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Remembering rape: The temporal construction of sexual violence in autobiographical narratives from 1990s Finland

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Abstract

This article examines how historical contexts affect the recollection of experiences of rape. We reanalyze sexual autobiographies that were gathered in Finland in 1992 in a sex research project called FINSEX. To illustrate how the time of the rape as well as the time it is recalled shape the possibilities of narrating a life story, we present a close reading of four autobiographies that we place in the context of the collection as a whole, and compare our analysis of the autobiographies to their interpretation in the FINSEX study. The narrative elements of the autobiographies reflect the violent experiences in complex and layered ways. For the authors of these autobiographies, temporal changes in cultural and social understandings of sexual violence enable the reinterpreting of life events and the naming of previously unnamed experiences.

Keywords

Rape, sexual violence, autobiography, sex research, Finland

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Introduction

In this article, we analyze the changing possibilities for remembering and narrating experiences of sexual violence. The definitions of rape and sexual violence in general have changed dramatically in the last few decades, as the focus on consent and sexual rights has heightened (e.g. Edgren, 2018). As Lindsey Earner-Byrne (2015: 89–90) has stated, historians have sometimes been hesitant to recognize evidence of rape in sources, especially if the attack does not include obvious physical violence. However, not just the definitions of violence and the violent acts themselves (Bourke, 2007), but also ways of narrating experiences of sexual violence have a history (Sielke, 2002). In this article, we focus on the changing opportunities of remembering and sharing the memory of an experience named as rape by rereading sexual autobiographies collected in Finland in 1992. Specifically, we analyze those accounts where the author uses the term rape (*raiskaus* in Finnish) to refer to what has happened to them.

As Sabine Sielke (2002) has shown in her analysis, cultural rape narratives both enable and limit the opportunities of disclosing an experience of sexual violence, and these narratives change in time. We contextualize the texts under analysis using three levels of time (cf. Taavetti, 2018). The time of the violent episodes described in each of the autobiographies varies from the post-war era of the 1950s to the 1990s, close to the time of writing. The time of conducting the original research in the early 1990s is the present from which the authors interpret these events (on the simultaneous existence of two presents in autobiographies, see Summerfield, 2018: 88–91). This is also the present in which the initial researchers analyzed the sexual autobiographies as part of a sex research project called FINSEX. Lastly, we pay attention to our present, the time of rereading the material now, almost 30 years after it was originally collected. The legal and cultural framework is now different in essential ways: rape within marriage was criminalized in Finland in 1994, and the law finally recognized male victims of rape in 1999, and in recent years, demands for defining rape through lack of consent have become more vocal in Finland, too.

In the 1990s, different historical understandings of sexual violence overlapped. In Finland, as elsewhere in the Western world, the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s addressed questions related to bodily rights and reproduction, but sexual violence was not widely discussed in Finnish society at that point. Before the 1990s, domestic violence was often perceived in Finland as a family issue, and violence against women in general and sexual violence in particular were not addressed as women's rights concerns (Julkunen, 1997; Virkki, 2017). In contrast to the neighboring country Sweden, where discussion on sexual violence was already vocal in the 1970s (Bergenheim, 2010), as well as the United States and the United Kingdom, in the Finnish discussion, women's bodily rights came to the fore only later (Julkunen, 1997).

Our material is a collection of sexual autobiographies gathered through an open call for contributions in which anyone could participate. Therefore these texts offer

a source that differs from literary texts (Sielke, 2002), and narratives produced in the courts (Edgren, 2018) or the media (Leine et al., 2019) that have been utilized to understand the limits of the possibilities of narrating an experience of sexual violence or to name it as rape. Our material offers a rich collection of possible narratives and discourses on sexual violence at the time of their collection, describing experiences that have occurred during several decades over the latter half of the 20th century. Our choice to concentrate on sexual autobiographies where the authors describe sexual violence they themselves recognize and name as rape enables an analysis that is not bound to either current definitions of rape concentrating on lack of consent, or previous definitions concentrating more on something being taken away from the raped person, such as chastity (see Bourke, 2007 for a similar methodological choice). We view the discourses and experiences of rape as coexisting and interacting with each other, and in particular, analyze the experiences caught by the “charged notion” of rape (Gunnarsson, 2018) in early 1990s Finland. Indeed, as our analysis demonstrates, exactly when the violent experience was narrated and when it occurred both set limits on what can be named as rape.

