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Sex, Love, and Autonomy in the Teenage Sleepover

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sex, love, and autonomy in the teenage sleepover

by amy schalet

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Karel Doorman, a soft-spoken civil servant in the Netherlands, keeps tabs on his teenage children's computer use and their jobs to make sure neither interferes with school performance or family time. But Karel wouldn't object if his daughter Heidi were to have a sexual relationship.

"No," he explains. "She is sixteen, almost seventeen. I think she knows very well what matters, what can happen. If she is ready [for sex], I would let her be ready." Karel would also let his daughter spend the night with a steady boyfriend in her room, if the boyfriend had come over to the house regularly beforehand and did not show up "out of the blue." That said, Karel suspects his daughter might prefer a partner of her own sex. If so, Karel would accept her orientation, he says, though "the adjustment process" might take a little longer.

Karel's approach stands in sharp contrast to that of Rhonda Fursman, a northern California homemaker and former social worker. Rhonda tells her kids that pre-marital sex "at this point is really dumb." It's on the list with shoplifting, she explains, "sort of like the Ten Commandments: don't do any of those because if you do, you know, you're going to be in a world of hurt." Rhonda responds viscerally when asked whether she would let her fifteen-year-old son spend the night with a girlfriend. "No way, Jose!" She elaborates: "That kind of recreation... is just not something I would feel comfortable with him doing here." She might change her mind "if they are engaged or about to be married."

Karel and Rhonda illustrate a puzzle: the vast majority of American parents oppose a sleepover for high-school-aged teenagers, while Dutch teenagers who have steady boyfriends or girlfriends are typically allowed to spend the night with them in their rooms. This contrast is all the more striking when we consider the trends toward a liberalization of sexual behavior and attitudes that have taken place throughout Europe and the United States since the 1960s. In similar environments, both parents and kids are experiencing adolescent sex, gender, and relationships very differently. A sociological exploration of these contrasts reveals as much about the cultural differences between these two countries as it does about views on adolescent sexuality and child rearing.

adolescent sexuality in contemporary america

Today, most adolescents in the U.S., like their peers across the industrialized world, engage in intercourse—either oppo-

site or same-sex—before leaving their teens (usually around seventeen). Initiating sex and exploring romantic relationships, often with several successive partners before settling into long-term cohabitation or marriage, are now normative parts of adolescence and young adulthood in the developed world. But in the U.S., teenage sex has been fraught with cultural ambivalences, heated political struggles, and poor health outcomes, generating concern among the public, policy makers, scholars, and parents. American adolescent sexuality has been dramatized rather than normalized.

In some respects, the problems associated with adolescent

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sexuality in America are surprising. Certainly, age at first intercourse has dropped in the U.S. since the sexual revolution, but not as steeply as often assumed. In a recent survey of the adult American population, sociologist Edward Laumann and colleagues found that even in the 1950s and '60s, only a quarter of men and less than half of women were virgins at age nineteen. The majority of young men had multiple sexual partners by age 20. And while women especially were supposed to enter marriage as virgins, demographer Lawrence Finer has shown that women who came of age in the late 1950s and early '60s almost never held to that norm. Still, a 1969 Gallup poll found that two thirds of Americans said it was wrong for "a man and women to have sex relations before marriage."

But by 1985, Gallup found that a slim majority of Americans no longer believed such relations were wrong. Analyzing shifts in public opinion following the sexual revolution, sociologists Larry Petersen and Gregory Donnenwerth showed that among Americans with a religious affiliation, only conservative Protestants who attended church frequently remained unchanged. Among all other religious groups, acceptance of pre-marital sex actually grew, although Laumann and colleagues reported a majority of the Americans continued to believe sex among teenagers was always wrong. Even youth agreed: six in ten fifteen to nineteen-year-olds surveyed in the 2002 National

Survey for Family Growth said sixteen-year-olds with strong feelings for one another shouldn't have sex.

