

Raging Hormones, Regulated Love: Adolescent Sexuality and the Constitution of the Modern Individual in the United States and the Netherlands

AMY T. SCHALET

Recent research has suggested marked differences in culture between advanced industrial nations (Biernacki, 1995; Dobbin, 1994; Griswold, 1987; Hofstede, 1998; Lamont, 1992). The nature and implications of these differences, however, remain unclear. Are cultural differences located at the level of ideological beliefs or at the level of less consciously articulated, taken-for-granted assumptions? Do cultures provide different conceptual tools or do they differ primarily in terms of people's practices and strategies for action? To what extent do the various aspects of a culture interrelate and cohere? This article addresses these questions by examining constructions of sexuality and family life in the US and the Netherlands. It compares parental attitudes towards adolescent sexuality among a stratum of the Dutch and American population to reveal the different cultural logics that inform them. The article shows not only how parental views of adolescent sexuality are culturally constructed; it also shows how the comparative study of adolescent sexuality can, in turn, contribute to our understanding of cultural processes and the nature of modern personhood.

The article is based on in-depth interviews with 14 American and 17 Dutch parents of 16-year-olds. While the numbers of these samples are small, the

Body & Society © 2000 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi),
Vol. 6(1): 75–105
[1357-034X(200003)6:1;75–105;012040]

differences I found are striking enough to suggest fundamentally different cultural patterns. The interviewees have similar socio-economic and demographic characteristics. All are white and most are well-educated. Yet the Dutch and American parents differ sharply in their definition of adolescent sexuality and the strategies they prefer for its management. The American parents describe adolescent sexuality as a biologically driven, individually based activity which causes disruption to the teenager as well as to the family. The Dutch parents, by contrast, emphasize the love relationships and social responsibility of teenagers which make their sexuality a 'normal' phenomenon. Their different definitions of adolescent sexuality lead the two sets of parents to divergent conclusions about how best to handle it. Whereas 12 out of 17 Dutch parents say they would permit their 16-year-olds to sleep together with a girl- or boyfriend in the home, 13 out of 14 American parents say they would not. Thus, Dutch parents tend to 'normalize' adolescent sexuality and include it in the family while American parents 'dramatize' adolescent sexuality and exclude it from the family.

I argue that the Dutch and American parents I interviewed define and manage adolescent sexuality differently because a different cultural logic informs their interpretations and behavior. While my research permits only tentative and partial conclusions about general cultural differences between the US and the Netherlands, it does have a number of implications for the study of culture in advanced industrial societies. I show how culture operates at the level of taken-for-granted assumptions about human nature and social relations which are expressed and transmitted through everyday phrases, rituals and practices. Contrary to some arguments about culture in advanced capitalist society, I argue that together these assumptions do form a relatively coherent, systematic and mutually reinforcing whole which justifies the use of the term 'logic'. Most interviewees belong to the white middle class. Nevertheless, I believe that within their respective countries the attitudes they articulate are dominant – in two ways which I discuss in the concluding section. If indeed different cultural logics have prevailed in different 'Western' nations, this means that we must be very careful in accepting theories which propose a single notion of modern personhood.

Adolescent Sexuality in the US and the Netherlands: Attitudes and Practices

Researchers have noted large differences among advanced industrial societies in public attitudes towards adolescent sexuality (Ester et al., 1993; Halman, 1991; Jones et al., 1986; Rademakers, 1997). Public attitudes towards adolescent sexuality in the US have been characterized as 'restrictive' and 'non-accepting', and those in the Netherlands as occupying a midway position between the permissiveness of

Scandinavian countries and the restrictiveness of southern Europe and the US (Rademakers, 1997). The clearest indicator of a sharp difference between the US and Netherlands comes from the European Value Systems Study Group. In 1981 this survey group found that 65 percent of the American public believed sex between people under the age of 18 was never justified while only 25 percent of the Dutch public agreed with this statement (Halman, 1991).¹ The sexual practices, particularly the contraceptive behavior, of Dutch and American adolescents display an equally striking contrast. Although they become sexually active at roughly the same age, American teenage girls are nine times more likely to become pregnant than their Dutch counterparts.² While teenage pregnancy is a rare occurrence in the Netherlands, 20 percent of American girls who are sexually active become pregnant each year (Brugman et al., 1995; Delft and Ketting, 1992; *Facts in Brief*, 1998).

