

# Sexual activity of Polish adults

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## Abstract

**Aim.** The purpose of this research was to explore the subject of sexual activity in the Polish population, with special focus on age and gender differences, and sexual infidelity. Sexual activity is one of the basic factors in initiating and maintaining relationships. On the one hand, sexual activity enables us to meet natural needs and maintain an intimate relationship with another human being; on the other, it may allow us to overcome loneliness and social isolation by providing the opportunity to express feelings of closeness and unity.

**Material and method.** The research was conducted on a representative group of 3,200 Poles aged between 15–49, with the support of a well-known Polish research company – TNS OBOP. Face-to-face and Pencil and Paper (PAPI) interviews were carried out.

**Results.** The results focus on two main issues: the age and motives of sexual initiation among teenagers (with a significant percentage starting their sexual activity at the age of 15), and the quality of the sexual lives of adults (average number of sexual partners, sexual infidelity and sexual satisfaction).

**Conclusion.** There is dependence between the type of relationship and the performance or non-performance of sexual activity, as well as the quality of the relationship. Among both adolescents and adults, remaining in a stable relationship (partnership or marriage) promotes loyalty. The performance of sexual goals turns out to be an important mechanism regulating the interpersonal aspects of a relationship, influencing their perception and evaluation

## Key words

Sexual health, sexual behaviour, love, Marital status, psychosocial isolation

## INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is an inherent attribute and function of the body, subject to complex internal and external conditions. Thus, sexuality can be characterised by stability (as an inherent human attribute, fulfilling a certain function) and variability (conditioning the adjustment to individual developmental stages). The functions of sexual behaviours vary, and aside from the basic task of reproduction, the following purposes can be itemized:

- a) confirmation of masculinity or femininity;
- b) enhancement or maintenance of self-esteem;
- c) exerting power or domination;
- d) close dyadic relationships and the promotion of intimacy;
- e) a source of pleasure;
- f) reducing tension;
- g) expressing hostility;
- h) undertaking risk as a source of excitement;
- i) financial benefits.

In the subject literature, it is emphasised that the greatest changes in human sexuality have been observed over the last 2–3 decades, especially in the sexuality of women [1, 2]. As noted by J. Bancroft [2], most evident is the extinction, and to some extent the reversal, of the tendency for sexual initiation at an ever-younger age. The trend for pre-marital sexual experience continues, almost certainly because people get married later and less often.

The average age of sexual initiation systematically, though slightly, decreases. For women, in 1997 it featured at the age

of 19.34 years, in 2001 – 19.2, and in 2005 – 18.83, while for men in 1997 it was 18.43, in 2001 – 18.32, and in 2005 – 18.06. There is a tendency for an increase in the age of entering into marriage – in 2010, the average age of marriage for men was 28, which is over three years more than at the beginning of 1990s. The average age of marriage for women in 2010 was 26, compared with less than 23 at the beginning of 1990s. In other words, the age group for the most frequent marriages shifted to 25–29 with its present share at 42% (in 1990, it was less than 14%) [3].

A separate issue is the answer to questions concerning differences in the sexuality of women and men, and those concerning cultural differences in the description and assessment of sexual behaviours. Most probably, differences result from the varying methods of experiencing and expressing sexuality. Sexual behaviour, as any other behaviour, is a regulator of human relationships, and the influence of gender stereotypes is therefore unavoidable. It is worth noting that sexual behaviour contributes to the building of psychosexual bonds, by the fulfilment of behaviour aimed at the assisted satisfaction of needs, and clearly determines the criteria of a psychosexual relationship based on the interaction of partners. Sexuality is a central factor in intimate relationships, and relationship satisfaction is strongly correlated with sexual satisfaction in both married and dating couples [2, 4, 5, 6]. Sexual satisfaction is most often identified with the notion of pleasure [7], which seems to be the basic determinant in directing and reinforcing sexual behaviour. Interpersonal factors, especially ones related to relationship quality or satisfaction, have also been evaluated in a number of studies, with equally mixed results [8]. Studies on the Polish population have found that low relationship quality is associated with infidelity [9, 10].

