

'I would just like to be straight.' Boys and young men's concerns about being gay in the questions sent to a Finnish sexual counselling service

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the experiences of boys and young men grappling with anxiety surrounding potential 'homosexual' orientation, particularly within the context of societal expectations of normative heterosexuality. Using data from queries submitted to a Finnish sexual counselling service between 2017 and 2019, we highlight a dissonance between societal equality initiatives and the lived experiences of boys and young men in Finland. Drawing on queer theory and social norms critique, we analyse the constraints that limit the exploration of sexuality and self-identification among young Finnish men. Our findings underscore the pervasive impact of enduring societal norms on young men's ability to express their sexuality openly and authentically. We advocate for strategies to promote a more supportive environment for young persons to navigate their sexual identities and advocate for the well-being of young people, alongside considerations for professionals working in youth support roles.

KEYWORDS:

heteronormativity

homosexuality

normcritique

boys

equality

sex education

Introduction

In Finland, grassroots activism has long driven the pursuit of sexual equality. Legislative updates, such as the 2015 amendments to the Equality Act and the Gender Equality Act, the 2017 Equal Marriage Law, and the 2023 revisions on sexual offences, have sought to promote gender and sexual equality, sexual self-

determination, and personal integrity as fundamental rights. These legal advances, combined with community equality initiatives and shifting societal attitudes, reflect increased recognition and acceptance of sexuality equality and gender minorities.

Despite claims by some anti-gender and anti-feminist advocates that Finland has moved too far towards an inclusive society, empirical data from an online sexual counselling service tells a different story. Analysing 8,057 anonymous inquiries to the Sexpo Foundation's service from 2017 to 2019, we focus on boys and young men grappling with anxiety about having a potential 'homosexual' orientation. We explore their perceptions of sexual identifications, particularly the desire to conform to normative heterosexuality in a society touted as progressive and liberal regarding gender and sexuality.

This data highlights a disconnect between high-level equality initiatives and the everyday experiences of young people, revealing entrenched power structures and hierarchisation that permeate sexuality and gender. Despite Finland's high ranking on the Gender Equality Index and evolving understandings of gender and sexuality (e.g. Juvonen 2019; Kangasvuo 2020), study findings illustrate the ongoing challenges young men face in expressing their sexual selves, constrained by stigmatisation and rigid identity categories, as exemplified in previous research (e.g. Sharpe 2002; Meeks 2001; Messerschmidt 2000). Our study offers insights into navigating this paradox, suggesting strategies to support the sexual well-being of boys and young men amidst evolving societal norms and discriminatory practices and structures.

Materials and methods

Established in 1969, the Sexpo Foundation promotes sexual well-being in Finland, offering free of charge counselling services online, over the phone, via video calls, and in person. The Foundation responded to 8,057 anonymous contacts from young people and young adults between 2017 and 2019, the period our research focuses upon.

To make sense of the extensive empirical data this paper focuses on, we used Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis framework (2019; Braun and Clarke 2022). This qualitative method helped us categorise and structure the data, revealing insights into the issues driving young individuals in Finland to seek guidance from Sexpo's online counselling service. We began by familiarising ourselves with the data and systematically coding it to identify recurrent themes. Interpersonal relationships, dating, body image, and sexual preferences were prominent topics in this vast dataset.

As sexology professionals who advocate for sexual rights as an indispensable educational and ethical tool for supporting young people's sexual well-being, visibility, and non-discrimination, we focus in this article on 326 inquiries (approximately 4% of all those received) related to sexual identification, noting a gendered communication pattern in 18% of these. Boys and young men, predominantly identifying themselves as heterosexual, expressed uncertainty and

anxiety about desires, behaviours and orientations they identified as 'homosexual', a concern absent in inquiries from girls or young women. While this topic did not seem to be one of the most pressing issues for Finnish young people contacting Sexpo's online counselling service, this gender bias concerning preferred sexual identification caught our attention as it highlights the need for inclusive support in sexuality education and advocacy for multiple and fluid sexual identifications (e.g. Christensen 2020).

It is imperative to emphasise that the data excerpts featured in this article provide no means of identifying the individuals involved. Since Sexpo's online counselling service does not collect personally identifying information from its users, we could not seek explicit consent from those who submitted their inquiries to Sexpo (as per TENK, Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2019). Each inquirer completed an online question form on the understanding that the questions they submitted and the responses provided by trained sexologists would be made publicly available on Sexpo's online counselling forum. Consequently, we treat the data analysed here as public documents. Nevertheless, we have undertaken extra steps to ensure anonymity, especially in those cases where the inclusion of specific details (such as specific dialectal expressions or disclosed places of residence) might lead to the identification of the individuals.