In this article, we first describe the nature of these autobiographies as sources and our methods of analyzing them. We then address how the collection as a whole demonstrates the variety of ways in which experiences of rape could be remembered and recalled in Finland in the early 1990s. We illustrate our analysis of the autobiographies with a close reading of four autobiographies, organized into two pairs. We analyze these autobiographies together with the FINSEX study to demonstrate what the FINSEX study’s reading obscured in the autobiographies. First, we focus on how the time the rape occurred affects narrative possibilities and second, we focus on different ways in which an account of rape may structure the autobiography as a whole. On a wider methodological level, this article demonstrates some of the opportunities offered by the rereading and reinterpretation of not just these autobiographies, but research data on sexuality in general.

Sources and methods

Our sources consist of sexual autobiographies that were originally collected in 1992 as part of the FINSEX research project that mainly utilized population-level surveys (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1993, 1995b). The principal investigators of the project, two sociologists focusing on sexuality, Elina Haavio-Mannila and Osmo Kontula, organized the collection of these autobiographies as a writing competition with prizes for the best contributions. The call for contributions was published in Finnish newspapers and magazines. A leaflet with full writing instructions emphasized the importance of authenticity and presented writers with a list of four themes ranging from their present-day situation to learning about sexuality in childhood. The participants were also asked about their first sexual experiences and to recall the best and the most traumatic experiences in their life. (The call is reprinted in Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1995a: 595–599.) In Finland, gathering written contributions for research purposes using open

calls is a common practice, which has evolved from calls for gathering folklore to collecting personal narratives (see, for example, Heimo, 2016), and was also a culturally known phenomenon for the participants in 1992. This kind of collection work is still ongoing with varying themes and scopes (for an example of a writing collection on pornography, see Paasonen et al., 2015).

Even though the demographic markers of the writers of these autobiographies, such as age, gender, education, and place of residence can be, and have been (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1995a: 44–55), compared to Finns in general, a collection of autobiographies is not a representative sample (on questions of representativeness in studying personal narratives, see Summerfield, 2018: 135–166). Instead, these kinds of collections of writings offer a way of getting past the simplified generalizations of cultural history, as Matt Cook (2017) has pointed out in his discussion of the British Mass Observation collections that are in many ways comparable to the Finnish collections of written reminiscences. In other words, the sexual autobiographies discussed here offer an opportunity to analyze the several possible ways of interpreting violent experiences in a certain historical context, and to scrutinize the connections between personal experiences and changing societal contexts.

Altogether 175 writers responded to the call for contributions and wrote, in varying lengths, styles, and levels of detail, about their sexual experiences and feelings, and 149 of these texts are now available for research, as their writers gave permission for archiving and future use.¹ The writers were protected by anonymity, and the texts were not, at least in the first place, meant to be published. While these are confessional texts of sexual experiences and feelings (cf. McAlister, 2017), they were not written for anthologies or public collections, but to be utilized in research (cf. Paasonen et al., 2015: 398). The contributors often considered sexuality as an important aspect of their lives, as Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1995a: 23) note. Some writers shared their sexual experimentation with multiple partners, while others advocated the ideal of a life dedicated to a single partner. Some authors were motivated by the possibility of revealing to the researchers topics that they felt were missing from the public discussion. Experiences of violence was one such topic.

Our own research on this collection began with both researchers reading all of the 149 autobiographies. Frisk then used the Atlas.ti software to manage the material, and marked all the segments where sexual violence was mentioned, using different codes for whether it was discussed in some length, mentioned clearly but briefly, or if sexual violence was hinted at (also including lengthier descriptions of “gray zone” sexual acts, cf. Karlsson, 2019) and to indicate whether the role of the author in the violent act was that of victim, offender, or third person describing or referring to someone else’s experience.

To address the earlier interpretation of these texts, we made a list of the pages where Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1995a, 1997) quote each of the writings, and compared their interpretation of the cited segments to the original narration of the author. We read the autobiographies and their earlier interpretation side by side

and connected them to the overall view we had gained of the collection. We continued the analysis of the first person texts referring to severe sexual violence in adulthood and youth, and during this process of analysis, we narrowed down our topic to texts that used the term rape. To enable the presentation of our close reading, we chose four texts that exemplified the temporal features and differences in these texts and allowed discussion of the themes we considered most relevant, and that were all also referred to in Kontula and Haavio-Mannila's publications.