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**Sexual infidelity.** In the area of close interpersonal relationships, factors related to the contribution of sexual activity to the stability of a relationship or, on the contrary, those threatening its dissolution, have been sought. From the perspective of the studies presented in this article, we focus mainly on sexual infidelity as a consequence of sexual desire, in relation to the type of personal relationship [2, 8,10, 11]. In the subject literature, sexual desire is chiefly defined as a psychological state that determines sexual behaviour. For example, Levine [12,13] defines sexual desire as the sum of the forces (biological, psychological, and cultural determinants) that have an impact not only on the search for, but also on the escape from sexual behaviour. It is worth noting that several large-scale surveys have shown that sexual desire, as well as the related constructs of sexual satisfaction and sexual frequency, declines with the length of time that partners have been in a relationship [11, 14].

A separate issue is that of sexual infidelity, defined as extradyadic sex within the context of a monogamous relationship, which is considered to be among the most significant threats to the stability of adult relationships, including marriage. K. P. Mark, E. Janssen and R. R. Milhausen, [8] referring to the studies of Betzig (who conducted them in 160 countries), note that infidelity was one of the most frequently cited causes of divorce. In other words, it is estimated that in Western society, 25–50% of divorces are caused by infidelity. Mark, Janssen, Milhausen [8] conclude that research on nationally-representative samples shows that approximately 20–25% of men, and 10–15% of women reported engaging in extramarital sex during their marriage.

In Poland, we can also observe the relationship as indicated, by studying people declaring sexual contact outside their normal relationship. The studies of Z. Izdebski [10] show that 22% of 1,829 participants had sexual contact outside their steady relationship: among men, the percentage was 28% and among women – 16%. It is worth highlighting the fact that theoreticians and researchers of the issue emphasise the negative influence of infidelity on the stability of a relationship and personal welfare, whilst the factors responsible for infidelity are located both in the individuals and in the relationship [8, 11, 14]. These factors fall broadly into three categories: demographic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. In the brief review that follows, unless otherwise stated, infidelity or extradyadic sex refers to a partner (or both partners) having sexual intercourse with someone outside the relationship. Interestingly, similar regularities can be observed in the Polish population, where infidelity is conditioned both by subjective and relationship-shaping factors [3, 10, 15]. Mark, Janssen, Milhausen [8] noted that most studies fail to make a distinction between extramarital sex and extramarital affairs, which may involve different attitudes, determinants, and outcomes. They also suggest that women, more than men, believe that falling in love justifies extramarital sexual involvement.

## OBJECTIVE

In general, the presented study aimed to describe the sexual activity undertaken and interpersonal relations formed by adults from the Polish population. The following attributes were analysed:

a) characteristics of the respondents;

- b) age of sexual initiation;
- c) type and stability of relationships;
- d) satisfaction with sexual life;
- e) reasons for the disintegration of relationships.

The results of these studies were not compared with results concerning other populations. In our assessment, such a stance is justified methodologically since, as proven by the research and analyses of other studies on sexuality, we should be especially aware of the difficulties in such comparisons due to cultural differences in the perception of sexuality [2].

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

The research incorporated 3,200 participants aged between 15–49. The sample was narrowed to this age range for two reasons:

- 1) the recommendation of WHO/UNAIDS specifying 15–49 as the “reproductive age”;
- 2) regularities described by developmental psychologists, indicating that in this range, the formation and disintegration of relationships is most frequent.

Due to the character of the studies being related to difficult subjects of human sexuality, and previous experience in the research of large groups, it was decided to employ two research techniques:

- 1) a survey-type, face-to-face structured interview with regard to the social and demographic characteristics of the participants;
- 2) the PAPI (Paper and Pencil Interview) method – an anonymous survey on sexual life.

Both techniques used questions and indicators recommended by the WHO/UNAIDS [16], and in combination this decreased the number of refusals or missing answers.

The study was conducted in April 2005 among people aged between 15–49, on a representative sample of 3,200 respondents from the whole of Poland. Research was undertaken by the independent research institute TNS OBOP, with the support of the Eli Lilly pharmaceutical company. Thus, its scope was extended with issues concerning lifestyle and satisfaction with sexual life, among other topics. TNS OBOP is the largest company in the world performing research and analyses adjusted to customers’ needs, and a leading supplier of socio-political studies. It has long-term expertise in the organisation of consumer panels, the measurement of the size of TV audiences (telemetry), and the monitoring of advertisements. TNS works within a global network covering some 70 countries, enabling the delivery of coherent, high-quality information and analyses, updated on an ongoing basis.