We have made minor edits to some quoted inquiries to enhance readability, including adding punctuation and trimming redundant or verbose elements while preserving the conversational style. Both the Sexpo Foundation and the Ethics Review Board of the University of Turku approved the research plan and the utilisation of anonymised data within the scope of our research project.

To better contextualise the evident gender bias concerning sexual identification within our research material, we draw upon queer theory (notably Turner 2000; Warner 2000) and social norms critique (Christensen 2020; Jagose 2015). We find these theoretical approaches beneficial in our analysis as, by these means, it is possible to challenge and deconstruct traditional understandings of sexuality, gender identity, and sexual norms. Because queer theory stresses the performative nature of gender (Butler 1990), it directs our attention towards the very performances of gender, suggesting that gender is not inherent but constructed through repeated acts and behaviours. With an emphasis on the fluidity and multiplicity of identities (for example, Halperin 1990; Sedgwick 1985; Warner 2000), queer theory suggests that individuals may experience their gender and sexuality in diverse and complex ways that defy fixed categories and categorisation.

Intersections with other critical theories helped us to explore how systems of power and oppression intersect and shape individuals' experiences of gender and sexuality. Queer theory critiques heteronormativity (Warner 1991), the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm and superior to other forms of sexual expression, and explores how it marginalises and excludes non-heteronormative identities and practices. Overall, queer theory seeks to disrupt conventional understandings of gender and sexuality, offering new frameworks for understanding the complexities of human identity and experience, which we find helpful in our efforts to challenge discrimination, advocate for LGBTQIA+ rights, and promote social justice.

In our analysis, we aim to unearth pervasive societal norms and discriminatory structures surrounding sexuality through critique of social norms, which may elucidate the observed patterns within our research material. Through the lens of our chosen theoretical apparatus, we explore how gender and sexuality norms persist even in ostensibly progressive societies, influencing the organisation of individuals, behaviours, and societal constructs and foreclosing differences. As elucidated by Christensen (2020, 59–60), social norms gradually evolve into naturalised conventions over time, rendering them invisible and challenging to discern in everyday interactions until a deviation occurs. Consequently, norms mould the implicit ideals against which everything else is measured, shaping perceptions of diversity and difference within society and creating social inequalities. Norm critique, then, is to be critical of social norms and the normative conditions they give shape to.

Viewing our research material through a norm-critical lens (Bengtsson and Bolander 2019; Christensen 2020; Warner 2000), we focus on the societal and everyday structures of thought and action that perpetuate inequality and concretely impact individuals' lives, particularly their sexual well-being. We see this critical approach to social norms and constructions of normality as a way of enhancing inclusion and equality by 'exposing the construction and history of normality, investigating how oppressions operate through the repetition of norms in everyday lives, and engaging educators and pupils to think critically and question power structures as well as their own oppressive actions and positions' (Bengtsson and Bolander 2019, 155). By deconstructing dominant social norms related to sexuality, we actively reflect on the beliefs and practices that would allow everyone to explore their identity, fantasies, gender, interests, pleasures, and sexuality at their own pace, free from shame, discrimination, and fear of stigma. We advocate for fluid approaches to understanding sexuality and practices that support peaceful growth towards sexual maturity and the realisation of sexual rights.

Our theoretical approach suggests that sexuality is a construct that takes shape within the unique historical and contextual circumstances of a given time and place. It is influenced by various performative practices (Butler 1990, 1993), encompassing recurrent linguistic, institutional, bodily, and visual expressions and their iterations. These practices mould sexual identities and their associated claims of truth, 'solidified modes of being and doing' (Christensen 2020, 59), dynamically adapted to specific moments in time and geographical locations (Butler 1990, 1993; Foucault 1978).

Furthermore, this perspective posits that sexuality and gender are not inherent but are instead constructed and interpreted within specific contexts. Knowledge about sexuality, tied to time and place, defines the boundaries of comprehensibility, influencing what can be seen, acknowledged, and experienced as sexual (Foucault 1978; Butler 1990). In the realm of sexual identifications, gender and sexuality often become intertwined, with gender serving as a crucial prerequisite for sexual understanding. For instance, in the context of a same-sex attracted or practising identity, there is an amalgamation of one's own gender and that of the desired object of affection, which typically aligns with one's own gender. While we acknowledge the intricate interplay of the concepts of gender and sexuality from an experiential perspective, our article makes a deliberate, analytical distinction between these two concepts with a primary focus on sexuality and the internal and

external power relations within and between sexual identifications (Rubin [1984] 2006).