What do all these variations mean? Certainly the different pregnancy rates can be related to many factors. The high teenage pregnancy rate in the US may be, at least partially, due to the opportunity structure which provides minority women with few desirable alternatives to motherhood (Luker, 1996). The low pregnancy rate in the Netherlands, by contrast, is in part due to easily available and affordable contraceptives, most notably the pill (Ketting, 1990). However, researchers have also argued that the cultural climate and the nature of adult attitudes towards adolescent sexuality affect the likelihood that teenagers will use contraceptives effectively. Rademakers, for instance, states that 'a more permissive attitude leads to more effective contraceptive use' (Rademakers, 1997; see also Jones et al., 1986; Ketting, 1990). But while researchers may suggest a relationship between the broader cultural climate and the sexual norms of parents, it remains unclear how exactly this relationship works. Are terms like 'permissive' and 'restrictive' really adequate to describe cultural differences? How do parental norms in the sexual realm relate to the cultural concepts and practices used to negotiate other dimensions of social life? I seek to shed light on these questions by demonstrating how two divergent views of adolescent sexuality are embedded in and upheld by a whole constellation of cultural conceptions, some of which are not immediately obviously related to sexuality.

In treating constructions of adolescent sexuality as a window onto broader cultural dynamics, my analysis has much in common with those showing how the category of 'the homosexual' has profound implications for notions of sexuality and social relations in general (Foucault, 1978; Sedgwick, 1990; Weeks, 1985). These theories, however, often suggest a monolithic, modern Western culture. In fact, there are striking differences across 'the West' in the perception of non-heterosexuality. The Netherlands and the US represent two extremes of this range: the Dutch expressing far less fear and condemnation of homosexuality than

do Americans (Ester et al., 1993: 114; Smith, 1994: 68). This is not to say that Dutch parents do not presume heterosexuality on the part of their children, or that there is no homophobia in Dutch society (Brugman et al., 1995; Ravesloot, 1997). It does suggest, however, that cultural differences among Western nations, not usually acknowledged in existing theories of sexuality, shape the meaning of the categories 'homo-' and 'heterosexuality'.

Gender, like sexual orientation, may be shaped by cultural differences within 'the West'. Existing studies show that in both the US and the Netherlands parents are more restrictive and engage in more conflict over sex with their daughters than with their sons (Hart, 1992; Martin, 1996; Ravesloot, 1997; Waal, 1989). But, there are also indications that gender plays out in different ways in the two countries. Dutch researchers have noted that gender differences in sexual attitudes have continued to decrease throughout the 1990s among Dutch youths (Brugman et al., 1995: 20). While Dutch boys are more likely than Dutch girls to want or approve of sex without emotional intimacy, they both regard a relationship or a strong emotional bond as the most preferable context within which to have sex (Rademakers and Ravesloot, 1993; Ravesloot, 1997: 193; Brugman et al., 1995: 25). These studies do not report the 'oppositional gender strategy' that Karin Martin (1996) finds firmly entrenched among American teenagers – according to which girls seek love but are unable to experience themselves as sexual subjects while boys are excited about sex but express hostility toward girls and fear of commitment.

The cultural differences that I discuss in this article suggest how and why the categories of gender and sexual orientation may be constituted differently in the US and the Netherlands. At the heart of the different conceptions and management of adolescent sexuality that the Dutch and American parents articulate lie, I argue, different understandings of the relationship between the self and others. Whereas the American parents emphasize differences in sexuality and the inevitability of conflict between people, the Dutch parents emphasize similarities in sexuality and the potential for agreement. Thus, while my analyses do not explicitly address constructions of gender and sexual orientation, they nonetheless have profound implications for these processes. My article suggests that the extent to which contrasts between homo- and heterosexuality are played up, and differences between men and women are viewed as antagonistic, is shaped by conceptions of self and other which vary across Western nations.

