

SOCIO-SEXUAL HEALTH: A CRITICAL ESSAY ON THE CULTURAL SYSTEMS OF THREE WESTERN COUNTRIES: FINLAND – ICELAND – UNITED STATES

DAVID MEGATHLIN

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INTRODUCTION

Through my formal investigation on the social relationships of sexual minority men (a term that includes men who are gay, bisexual, queer, closeted, and otherwise) in Finland and Iceland, I look to create a better understanding of the often-neglected concept of socio-sexual health. Socio-sexual health is defined here as the dynamic balance of interacting physical, psychological, emotional, and social factors between an individual and the surrounding cultural system within which that person is embedded (for a comprehensive discussion on Sexual Health in Finland, reference “New Views on Sexual Health: The Case of Finland,” Edited by Ilsa Lottes and Osmo Kontula). In attempting to write this article, I strive to construct a descriptive analysis of my experiences as a sexuality researcher and also as a gay man living in Scandinavia. Methodologically formal and informal data was collected during my stay in Finland and Iceland. Understanding the quantitative and qualitative data I gathered through research interviews and integrating such information with the more informal data I conducted while living as a student, classmate, friend, and boyfriend in Finland and Iceland, I hope to provide a better overall understanding of Scandinavian culture. Discussion of the socio-sexual climate in Scandinavia holds importance primarily because these 5 countries (Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Denmark) are often deemed the most socially progressive and sexually healthy countries in the world. By unpacking and exploring these highly developed social cultures, we can create a model by which other societies can construct their own rapidly transforming cultural identities.

As a starting point, this article presents my perspectives on personal and professional experiences while in Scandinavia to illustrate a broader discussion of the varying socio-sexual cultural systems embedded throughout the US and the Nordic Countries. In examining this concept of socio-sexual health, I look to challenge the common assumption that the United States, from coast to coast, and Western Europe constitute one general socio-sexual entity, the Western World. Vast differences in socio-cultural and socio-sexual norms exist throughout the United States. The socio-sexual climate of the United States also lies in stark contrast to the socio-sexual climate of Northern Europe. In addition, I also use this article as a platform in which to develop emerging questions, ideas, and theories on sexual culture sparked by my experiences in Scandinavia. I hope this piece excites, challenges, and motivates its reader to further explore the intersection of culture, society, and sexuality.

MY JOURNEY

I first moved to Scandinavia in 1999 on a United States Fulbright Scholarship. Avoiding the typical London-Paris-Rome ventures, I chose to move to Finland to explore a world different from any story or experience I had heard or seen. I enrolled as a 22-year-old “straight”, quiet, slightly naive graduate student at the University of Jyväskylä in Central Finland. In the years prior, I lived my life as a deeply closeted gay man. I guarded my closet with draining effort, living under the erroneous belief that no one would ever find this closet, and in turn discover my true my sexual identity. What I kept locked inside my closet included my raw, personal, and most basic human emotions, ranging from drives of physical lust to yearnings of emotional love and intimacy as well as everything in between. Whenever these feelings would surface, I painstakingly denied them, losing myself in a consciously contrived world where I monitored every desire, thought, action, and even hand movement, as not to appear gay. Then, in September of 1999 I took this closet, insulated with secrecy, and moved to Scandinavia. Taking advantage of my distance from home, family and friends, with whom I painstakingly created a world based upon the ideals of the heteronormative American society (i.e. the overall heterosexually-based American society that provides strict social roles of masculinity, femininity, social interaction, marriage, and procreation for example), I slowly breached the defensive security of my closet. As I discovered much of myself while living in a variety of cultural contexts, my present sexual identity is heavily influenced by both American as well as Nordic sexual cultures.

No, I am not the first person who has used the comfort of living so far away from home to come to terms with his sexual identity. In making the decision to come out of my closet while in Finland, I opened up a world of possibility to myself. And after taking an enormous amount of time and effort to undo all the locks on my closet door, I took my first step into honest self-exploration and emerged into the wilderness of the Finnish – Keski-Suomi - countryside.