We use the term 'gay concern' to characterise a recurring theme in the communications received from boys and young men regarding sexual identification. This theme revolves around deeply personal fears related to the possibility of same-sex attraction. It also serves as a lens through which we can understand the pressures faced by young men with their preferred sexual identification. One might think that 'gay concern' would be more of a finding from the research data than a starting point. We understand this perspective and do not exclude this interpretation. However, we want to clarify the matter. Throughout the study, we noticed and named a specific type of contact 'gay concern' even before the thematic analysis of the data (Braun and Clarke 2019, 2022). The reflexive thematic analysis only confirmed our original observation and verified it as a distinctively gendered type of submission since it was entirely absent in inquiries from girls or young women. A norm-critical approach (e.g. Bengtsson and Bolander 2019) helped solidify our original observation and further contextualise this critical finding.

In the light of the theoretical tools we have used to analyse the material, our interpretation suggests that pressures regarding the potential sexual identification the boys and young men express in the research material are intimately tied to societal and cultural norms, structures and practices that shape conventional understandings of sexuality and gender. In the counselling inquiries we examined, the possibility of 'homosexuality' is portrayed as a stigmatising identification and sexual orientation, which boys and young men strive to avoid at all costs (Pascoe 2011).

We approach the topic of gay concern that we have chosen to highlight as a grave societal issue, shedding light on issues related to equality, well-being, and sexual health. When delving into the concept of gay concern, it is essential to emphasise that it is not an irrational personal anxiety but rather a deeply entrenched matter connected to societal power structures. Within our contemplation of sexual identifications, particularly the juxtaposition between homo- and heterosexuality within our dataset, it becomes evident that these identification options are not viewed as equal. Our society operates within a cultural framework in which normative heterosexuality is considered the default mode of existence and sexual expression. Any deviation from this norm is frequently met with negative sanctions, sometimes even manifesting as acts of violence (Rubin [1984] 2006).

Throughout this article, we diligently explore how the preferred sexual self-concept of the boys and young men who reached out to Sexpo is significantly challenged, resulting in considerable anxiety. We take the experiences of these individuals seriously and sincerely consider the societal hierarchies concerning different sexual orientation. In doing so, we contemplate whether an alternative perspective on understanding sexuality and gender could alleviate the suffering experienced by these boys and contribute to the enhancement of their sexual well-being.

Throughout our conceptual work, we remain acutely aware that the transformation of perspectives necessitates practical action to advance sexual rights. The gay concern arises within a socio-cultural context where non-heterosexual identification in

general, and homosexual identification in particular, are deemed less possible and safe in comparison to adhering to the normative path of heterosexuality. This context necessitates relentless grassroots efforts that work to break down the systemic structures evident in our dataset, whereby specific sexual orientations and expressions of flexibility are consistently favoured over others.

Analysis

Our research material offers a distinctive perspective on how individuals who identify as heterosexual boys or men navigate their sexuality in contemporary Finland, a nation celebrated globally for its commitment to sexual rights and ongoing efforts to promote gender equality and non-discrimination. The material engages with the experiences of young boys and men who experience agonising concerns about the direction of their desires, emotions, interests, and attractions, different from their understanding of heterosexuality. Using a queer theoretical and norm critical analysis, we deconstruct the pressure gay concern places upon boys, revealing how normative concepts surrounding sexuality tend to exclude diverse expressions of sexuality, fostering and reinforcing discriminatory thinking even in liberal societies.

Gendered structures of heteronormativity

So, I am a 9th-grade boy, and I am 15 years old. I'm constantly afraid that I might be gay. I've never had any crushes on boys. I'm not particularly aroused by gay porn; sometimes, I've experienced a half-erection - - - I know, it's really stupid. And I also know that almost no one is 100% straight. But I have these gay thoughts in my head. Sometimes they even feel appealing, but they don't turn me on (fortunately!). I'm a tolerant person. My friend only told me about his bisexuality because he knew I wouldn't judge. I wish I could just be straight myself. Then, once I saw a picture of a gay couple and saw myself in the future, and it scared me. However, I don't know if I can trust my feelings because this whole fear started without a reason - - - But sometimes, I catch myself looking at a boy's behind, and I don't know if I'm very straight. It might not necessarily mean anything, but it's scary. I can more easily judge if girls are good-looking compared to boys because I pay more attention to girls. Thank you in advance for your response.

The provided communication offers a poignant illustration of how young boys and adolescent men who identify as heterosexual often articulate their emotions when discussing matters of possible non-heterosexual orientation in our research material. The fear of being associated with 'homosexuality' significantly shapes their perceptions and experiences of their own sexuality. In this particular exchange, a 15-year-old boy acknowledges the widely accepted notion that 'almost no one is 100% straight', yet this knowledge fails to alleviate his personal concerns. The communicator expresses a sense of relief that he does not become aroused by 'gay thoughts' even though, occasionally, they may hold a certain allure. His introspection is triggered by moments when he finds himself discreetly admiring another boy's

physique, leaving him questioning the extent of his own heterosexuality. Despite considering himself a tolerant individual, he nonetheless yearns to 'just be straight'.