Conceptualizing Culture

I will argue that the views that the Dutch and American parents hold of adolescent sexuality are anchored in their taken-for-granted assumptions about human

nature and social relations, assumptions which reinforce one another, forming together a distinct cultural logic. This conception of culture has three components. First, it assumes that culture operates and can be observed at the level of the taken-for-granted interpretations and actions through which people construct their day-to-day lives. This level of culture can be termed 'common sense', which Ann Swidler defines as 'the set of assumptions so unselfconscious as to seem a natural, transparent, undeniable part of the structure of the world' (Swidler, 1986: 279; see also Derné, 1994). It is exactly the 'naturalness' or obviousness of such assumptions which not only give them their power, but also make them hard to elicit or discern, sometimes even for the researcher (LeVine, 1984). Comparing cultures across nations allows one to elucidate those taken-for-granted assumptions. Cross-national comparisons of this kind have been undertaken with regard to labor practices (Biernacki, 1995), political efficacy (Dobbin, 1994), pre-schools (Tobin et al., 1989) and class distinctions (Lamont, 1992). However, even though constructions of sexuality and family life are imbued with deeply held notions of the natural, and thus constitute a fruitful point of departure for the study of culture, they have thus far not been used to explore cultural difference among advanced industrial nations.

The second component of my conception of culture concerns the content of these taken-for-granted assumptions. At the heart of the cultural differences between the Dutch and American parents, I argue, lie different conceptions of human nature and of the relations between people. While these conceptions have practical implications and emotional corollaries, they also have a clearly cognitive dimension. This means that unlike those theorists of culture who treat culture as something to be observed primarily in practices or public rituals, I treat it as something that people do 'carry around in their heads' and can come to articulate (Biernacki, 1995; Geertz, 1973a; Swidler, 1986). This does not mean one can take what people say at face value since the most powerful level of culture operates not at the level of consciously articulated beliefs. The words and expressions that people use to describe themselves and others provide important clues about their underlying cultural conceptions. Thus, when Dutch parents recurrently refer to the 'normality' of sexuality and the value of 'pleasant togetherness', this reveals something about the way they believe people do and should operate. Likewise, when American parents worry about teenagers 'losing control' while stressing the importance of 'space', this points towards a tension in their conception of personhood.

The third aspect of my conception of culture pertains to its interrelatedness. When I argue that the Dutch and American parents follow different cultural logics, I mean by 'logic' something akin to the 'cultural integration' which Geertz

defines as cultural emphases which although 'neither permanent nor perfect. . . are dominant. . . do reinforce one another, and. . . are persisting' (Geertz, 1973b: 406). A cultural logic consists of a set of mutually reinforcing assumptions about human nature and the social world which have emotional, pragmatic and moral implications. It is the interrelatedness of its components which makes a cultural logic so powerful and such a matter of course to those who share it. To say that the Dutch and American parents operate according to a different cultural logic is not to say that there are no tensions or contradictions embedded in these logics. Nor does it mean that the two frameworks that I highlight constitute the sole one in each country (although there is reason to believe that each does constitute a dominant one). What I am arguing, however, is that in advanced industrial societies cultures do form integrated wholes which structure people's interpretations and actions.³ I want to suggest also that these broad cultural constellations differ significantly and systematically between nations.

Different Versions of Modern Personhood

The argument that Dutch and American parents differ systematically in their understanding of the individual challenges theories of modernity which posit one form of personhood as typical for the modern 'West'. I will discuss one such school of thought, namely, that of Dutch figurational sociology, since its vision of modernity is particularly well suited to describe contemporary Dutch culture but is far less satisfying for the description or explanation of contemporary American culture. Building on the theories of Norbert Elias (1994), Cas Wouters (1986, 1992) and Abram de Swaan (1981) have each outlined an argument about the nature and causes of contemporary social relations. While their terminology and emphases differ, de Swaan and Wouters have similar conceptions of how modern individuals relate to themselves and each other. As a consequence of growing interdependence and physical safety, emancipatory social movements, the 'equanimity of the welfare state'⁴ and the emergence of bureaucracies, a new form of interpersonal and emotional management has evolved, replacing the older, more formal and hierarchical code of behavior.⁵ This 'management by negotiation' (de Swaan) or 'informalization' (Wouters) is based on a deep and taken-for-granted self-control of sexual and aggressive impulses. It does not require, nor tolerate, stark inequality or blatant exercise of power between, for instance, the sexes, parents and children, or employers and employees. Instead, the 'social glue' that holds people together consists of an internalized compulsion towards mutual consideration, flexibility and negotiation. This means that while people may be more free from external rules and authority than they were in the past, they are

also constrained by new taboos and internal compulsions which bind them closely together.