The descriptions of sexual violence in the autobiographies

The call for sexual autobiographies framed the rape experiences as sexual experiences, instead of framing them as violence, or considering them from the perspective of power and trauma (cf. Plummer, 1995: 15). The writers often offered interpretations on how their difficult experiences have affected their sexual lives. As the topic of violence was not a theme named in the call for contributions, the writers were not invited by the researchers to discuss their experiences of violence (cf. Sheftel, 2018). That said, the context of writing a sexual autobiography did render these experiences tellable, and sometimes the writers explicitly opposed the framings offered in the call.

Kontula and Haavio-Mannila divided the writers into three sexual generations (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1995a; for an English-language publication, see Haavio-Mannila et al., 2002), inspired by earlier sociological studies on generational change reflected in autobiographies (see Roos, 1987). With these generations, they painted a picture of gradual sexual liberation in Finland during the decades following World War II. In this model of liberation, sexuality is essentially perceived as joyful and positive, and the limitations to it are understood as the result of old-fashioned attitudes and moralism. Sexual violence fits very poorly with this narrative, and even though Kontula and Haavio-Mannila did capture important aspects of the changes in Finnish sex lives, their research publications reveal neither the numerous experiences of violence in the source material used, nor the effect of these experiences on the writers (for this critique, already made at the time of publishing the studies, see Kaskisaari, 1996). In addition, the researchers made observations by grouping segments of different authors' texts together thematically, but the profound role of these life events in the narration can only be observed by reading the complete narratives.

Our analysis differs from that of Kontula and Haavio-Mannila both regarding how common violence was in the autobiographies and what this tells us about their authors. The 1990s interpretation of the autobiographies was strongly affected by being organized as part of the FINSEX project, characterized by large-scale surveys, not qualitative textual analysis taking into account the narrative aspects of the autobiographies. The researchers treated the autobiographies as sources of factual knowledge about the authors' life events. This resulted in argumentation where Kontula and Haavio-Mannila counted the percentage of writers within a certain generation who had reported certain experiences, and compared these with

survey results. According to the researchers, 12% of female and 2% of male writers reported experiences of sexual violence or harassment during adult life, which, according to them, is less than the proportion reported in surveys (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1997: 550–551). This number is significantly smaller than could be expected based on the texts available to us, and more importantly, all the writers who had experienced violence did not necessarily write about it in their autobiographies, as writing an autobiography is influenced by how people wish to tell their life story and what they expect the researchers to be interested in (cf. Greenspan, 2014).

Our intention is not to claim that the writings reported all the experiences of violence that the writers had, but to focus on how the experiences they did mention were narrated when the term rape was used. Of the 149 texts available for further analysis, according to our reading, altogether 36–39 texts (depending on the interpretation of unclear hints) mention first-hand experiences of being a victim of sexual violence. Of the texts describing sexual violence in a sufficient level of detail to roughly situate the experience in the life course, 15 texts describe sexual violence in childhood, 12 texts describe sexual violence in adolescence or youth, and 13 texts describe sexual violence in adulthood. Some writers report experiences of sexual violence at several points of their lives.

Many of the authors describe violent experiences without naming them as rape. In addition, some of the authors mention that the situation was “close to violence” or “close to rape,” indicating hesitancy in naming the experience using these words (on the difficulty of naming an experience of unwanted sex as rape, see, for example, Thomas et al., 2017). The expression rape (in Finnish as a noun *raiskaus*, and as a verb *raiskata* or *maata väkisin*, the juridical term at the time) is used by six authors when describing experiences in youth, and three more use expressions such as attempted rape or being nearly raped about violent experiences in youth. Fairly similarly, seven authors use the term rape to name their experience in adulthood, and two refer to the concept by talking about an attempted rape or being nearly raped. Especially elderly female writers do not discuss consent to intercourse, and it is often difficult to tell whether the intercourse took place willingly or unwillingly (for studies on sexual consent, and in particular on how young women negotiate sexual consent in heterosexual encounters, see Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; on a more complex view on consent and sexual wanting, see Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2007). Three texts describing sexual violence in childhood use the term rape, and one refers to “almost getting raped,” but terms such as incest and sexual abuse are more common in the childhood context. The four texts we have chosen to illustrate our analysis represent those accounts where the writers delve into their experiences of sexual violence during their youth or adult life, in particular the texts using the term rape. The authors of these accounts are certain that they were raped, have clear recollections of the events and, at least in retrospect, condemn what was done to them as wrong. This contrasts with many studies of rape that concentrate on experiences described in much more ambivalent and uncertain terms (see, e.g. Gunnarsson, 2018; Karlsson, 2019; Tutenges et al., 2020).