## RESULTS

The opinions of Poles on their sexual lives, applicable norms, and acceptance or lack of acceptance regarding allowed sexual behaviours, show deeply fixed views on sexuality. These views often translate into specific actions and decisions, and illustrate patterns of sexual behaviour.

**Sexual initiation of adolescents.** The age of sexual initiation, from an individual perspective, very often determines one's further sexual history and influences the readiness to undertake various forms of activity in this area, while in the social dimension it highlights possible changes in morality. In the general group of participants, 19% of respondents declared that they had no sexual experience such as kisses, erotic caressing or sexual intercourse. Among those who already had some sexual experience, most (86%) had already had sexual intercourse. Sexual initiation was more frequent for men (71%) than for women (68%), and the age at which it happened was declared by 27.3% of boys and 16.8% of girls in the up-to-15 age group, and by 40.0% of boys and 31.9% of girls in the 17–18 group. The reasons for the decision to undergo sexual initiation were very interesting (Fig. 1, 2). Girls most often declared the reason as love (70.7%), while boys indicated pleasure (64.4%), sexual arousal (64.3%), and curiosity (60.6%).

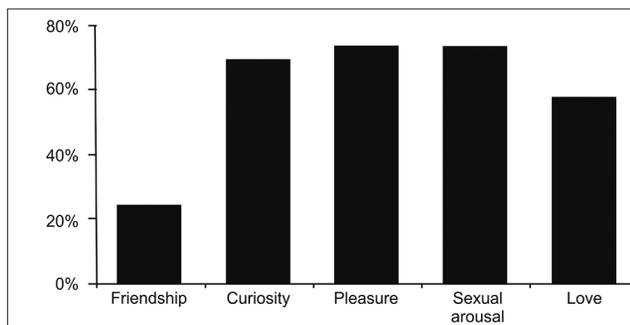


Figure 1. Reasons for the decision to undergo sexual initiation in boys

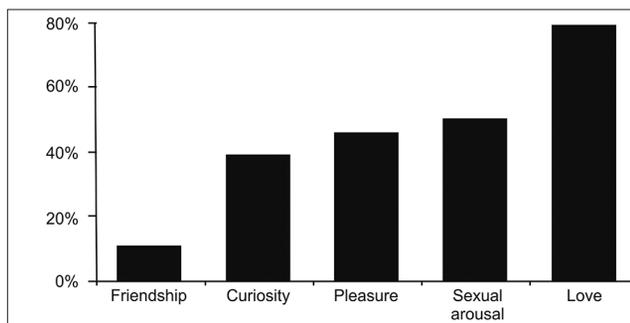


Figure 2. Reasons for the decision to undergo sexual initiation in girls

Further analyses considered only the results from people already sexually initiated. It was determined whether the participants stayed in relationships following sexual initiation. The research indicated that people who declared themselves sexually initiated frequently stayed in the relationship – 90.5% of girls and 80.6% of boys. Moreover, 3 out of 4 adolescents (76%) would definitely like to be in a stable relationship with a person who is 'the one', while girls dream of this type of partnership significantly more often than boys. As many as 76% of adolescents dream of a stable relationship with one specific person. However, only 45% of the participants between the ages of 17–18 definitely agree that any contact with a person whom we do not love should be avoided. 66% of girls and 24% of boys definitely support the principle of avoiding sexual contact with a person we do not love.

## SEXUAL LIFE OF THE OVER-18S

**Average number of sexual partners.** An important variable differentiating the number of sexual partners was the type of relationship in which participants were engaged. As shown by the research, those not in a relationship had the largest number of partners (1.94), while married people had the smallest number of partners (1.12). It should also be noted that marriage and cohabitation lasting for more than 12 months (in recent years, a frequently-chosen alternative to marriage in Poland [17,18]) are two types of relationship that promote the most loyalty between partners (Tab. 1, Fig. 3).

