotional development has not been able to keep up with this. When an adolescent person first shares sexual experience with another person, it is mostly a bodily experience accompanied by immature emotions while likely lacking shared experience, i.e. the free and unlimited expression of emotions and the catharsis of intimacy. At this age, these happenings are accompanied by several important "added values" that strongly affect self-assessment, self-confidence and integrate into the self image. Added values like this are "I am an adult", "I am a good woman/man", "I can give/accept" ("I am accepted"); these are important even if the first time

is only a happening and does not turn into catharsis owing to the lack of intimacy. But if the first time is not a positive experience and ends in disappointment or psychic/somatic failure, then the adolescent might experience a minor or major trauma.

The parents' attitude to sexuality is an important factor: if it is a taboo in the primer group, then the child will get information in the secondary groups. The parents' attitude to their own personal sexuality and the unconscious communication of related emotions as well as the suppression of related communication are important. The opposite extremity where the parent overstimulates his or her child erotically can be just as detrimental.

Development obstacles:

In contrast to a complete family where the different attitudes of the two parents can ensure the balanced development of the child, single-parent children are in a more difficult situation, depending on whether the single parent's biological sex is the same as or different from the child's own biological sex. Single parents are predominantly mothers. Two circumstances should be mentioned in this case: (a) the lack of a masculine model and (b) the mother's attitude to men. Both are just as important; factor (a) is, however, more significant for the development of a boy, and factor (b) is more efficient in case of girls. Both factors are involved in a single-mother situation and affect the child's psychosexual development irrespective of the child's sex. Both children lack a male model and are (could be) affected by the mother's (who is not "only" a mother but also a woman) tackling with the trauma caused by an "unfaithful man". If the divorce is accompanied by hostile emotions, and the fight continues before a court where the child is only "munition in the war between the parents" (Erikson), then the child will always lose.

Just as a parent in a complete family brings his or her child up not only through verbal explanation but also unconsciously, by passing on his or her behavioural patterns, the personal attitude, behaviour and communication of a single woman (mother) affects her child. And this effect often intensifies, because the single source of parental information appreciates.

In the situation of a *single mother bringing up a boy*, the mother's having a (new) partner and the boy's relationship with the mother's new partner are important. If an abandoned woman's loss of her partner is a traumatic stress to her, and she fights a multitude of negative emotions, then her wrath might be not only against the partner having left her, but this attitude can concern all men and the male sex in general. This might be an unwanted hidden model for her son who does not have an up-to-date masculine model and identifies himself with the model of a man who is unfaithful, unreliable and rejected by women. He looks for a solution but cannot find a person to talk his problem over with; he might, however, find somebody who notices him, listens to him and gives useful advice because he appears to be a manly model, although he should not be trusted.⁴ If, however, the traumatised mother identifies his son as the only remaining meaning of her life and cannot find a new, similar-age partner for herself, then she unconsciously communicates to her son that he is to replace his unfaithful father. This implies the instruction that the son should remain faithful to her and will be sinful if he wanted another woman.

In case of a single mother with a daughter, the mother's attitude to men (and the male sex) is just as important, but differently. It appears as a model in the daughter's psychosexual development. To her, the maternal attitude is a model to be followed and conveys psychosexual identity, showing the little girl how she can become a woman. If the mother communicates, even on the meta level, that men are not trustworthy, then the girl will embrace this attitude as she has an evidence: my father (a man) has left both of us.

Events that are insignificant or remain hidden to the environment but are traumas to the child or the adolescent might happen. A *trauma* is the psychic consequence of a suddenly occurring psychic (physical) injury, serious psychic distress, a penetrating, dreadful and

⁴ Kohut, H. (1979). The two analyses of Mr. Z. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 60(1), 3-27.

dangerous experience. It can be triggered not only by an unexpected, *sudden* event (“psychic distress”) but also by the unsuccessful processing of a conventional event. If a traumatic event becomes secret and its associated impressions are not verbalised, then the suppression will keep the event in the unconscious despite the person has seemingly forgotten it. This might cause that another, seemingly ordinary event awakens the connotation associated to the traumatic secret kept in the unconscious, and this can disturb development.⁵

Trauma (traumatisation) emergence is individual specific and greatly depends on earlier personality development as well as already-developed personality traits, such as problem-coping strategies, the types and functioning of preferred aversion mechanisms, self-assessment, self-control and several other factors. Psychoanalysis regards all anxiety-inducing experiences which cause psychoneurosis⁶ if not averted successfully as traumas. If an event is not a serious trauma and does not become secret, then the parent can support his or her child in processing the events.

A review of the foregoing:

We have already touched upon the psychosexual development of personality, including the two motives of “humanised” sexuality (procreation, gratification) and its more important specificities (trust). We have also touched upon the condition for balanced development, the role of the family, social (imitative) learning, the psychosexual development framework of the two sexes, then we overviewed potential obstacles in the process, which might make the development of a boy/girl brought up in a single-parent family difficult and prevent it, in contrast to a complete family; finally, we introduced the concept and role of trauma. We have discussed all this in connection with sexual preferences; without, however, saying a word about differences in preference, preference for the opposite or the same biological sex (apart from a few references). We are now going to discuss these, but first, let us briefly discuss what does it mean when we do not prefer somebody.