Temporal aspects of disclosing rape

In this section, our focus is on the effect of temporal aspects on the way in which rape can be disclosed. In the first of the two texts we present to illustrate our findings, the rape took place in the 1950s. In this text, the victim kept the rape a secret as it threatened her sexual reputation, whereas in the second text, describing a rape in the 1990s, the experience is discussed with friends and reported to the police. This reflects the collection at large: older authors often explicitly mention that they have kept silent about their experiences, whereas many of the younger authors comment that they have talked about their experiences of violence at least with their partner.

A female narrator (053), born in 1937 and 54 years old at the time of writing, begins her account with an evaluation of the atmosphere that prevailed in her youth in the 1950s. She states that it was a common assumption of the time that only men and “sluts” would have premarital sex. She recalls being raped in adolescence by a grown-up man when she was left alone at a local community hall. She recalls being extremely afraid that someone would find out what had happened to her: that she was no longer a virgin, but sinful and a slut. (On the connection between losing respectability and being a victim of sexual assault in descriptions of girlhood in the 1950s, see Helgren, 2015; on the difficulty of narrating an experience of rape in the context of being a victim of violence rather than an immoral and sexually contaminated woman, see also Earner-Byrne, 2015.)

From the perspective of the time of writing, 1992, the writer reflects that at the time of the rape she did not understand that the man had committed a crime and would have faced charges had someone found out. This is relatively common in the stories of authors who have experienced sexual violence at a very young age. Also, again reflecting on her experience, she names what happened to her as rape. A narrative that she felt could not be told in her youth does, in the context of the 1990s, have a name and a framework it can be attached to, and the stigma of speaking about it has somewhat faded. In this sexual autobiography, the experience of rape in adolescence is not the only instance of sexual violence, but the writer describes feeling that the rape made her somehow more at risk of violence. As already evident in the notion of sinner, religious language is present in her text, as she even describes her voluntary sexual encounters as “falling.” The fear of violence is a structuring element of the story, and the writer expresses her horror at the predatory logic of premarital relationships, where the role of the man or boy is to make the move and the woman or girl is expected to resist. (On the connection between similar predatory premarital relationship norms and sexual violence in 1950s United States, see Dorr, 2008.) Later in her account, she also mentions being in need of psychiatric care as evidence of the effect that these experiences had on her.

In their study, Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1995a: 183) mention this writer as an example of an exceptionally religious person for her generation. Although the writer’s description of her sexuality is structured by the rape in adolescence and the

shame that the writer associates with it, the researchers perceive her “sexual inhibition” merely as following from her religious and old-fashioned attitudes, and her experience of rape at a young age is left unnoticed in this context. The researchers do bring up, however, her account of sexual violence in their section on rape in the volume on sexual experiences during childhood and adolescence (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1995a: 408), and also mention her later account of being the victim of attempted sexual assault (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1995a: 350–351). That said, these discussions do not reflect on the long-term effects of the sexual violence on her life, wellbeing, and sexuality.

Despite these devastating experiences, the autobiography ends positively: the writer describes how she has, in her current relationship, learned to accept herself and her body, and is now finally enjoying herself as a sexual being. In this manner, her narration also complies with Kontula and Haavio-Mannila’s description of sexual liberation; and indeed, her story is frequently quoted by the researchers as an example of discovering joyful sex in later life. However, their representation of this fulfilling relationship is not contrasted with the experiences of violence and the consequences that the author describes. The rape or later accounts of violence are simply not mentioned. Kontula and Haavio-Mannila describe the author’s depression as resulting from divorce, and the joy in the new relationship as straightforwardly connected to sexual pleasure (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1997: 70, see also 474–475).