I have lived in a variety of cultural settings throughout the US and Europe over the past years, including Jyväskylä - Finland, New York City, San Francisco, Boston, Helsinki - Finland, and Reykjavik – Iceland. My travels have allowed me to explore sexual identities embedded in entirely different social systems. More importantly, my

mobility has provided me with a self-reflective understanding of my own sexual identity in constant interaction with each surrounding socio-sexual system.

SEXUAL SYSTEMS AND SEXUAL MINORITIES

The socio-sexual systems of the United States, Iceland and Finland each contain overlapping yet distinct sexual cultures that I will discuss in this piece. *And as with all human behavior, these models of sexual behavior and conduct are laden within a surrounding social culture and these models therefore have a direct effect on the emergence, construction, enactment, and reproduction of sexuality within the people of that culture (Hostetler, 1998).*

I discuss my “coming out,” or the disclosure of my sexual identity, because it instigated my entire graduate research career and my constant travels. Yet I must note that every person, heterosexual and sexual minority alike, constantly “comes out”, in both overt as well as in more subtle manners, no matter what the cultural context. For example, people talk about having a crush on someone, or their gaze might follow a person they find attractive. And although some signs or clues, including types of dress or physical mannerisms, might simply be cultural stereotypes of homosexuality and heterosexuality, more often than not, some of these generalizations are true. Yet for the heterosexual population, such disclosure and such stereotypical actions go almost exclusively unnoticed because they coincide with the surrounding heteronormative society. Heteronormative standards, stereotypical homosexual behaviors, and the social pressure to adhere to such standards, vary to quite salient degrees in Finnish, Icelandic and American societies.

Saying that you are either heterosexual or a sexual minority (being gay, bisexual, or otherwise) hold completely different meanings that are dependent on the socio-sexual culture in which you live (i.e. the United States, Finland, Iceland, etc.). I lived in Scandinavia over the past year in order to examine and explore such differences. My thesis research focuses on the social relationships and friendships of sexual minority men in Finland and Iceland, examining their definition of friendships, the people they hang out with on a regular basis, and how the boundaries between their friendships and family relationships differ. As I continue to analyze my data, I find overarching patterns of liberalism within Scandinavia, which includes the contrast of a liberal ambition in Finland that continues to develop amidst the roots of a conservative groundwork. I have also found a radically progressive Icelandic culture that is incomparable to any socio-sexual cultural landscape I have ever seen.

I found the social boundaries of gay men in Finland in relation to family to be quite strict on some fronts. Through my own interpersonal interactions, I discovered that it is especially difficult for gay Finnish men to talk about family. I was told on a number of occasions not to discuss how a gay man’s family has reacted to their disclosure of same-sex desires. By taking such topics of discussion for granted, and transcending these taboos, I inadvertently created a number of very uncomfortable social situations.

In Helsinki, sexual minorities seem to have an overall presence and a strong voice, yet I did not find an open, vocal social embracement of sexual diversity. Never did I see

men walking down the streets of Helsinki (or any other part of Finland) holding the hand of another man, although I was told by some gay friends that they had done so freely within the capital city, without consequence. Yet to afford perspective, I did not find many heterosexual couples publicly displaying their affection either. Sporadic hand-holding and quick kissing among younger couples was observed, yet not as pervasive as in some other cultures. Such observation can imply a cultural norm of reservation and conservatism for public displays of physical intimacy.

On the other hand, I witnessed constant public displays of affection amongst Icelanders in Reykjavik, including hand-holding, light kissing and more intense kissing amongst both heterosexual as well as same-sex couples. I also observed a cultural platform that promoted open sexual discussion and expression, where sexual and emotional intimacy can be frequently observed, displayed, and discussed.

