
Normative sex, by all means

Sex survey questionnaires revisited

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A population based national sex survey conducted in Sweden by Hans Zetterberg in 1967 inspired also the sex research in Finland. In 1971 three Finnish men, Kai Sievers, Osmo Koskelainen, and Kimmo Leppo created a sex survey questionnaire to explore the sexual habits of average Finns. The research team knew they could not use a big enough sample to include a noticeable amount of respondents belonging to sexual minorities. Their decision to more or less exclude the issue of homosexuality from the questionnaire of *Suomalaisten sukupuolielämä* (1974, *The sexual life of Finns*; in the text as SuSu) was a sensible and reasoned one.

The heterosexual frame of the first survey questionnaire, however, continued to influence the subsequent surveys conducted in Finland. A new interest in national representative sex surveys came up in 1980s when the rise of the AIDS epidemic made apparent the need for reliable information about sexual behaviour of the populations (Miller 1995). That allowed in 1992 also for the research team of Elina Haavio-Mannila and Osmo Kontula to rise public money to conduct a new sex survey in Finland, *Suomalainen seksi* (1993, *Finnish sex*; in the text as SuSe).

In Finland the researchers were most interested in learning how sexuality has changed in the past twenty years in Finland due to the social changes (SuSe p. 16-17). In order to allow temporal comparison they used the old survey questionnaire as their basis for the new study. Here their decision differ markedly from that of Bo Lewin and his team in Sweden 1998, since for *Sex i Sverige* a whole new questionnaire was designed (Lewin ed. 1998). However, in Finland the researchers soon realised that new items had to be introduced in to the old questionnaire in order to obtain a more accurate picture of the changing sexual trends. So when the researchers of 1971 had consisted of only two questions about homosexuality, the issue was now approached with 11 different questions.¹

In the following I will discuss the struggles and pitfalls of questionnaire design in a situation where there are two such contradictory approaches as keeping the old questionnaire intact "without changing a word" (Haavio-Mannila 1999 p. 44) and simultaneously introducing homosexuality as a new issue. The research team of 1992 seems blinded by their reliance on the survey method as

such, when they assumed that copying the good old questionnaire from 1971 would provide them easily with useful and comparable results. In their eagerness for comparison they failed to critically reflect upon the upcoming problems. One of the problems was created by the societal changes that had happened over time, another by the fact that the model questionnaire was intended to be normatively heterosexual.

The results of a sex survey might be fun to read, yet it is even more fascinating to look at the ways in which researchers construct sexualities in their questionnaire design. One can learn a lot about the changing construction of normative sexuality from the questionnaire design, its structure and wording, and the subtle adjustments done in subsequent surveys.

Importance of emphasis and placement

When looking at quantitative research it is convenient to start with numbers. The 1971 survey had in total 192 questions, out of which two referred to homosexuality. The 1992 survey had 11 questions about homosexuality, from a total of 207. It is obvious that the picture created about homosexuality by only two or even with 11 questions is bound to be rather narrow. Likewise this emphasis on heterosexuality leads the respondents to understand that heterosexuality is, and continues to be, the norm, and homosexuality is only an exception from that.

In the questionnaire design of 1971 there is a crucial filter question, which asks respondents whether they have ever been engaged in "a sexual contact". If that question is understood to refer to heterosexual intercourse (like it should have, as indicated by some of the follow up questions referring to a relationship between men and women), those without heterosexual contacts are asked to transit from question 63 to question 102. A similar 39-questions transition is built in into the 1992 questionnaire with a new filter question about "a sexual intercourse".

Due to the transit people without heterosexual experiences are thus not asked about issues such as sex education, love, regularity of sex life or contentment with it, sex life of singles or parallel relationships, sexual problems or diseases. This indicates that such issues are not relevant to homosexuality, although they are considered necessary to an ample picture of heterosexual sexuality. Nor can homosexuality, unlike heterosexuality, be seen connected with fulfilling human relationships.

Both surveys rely on the format where the more sensitive and difficult questions are located at the end of the questionnaires. That is also where the questions about homosexuality are placed. In the 1971 questionnaire the question about homosexual drive is located right after the questions about masturbation and

male impotence, thus framing homosexuality into something one should be likewise ashamed or worried about. In 1992 the section with specific questions about same-sex sexual behaviour and practices is located directly after such new and sensitive issues as the usage of pornographic materials, engaging in manual and oral sex, and using sex toys alone or with a partner.