As we had previously worked with autobiographies on youth, we discovered that the same writer also participated in a writing competition on youth held in 2010 (Vehkalahti and Suurpää, 2014).² This discovery allowed us to analyze how the context of writing together with the different phase in the writer’s life affected her interpretations of her experiences. In this account on youth, written almost 20 years later, the author describes the experience of rape and its meaning for her later life in quite a similar manner as in her sexual autobiography. That said, unlike in the earlier account, the author does not structure her life story as liberation from old-fashioned narrow-minded attitudes, but states how her early experiences of violence left “a permanent mark on the soul.” This is an example of how both the life situation of the writer, who had, by the time of writing the later autobiography, separated from her partner, as well as the call for contributions changes the interpretation given to the same life events.

Hiding the rape for fear of a negative sexual reputation is a common feature in the narratives especially of the elder authors, who often mention the rape making them feel dirty. The female writers over the age of 50 (born before the mid-1940s) refer to their youth as a time of innocence with very limited knowledge of sexuality but also describe how they fought back in the case of sexual aggression (see Helgren, 2015; on pre-sexual revolution women and the discourse of innocence, see Szreter and Fisher, 2010). However, the extreme consequences the author describes the violent experiences to have had in her life resemble those described by two other authors, both women in their early 40s, who were sexually exploited

for several years during their adolescence, and as a consequence both of these young women felt they would not be good enough for anyone else.

Another account (146) tells a more recent story of coping with an experience of rape, and, together with the autobiography analyzed above, allows us to address how the time of the experience affects the narration of the consequences of rape. In this account, the writer is a woman who was 33 years old (born in c. 1959) at the time of writing and had been raped by her violent ex-partner a year earlier. Unlike in the autobiography discussed above, here the memory of the rape does not organize the story as a whole. The writer begins her narration by reflecting on the important role that sexuality has in life and recounting her sexual experiences starting from childhood. Then she recalls falling in love with a man whom she describes as artistic and bohemian, and their relationship as simultaneously passionate and mature. The man has a previous criminal conviction, and later the writer discovers that he had been convicted of violence and attempted rape. When the couple have a child, the man becomes jealous and possessive, and, gradually, violent. The writer leaves her partner after yet another burst of violence, and during the process of breaking up, the couple travel to the family summer house to talk things through.

In the account the trip to the summer cottage takes a chilling turn: The man refuses to be left, and the author's refusal to have sex leads to violent rape. The author narrates the experience in great detail, revealing her fear as well as the confusing feeling of being sexually aroused. Unlike the narrator discussed above, she recalls being afraid of losing the possibility of enjoying sex, not of losing her reputation as a woman. Moreover, she does not perceive rape as something that cannot be revealed to anyone, but describes how already during the rape she considered the possible physical traces left on her and how they would provide evidence. This way, her account complies with the narrative of recognizable rape that involves physical violence (Gunnarsson, 2018). The writer recalls processing her experience afterwards both by taking long walks and discussing it with a friend. This discussion gives her the strength to report the rape to the police. The first contact with the police is described as empowering, and she finds her way to a support group for women. Indeed, unlike the older writers who have kept their experience strictly secret, this author wants to get her experience recognized. Moreover, her use of the term trauma connects the narration to an understanding of rape as psychological harm and the account of survival is clearly affected by the women's movement's reframing of the rape experience. As Plummer (1995: 16) describes it, support groups for women formed an affirmative community for surviving rape. While the contact with a women's support group is perceived as empowering, later experiences with the police are described as a second rape as she is repeatedly questioned and made to wonder if she has, after all, just imagined everything.

This account highlights the historical context of naming rape. The couple had not been married, which made it possible to report the rape in the first place.³ Rape within marriage was only criminalized in Finland in 1994 (Virkki, 2017), and, as

Plummer (1995: 72) also notes, marriage has been, until quite recently, considered as a promise of sexual contact (see also Edgren, 2018; on discussions on the criminalization of rape in marriage, see also Featherstone, 2017). This is reflected in the collection, as only one of the married authors who are victimized by their spouses names the violence as a rape. The writer eventually grows tired of waiting for the case to proceed to court and withdraws the charges. When Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1997: 556) address the aftermath of the rape, they omit the difficulties of getting the crime recognized and see the decision to withdraw the charges as a result of the perpetrator promising to get therapy. In other words, their reading ignores the societal context in which it is possible to recognize rape as a crime and to find a community that supports one's recovery but, at the same time, how officially seeing rape as a form of violence is still difficult and dependent on the circumstances, such as the personal attitude of the police officer to whom the crime is reported.