While the insight that 'tolerance' and 'permissiveness' are predicated on particular social and psychological conditions which may be far from liberating is very valuable, the vision which these theorists present is not as widely applicable as they suggest. In particular, I will show that the Dutch and American notions of personhood and social relations differ along three key dimensions which de Swaan and Wouters argue are common features of modern societies. These dimensions concern the degree of self-restraint which people are expected to possess, the degree of inequality thought to be desirable and requisite for a functional social life, and the degree of social compatibility and conflict expected between individuals. The argument that 'management by negotiation' or 'informalization' binds people together by mutual consideration, identification, flexibility and negotiation assumes that ultimately people are able and motivated to do so. Yet, I will argue that the vision of individuals and of social life which the American parents express does not make this as plausible as de Swaan's and Wouters's models suggest. 'Management by negotiation' and 'informalization' seem to constitute one particular variant of modern personhood and social interaction, rather than, as these authors argue, the prototypical model.⁶ Moreover, this variant, I suggest, flourishes only under favorable cultural conditions.

The Study

Between September 1991 and February 1992, I interviewed 14 American and 17 Dutch parents of teenagers. In each country I contacted half of the interviewees via a high-school parent organization and the other half through referrals from personal networks. The parents I interviewed all lived near or in a middle-sized university city in a metropolitan area. In both countries the parents differed from the national average since almost all were married, more than half were Catholic (although many Dutch interviewees describe themselves as non-religious), all were white, and most were well educated. Nine Dutch and ten American parents had at least an MA degree. Two parents in each country had degrees from junior colleges. Six Dutch and two American parents had high-school degrees or less. Most of my interviews were with mothers but in each country some fathers participated. Their children were all around 16 years old and were as often boys as they were girls.

The interviews I conducted were semi-structured and centered around topics that concern parents of adolescents: school, work, friends, alcohol, sexuality, family and transitions into adulthood. My initial goal was to explore general

differences and similarities in the way these Dutch and American parents constructed adolescence as a phase of life. Only in the course of these interviews did sexuality emerge as the most significant and clear point of divergence between the two sets of parents. Taking this divergence as point of departure, I systematically compared the interview transcripts of the Dutch and American parents by topic. By counting the quantifiable answers and tracing the words, expressions and forms of reasoning parents used, I was able to reconstruct their different cultural logics. The presentation that follows combines description with interpretation to illuminate these logics. First, I discuss how the American and Dutch parents conceptualize adolescent sexuality. Then I turn to their strategies for managing it within the parental home.

The Dramatization of Adolescent Sexuality

Even before the interview turns to the subject of sexuality, 11 out of 14 American parents mention sex as something that characterizes and complicates the period of adolescence. They often refer to the sexual desire of an adolescent as ‘drives’ or ‘urges’ which they attribute to the physical processes of puberty. Puberty confuses the child, burdening him with a load of hormonally produced sexual feelings. One mother thinks the physical transition adolescents experience is

... difficult for them, very difficult. Their bodies are changing, and they are experiencing feelings that they have never had before, and they are getting interested in the opposite sex per se and having feelings to deal with that they never had.

Expressions such as ‘raging hormones’ and ‘hormones that are acting up’ suggest that adolescent sexuality emerges from a biological source within the individual and possesses a disruptive power.

While many parents say it is normal for a teenager to experience sexual feelings, all of them also say that at 16 their child is not ready for a relationship involving sex. When parents talk about teenage sex, they usually refer to *other* teenagers, not to their own children. Parents describe teenage sexual involvement as an individual condition or activity; teenagers are ‘sexually active’ or engaged in ‘sexual activity’. American parents do not usually refer to a relational or emotional context when talking about the sexual activity of teenagers. One reason they do not associate teenage sexuality with love or an emotionally meaningful relationship is the widespread belief that 16-year-olds are unable to form deep or steady romantic attachments. One American mother says point-blank, ‘They’re not mature enough to handle a serious relationship’. Another doesn’t think ‘a 16-year-old is going to be committed to that extent. I mean maybe this month, but next month it could be someone else.’ Even when long-term romantic attachments do exist between

adolescents, parents do not believe sex is warranted. A mother whose daughter had dated the same boy throughout high school does not think 'someone who is 16 is mature enough to really have a relationship that would be a meaningful relationship, one that would involve sex'.