As authors committed to queer theoretical and norm-critical understandings, our approach is rooted in the idea that gender and sexuality are non-essential and performative aspects of identity rather than intrinsic or pre-existing characteristics (e.g. Paasonen and Spišák 2018). When analysing the data through a queer theoretical and norm critical lens, it appears that there is limited space for the exploration of sexuality and self-identification among boys and young men who contacted the counselling service, a limitation we interpret as closely linked to prevailing norms and assumptions regarding sexuality and gender and their intricate interplay. These assumptions often wield a dual influence: they are widespread in their impact, yet remain inconspicuous in their obviousness (see, for example, Christensen 2020).

Furthermore, their relationship to the promotion of equality can be paradoxical. For many young people, self-identifying with a particular sexual orientation holds great significance, and the right to determine one's sexual identity, or the choice not to, should be universally respected. However, discourse emphasising the necessity of self-identification and sexual identity categories can inadvertently obscure discussions about sexuality and hinder authentic experiences, especially in situations where sexuality is placed on the fringes of conventional categories, is searching for its place, or resists easy categorisation. Paraphrasing Christensen (2020, 60), norms linked to sexuality and gender normalise or naturalise specific modes of being and doing, which are constituted by excluding differences and other possibilities. Within our research material, heteronorms work as a constraining force.

While we, as authors, embrace a non-essentialist and adaptable perspective when examining matters of gender and sexuality, it is essential to note that our understanding does not align with the predominant discourse present in public discussion about sexuality. The individuals whose experiences form the basis of our research also approach this topic from a vastly different vantage point. To them, heterosexuality is not just considered normal; it is, at times, perceived as overwhelmingly compelling and the standard against which all other orientations are to be measured (Christensen 2020).

Within the material, boys and young men tend to navigate their sexual identities along a strict heterosexual-homosexual axis, where heterosexuality is seen as the unequivocal and desirable norm, and in which non-heterosexual identities other than homosexuality – such as bisexuality – remain absent (on the marginalisation of bisexuality, see Klesse 2011). In this context, heterosexuality is described as a form of sexuality in which attraction is consistently and systematically directed towards the gender considered 'opposite'.¹ However, this clarity and systematic approach are tenuous, as any desires, thoughts, arousals, or sexual practices that deviate even slightly from a rigidly heterosexual framework can potentially challenge the person's self-identification as heterosexual.

The inquiries, as exemplified above, construct hetero- and homosexuality as dichotomies that constitute each other, with homosexuality in opposition to and outside of heterosexuality. The thoughts shared by the 15-year-old at the outset of

this discussion illuminate the pervasive cultural norms and practices that underpin notions of 'appropriate' sexuality. These societal regulations define and govern how we perceive and express our sexuality (e.g. Foucault 1978; Plummer 1995; Warner 1991). In the specific context of our study, any exploration of one's sexual orientation is not without tension, as even the slightest deviation from the norm of heterosexuality can be perceived as a threat and may result in homophobia. Within the framework of this article, heteronormativity emerges as the central normative axis that shapes the material's discussion about same-sex attraction.

Heteronormativity refers to a paradigm in which heterosexuality is not merely viewed as one among various forms of sexual expression; instead, it is upheld as the most 'natural', 'appropriate' and 'desirable' way to be a sexual being. Within this construct, heterosexuality becomes an implicit and unspoken 'norm' against which all other expressions of sexuality are compared and defined (Warner 1991). In the words of Rossi (2006, 19), it critically underscores how 'institutionalized heterosexuality, established through discourse and various practices, becomes the assumed, naturalized, singularly accepted, and aspirational model for social and sexual relations'. While recognising that the concept of heteronormativity is not without its complexities and critiques (see, for example, Rossi 2006; Joseph and Sommer 2019), we maintain that its use can effectively bring to light the norms that may exert a constraining influence not only on homo- and heterosexual identities but also on the broader landscape of sexual identities and our understanding of human sexuality.

Heteronormativity pertains to how heterosexuality is positioned at the core of discussions on sexual orientations, particularly in contrast to those that deviate from it, such as homosexuality, which is a crucial aspect of our research material. However, our understanding of heterosexuality is deeply entwined not only with distinctions between various sexual orientations but also with the binary concept of gender, which serves as a lens through which heterosexuality is comprehended (Butler 1990).

The beliefs held by the boys and young men who reached out to Sexpo with concerns about same-sex attraction and practices are significantly influenced by both heteronormativity and binary gender thinking when it comes to how they should adequately embody heterosexual masculinity. Within our material, as these young men's thoughts weave gender and sexuality together, the norms associated with heterosexuality become a defining force, characterising any interest directed towards a gender that does not conform to the clearly defined 'opposite', as a deviation. In the material, any interest that might be interpreted as sexual in nature towards persons or people of the same gender signifies an experiential connection to a 'homosexual' identification, something the boys and young men actively seek to avoid.