The analysis of these two accounts reveals how both the context of the experiences and the context of recalling them affect the ways in which rape can be narrated. In the 1990s, changes in understanding sexual violence allowed experiences that were originally hidden to be revealed and for their role to be reflected on (cf. in the Nordic context Edgren, 2018). That said, the time when the violent experience takes place has a significant effect on the author's self-image and on the aftermath of the event, and these are both reflected in the narration. In many ways, their accounts comply with the culturally recognizable narrative of rape which includes physical violence and the helplessness of the victim. However, they also contain elements that make recognizing the violence more difficult, such as the intimate relationship between the victim and the perpetrator, or the fact that the experience was not disclosed to others when it took place.

How the historical context of the rape affects the narrative choices structuring the sexual autobiography

The next pair of sexual autobiographies is an example of how the narrative qualities reflect the experience of rape and its context. These aspects are not visible in all the accounts, however, as the autobiographies that only briefly mention rape are more often the ones in which the story is not structured by violence. Our first example of the narrative choices is a text by a female writer (107) aged 42 at the time of writing (born c. 1950). She begins her autobiography with a short account of a dream that depicts a flashback of being raped by three men at the age of 23 in the early 1970s. She repeats several times throughout her story that a caring relationship is an essential requirement for her to achieve sexual pleasure. Likewise, she prioritizes safety and emotional contact, and therefore states her preference for longer relationships. The writer explicitly connects this preference to her experience of sexual violence. Later in her narration, the storyline is interrupted by another flashback of rape, but she continues by describing how sexual fantasies are a way

of modifying these painful images into positive ones. For her, fantasies are a form of “escaping from reality” with regard to the rape experience that is very present for her even though it occurred two decades ago.

This account demonstrates how an experience of rape can structure the autobiographical narration, even though the experience itself is not actually described. The writer distances herself and her autobiography from the violent experience as well as from the fantasies reflecting that violence. The depictions of dreams and fantasies are presented separately in the text by using quotation marks. Moreover, as she describes her life chronologically from childhood through young adulthood later in her account, it is unclear where in this storyline the experience of rape falls. In other words, while the author reveals her rape experience, she also utilizes narrative methods that place it outside of her life story and recalls her life as a timeline on which the rape does not belong. The writer concludes her autobiography by reflecting on her present situation where her long-term relationship has become conflictual, and she has a secret relationship with another man.

Kontula and Haavio-Mannila refer to this autobiography on three occasions. Although this account is one of the clearest examples of a whole autobiography being structured around a violent experience, and rape with multiple perpetrators is the easiest kind to recognize (e.g. Gunnarsson, 2018), Kontula and Haavio-Mannila never mention the writer’s account of rape. They quote the writer’s description of the role of emotional safety during sex in their chapter on passion, but their interpretation heavily emphasizes her preference for partners who are able to have long-lasting intercourse. They connect the author’s fantasy of sex with several men to her secret relationship, not the rape (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1997: 94). Instead of focusing on the need for safety expressed by the writer, let alone the effect that the experience of rape has had on her, this emphasis puts the focus on the man and the possible demands placed on him.

In contrast to this narrator who shapes her whole account around the experience of rape, the only account in the collection by a male narrator (173) naming his experience of sexual violence as rape is very different. The author of this autobiography is a 46-year-old man (born c. 1946). At the age of 15 in the early 1960s, he was violently raped by his superior in his summer job when they were alone at the workplace after working hours. He narrates this incident in great detail, also revealing that he has never disclosed the events to anyone, although he has often wished to do so, and reflecting on how writing about the experience is difficult even now, over 30 years after the event.