I found that Icelandic culture, at least in Reykjavik, purports sexual exploration, open-mindedness (relative to the United States and Finland), and a shockingly liberal stance on social judgment and sexual identity among the young adult generation. Iceland has a relatively small population (Population, Iceland (2000): 282,849; Reykjavik: 111,345 (See Chart at end of Article). I must note that the size and distribution of a population is a significant factor in the social construction of sexual culture, the marginalization of sexual minorities, familial interactions, and issues concerning public and sexual health. What struck me most was the expectation of overall social acceptance amongst sexual minorities in Reykjavik. As has surfaced in my thesis interviews, rare were the occurrences of extreme family rejection upon the disclosure of same-sex desires. A number of my respondents did note strife and agitation within the family after coming out, which eventually subsided. Yet none noted the fear of family rejection, or the occurrence of such rejection. This is an overwhelmingly significant point in development of sexual minority youth in Iceland. *As compared to American adolescents, three main factors were absent in the development of the Icelandic youth who experiences same-sex desires: 1) fear of rejection from the family, 2) fear of exclusion and rejection from society-at-large and 3) an immediate social and mental link between being gay and contracting HIV. The absence of such stressors on the developing adolescent is of great significance and need to be explored in detail through further socio-sexual research.*

Population size has a direct effect on social interaction and the development of socio-sexual culture. In Reykjavik, my respondents and friends noted that the community is tight knit; everyone knows almost everyone else in Reykjavik. This feeling is more intense amongst the gay community. It seems as if all gay men know each other quite well, and that this intense social atmosphere is unavoidable. I heard stories about people being careful not to make enemies, as gossip spread like wildfire in Reykjavik, and people could very quickly find themselves socially excluded.

In the process of understanding same-sex desires and voicing a sexual minority identity in a social or interpersonal context in any country, expectations of social acceptance and marginalization are quite salient for the questioning individual...the "where do I belong" after I come out question. In the USA, as the gay community has gained progressive strength and grounding, it has also created a subsection of itself from society, isolated from the heterosexual community. With cultural divide, self- and social- disclosure of sexual minority status is further complicated; an us/them

paradigm is created with little middle ground. In contrast, the construction of the sexual minority community seems quite different in Iceland, and such an extreme divide is not the norm. This influences the coming out process in a different manner, at least in Reykjavik. As I was told on repeated occasions, and I need to reiterate from previous discussion, separation from the family is not seen as a threat. From what I found as well, separation from established, existing friendships after the disclosure of sexual identity is not generally threatened either (at least in Reykjavik). Yet, generally, such notions are very real within the American and Finnish socio-sexual cultural systems. As the adolescent explores his or her sexual identity, they take social rejection quite seriously into consideration.

The Icelandic socio-sexual world displays a sexually post-modern construct of a "blended nation." It is impossible to find an exclusive, isolated gay culture in Reykjavik, such as an all-gay coffee shop, bar or club. Comparatively, exclusive gay bars and clubs do exist in Helsinki, but on a fairly small scale. On the other hand, in major cities in the United States, like New York City and San Francisco, entire sections of town are largely carved out for the residence, dining, socializing, shopping, and working of a gay populace.

In my writing, I tend to idealize Iceland, specifically Reykjavik, as a radically progressive utopian society. Perfect it is not. Reykjavik merely shows an extreme comfort with differing sexual identities, and I felt at such ease living in the city as a gay man with a diverse social network, never feeling barred from socializing at any venue or with any type of person. Yet other towns and cities of similar size in the West are traditionally quite conservative. Why is there such a difference in cultural progression? In assuming that both Reykjavik, Iceland and a comparatively random small town the US or Europe are all fairly racially homogenous, why has such a radically different socio-sexual culture developed? In part, mobility, or lack thereof, in Iceland, has played a key role in Icelandic social development. The individual who feels different in a small town in Europe or the US has a much easier time moving to a large city or traveling to a neighboring country than a person in Iceland. Many sexual minority youth do tend to migrate towards Reykjavik from the Icelandic countryside. Combined with the Nordic cultural influence that teaches an overall open approach to sexuality, along with a host of other variables yet to be understood, such a combination plants the seeds for a radically progressive social culture.

