

ESF Exploratory Workshop on

**BEYOND MAINSTREAM:
UNDERSTANDING SEXUALITY IN EUROPE**

Scientific Report

Turin (Italy), 30th september – 4th october 2009

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1. Executive summary

The workshop gathered scholars coming from what can be identified as “non-mainstream” countries, regarding research and theoretical reflections on sexuality, within the domain of social sciences (they were mainly sociologists, but also demographers). In particular, the scholars came from Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia. In one case, we have invited a scholar who is currently working in a “mainstream” country, namely the UK, but who has based her empirical work on other countries, pointing to the need to contextualise interpretative frameworks on sexuality.

These scholars were selected on the basis of their competences in the field, and the workshop was a precious occasion to develop relations among scholars working on same topics but not having met each other before.

The aim of the workshop was to share knowledge on the available empirical data regarding sex research in the different national contexts, with the final goal of making space for alternative interpretative frameworks to emerge.

The workshop was largely carried out as planned, with some variations aimed at meeting the needs for broader discussions on interesting topics and crucial points.

In order to provide a protected space for intensive interaction, the workshop was held in a building just outside the city of Torino, a quiet old villa managed by an Italian Ngo, supplying both full board accommodation and all the facilities for the working sessions. This setting proved successful in encouraging and sustaining mutual knowledge and ongoing exchange among the participants, well beyond the scheduled sessions.

The workshop lasted three days and was structured into six sessions. In the first session two plenary papers were presented, with the aim of bringing up to discussion the problems related to using “mainstream” conceptual frameworks and research tools in understanding sexualities in local contexts. The first paper was given by the convenors, and focused upon some research examples outlining “mainstream attitudes” and their shortcomings for a context-sensitive understanding of sexuality.

The second paper was based on a comparative research case, as an example of how it is possible to develop alternative frameworks.

The following four sections were devoted to the presentation of papers regarding the different national contexts, grouped according to macro-areas. The first of these sessions included the Czech Republic, Hungary and Bulgaria; the second one included Slovenia and Croatia; the third one included Poland and Lithuania; the fourth one included Portugal, Greece and Italy.

The scholars provided an overview of the state of sociological research on sexuality in their country of reference, and discussed the theoretical and methodological choices that they made in their own research experience in order to take account of the specificities of the local context.

Each presentation, lasting about 30 minutes, was followed by a lively and broad discussion. Throughout all these discussions, shared themes and conceptual threads emerged, outlining a common scenario of hegemonic frameworks and topics, and thereby the features of a “mainstream” sex research, as well as critical perspectives on them. The heterogeneity of the research experiences of the participants, and the presence of different sub-disciplinary competences, also gave the possibility of discussing limits and possibilities of different methodologies in studying sexuality.

In the last session, the agenda of issues that emerged from the previous ones was taken up in a broader discussion. This discussion focused upon both common features regarding how sexuality is investigated in different countries, and upon fundamental differences, due to the specificities of the cultural, economic and political context, but also due to the specific power relations between disciplinary fields in each country.

This discussion was aimed at developing a critical view of mainstream concepts and research tools, at identifying possible directions for the development of other interpretative frameworks, and at influencing the international research agenda on sexuality, by pointing to underresearched dimensions.

2. Scientific content

In the last three decades we have witnessed a growth in sociological research on sexuality all over Europe. Given the specificity of the sociological perspective, which is to consider sexuality as socially embedded, attention has been focused upon its variable social and cultural dimensions.

However, notwithstanding the importance of taking into account the sociocultural contexts for understanding sexual behaviour, Europe has imported most of its interpretative frameworks and research tools from the USA. Afterwards, when in Northern European and some central European countries like France this field of research has become well-established (as regards available research data, networks of researchers and publications), their interpretative frameworks have become the mainstream and have been exported all throughout Europe. As a result, a colonization of meanings has taken place in many European countries where sexuality as a sociological research field still holds a marginal position, and is often carried out by single scholars or small groups which have little relation to each other, and have few occasions for discussion. The result is a rather scattered knowledge.

This situation of clear imbalance causes many problems. At the level of interpretative frameworks, it disempowers the potential of research in the different countries in producing not only “data”, but also “meanings”. Another problem concerns the use of some mainstream anglo-american research surveys’ items, reducing cultural differences to a mere matter of linguistic translation. A comparative approach and cross-country research projects should take the specific contexts more seriously in the very definition of the interpretative framework as well as in the construction of the research tools.