Part of the opposition to adolescent sexuality is its association with unintended consequences such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. In the U.S., the rate of unintended pregnancies among teenagers rose during the 1970s and '80s, dropping only in the early '90s. However, despite almost a decade and a half of impressive decreases in pregnancy and birth rates, the teen birth rate remains many times higher in the U.S. than it is in most European countries. In 2007, births to American teens (aged fifteen to nineteen) were eight times as high as in the Netherlands.

One would imagine the predominant public policy approach would be to improve education about, and access to, contraception. But "abstinence-only-until-marriage" programs, initiated in the early 1980s, have received generous federal funding over the past fifteen years, and were even written into the recent U.S. health reform law (which also supports comprehensive sex education). For years, schools funded under the federal "abstinence-only" policy were prohibited from educating teens about condoms and contraception and required to teach that sex outside of heterosexual marriage was damaging. A 2004 survey by NPR, the Kaiser Family Foundation, and Harvard University found that most parents actually thought that contraception and condom education should be included, but two thirds still agreed sex education should teach that abstinence outside of marriage is "the accepted standard for school-aged children." And for most parents, abstinence means no oral sex or intimate touching.

Dutch parents downplay the dangerous and difficult sides of teenage sexuality, tending to normalize it.

While American parents of the post-Sexual Revolution era have wanted minors to abstain, few teens have complied. Many American teenagers have had positive and enriching sexual experiences; however, researchers have also documented intense struggles. Comparing teenage boys and girls, for example, University of Michigan sociologist Karin Martin found that puberty and first sex empowered boys but decreased self-esteem among girls. Psychologist Deborah Tolman found the girls she interviewed confronted dilemmas of desire because of a double standard that denies or stigmatizes their sexual desires, making girls fear being labeled "sluts." Analyzing the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, researchers Kara Joyner and Richard Udry found that even without sex, first romance brings girls "down" because their relationship with their parents deteriorates.

Nor are American girls of the post-Sexual Revolution era

the only ones who must navigate gender dilemmas. Sociologist Laura Carpenter found that many of the young men she interviewed in the 1990s viewed their virginity as a stigma which they sought to cast off as rapidly as possible. And in her ethnography, *Dude, You're a Fag*, C.J. Pascoe found boys are pressured by other boys to treat girls as sex objects and sometimes derided for showing affection for their girlfriends. But despite public pressures, privately boys are as emotionally invested in relationships as girls, found Peggy Giordano and her associates in a recent national study out of Toledo, Ohio. Within those relationships, however, boys are less confident.

In the 1990s, the National Longitudinal Study for Adolescent Health found that steady romantic relationships are common among American teenagers. Girls and boys typically have their first intercourse with people they are dating. But the Toledo group found that once they are sexually experienced, the majority of boys and girls also have sex in non-dating relationships, often with a friend or acquaintance. And even when they have sex in dating relationships, a quarter of American girls and almost half of boys say they are "seeing other people" (which may or may not include sexual intercourse).

teen sexuality in the netherlands

In a late 1980s qualitative study with 120 parents and older teenagers, Dutch sociologist Janita Ravesloot concluded that in most families, parents accepted that sexuality "from the first kiss to the first coitus" was part of the youth phase. In middle class families, teenagers reported that parents accepted their sexual autonomy, but didn't engage in elaborate conversations with them because of lingering feelings of shame. Working-class parents were more likely to use their authority to impose norms, including that sex belonged only in steady relationships. In a few strongly religious families—Christian or Islamic—parents categorically opposed sex before marriage: here there were "no overnights with steady boy- or girlfriends at home."* But such families remain a minority. A 2003 survey by *Statistics Netherlands* found that two thirds of Dutch fifteen to seventeen-year-olds with steady boy- or girlfriends are allowed to spend the night with them in their bedrooms, and that boys and girls are equally likely to get permission for a sleepover.