ACTION THROUGH DIVISION

The American perspective on the fight for human rights has made huge strides in cultural development, yet through methods that must be reshaped in order to continue cultural growth. As an analogy, if we see diverse American society contained within one room, the gay community has, in effect, run to the other side of the room, turned around, and demanded equal rights. Of course they have come quite far in the past decades, but they have created a self-constructed glass ceiling through social division. There is still a large proportion of American society that has never understood, befriended, or even interacted with a sexual minority. I noticed that in Iceland, there was not such an extreme division. In Finland, I felt the presence of a sexual divide that did not seem to take over every facet of life. Sexual minorities socialized more with heterosexuals than their New York or San Francisco counterparts in both Nordic

contexts, and generally were not looking to construct lives exclusively separate from heterosexuals. In Iceland for example, I experienced much more social integration in the bar and club scene. Many straight patrons would not think twice about frequenting such clubs as “Spotlight” and “22” (traditionally gay-friendly bar-clubs in downtown Reykjavik) to see friends, hang out and dance. In addition, I would not hear protests of sexual minorities patronizing traditionally heterosexual venues. Keeping in mind that Reykjavik is a fairly small city, a strong cultural divide is nearly impossible. The social world is simply too small. Yet being such a small population does not negate the importance of such a culture nor the ability for such integration to occur in larger societies.

SEXUAL IDENTITY

The development of sexual identity extends beyond the individual. Sexual identity formation is driven by a myriad of interacting factors, including personal experience, social interaction, societal regulations, and social norms. The collective experiences and the sexual identities of individuals embedded within a culture manifest themselves as a shared sexuality.

Sexual identity is culturally variant. It is a dynamic process that utilizes influences from both the outside socio-sexual culture as well as from personal levels of self-reflection and understanding. The balance between outside factors and personal influences is greatly dependant on cultural context.

Extremely strong influences from the outside socio-sexual culture on sexual identity are present in the United States and Finland. *In contrast, Iceland seems to hold a more self-reflective sexual identity construction mechanism, where the individual is granted more access and power to the formation and understanding of their sexual identity.*

To illustrate United States sexual culture, I draw from a personal example. The first time I had sex with another man, I guarded that experience with extreme secrecy. I strongly regulated the disbursement of that information in my American social circle, as I felt that strong social judgments would be made on my sexual identity. I knew that reactions would be varied, ranging from intolerant, to accepting, and also fully embracing perspectives. Yet at that time in my life, I was not ready to accept any reaction, neither negative nor positive. As my fear in this example illustrates, the social guidelines for sexual conduct are quite strict in United States culture. Traditionally, one transience from heterosexual to homosexual normative action can alter the social perception of an individual for life. In other words, a sexual “act” is often misconstrued as a sexual “identity.” Rapid social change in American culture has begun to reshape this idea, yet a socially conservative groundwork still holds strong.

The Finnish socio-sexual identity displays numerous similarities with both American and Icelandic sexual cultures. Finland, like America, has a conservative social groundwork with strict sexual regulations. Unlike America, Finland does not seem to presently and universally denigrate sexual minorities in the fashion that American culture and government has done. Finland follows a pattern of elevated social rights

for women and sexual minorities, as compared to other nations in Europe and to the United States, yet culturally specific social roles do still exist. For example, social roles can be seen in profession choice contexts for men and women, and in social relationship choices, where men traditionally socialize with and befriend men, and women socialize with and befriend women. Walk into a dining hall at any university in Finland, and you will more often than not see tables exclusively filled with either men or women, largely void of cross-gender socialization.