A first step to move beyond this is to identify which elements of the currently mainstream interpretative frameworks are supposed to be universally valid while they are in fact context-specific. In other words, it means to identify which social and cultural features have a strong influence in shaping understandings of sexuality.

To focus on context peculiarities doesn’t mean to underestimate the scope of the process of globalisation of some behaviour and value patterns investing all the

European countries. However, even these globalised cultural objects are reinterpreted within local contexts.

The idea of this exploratory workshop stemmed from a double experience in the convenors' research work: the self-perception of a cultural marginality within the international scientific debate, dominated by American and Northern-European scientific literature, and the lack of satisfaction about the reference to some "hegemonic frameworks and concepts" circulating in the international literature, often used without acknowledging their contextually embedded and (sometimes) normative dimensions.

The workshop aimed at identifying and challenging what can be called a "mainstreaming attitude" which implies the risk of adopting research topics, methods and interpretative frameworks without fully acknowledging and taking in account their contextually embedded origin/nature.

In the workshop we therefore worked on such an acknowledgement and accounting, in order to promote a reflexive use of the international conceptual repertoire and the emergence of new contextualised understandings starting from the research experiences "from the margins" shared by the workshop's participants.

The papers that were discussed in the country sessions addressed in particular the following issues, by referring as far as possible to existing local research, suggesting tentative answers or opening up to new questions:

1. Contextualising: sexualities in the local context.

What are the main specific traits/features of sexual cultures, policies and experiences in that country? The speakers suggested relations between these traits/features and specificities of the local contexts, regarding e.g. religion, family structures and cultures, gender relations, legal regulation and public policies, patterns of migration.

2. Overview over the state of local sociological research on sexuality.

The country papers presented described the state of research on sexuality which was carried out in the country, including surveys on sexual behaviour and attitudes of the whole population, research on sexual minorities (e.g. homosexuality), and, possibly,

critical research on heterosexualities. Moreover, the papers discussed which theoretical frameworks (conceptual tools and interpretative perspectives) were used, and which epistemological and methodological choices (research designs and techniques) were made. Space was also devoted to identifying what was “missing” (underresearched issues, silenced topics, underdeveloped methodologies).

3. Reflections on the basis of the speakers’ own research experience

The speakers referred to their own research experience in their positioning in relation to the state of research on sexuality in their countries, and in discussing the ways in which they have dealt with “mainstream” interpretative frameworks and developed a context-sensitive research.

4. Further elements for general discussion

The speakers, and the comments of the other participants during the following discussions, also addressed the issues of the possible contribution for moving beyond “mainstream” that local research experiences could inspire. Moreover, possible directions of common research were discussed, out of wider research questions generated by local contexts.

3. Assessment of the results of the workshop

The workshop was successful in providing a reflexive space and thereby improving critical understandings of the current state of sex research in Europe. Throughout the discussions, some “fashionable conceptual frameworks” were identified as hegemonic in the European research agenda, i.e. the concept of “sexual health”, impinging upon the definition of relevant (and funded) research topics as well as on the choice of appropriate methodologies.

By gathering scholars coming from “non-mainstream” countries, the workshop developed therefore innovative and critical knowledge which could change the European research agenda on sexuality. Moreover, by questioning inappropriate

understandings of the context-specific features of how people behave in their sexual lives, and of attitudes about sexuality, this knowledge could affect policies, e.g. in the areas of risk prevention, and of actions countering homophobia and other forms of prejudice and violence related to sexuality.

On the basis of an acknowledgement of these important results, different possibilities for follow up activities were envisaged. With deadline in December, the participants agreed to revise and share the presentations that they had proposed in the workshop. Moreover, all participants agreed about keeping up and developing the network among scholars established during the workshop (and well grounded upon the personal knowledge allowed by intensive interaction), in different ways:

1. as “weak ties”, including mutual alerting about relevant events and forthcoming publications, exchange of published and unpublished writings;

2. as “strong ties”, including:

- bilateral or multilateral agreements for research exchanges;
- cooperation in training young researchers (e.g. the involvement of new scholars and countries in a Croatian spring school on sexuality), aimed at improving the quality of sex research by providing comparative critical knowledge.
- the construction of an inventory of quantitative and qualitative research tools (research projects, questionnaires, interview guides etc.)