Even though this experience has stayed concealed throughout the writer’s life, we claim that in this case too, taking the experience of violence into account is essential for understanding how the writer interprets his life. However, the effect is not at all straightforward, and it reveals the even greater difficulty of narrating from a position of male rape victim vis-à-vis a female victim in early 1990s Finland. Indeed, until 1999 Finnish criminal law defined the rape victim as female (on this change, see Sorainen, 2000), although the narrator was raped as a teenager and presumably would have been, had he been able to bring his case to the police,

treated as a victim of child sexual abuse.⁴⁴ The ability to take the position of a victim of sexual violence is also hindered by stereotypes of masculine men as able to defend themselves (see, for example, Turchik and Edwards, 2012) and the lack of a cultural narrative around being a male victim of sexual violence (Gunnarsson, 2018). That said, both the account of this narrator as well as that of the female narrator raped by her partner discussed in the previous section reveal how the limitations posed by the law in recognizing rape do not necessarily restrict the writers who describe their own experiences. In the case of this male writer, his young age, the fact that he was raped by a superior, and the violence the perpetrator used all enabled him to recognize the experience as rape. In fact, in many ways, this account resembles those of women of the same age who narrate their rape experiences. An important difference is, however, that this male writer does not report feeling dirty or sexually worthless.

The previously untold story of rape forms a double narration in the autobiography. Right before recalling the rape, the writer notes that this experience changed the way he felt about sexuality for years. However, his description of his life course does not explicitly present its effects on any of the later incidents. Indeed, it is possible to read the story as not profoundly shaped by his experience of violence. Only at the very end of his text does he ponder the consequences of “sexual exploitation during boyhood” on his sexuality. The female writer discussed above narrated her life course without including the experience of rape in it and used quotation marks when describing her dreams and fantasies that related to the violent incident. However, this male writer offers an even clearer case of two different ways of understanding the same life course—with and without the presence of sexual violence. The narration including the experience of rape is only referred to in passing, as the event has been previously excluded in the way he narrates his life story. We do not intend to claim that everything in an autobiography should be interpreted through the lens of a single event, no matter how formative (see Sheftel, 2018). We simply want to point out that these glimpses are references to another reading present in the account, and should be taken into consideration. This is what, in our opinion, Kontula and Haavio-Mannila failed to do when they discarded the narrative elements of the autobiographies and perceived them as giving transparent access to the life events of the writers.

As an example of a possible reading for the account, we analyze how the author describes his adolescence and how he portrays his shyness as a reason for why sexuality was not emphasized in his relationships with girls. He writes that “something” made him keep his sexual desires in the background and describes how in his first longer relationship he felt that his girlfriend might have expected him to be more active sexually, but he withdrew when he felt turned down. After this relationship had run its course and ended, he describes having been sexually very active and experiencing little connection between sex and emotions. This is also the context in which Kontula and Haavio-Mannila (1995a: 436) discuss his autobiography. They see the separation of sex and love as characteristic of the writer, omitting altogether how he only describes one phase in his life in this

manner, and also names this as an “active sexual period,” indicating that he no longer behaves this way. In fact, a period of gradually regaining the ability to feel sexual pleasure by having sexual encounters with emotionally safe partners is a recurring feature of the rape survival narratives in the collection (e.g. author 146 discussed above). Additionally, Kontula and Haavio-Mannila quote extensively from the account of the rape in their later book (Kontula and Haavio-Mannila, 1997: 559–561). As their later volume addresses experiences during adulthood, their positioning places this rape narrative that took place when the author was in his mid-teens into the context of adulthood in which it would not even have been, according to the legal definition of the time, considered rape.

The author reports how he married at the age of 31, and refers to his spouse as “a person with whom love and sex are in harmony.” After multiple relationships before marriage, he describes now being satisfied in a balanced relationship, and Kontula and Haavio-Mannila repeat this interpretation. In this context the writer does not refer to his experience of rape, but in the light of the other accounts of rape survival (see e.g. author 053 above), and his earlier implicit reference to the rape when describing previous relationships, this could be read as overcoming the experience and finding a peaceful connection to sexuality in a supportive relationship. Similar descriptions of healing relationships are common in the accounts describing surviving sexual violence, although in the case of this male writer it is noteworthy that his relationship has been healing even though he mentions that he has not disclosed this experience even to his partner.