A disruptive event to one's preferred heterosexual self-identification, such as experiencing arousal from gay pornography, is considered a significant challenge, potentially even leading to a re-evaluation of their long-standing self-perception:

Yeah, so I'm a 16-year-old boy. I've always been attracted to girls, and I still am, but for some reason, I'm interested in gay porn, which is really distressing. Outside of that context, I'm not interested in guys.

In the material, the presence of homophobia and homophobic thoughts is seen as a phenomenon closely intertwined with the inflexible and narrow framework of normative heterosexual masculinity. Connell's seminal work on gender and masculinity (Connell 2005) posits that sexual discrimination and homophobia play pivotal roles in the valuation and organisation of different forms of masculinity. According to Connell, homophobia primarily involves the devaluation and marginalisation of specific masculine identities, thereby reinforcing the dominance of normative – or, in Connell's terminology, hegemonic – heterosexual masculinity. Kimmel's (1996) definition aligns with this perspective, suggesting that homophobia is not solely rooted in the fear of homosexuality but is also deeply connected to power relations and sanctions within male relationships, as well as the repercussions faced by those who deviate from heterosexual masculine ideals.

The young individuals who sought assistance from Sexpo passionately expressed their desire to 'just be straight' and their willingness to 'do anything to become straight'. Their interest in the same sex becomes a source of distress to them when contrasted with conventional understandings of heterosexuality, its associated sexual behaviours, and societal expectations regarding gender expression. Within the material, boys were acutely conscious of the potential consequences of identifying as gay, including the bullying, threats and violence frequently endured by LGBTQI+ individuals (Duckworth and Nell Trautner 2019). They keenly observed the normative structures in society and recognised how heterosexual individuals have the privilege of not fearing or needing to justify their sexual orientation. Heterosexuality remained an unspoken and self-evident norm that demands no definitions or explanations.

In recent years, quantitative studies drawing from extensive population-level surveys have suggested a decrease in homophobia in some Western societies, aligning with broader trends towards equality and non-discrimination (for a comprehensive overview, see, e.g. Diefendorf and Bridges 2020). However, within our qualitative dataset, homophobia continues to manifest. Nevertheless, we do not perceive these seemingly conflicting findings as mutually exclusive. While homophobia may have waned at the population level, it does not imply uniformity across society nor guarantee that individuals everywhere conform to uniform, non-discriminatory practices.

Diefendorf and Bridges, who delve into the interplay between homophobia and normative masculinity, emphasise that quantitative studies, based on extensive statistical data, often overlook the diversity of sexual subjectivities that do not align with the overarching findings. They stress that contrary to what quantitative research may suggest, qualitative studies reveal that homophobic practices persist in shaping certain forms of masculinity as being hierarchically valued over others. Through our norm-critical analysis, we posit that the young boys and men in our material who express a strong desire to avoid a homosexual identity may be doing so to evade the homophobic stigma, discriminatory societal structures, and the potential for violent practices (see also Duckworth and Nell Trautner 2019).

Preferred heterosexuality as clear-cut and monolithic

As highlighted earlier, our material powerfully underscores the pressure to identify exclusively as heterosexual, owing to the elevated status of heterosexuality in contrast to other sexualities. In our interpretation, 'I would just like to be straight' carries a dual meaning: first, the will to identify as specifically heterosexual, distinguishing themselves from being homosexual, and second, the will to identify with only one clear-cut sexual identity that is stable in terms of gender and desire. At a more general level, the material also underscores the pressure to conform to a single, clearly defined identity category. In the following quotation, a young man who sought assistance from Sexpo is grappling with the notion that his homoerotic fantasies and arousal do not neatly align with his self-identification as heterosexual. He reaches out to Sexpo's online counselling experts to seek clarity regarding his identity category and whether he might be gay:

I'm a 20-year-old man. I've been pondering why I'm more aroused by gay porn and homoerotic fantasies than heterosexual ones. Indeed, I get aroused by hetero porn and heterosexual fantasies as well, and I enjoy having heterosexual sex. Currently, I'm in a relationship with a girl whom I really like. However, I find these homoerotic fantasies distressing because I couldn't imagine being with a man in real life. Not in a romantic sense, and I don't desire to fulfill these sexual fantasies either. The problem is that I've always thought of myself as straight, and I still feel like I'm straight. But the fact that gay porn and homoerotic fantasies arouse me more than heterosexual ones makes me wonder if I'm gay. Gay porn and eroticism has aroused me since I was a child. However, there have been periods when I haven't fantasized about men. Women have always aroused me. Do I see something "unreal" in gay porn and homoerotic fantasies that I don't see in typical heterosexual activities, which is why I get more excited by them? I don't know. But please, can you answer whether I'm gay?