4. Final programme

Wednesday, 30th September 2009

Afternoon	Arrival
	Get-together, informal meeting
20.00	<i>Dinner</i>

Thursday, 1st October 2009

09.30-10.00	Welcome
	Convenors: Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto (University of Turin, Italy), Chiara Bertone (University of East Piedmont, Alessandria, Italy)
	Reported welcome from: Franco Garelli (Dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Turin, Italy), Adriana Luciano (Head of Department of Social Sciences, University of Turin, Italy), Maria Luisa Bianco (Head of Department of Social research, University of East Piedmont, Italy)
10.00-10.30	Introduction to the workshop and presentation of the participants
10.30-13.00	Morning Session: Confronting with the mainstream
10.30-11.00	(Mis)understanding sexuality: some research examples Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto (University of Turin, Turin, Italy), Chiara Bertone (University of East Piedmont, Alessandria, Italy)
11.00-11.30	<i>Coffee break</i>
11.30-12.00	Confronting with the mainstream and introducing alternative frameworks: a case-study from Ireland Roisin Ryan-Flood (University of Essex, Essex, United Kingdom)
12.00-13.00	Discussion
13.00-14.00	<i>Lunch</i>
14.30-18.30	Afternoon Session: Country session 1
14.30-15.00	The Czech Republic Ladislav Rabusic (Masaryk University, Brno, The Czech Republic)
15.00-15.30	Discussion
15.30-16.00	Hungary Judith Takacs (Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, Hungary)
16.00-16.30	Discussion
16.30-17.00	<i>Coffee break</i>
17.00-18.00	Bulgaria Tatyana Kotzeva (Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria), Katia Mihailova (University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria)
18.00-18.30	Discussion
20.00	<i>Dinner</i>

Friday, 2nd October 2009

09.30-12.30 Morning Session: Country session 2

- 09.30-10.30 **Slovenia**
Ivan Bernik (University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia), **Alenka Svab**
(University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia)
- 10.30-11.00 Discussion
- 11.00-11.30 *Coffee break*
- 11.30-12.00 **Croatia**
Aleksandar Stulhofer (University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia)
- 12.00-12.30 Discussion
- 13.00-14.00 *Lunch*
- ### 14.30-18.00 Afternoon Session Country session 3
- 14.30-15.00 **Poland**
Antonina Ostrowska (Polish Academy of Sciences, Warszawa, Poland)
- 15.00-15.30 Discussion
- 15.30-16.00 **Lithuania**
Arnoldas Zdanevicius (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania)
- 16.00-16.30 Discussion
- 16.30-17.00 *Coffee break*
- 17.30-19.30 City Sightseeing
- 20.00 Dinner in the City Centre

Saturday, 3rd October 2009

09.30-12.30 Morning Session: Country session 4

- 09.30-10.00 **Portugal**
José Machado-Pais (University of Lisbon, Lisbon, Portugal)
- 10.00-10.30 Discussion
- 10.30-11.00 **Greece**
Elizabeth Iannidi-Kapolou (National School of Public Health, Athens, Greece)
- 11.00-11.30 Discussion
- 11.30-12.00 *Coffee break*
- 12.00-12.30 **Italy**
Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto (University of Turin, Turin, Italy), **Chiara Bertone** (University of East Piedmont, Alessandria, Italy)
- 12.30-13.00 Discussion
- 13.00-14.00 *Lunch*
- ### 14.30-17.00 Afternoon Session: Conclusions and Planning
- 14.30-15.00 **Presentation of the European Science Foundation (ESF)**
Bogdan Mach (ESF Standing Committee for Social Sciences (SCSS))

15.00-16.30	Discussion on emerging interpretative frameworks and research questions Discussion on follow-up activities/networking/collaboration
16.30-17.00	Practical instructions for refunding procedures and follow up paper presentations
17.00-19.00	<i>Free social activities</i>
20.00	<i>Closing Dinner</i>
21.00	<i>Farewell Party</i>

Sunday, 4th October 2009

From 07.00 Departures

5. Final list of participants

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6. Statistical information on the participants

Age	Male	Female
Less than 40 yrs	1	5
Over 40 yrs	4	4

Country	Male	Female
Italy	0	2
Slovenia	1	1
Greece	0	1
Bulgaria	0	2
Portugal	1	0
Poland	0	1
The Czech Republic	1	0
Ireland	0	1
Croatia	1	0
Hungary	0	1
Lithuania	1	0