This transition of homosexuality away from the “normal” partnered heterosexual sex into a context of “secretive sexuality” (SuSe p. 18) means that homosexuality is introduced to the respondents as a purely sexual thing and a kinky variation to that.

Wording

The tone of 1971 survey is mostly held gender neutral, which makes same questions applicable for both male and female respondents. Yet topped with wordings that differentiate poorly between male and female partners, such as “sexual contact”, it creates a situation where the researchers actually cannot know whether the respondents refer to hetero- or homosexual experiences in their answers to general questions.

Since seventies it had become obvious in sex survey that the respondents do not always understand the wording of the questions in a uniform way. So it had become popular to search for a more precise sexual vocabulary and to introduce definitions of the central words used in a questionnaire in order to achieve more consistent answers (Smith 1999 p. 392-393, 395). This was also the case in the 1992 survey, where the researchers decided to define some key concepts like “intercourse” (here “sexual contact directed towards vagina”) and “sexual contact” (meaning “sexual interaction by either intercourse, oral sex, anal intercourse or arousing the other by hand”).

Unfortunately these definitions are not very helpful, because they are not exclusive. In addition the crucial filter question uses the wording “sexual intercourse”, which is not defined at all. So again in 1992 the ignorance about homosexual option and the simple, and false, reliance on heterosexual assumption about the meaning of the words leads to a situation where there is a lack of proper definitions, adequate filter questions and gender specificity. Thus homosexuality can sneak in into a questionnaire that was supposed to deal with average heterosexuality only.

Phrasing of the questions

In 1971 survey there is an attitude question (question 12) about homosexual behaviour: “Homosexual behavior [sic] among adults is a private affair of the people concerned, with which officials and the law should in no way interfere?”.² In the year of conducting the survey, in 1971, homosexual acts between both

men and women had been proclaimed legal in Finland. So the question was intended to measure how well public opinion reflected the new law (SuSu p. 131). The question is phrased rather problematically, though. Firstly it fails to take into account that a law nevertheless continued to interfere with homosexual behaviour in Finland, since the incitement to commit a homosexual act was made illegal the very same year. Secondly the phrasing of the question simultaneously places homosexuality well into privacy, not allowing for the possibility that it is seen a public or a political issue.

The confusion got even worse in 1992, when new demands for a partnership law were voiced and homosexuality thus became more and more a public issue about which officials were expected to take stand. To accommodate this change the researchers decided to add a new attitude question (K78), suggesting "It should be possible to validate unions between homosexuals (male couples and female couples) in the way as it is done with marriage?", with possibilities to agree or to disagree. Here heterosexual marriage is stated as the norm, which the homosexuals are seen either aping or threatening. In hindsight the researchers themselves noticed that their question actually radically overstepped the Government Bill of 2001, where marriage and registered partnerships were dealt with separately (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula 2001). I'd like to add that the current law neither requires nor expects certain sexual identities: two people of the same juridical gender do well enough.

Introducing and defining the questions

Already the researchers of 1971 survey knew that introducing sensitive questions is important for adequate response. So they added comforting introduction to the question concerning impotence and explained in a matter of fact way what masturbation is about. Yet the question about ones homosexuality was in 1971 phrased bluntly as follows: "Would you say your sex drive is oriented Only / Mainly to the male, Equally to both sexes, Mainly /Only to the female". The researches asked the question up front, without any comforting introductions or any explanation of the concept of "sex drive".

Neither did the respondents knew what the researchers meant with "sex drive", nor knew the researcher whether the respondents were referring to same-sex interest, love, or deeds. Strikingly many of these respondents with the same-sex sex drive also indicated that they were married and had recently experienced an intercourse – something the researchers concluded to be a response error (SuSu p. 48). Yet it is possible that the researchers made a more pronounced differentiation between homo- and heterosexuality than the respondents. They might in turn have learned to negotiate their sexuality in rather flexible ways during the years when homosexual deeds were illegal.