In this communication, heterosexuality is portrayed as a rigid and uniform sexual orientation, wherein even relatively individual factors like desire, autonomously regulated bodily arousal, and the direction of thoughts are expected to conform to a systematic heterosexual pattern. Homoerotic fantasies and the arousal derived from gay pornography are perceived as inappropriate in a context where one cannot envision being romantically involved with a man or engaging in real-life sexual encounters. In this rigid pattern, even the slightest hint of a same-sex orientation are alarming, and there is no room for the simultaneous desire for different genders. While in the query above, apprehensions about same-sex attraction and practices, and fitting into a specific category, are primarily centred on desires, thoughts, and bodily responses that diverge from the heterosexual norm. In some of the interactions, concerns about being gay also encompass practical aspects of sexual activity and the specific areas of the body that elicit pleasure:

Hi ! I'm an 18-year old boy. I think myself as straight, but I have these fantasies of a woman sticking her finger into my ass. I have done this to myself and I like it. But now I wonder if I can still be straight. I don't have any

feelings towards men. It bugs me if I could still be straight though I want to find my G-spot. I feel kind of guilty since I don't want to be gay.

The 18-year-old individual's query regarding experiencing penetrative pleasure through anal sex raises questions about their heterosexuality, not only as a part of solo sexual activity but also in fantasies involving a sexual partner of a different gender than themselves. This question illuminates how a heteronormative perspective on sex imposes limitations on the spectrum of possible sources of bodily pleasure. Rather than enjoying sexual pleasure, the individual is burdened with feelings of guilt and shame. Within the context of our material, heterosexual sex adheres to a strict and well-defined script, influencing both the mental and physical dimensions of heterosexuality; heterosexuality presents a uniform pattern of behaviour and approach to all those young individuals whose preferred identification is heterosexual. Any deviation from this conventional pattern leads to significant confusion.

We intend to challenge the singular and monolithic understanding of heterosexual sexuality and to stimulate dialogue regarding the recognition of diverse forms of heterosexuality at both the level of heterosexual identifications and heterosexual sexual practices. Jackson (1999, 3) underscores the interconnectedness of normative practices of heterosexuality with everyday social structures that shape how individuals negotiate their sense of self and their relationships. She encourages us to critically examine the norms, silences, assumptions, neutralities, and invisibilities linked to heterosexuality that perpetuate the influence of heteronormativity. Furthermore, she urges us to scrutinise the different social structures that promote normative heterosexuality and portray heteronormative positions as natural, self-evident, and fundamental forms of being in relationships.

We believe that as awareness regarding the flexibility, fluidity and adaptability of sexuality (e.g. Paasonen and Spišák 2018) becomes more prevalent, it has the potential to expand the realm of sexual exploration and diminish homophobia. The strengthening of these 'malleable perspectives' (ibid.) inherently reduces the necessity to delineate the boundaries between different sexualities so rigorously. In reality, heterosexuality displays remarkable diversity. It can encompass various forms, such as consensual non-monogamous relationships, voluntary childlessness, significant age disparities between partners, unconventional sexual practices, sexless relationship arrangements, or an open space for same-sex desires. The conventional perception of heterosexuality conceals the significant variance within heterosexual identifications, which empirical studies illustrate (see, for example, Beasley, Brook, and Holmes 2012; Copen et al. 2016).

A norm-critical view of heterosexuality challenges the notion that it represents a natural, unalterable form of sexuality. Instead, it positions normative heterosexuality as just one among many diverse sexual identifications, subject to construction, normalisation, and perpetuation while marginalising other sexual orientations. Our primary focus in this and other work is on the ongoing progress in fostering equality, dismantling discriminatory structures, creating a more inclusive social environment, and highlighting the critical importance of continuing these efforts. Recognising the potential for increased equality through understanding the malleability of sexuality

requires an environment where individuals can explore their identities freely, devoid of pressure to conform to any particular mould.

The expression of one's sexuality is significantly influenced by the possibilities for conceptualising different forms of sexuality, desire, and sexual practices within a specific historical context. Rossi (2003, 33) argues that our representations and performances are shaped by an ever-evolving range of *potential* representations, a mental repertoire that guides our perceptions of the world. Notably, in the 21st century, the spectrum of conceivable and comprehensible expressions of sexuality has broadened, a process that has occurred slowly and unevenly, even within heterosexuality. As these shifts become more widely accepted, they have the potential to dismantle rigid norms, ideologies and practices associated with heteronormative masculinity. Heterosexuality, too, evolves within the constraints of time and place, allowing for the possibility of diverse forms. If sexuality has been structured by various normative standards, what actions and ongoing changes can we embrace to shape it into a more accommodating space for young men wrestling with homophobia?