The verb “prefer” and its opposite, “do not prefer”, imply an unasked question: “why has he or she become the object of attraction?”. Non-designation of the root cause of preferences makes one feel that something is missing, i.e. we cannot define *why* preference for the same sex appears. A cause (or even causes) like this exists presumably but is not to be generalised. It is always specific, just like in heterosexual relationships. If the reader finds this problem interesting, then he or she should try to answer the problem, why an Indian person is vegetarian and why has a European person become one? The reader will surely find an answer, but it will not apply to everybody. Or, the fear from flying of somebody who has travelled by plane and has gone through an emergency landing is understandable, but why is a person who has never flown before afraid from flying even though he or she has already had several car accidents while driving his or her car? Can one or more traumas in life affect sexual preferences? Is there a general answer to preferences?

Returning to preferences

This paper understands preference as special attention of one person (hereinafter referred to as One Person) to another person (hereinafter referred to as Other Person). Accordingly, the following apply to preferences for the opposite as well as the same sex.

The object of attention (Other Person) draws the attention of One Person, and One Person shows attention to Other Person, and interest becomes attention, then emotion, affection, love, longing and eventually bodily desire (the sequence is optional). The object (Other Person) can only be a human being,⁷ his or her biological sex is the same as or the opposite of

⁵ Racsmány, M. & Conway, M. A.: Retrieval-induced forgetting: evidence for a cue-dependent impairment (in press).

⁶ Psychoneurosis is (in the interpretation of Freud) a conflict between the ego and the instinctive self.

⁷ The expression “human being” excludes perversions (e.g. fetishism) and, therefore, emphasises that we are still and only talking about preferences for both sexes as we have done so far.

One Person. One Person and the Other Person might develop a *physical and spiritual connection*, regardless of the fact whether their sexes are the same or different. The only difference in their relationships is the difference or identity of the sexes of the two parties. We must also emphasise, that the psychic and somatic markers of the two relationship types, including all traits from emotions to physicality, are essentially indifferent.

There is, however, a Third Person. In this person's phantasies, preference for the same sex⁸ is equal to physicality. More specifically, preference for the same sex is nothing more than having sex. I would assume that this person does not think that the two persons could have an emotional relationship (intimacy), sometimes to an extent that it is more important than physicality. If we are here: if a Third Person like this sees a boy and a girl holding hands while walking down the street, then he or she immediately imagines a bed scene. Would a Third Person like this associate to an erotic night if this couple were not two young people but a retirement age man and woman? This is unlikely. The question is, however, not this but about replacing the previous example with a *same-sex* couple (who are not walking arm-in-arm but holding each other's hands). Why does this make the Third Person think about sex and (let's say) not that "Here. This is how love begins and this is how it can turn into affection and togetherness which is (of course) made colourful by sexuality."? Let us not go deep into analysing why the Third Person works like this (although this could be an interesting thought); let us just be satisfied with the fact that the Third Person represents homophobia, and let us represent the opinion that in case of same-sex preference, emotional motives can be the first impulse of getting closer to each other just like as in heterosexual relationships. We can also turn this around: the desire to have sex can occur without serious emotions in case of same-sex preferences just as well, but this does only prove that the characteristics of the two preference types are not different substantially. Both preferences can have casual relationships and long-term affections. The latter requires intimacy, because mere sexuality cannot hold two people together over a long period of time. This is independent from their biological sexes.

The homophobic Third Person's opinion on the Other Person preferring his or her same sex is only one side of the coin. The true question is what the two persons involved say about themselves. Do they express their gender identities, or do they have to hide their preferences? Some defend themselves by identifying as bisexual. This appears to be more acceptable than same-sex preference.

Preference for the same sex can be used for plays as well. Let me illustrate this with the following story.

Roles: Father, Mother, Daughter, Lover. *Father continually cheats on his wife (Mother), who files for divorce and then does all she can to prevent and restrict the relationship between her former husband and daughter. She takes the child to the court hearings and uses her as "munition" in her war with the father.⁹ The 8 years old girl has an affection for her father; she, therefore, gets gradually opposed to her mother, visits her father in secret during her secondary school years and, in doing so, she meets her father's girlfriend. She starts to feel that her father does not love her anymore. Once, she sees a loud dispute between her father and his current girlfriend. The girlfriend runs away, the girl goes after her. They sit down in a café and share their troubles. The girl realises that her father's lover is an understanding friend and can go to her after a fight with her mother. On the day following the secondary school graduation banquet, the girl has a fight with her mother and goes to her friend to sleep at her place and they bond with each other. A few weeks later, the girl moves in with her father's former lover and lives with her for four years. They both say that they live together by necessity to take revenge on the father. The girl, however, tells honestly that they have more than friendship between them.*

The case does not require any explanation, and the play is obvious. Only two open questions remain. What caused the change in preferences? Which are the true preferences, homosexual, heterosexual or both?

⁸ In the following, I will use the term "same sex" instead of the expression "for the same sex".