GAY CULTURE

Rapid social change has instigated the emergence of a structured gay culture in the United States. Such structured gay culture refers to establishments geared towards gay patrons and a gay audience, including gay bars, clubs, cafes, cinema, television, clothing stores and city districts. The frequency and comfort with which the heterosexual population interacts with structured gay culture can be used as a cultural marker for the integration, understanding, and acceptance of gay culture within a society.

The United States generally holds a strong cultural divide between structured straight and gay venues. San Francisco, where gay culture has been argued to be among the strongest and most socially progressive in the world, epitomizes this American ideal. Structured gay venues do not often welcome straight patrons, and at times work diligently to make heterosexuals feel excluded. New York holds this cultural divide as well, but to a lesser extent. The boundaries between gay and straight culture seem more vague at times, as New York's cultural superlatives for both the gay and straight population, including fashion, design, theater, and nightlife are, in part, extremely gay-run industries. Quite a number of times, I have heard gay American men in both cities state that "we do not want to be around straight people," or that "straight people are not welcome here [in this bar, club, or area of town]." I have also been to bars and clubs in New York that specifically barred the entrance of my straight friends. The gay population has detested the social exclusion they traditionally felt, and still often feel, in straight venues. Such exclusion, prejudice and hatred redirected towards the heterosexual population in gay venues are equally as offensive. Well-meaning straight people who want to frequent structured gay venues to see friends, socialize with the gay community, and generally hang out in an environment in which they might feel comfortable are sometimes barred from entrance, ridiculed, and if allowed entry, sometimes made to feel so awkward that they must leave out of their own volition (a feeling many of many own friends have experienced). *This reactionary prejudice against heterosexuals today is outdated, unnecessary, and works to further perpetuate the societal marginalization of sexual minorities.*

On the other hand, Scandinavia does not seem to provide such an extreme cultural divide. *On the whole, Northern Europe does not follow such a pattern of exclusionary diversity in a socio-sexual context*, where sexual minorities actively work to carve out a world apart from heterosexual culture. On the other hand, America often follows patterns of exclusionary diversity on many sexual, ethnic, cultural, and socio-economic fronts. America's extremely heterogeneous culture repeatedly emphasizes and celebrates individual differences. In contrast, European culture emphasizes and celebrates regional/country-specific similarity, in language,

nationality and cultural tradition. One factor encouraging this European sociological development was the ideology of societal integration, as opposed to assimilation or segregation, that was the predominant current of thought sparked from WWII social recovery efforts in Germany and the Netherlands. This ideology gradually spread to the Nordic countries.

SOCIAL HEALTH

Scandinavia is commonly deemed one of the most socially progressive and sexually healthy corners of the world. As before, I define socio-sexual health as the dynamic, balanced of physical, psychological, emotional, and social factors that interact between an individual and the surrounding cultural system. Considering an individual as “healthy” in such a dynamic sense is questionable if they live in an environment that does not accept the understanding, expression, and fulfillment of their sexual desires. People must be able to fully and honestly understand such desires within themselves. If sexual minorities cannot develop and maintain friendships with people who do not fully accept them as sexual beings without prejudice and judgment, and they are deemed a threat to the fabric of the local culture, how can people create social relationships that fulfill their own desires (and not culturally mandated desires) throughout their lifetime and develop fully as social individuals. Most people, no matter what country they reside in, (unfortunately) have to monitor what they say, do, and share in so many social, professional, familial interactions on a variety of topics. Yet when such vigilance includes ANY discussion of sexual minority identification (in an extreme, limiting, shameful manner), and in turn any social activities, social relationships, and intimate relationships that might reveal that identity, undue (and unjust) stress is put on the individual. Punishment for lack of adherence to the social norm and placing the blame on the sexual minority for their lack of social adherence is all too prevalent.