Table 1. Number of sexual partners and type of relationship

Type of relationship	Average number of partners
Cohabitation < 12 months	1.93
Cohabitation > 12 months	1.15
Relationship without cohabitation	1.56
Cohabitation after divorce, separation	1.67
Marriage	1.12
No relationship	1.94
Separation, divorce, widowhood	1.78

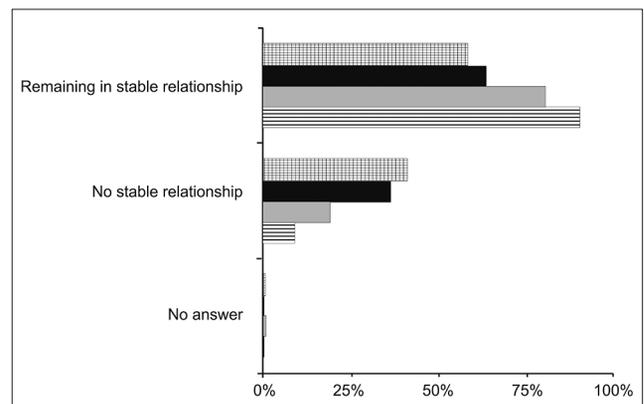


Figure 3. Sex and being in a relationship

Another aspect raised by the survey was the participants' opinion of sexual infidelity. 18% of participants agreed with the belief that a multiplicity of partners allows for the experience of a vast array of sexual sensations, whilst 10% held the view that it is normal to have sexual contact with various partners while in a steady relationship. Analysing the issue of sexual contact with a person other than the steady partner (depending on the age group), it should be noted that the highest percentage of people who declared that, at least once in their lifetime, they had had sexual contact with someone other than their regular partner, was among the age groups of 30–39 (23%) and 40–49 (23%).

**Satisfaction with sexual life.** An extremely important factor in the assessment of a successful sexual life was love – 46% of women and 41% of men definitely agreed with such a statement, and 39% of women and 43% of men rather agreed with it (Fig. 4).

The review of participants' responses indicated that, among people who expressed satisfaction with their sexual life, 9 out of 10 Poles (91.4%) were satisfied with it, including 18.5% assessing it as very good, 49.4% as good and 23.5% as rather

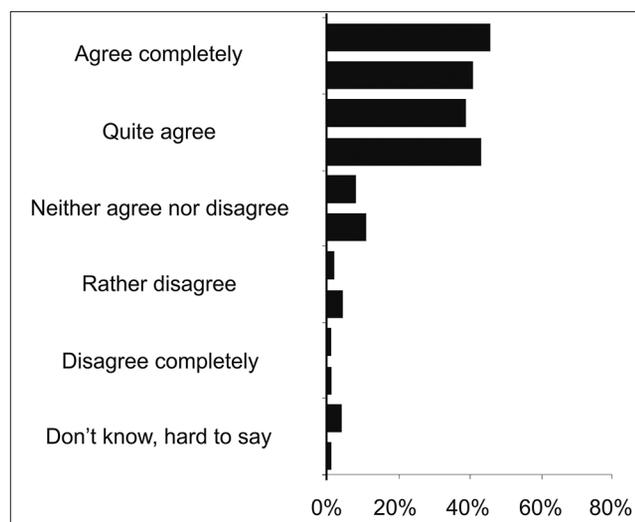


Figure 4. Love and satisfying sex life

good. People who more often rated their sexual life as very good were those between the ages of 18–24 (18%), 25–29 (19%) and 30–39 (19%). Conversely, 8.6% of Poles were not satisfied with their sexual life, including 4.7% assessing it as rather bad, 2.6% as bad and 1.3% as very bad. People who more commonly saw their sexual life as very bad were those between the ages of 40–49 (2%).

## DISCUSSION

Sexuality is an inherent attribute and function of the body, subject to complex internal and external conditions. Thus, attention should be given to the factor of preferring short- and long-term goals [19, 20]. It was shown that people staying in steady relationships more often preferred long-term goals, hence the reason why they do not undertake sexual activity with other people, since they treat the relationship as the performance of goals in a long-term perspective [7]. Moreover, the performance of sexual goals turns out to be an important mechanism regulating the interpersonal aspects of a relationship, influencing their perception and evaluation. In other words, people oriented towards the performance of values such as love and happiness in a relationship, also positively evaluate their own and their partner's sexual activity in the relationship.

## CONCLUSIONS

There is dependence between the type of relationship and the performance or non-performance of sexual activity, as well as the quality of the relationship. Among both adolescents and adults, remaining in a stable relationship (partnership or marriage) promotes loyalty. In other words, in the opinion

of participants, a steady relationship was a factor in limiting sexual activity outside a relationship. It is worth pointing out that loyalty to a partner was not related to the formal aspects of the relationship, moral standards, or a value system. The performance of sexual goals turns out to be an important mechanism regulating the interpersonal aspects of a relationship, influencing their perception and evaluation

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