These two accounts demonstrate how differently sexual violence can structure the autobiography—in both cases, the authors themselves reflect on how their experiences of being raped have had a formative effect on their lives. However, the available opportunities for recalling and naming these experiences change the way the account of rape structures the story. For the female writer, the experience of rape frames her short autobiography, and it is the first thing she mentions whereas for the male writer it is mostly at the end of his account where he considers the effects that the rape has had on him. Despite these differences, both accounts show how even a relatively modest analysis of the narrative elements of an autobiography offers more opportunities for understanding the description that the authors give of their lives, and also connects the narration to the historical context of the violent experiences and the context in which they are recalled. In both of the accounts, the writers give what can be read as two separate accounts of their lives, one in which the experience of violence is included and one from which it is omitted. In both cases, the account which includes the violence is more fragmented. The violence both structures the writers’ idea of their sexual selves and is something that is can be partly omitted from the autobiography to make it more coherent. Only focusing on one of these possible narrations, or only on fractions of one of them, does not do justice to the complex and layered experience and recollection.

Conclusions

In this article, we analyzed the changing ways in which sexual violence has been narrated and named as rape by rereading sexual autobiographies written in 1992 for the FINSEX research project, a Finnish sociological study on sexuality. We showed how the temporally changing cultural context in mid- to late 20th century Finland affects the experiences as well as their narration. The temporal difference between us as researchers in the present and the researchers working with the material in the 1990s together with our focus on the different historical contexts of rape allows us to evaluate how the context of remembering shapes the interpretation of the experiences of violence. In our rereading, we emphasize the importance of taking into account narrative elements and analyzing the autobiography as a whole to fully understand how experiences of violence have affected the narrators' lives and their interpretation of their experiences. Moreover, reanalyzing these autobiographies enables understanding the changes that have occurred in research.

The FINSEX study's methodological choice of ignoring narrative aspects had an important outcome ultimately affecting the discussion on sexual violence in Finnish society at large. Even as Finland has a reputation and public self-perception as a country of advanced gender equality and as a forerunner in implementing women's rights, sexual violence became a topic of political conversation relatively late in international comparison. While there is obviously no single reason for this, FINSEX studies have been discussed extensively in Finnish media, especially in the 1990s, and acted as the most influential public source of information on Finnish sexuality. The public discussion around FINSEX studies, including their omission of violence, has contributed to how sexuality in general and sexual violence in particular have been addressed in Finland. This has meant that the accounts of sexual violence that were, according to our understanding, an important motivation for writing sexual autobiographies, have not been fully heard.

The FINSEX study and its presumptions about sexuality and liberation restructured these narratives of violence and hid some of the longstanding effects of rape that the authors reported. That said, the study also offered the space to tell these stories in the first place, and the researchers, Osmo Kontula and Elina Haavio-Mannila, made the choice (not at all self-evident in the 1990s) to donate their research material for future use. This rich material also offers opportunities for studying other aspects of remembering sexual violence. It would be possible, for example, to analyze experiences of sexual abuse in childhood, accounts where the author does not name the experience as rape and where the narration of sexual violence is more ambiguous, and even autobiographies of those who reveal being sexually violent.

Our findings show that the experiences of violence structure the autobiographical narratives in different ways: some authors separate the experience of rape from the autobiography as a whole which creates a multilayered narration.

The consequences of the experiences are visible in the interpretation of later life events, but this can only be discovered when reading the autobiography as a whole instead of in short thematic segments. In addition, the changes in the public discussion on rape and sexual violence from the time when the writers had been raped to the time when they wrote their sexual autobiographies created an opportunity for narrating even previously unnamed experiences. These opportunities were not the same for everyone, however, and not every rape was equally recognized at the time of writing, such as rape within marriage or rape of a male victim. Therefore, a careful analysis of the effects of all the three layers of time—the time of the violent experience, the time of its narration, and the time of the analysis, whether in the present or in the past—is needed.

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Notes

1. Kontula, Osmo (University of Helsinki): Sexuality as Part of Life 1992 (dataset). Version 1.0 (2015-04-27). Finnish Social Science Data Archive (distributor). <http://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:fsd:T-FSD2952>. The texts have been anonymized by the archive. We refer to the authors with the numbers used by the original researchers.
2. This writing competition, titled *Oi nuoruus!*, was organized by the Finnish Youth Research Society together with the Finnish Literature Society in 2010, and it was targeted at both adults remembering their youth and young people. The competition gathered 376 writings. For more details, see Vehkalahti and Suurpää (2014).
3. The law recognized that a married woman could be raped by her spouse only if the spouses were permanently separated.
4. The law has recognized both boys and girls as victims of child sexual abuse since 1926.

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