⁹ © by Erikson.

Sexuality is a personal, private matter and a discreet, sensitive topic. People are, however, curious. Not everybody approaches the topic as the Third Person does; some people, however, do not have the courage to ask even a close friend “how long he or she has known” and when he or she started to feel attracted to the Other Person. This question can, however, be asked anytime about male–female relationship. Why the refrainment and concerns? Do society’s unspoken rules prevent us from asking questions like that? Or does the behaviour of the Third Person affect our way of thinking? This and many other similar small matters lead to keeping same-sex preferences in secret as long as possible and to not speaking openly about it. Except if speaking is in the style of the Third Person. This is also instrumental in not letting those affected, be them either women or men, live free from care. It is not only the persons concerned, but also those in their environment. Those people also avoid the sensitive question even if it is about a close family relative. This is what Joseph Nicolosi reflected to in 1992 by noticing that some men who prefer their own biological sexes¹⁰ conflicted with their preferences and attempted to return to heterosexuality.

Nicolosi developed the so-called “reparative therapy”, which says that homosexuality is a variant emerging from conflicts (traumas) in one’s psychosexual development and is, therefore, changeable. This variant is not only about sexual attraction to the same sex, but also about an unsteady self image, reduced self-confidence and a false self developed by them. Nicolosi writes that these men are attracted to their own sex because they are trying to develop their own gender identity. They usually fail owing to their endeavour’s erotisation. Reparative therapy does not focus on ending the homoerotic attraction but on making the client aware of the problem by exploring its roots and creating the psychic conditions for non-erotic relations with same-sex persons, stabilising gender identity and, optimally, ensuring that the client enjoys heterosexuality.¹¹

This theory was received with extreme reactions all over the world, primarily because the person having developed it was of the opinion that homosexuality does not require *curing*. Emphasising it as a standpoint was unfortunate, because at the time, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) had already taken out homosexuality from the DSM¹² nearly two decades earlier. Some saw Nicolosi’s theory almost as enlightenment, others treated him as a quack. There was hardly any middle way, I dare say that “the baby was almost thrown out with the bathwater”. True, the baby was quite weak, but a sieve could have been used when the bathwater was thrown out.

Nicolosi’s theory raises a dilemma. Namely, if a person with same-sex preference *does not accept* his or her sexual orientation as a source of pleasure, but it is susceptible to change with certain assistance (from a psychologist), then this is possible the other way around as well— i.e. a heterosexual person’s preference could be transformed in the same way with some (alluring?) help. If this is indeed possible, then unchangeable sexual orientation does not exist, but variants of sexuality do. No unambiguous proof exists for when, how and why these emerge.

In my decades of practice, I only met two men¹³ who experienced conflicts while living in long-term relationships with their partners (owing to their own attractions). Same-sex preference appeared in the early phase of their developments, and neither of them had ever had a heterosexual relationship. After a few sessions, it started to become clear that the conflict had not been induced by their sexual orientations but rather by their fear from exposure and social discrimination. After identifying the actual cause of the problem and discussing the unacceptability of the preference, both clients said that they did not need any more assistance. Others who were in same-sex relationships when they made their appointments and had

¹⁰ Nicolosi focuses on the preferences of men.

¹¹ For more detail, see another text on this website (Kell-e “gyógyítani” a homoszexualitást? / Does homosexuality require “curing”?)

¹² Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

¹³ Two clients who do not know each other

previous heterosexual relationships as well, however, did not explain their appointments with their sexual orientation but with something else.

Not a summary, but...

I presume that not everybody agrees with the next idea, but my opinion is that we must acknowledge that people who live non-average lives have always been, are and will be. They are the so-called minority groups. Not everybody chooses being different voluntarily, and some still see them as deviants and think that these people are required to change and be reeducated no matter if it causes difficulties to them. Minorities include left-handed people with the right brain hemisphere as the dominant one. They have been mocked until recent times and forced (reeducated) to use their right hands. Minorities also include people whose sexual orientation is different from that of the majority. Some people mock them, as they used to mock left-handed people as well. Minorities also include disabled people who are, tragically, also abused sometimes. We could go on with the examples of minorities; my opinion (as a psychologist) is, however, that mocking is not about the mocked, but the mocker. Mocking is not about wheelchair people or people with same-sex preference or left-handed people, but about the personality of the mocker. Nothing can be done about it. There have always been, are and will always be people who try to compensate their unstable self-confidence, self-assessment and self image by belittling others.

If a sexual preference is permanent, committed and has become part of the identity, then we must acknowledge it: this is a private matter and none of our business. Everybody has the right to live his or her life in a way that suits him or her. If he or she respects the rights of others, then he or she can also demand respecting his or her rights. Nobody should want to reeducate, cure or feel pity for or envy him or her. Do not take away anything if you cannot give something better in return.

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Translated by *Ádám Katona*

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Instead of an epilogue:

Related publications, *research article*, HUMAN GENETICS:

[Large-scale GWAS reveals insights into the genetic architecture of same-sex sexual behavior](#)

Ganna *et al.*, *Science* **365**, eaat7693 (2019) 30 August 2019