In 1992 the respective question (M48) has a new wording and introduction. It informs the respondents as follows: "Besides being sexually attracted to the opposite sex, people are sometimes also attracted to their own sex. Are you at the moment sexually attracted to: Only/Mainly the male sex, Both sexes equally, Mainly/Only the female sex". This phrasing, however, gives respondents a signal about what is of importance and desirable and what is marginal. It places the opposite sex attraction on the prime and after explaining that the same sex attraction occurs only sometimes asks the respondents to tell what is their state of mind at the very moment.

The following six questions in 1992 survey are about sexual experiences and practices (M49-54). These can be reflected in the light of subtle details indicating insecurity and incompetence, which, according to Herek et al., sometimes are indicators of research bias. This may be sensed by the respondents, which in turn leads to incomplete and misleading answers (Herek et al. 1991 p. 960). So for the question focusing in the art of various sexual experiences (M51) the respondents can report having experienced "Arousing fondling without touching genitals", "Stimulation of genitals by hand or rubbing genitals against the partner's genitals", "Stimulating and fondling genitals by mouth", and only the men "Anal intercourse". The phrasing of the choices is also in Finnish awkward and not very useful, since it does not differentiate female and male experience in any meaningful way. At the same time it conflates safe and unsafe sexual practices, rendering the answers rather useless for e.g. HIV prevention.

The other questions about same sex sexual experiences, the age when it first occurred, when did it occur the last time, with how many people one has had sexual experiences, and whether same sex sexual contacts have been orgasmic are in principle the same questions as those already asked among the gender neutral and thus assumedly heterosexual questions. Now the placement of these repeated questions behind the filter transition, the subtle differences in their wording compared with the earlier ones, and the lesser amount of given answer possibilities both presuppose and indicate that there already always is a difference between hetero- and homosexualities. Thus the questionnaire does not allow for an open situation where one would be able genuinely to study whether the gender of the sexual partner would make a difference.

Anxiety and fear

The 1992 survey has at the very end of the questionnaire two general questions which are understood by the researchers to be relevant to homosexuality. First of them (M78) asks "Have any of the following matters bothered you personally or caused you anxiety and fears?" and suggests among eight different possibilities also "Fear of own sexual deviance?" and "Anxiety about own sexual images and

phantasies? [sic]”. The second (M92) encourages people to voice their opinions about sexual perversions. “It is often said that people have sexual [sic] perversions. In your opinion, what is perverted or sick in sexual matters?”.

When earlier in the questionnaire homo- and heterosexualities are differentiated in such a hierarchical way as they are, and homosexual sexual practices are framed and described the way they are, one is not surprised to find out that the answers to the first question about anxiety are discussed in the report in the section about sexual minorities. Here they foster the idea that homosexuality, even as a fantasy, is a deviance one should react to with anxiety and fear. As anticipated, homosexuality and bisexuality were listed in the report as sexual perversions by 20.7 per cent of those male respondents who answered the question and 8.1 per cent of the female ones (SuSe 83).

Lessons to learn

It is important to look at the construction of survey questionnaires, since they not only construct the subject of their study by given answers but also always indicate the respondents what is normal, what is extraordinary or what is best to be avoided. Here the heteronormative frame of the questionnaire constructs a rather queer picture of homosexuality, enforced by odd contexts and recurring differences in wording as well as by in generally marginalising the homosexual topic.

From the examples discussed above it should have become obvious that one cannot simply introduce new items, especially contested and vulnerable ones like homosexuality, into a survey without rethinking and restructuring the whole questionnaire. If homosexuality is just added as an afterthought, the normatively constructed questionnaire as a whole only reinforces the discriminatory idea of a dominant heterosexuality and a marginal homosexuality (c.f. Herek et al. 1991).

These questions are important since surveys do not simply ask questions, but they also heavily influence what kind of discussions based on the results will be possible. Likewise repeated surveys not only measure change but effect it – either opening up new possibilities for answers or maintaining the obsolete status quo.

This research has been funded by the Academy of Finland research programme Marginalisation, Inequality and Ethnic Relations in Finland (SYREENI) as a project number 50400.

Notes

¹ I will not discuss here in detail the interpreting of the results, although it is evident that too limited sample size creates some serious problems.

² Translations of the questions are given as in Kontula, Osmo & Haavio-Mannila, Elina & Suoknuutti, Helena (1994).

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