This could hardly have been predicted in the 1950s. Then, women *and* men typically initiated intercourse in their early twenties, usually in a serious relationship (if not engagement or marriage). In the late '60s, a national survey conducted by sociologist G.A. Kooy found most respondents still rejected premarital sex when a couple was not married or planning to do so very shortly. But by the early 1980s, the same survey found that six out of ten respondents no longer objected to a girl having intercourse with a boy as long as she was in love with

him. Noting the shift in attitudes since the 1950s, Kooy spoke of a “moral landslide.” His colleague, sociologist Evert Ketting, even went as far as to speak of a “moral revolution.”

What changed was not just a greater acceptance of sex outside of the context of heterosexual marriage. There was also serious new deliberation among the general public, health professionals, and the media about the need to adjust the moral rules governing sexual life to real behavior. As researchers for the Guttmacher Institute later noted, “One might say the entire society has experienced a course in sex education.” The new moral rules cast sexuality as a part of life that should be governed by self-determination, mutual respect, frank conversation, and the prevention of unintended consequences. Notably, these new rules were applied to minors and institutionalized in Dutch health care policies that removed financial and emotional barriers to accessing contraceptives—including the requirements for a pelvic examination and parental consent.

Indeed, even as the age of first sexual intercourse was decreasing, the rate of births among Dutch teenagers dropped steeply between 1970 and 1996 to one of the lowest in the world. What distinguished the very low Dutch teenage birth rate from, for instance, that of their Swedish counterparts, was that it was accompanied by a very low teen abortion rate. Despite the AIDS crisis, by the mid-1990s, funding agencies were so confident that, in the words of demographer Joop Garssen, youth were doing “wonderfully well,” they decided further study of adolescent sexual attitudes and behavior wasn’t warranted.

Sex education has played a key role. Sociologists Jane Lewis and Trudie Knijn find that Dutch sex education curricula are more likely than programs elsewhere to openly discuss female sexual pleasure, masturbation, and homosexuality. The Dutch curricula also emphasize the importance of self-reliance and mutual respect in negotiating enjoyable and healthy sexual relationships during adolescence.

A 2005 survey of Dutch youth, ages twelve to twenty-five, found the majority described their first sexual experiences—broadly defined—as well-timed, within their control, and fun. About first intercourse, 86 percent of women and 93 percent of men said, “We both were equally eager to have it.” This doesn’t mean that gender doesn’t matter. Researcher Janita Ravelsoot found that more girls than boys reported that their



Photo by Leah G via Creative Commons

Raising happy and healthy teens is a goal shared by parents worldwide, but there’s just no universal idea of how to go about it.

parents expected them to only have intercourse in relationships. Girls were also aware that they might be called sluts for having sex too soon or with too many successive partners. And although most of the 2005 respondents said they were (very) satisfied with the pleasure and contact they felt with their partner during sex, men were much more likely to usually or always orgasm during sex and less likely to report having experienced pain.

It also appears that having sex outside of the context of monogamous romantic relationships isn’t as common among Dutch adolescents, especially older ones, as among their American counterparts. Again in the 2005 survey, two thirds of male youth and 81 percent of Dutch females had their last sex in a monogamous steady relationship, usually with a partner with whom they were “very much in love.” Certainly, Dutch adolescents have “non-relational” sex—indeed, one in three males and one in five females had their last vaginal or anal sex outside of a monogamous romantic relationship. That said, relational sex seems to remain the norm, especially as young people age: two thirds of fifteen to seventeen-year-olds, and three quarters of those eighteen to twenty, had their last intercourse in a monogamous relationship. Among the oldest group—nineteen to twenty-four-year-olds—almost half of gay men surveyed, six in ten straight men and lesbians, and nearly three quarters of straight women were in long-term relationships.

explaining the differences

So why do parents in two countries with similar levels of development and reproductive technologies have such different attitudes toward the sexual experiences of teenagers? Two factors immediately spring to mind. The first is religion. As the Laumann team found, Americans who do not view religion as



Don't worry, moms and dads, they're at the museum!

a central force in their decision-making are much less likely to categorically condemn teenage sex. And devout Christians and Muslims in the Netherlands are more likely to exhibit attitudes towards sexuality and marriage that are similar to those of their American counterparts. That Americans are far more likely to be religiously devout than the Dutch, many of whom left their houses of worship in the 1960s and '70s, explains part of the difference between the two countries.