Re-absorption of the sexual minority into the societal norm, without recognizing salient differences, can also be quite problematic. Neither the extreme of complete separation from or of the complete absorption into the stereotypical norm can be socially beneficial in the long run. Such challenges to the pre-established norms of society need to be challenged, including how men and women should traditionally behave in social and socio-sexual interactions, what defines proper and deviant sexual behavior, limits on same-gender sexual interaction, the pursuit of physical and emotional intimacy, and the establishment of long-term relationships. Blindly followed norms must be examined, possibly reshaped, and voluntarily followed with a clear understanding. The comment made by some heterosexuals that “gay people are just like us, they merely go home with someone different at the end of the night” overlooks the myriad of differences in social acceptance, interaction and behavior within the variant sexual minority community. In many socio-sexual cultural systems, sexual minorities do not end up going to the same places during the day, socializing with the same people, discussing the same topics, worrying about the same problems, but apparently they “just go home with different people at the end of the night?” *Such a perspective is one-dimensional and ill reflective of the completely complex nature that is sexuality.*

In order to explore and understand the health of sexual minorities in a global context, research must not only focus on STD and HIV prevalence and drug use amongst sexual minorities, especially gay men, and subsequent problematic health outcomes. Measures of general socio-sexual health must begin to be taken into account beyond these stereotypical research interests. The societies in which people live directly affect their behavior and their sexual and social health. Scandinavia is constantly seen as a forerunner in public policy for sexual minorities. The enactment of the constantly evolving laws in the Nordic Countries on the social interactions of these societies needs to be closely examined. *Levels to which people are marginalized, and the manner in which these people are marginalized, directly effect the intricate connection between public health information disbursement, help-seeking behavior, and the course of disease transmission.*

CONCLUSION

We must examine the social health of sexual minorities in a cross-cultural context. The societies in which these people live directly affect their health as human beings. American can learn from the exploration of these different socio-sexual planes in order to more positively develop our own sexual culture.

My graduate work in human sexuality works in tandem with my own personal and professional relationships with various people throughout the Nordic countries. From my experience, Finland is a country composed of a conservative influence from the Russian east, coupled with liberal social views of the Nordic West, in a combination that is distinctly their own. Amidst this complex combination of influences comes a social culture that affords many of the accepting values that Scandinavia has to offer (including elevated rights of sexual minorities and women, and a low occurrence of HIV as compared to the rest of the world), while at the same time adhering to a strong, sometimes stoic gender and social role tradition. In contrast to these stoic traditions, my research in Iceland afforded quite a different perspective. Emerging thematic differences in my data and fieldwork observations displayed an overall integrated social culture amongst the younger Icelandic generation, with little distinct dividing lines between gay and straight culture/venues in downtown Reykjavik. With this lack of separation (and with that little impending societal marginalization), I saw a more tangible acceptance of differences in sexuality. So much can be learned from each culture in terms of their advanced levels of sexual health, social status of gender and sexual minorities, and their overall social integration. And with a better understanding of the status of sexual minorities throughout Scandinavia, nations such as the United States can better enhance their own social policy and progress, as well as better their own cultural influence on other nations throughout the world.

I continue to develop my understanding of the cultural systems in each unique Nordic country. I realize that some of my questions in this piece were unanswered, and some ideas were not fully unpacked and explored. They will continue to be explored and developed in coming papers, travels, and research projects. General cultural trends of superlative sexual, social, and public health link the Nordic countries together. History, geography, social movement and language have helped to develop each socio-sexual system into their own separate and amazing entity. Efforts to improve

systems of health throughout the world need to look at how these models that operate, and attempt to understand how they have created such a wonderful reality.

I encourage any feedback on my piece to be directed to: david_megathlin@lycos.com.

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POPULATION STATISTICS

Country	City	Population Size
Iceland		282,849 ¹
	Reykjavik	111,345 ¹
Finland		5,180,038 ²
	Helsinki	599,716 ²
United States		280,540,330 ³
	San Francisco	1,673,765 ³
	New York City	7,901,867 ³

¹ <http://www.hagstofa.is>

² <http://www.stat.fi>

³ <http://www.census.gov>