Discussion

Norm critique as a tool in advancing equality best practices

Societal norms exert control over who and what is permitted visibility, audibility, and existence, dictating the manner of this presence. Our article delves into the intricacies of these norms, particularly concerning sexuality and, to some extent, gender. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that such norms do not exist in isolation and represent only a fragment of the societal normative framework (Crenshaw 1989). However, sexuality occupies a significant role as it is the conduit through which society has historically normatively defined and continues to define an individual's 'inner truth' and level of acceptability (Foucault 1978). We firmly believe that actively highlighting and deconstructing these norms can mitigate discrimination and advance the cause of equality in realms of sexual orientation, gender, and practices related to sexualities and relationships.

Within our research material, normative heterosexuality appears to be difficult to 'live out'. The preferred identification of heterosexuality is anything but smooth. Boys and young men who contacted the online counselling service experience wide cracks and dissonance in a preferred male heterosexual identification in the forms of deviating desires, pleasures and behaviours. These cracks cause anxiety as they make the construction of normative heterosexuality hard to achieve. Instead of embracing desires and behaviours that have the potential to yield pleasure, these young people strive to fit into the mould of normative heterosexuality.

Norm-critical thinking calls for introspection into how various phenomena and ways of thinking have evolved into our current forms. The term 'norm' (derived from the Latin *norma*) denotes not just a 'mould' or a 'measure' but, notably, a 'right angle'. In

this context, it symbolises the builder's tool, ensuring materials are correctly aligned. When intertwined with education, this concept portrays how various norms dictate the ideal characteristics educators aim to instil in their students. In contrast, norm-criticality should serve as the cornerstone of discussions about education and sexuality. A norm-critical perspective facilitates criticism and propels the development of innovative and alternative pedagogical methods. It advocates for a forward-looking and transformative approach to societal critique, which demands a commitment to scrutinising existing norms. It implores us to consider a world in which we do not presume everyone is cisgender or heterosexual unless proven otherwise. How would it affect the way we converse with young people about matters of sexuality and sex if we relinquish the belief in one-size-fits-all identity definitions, recognising their fluidity and multiplicity? Instead of accepting that some sexual behaviours are, let us say, 'homosexual', we should ask why we think this is the case.

The power and challenge of applying norm-critical thinking lie in the same place: the profound and pervasive influence that norms exert beneath the surface, shaping social relationships and societies. Norms related to sexuality and gender reach into each of us uniquely, as summoned by a norm-critical perspective. On one hand, we maintain our individual relationships with norms surrounding sexuality and gender. On the other hand, we hold our perspectives on what constitutes healthy and desirable sexuality and interpersonal relationships. As societal structures become more diverse, they may appear desirable but also bewildering or even threatening. The intersection of norms at the boundary between the societal and the personal calls for a critical examination of how norms affect our lives and personal understandings and practices related to sexuality.

The ongoing scrutiny of societal structures, values, and attitudes allows, at its best, the ability to see the 'familiar as unfamiliar', both structurally and individually, to better understand sexuality. This, in turn, creates room for action that is values-driven and transformative of structures. This action encompasses the belief that even if one's experience is a certain way, it does not render differing experiences any less accurate. Simultaneously, it involves an understanding that a life that does not align with norms is genuinely more burdensome than one that fits the norm.

Strengths and limitations

This study has several significant strengths. Firstly, it analyses 8,057 anonymous inquiries submitted to the Sexpo Foundation's counselling service over a two year period, providing a large and reliable data set. Additionally, the use of a reflexive thematic analysis framework enabled a systematic and detailed examination of the data and the effective identification and categorisation of recurrent themes, ensuring a thorough and credible analysis of the issues at hand. By employing a norm-critical lens, we were able to examine the societal structures and norms that perpetuate inequality. This approach sheds light on how power structures influence individuals' sexual well-being and provides a transformative perspective on social norms related to sexuality, advocating for greater inclusivity and equality.

The focus on boys and young men provides valuable insights into the specific challenges they face, particularly the pressure to conform to normative

heterosexuality. Furthermore, the research contributes to a broader discourse on sexual rights, advocating for the use of educational and ethical tools to support the development of young people's sexual well-being, visibility, and non-discrimination towards them. This contribution is central to promoting a more supportive and inclusive environment for all individuals navigating their sexual identities.

Despite its strengths, the study is not without its limitations. The study identifies a gender bias in the data, noting that 'gay concern' was absent in inquiries from girls or young women. This indicates a potential bias in the way different genders express their concerns about sexuality, which may limit the comprehensiveness of our findings. Moreover, the findings are heavily contextualised within Finnish society and its specific cultural and legislative environment. As a result, the applicability of the findings to other cultural or national settings with different societal norms and legal frameworks regarding sexuality and gender may be limited.