A second factor is economic security. Like most European countries, the Dutch government provides a range of what sociologists call "social" and what reproductive health advocates call "human" rights: the right to housing, healthcare, and a minimum income. Not only do such rights ensure access, if need be, to free contraceptive and abortion services, government supports make coming of age less perilous for both teenagers and parents. This might make the prospect of sex derailing a child's life less haunting. Ironically, the very lack of such rights and high rates of childhood poverty in the U.S. contributes to high rates of births among teenagers. Without adequate support systems or educational and job opportunities, young people are simply more likely to start parenthood early in life.

While they no doubt contribute, neither religion nor economics can solve the whole puzzle. Even Dutch and American families matched on these dimensions still have radically divergent views of teenage sexuality and the sleepover. After interviewing 130 white middle-class Dutch and American teenagers (mostly 10th graders) and parents, I became convinced that a fuller solution is to look at the different cultures of independence and control that characterize these two middle classes.

In responding to adolescent sexuality, American parents emphasize its dangerous and conflicted elements, describing it in terms of "raging hormones" that are difficult for young

people to control and in terms of antagonistic relationships between the sexes (girls and boys pursue love and sex respectively, and girls are often the losers of the battle). Moreover, American parents see it as their obligation to encourage adolescents' separation from home before accepting their sexual activity. Viewing sex as part of a larger tug of war between separation and control, the response to the question of the sleepover, even among many otherwise socially liberal parents is, "Not under my roof!"

Dutch parents, by contrast, downplay the dangerous and difficult sides of teenage sexuality, tending to normalize it. They speak of readiness (*er aan toe zijn*), a process of becoming physically and emotionally ready for sex that they believe young people can self-regulate, provided they've been encouraged to pace themselves and prepare adequately. Rather than emphasizing gender battles, Dutch parents talk about sexuality as emerging from relationships and are strikingly silent about gender conflicts. And unlike Americans who are often skeptical about teenagers' capacities to fall in love, they assume that even those in their early teens fall in love. They permit sleepovers, even if that requires an "adjustment" period to overcome their feelings of discomfort, because they feel obliged to stay connected and accepting as sex becomes part of their children's lives.

These different approaches to adolescent sexuality are part of the different cultures of independence and control. American middle-class culture conceptualizes the self and (adult) society as inherently oppositional during adolescence. Breaking away from the family is necessary for autonomy, as is the occasional use of parental control (for instance, in the arena of sexuality), until teenagers are full adults. Dutch middle-class culture, in contrast, conceptualizes the self and society as interdependent. Based upon the assumption that young people develop autonomy in the context of ongoing relationships of interdependence, Dutch parents don't see teenage sexuality in the household as a threat to their children's autonomy or to their own authority. To the contrary, allowing teenage sexuality in the home—"domesticating" it, as it were—allows Dutch parents to exert more informal social control.

what it means for kids

The acceptance of adolescent sexuality in the family

creates the opportunity for Dutch girls to integrate their sexual selves with their roles as family members, even if they may be subject to a greater level of surveillance. Karel's daughter, Heidi, for example, told me she knows that her parents would permit a boyfriend to spend the night, but they wouldn't be happy unless they knew the boy and felt comfortable with him. By contrast, many American girls must physically and psychologically bifurcate their sexual selves and their roles as daughters. Caroline's mother loves her boyfriend. Still, Caroline, who is seventeen, says her parents would "kill" her if she asked for a sleepover. They know she has sex, but "it's really overwhelming for them to know that their little girl is in their house having sex with a guy. That is just scary to them."

American boys receive messages ranging from blanket prohibition to open encouragement. One key message is that sex is a symbol and a threat—in the event of pregnancy—to their adult autonomy. Jesse has a mother who is against premarital sex and a father who believes boys just want to get laid. But like Caroline, Jesse knows there will be no sleepovers: "They have to wait for me to break off from them, to be doing my own thing, before they can just handle the fact that I would be staying with my girlfriend like that," he says. By contrast, Dutch boys are, or anticipate being, allowed a sleepover. And like their female counterparts, they say permission comes with a social control that encourages a relational sexuality and girlfriends their parents like. Before Frank's parents would permit a sleepover, they would first have "to know someone well." Gert-Jan says his parents are lenient, but "my father is always judging, 'That's not a type for you'."

These different templates for adolescent sex, gender, and autonomy also affect boys' and girls' own navigation of the dilemmas of gender. The category "slut" appears much more salient in the interviews with American girls than Dutch girls. One reason may be that the cultural assumption that teenagers can and do fall in love lends credence to Dutch girls' claims to being in love, while the cultural skepticism about whether they can sustain the feelings and form the attachments that legitimate sexual activity put American girls on the defensive. Kimberley, an American, had her first sex with a boy she loves, but she knows that people around her might discount such claims, saying "You're young, you can't fall in love." By contrast, in the Netherlands, Natalie found her emotions and relationship validated: her mother was happy to hear about her first intercourse because "she knows how serious we are."

In both countries, boys confront the belief and sometimes the reality that they are interested in sex but not relationships. But there is evidence in both countries that boys are often emotionally invested. The American boys I have interviewed tend to view themselves as unique for their romantic aspirations and describe themselves, as Jesse does, as "romantic rebels." "The most important thing to me is maintaining love between me and my girlfriend," while "most guys are pretty much in it for the sex,"

he says. The Dutch boys I interviewed did not perceive themselves as unusual for falling in love (or for wanting to) before having sex. Sam, for instance, believes that "everyone wants [a relationship]." He explains why: "Someone you can talk to about your feelings and such, a feeling of safety, I think that everyone, the largest percentage of people wants a relationship."

culture's cost

How sexuality, love, and autonomy are perceived and negotiated in parent-child relationships and among teenagers depends on the cultural templates people have available. Normalization and dramatization each have "costs" and "benefits." On balance, however, the dramatization of adolescent sexuality makes it more difficult for parents to communicate with teenagers about sex and relationships, and more challenging for girls and boys to integrate their sexual and relational selves. The normalization of adolescent sexuality does not eradicate the tensions between parents and teenagers or the gender constructs that confine both girls and boys. But it does provide a more favorable cultural climate in which to address them.

*Note, this quote and subsequent quotes from Dutch sources are the author's translations. Names have been changed to protect anonymity.

recommended resources

Michel Bozon and Osmo Kontula. "Sexual Initiation and Gender in Europe: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Trends in the Twentieth Century." In M. Hubert, N. Bajos, and T. Sandfort (eds.), *Sexual Behaviour and HIV/AIDS in Europe: Comparisons of National Surveys* (UCL Press, 1998). Documents historical trends in sexual initiation in Europe during the last half of the 20th century.

Evert Ketting and Adriaan P. Visser. "Contraception in the Netherlands: The Low Abortion Rate Explained." *Patient Education and Counseling* (1994), 23:161-171. Describes various factors, including healthcare delivery and media education, which have contributed to the low teenage pregnancy rate in the Netherlands.

Jane Lewis and Trudie Knijn. "Sex Education Materials in The Netherlands and in England and Wales: A Comparison of Content, Use and Teaching Practice." *Oxford Review of Education* (2003), 29(1):113-132. Provides an analysis of the politics and content analysis of Dutch sex education as compared to programs in the U.K.

C.J. Pascoe. *Dude You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (University of California Press, 2007). An ethnographic study of a racially diverse working-class high school that shows American boys' pressures to "perform" masculinity.

Deborah L. Tolman. *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (Harvard University Press, 2002). Illuminates how American girls grapple with the experience and articulation of their sexual desires in face of social and cultural pressures.

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