Additionally, the study primarily examines sexual identification along a strict heterosexual-homosexual axis. This focus may overlook the experiences of individuals with other sexual orientations, such as bisexuality or pansexuality, which are not so prominently discussed in our analysis. Finally, while thematic analysis is a robust qualitative method, it is inherently subject to researcher bias in theme identification and interpretation. The researchers' perspectives and assumptions likely influence how the data is coded and understood, potentially affecting the objectivity of our findings.

By acknowledging these strengths and limitations, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the sexual anxieties experienced by young men in Finland. It also calls for more inclusive and equitable societal norms surrounding sexuality, contributing to ongoing efforts to support and affirm diverse sexual identities.

Conclusion

From our perspective, gay concern reflects how the power structures that govern sexuality and normative orders permeate the lives and experiences of individuals, leading to significant distress. At the heart of norm critique lies the call for a more equitable, inclusive, and non-discriminatory society. Queer political thought provides valuable tools for envisioning a fairer future regarding sexuality (Turner 2000, 134). This perspective sheds light on the deeply ingrained and commonplace understandings, practices, and structures related to sexuality that have real-life, material consequences for individuals and communities. In the queries submitted to Sexpo, normative pressure is expressed as a gay concern, where young men reaching out to Sexpo fear not fitting the mould of being 'just straight'. Heteronormative and sexuality-categorising regulations send a message to these young men, dictating that their gazes, emotions, interests, and desires should conform to a single, straightforward path.

The anxiety that one's own sexuality does not align with the image of 'ideal heterosexual masculinity' significantly drains the vitality and well-being of the young men in this study. How can someone embrace and enjoy their sexuality fully while

grappling with the shadow of gay concern? Although Finnish youth culture is typically associated with freedom, boundlessness, and an ethos of defying norms (Taavetti et al. 2020, 32), this spirit seems to bypass the realm of gay concern in our research material. To us, this reveals at least two stark realities: first, the continuing inequality and subordinate status of male same-sex attraction, compared to heterosexuality, manifesting as discrimination, homophobia, and even violence; and second, and closely related to the first point, the rigid and unambiguously exclusive nature of gendered desires and sexual identity categories.

We believe that adopting a non-essentialist and more flexible perspective in understanding sexuality and gender could have a positive impact on the well-being and emotional equilibrium of young individuals as they navigate towards sexual growth and sexual health. A norm-critical approach, grounded in good quality research guided by queer theory, exposes the normative structures that influence entrenched perceptions and practices concerning sexuality. Norm critique questions the assumed naturalness of heterosexuality and its role as the benchmark against which all other forms are measured. Existing knowledge already demonstrates that, while heterosexuality appears to be internally uniform, it is not. There is a significant complexity and diversity in the desires and practices of heterosexual men. Same-sex attraction is not on the fringes; it is only sidelined when compared to normative heterosexuality (see, for example, Savin-Williams 2017; Ward 2015).

While emphasising the adaptability of sexual identities, the internal heterogeneity of heterosexuality, and various anti-homophobic sexual practices, we must also consider gender-related norms and their intersections with sexual norms. Especially when discussing heterosexuality, boys and men are frequently portrayed as problematic boundary violators in sexual contexts. In parallel to these discussions, there is a pressing need for dialogue on the sexual vulnerability of boys and young men, the possibilities for pleasure, and the various ways in which narrow gender frameworks restrict sexual freedom for people of all genders. Following Sedgwick (1985), we should rethink hetero-masculinity and acknowledge its diverse expressions. Normative hetero-masculinity marginalises not only the sexualities and genders that diverge from it, but also all the desires and practices of those identifying as heterosexual men who do not neatly fit into this rigid category.

A norm-critical perspective challenges the prevailing therapeutic understanding, which confines the sources of distress and conflicts to an individual's inner world. An analysis that encompasses the personal and societal domains allows for a more comprehensive discussion about the kind of sexual culture that would not exert pressure on the boys and men in our data to be 'just straight'. This standpoint creates space for questions shaping the future such as: how can we create safe havens for self-exploration and diverse self-expression for boys and young men; how can we establish a culture where boys and men are free to experience sexual desire for any gender, regardless of gender; and how can we foster an environment in which boys and men can explore and delight in various consensual pleasures and, instead of experiencing shame, take pride in their unique sexualities?

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Notes

1. It is vital to note that the notion of ‘opposite gender’ is tricky within the context of our article, as our own words, inspired by queer theory, inadvertently help shape reality in a certain way. Nevertheless, this notion is crucial to the self-definition and, as we will explore in more detail, the associated struggles of the individuals in our dataset. The concept of ‘opposite gender’ is a fundamental aspect of self-identity for these individuals and is connected to their personal experiences.

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