This dissociation of teenage sexuality from contexts of love and commitment explains why American parents often refer to teenage sexual activity as experimental, promiscuous, immoral or exclusively pleasure-driven. It is not uncommon, in fact, for parents to mention teenage sex in the same breath as drugs, excessive drinking or vandalism. However, parents do not attribute such negative qualities to sexuality in general. Adult sexuality is different from the sexual activity of 'kids'. 'I very strongly feel that sex is not a child – shouldn't be an activity for children', says one mother. 'I just think sex is another thing that's for adults and not for kids.' The developmental maturity, economic independence or marital status of 'adults' distinguishes them from 'kids' and sanctions their 'adult' sexual activity. Because teenagers lack these attributes, their motivations for engaging in sex and their sexual desires, motivations and experiences are thought to have a different, lesser value. 'It's not that we don't approve of sex', says one mother. 'It's that we don't approve of sex at a certain time in life.'

Some religious parents believe that sexual intercourse, regardless of its consequences, poses a threat to the individual because pre-marital sex is wrong. Most parents, however, do not refer to sin but rather emphasize the negative consequences that sex can entail. One mother says that 'sex is not good for a kid' and that with the spread of AIDS 'it's terribly, terribly dangerous'. Another father would disapprove of his son's becoming sexually involved because 'tied in with that is this whole horror show of AIDS and related diseases'. One mother feels her daughter is 'at risk': 'And [you worry] that their lives can get messed up more. If a girl gets pregnant, she has to deal with an abortion or a baby.' Another mother says that her son could risk his future by getting sexually involved. Her advice to him: 'You're really blessed. Don't blow it. You know. Don't throw it out the window on some cheap thrill because what's it going to get you?' Another father believes one should tell teenagers, 'Don't do it. You're crazy. You're playing with a loaded gun. There's no other way that I can put it. You're going to ruin your life.'

American parents assume that teenagers cannot guard against unwanted consequences of sexual involvement – for instance, by using contraceptives. They suggest that teenagers are unable to regulate their sexual impulses, making any sexual involvement tantamount to irresponsibility. The parents express similar notions about the inability of teenagers to exercise self-restraint when they discuss alcohol consumption. Eleven parents believe 16-year-olds should not be

allowed to drink alcohol without parental supervision because they 'would not know their limitations', 'do not have any idea of their capacity' or 'are not mature enough to be able to control something like that'. Parents suggest that if teenagers are given free access to alcohol they will consume excessively rather than in moderation because they 'don't know how to make those distinctions'.

The notion that a teenager cannot restrain herself is related to the belief that she lacks a fully solidified internal reference point or a reliable moral compass. Like the biological process of puberty, the period of adolescence is thought to disrupt and confuse a person and to make one extremely susceptible to influences outside oneself. This 'inner unreliability' renders teenagers unaccountable for their actions. Thus, many American parents explain the drinking and sexual behavior of teenagers not as a consequence of free will but as a result of 'being pushed' or 'forced' by others. 'Too often a kid ends up having sex because it's a peer thing rather than something he's honestly ready for', one mother says. A father believes, 'These kids get wrapped up in it. It's a trap. It's peer pressure.' The *dramatization* of teenage sexuality thus involves the interplay of internal urges, external pressures and a self unable yet to direct or protect itself.

The Normalization of Adolescent Sexuality

While the American parents emphasize how teenage sexuality is disruptive, the Dutch parents describe teenage sexuality as something that does not and should not present many problems. They often speak jokingly about the relationships and sexuality of teenage children. One mother tells of her amusement when her son said to her one day, 'Now I want a girlfriend, the time is ripe for that.' Another father describes how, as a joke for Christmas, he and his wife gave their children gold-colored condoms, which they had bought in Berkeley, California. Such jokes indicate the *normality* with which the Dutch parents approach the issue of adolescent sexuality. Dutch parents believe that sexuality should be talked about and dealt with in a 'normal' way, meaning that it should not be made taboo or the cause of unnecessary difficulty. 'We have always talked openly, normally about [reproduction and contraception]', says one mother. Another mother favors sex education at school because that way 'it becomes very normal to talk about it'.

The onset of sexual desire in teenagers is usually discussed in relation to a boyfriend or girlfriend, or in terms of being *verliefd* (in love or infatuated) with another person. In other words, Dutch parents think about the sexuality of teenagers in the context of a relationship and their emotional involvement with another person. Adolescents are not said to be 'sexually active'; rather they 'go to

bed with each other' or have 'sexual contact'. 'Yes, I do think that is a result of having a boyfriend or a girlfriend for a long time, that you surely have a sexual, thus an intimate, relationship', one mother says. Another mother explains why a young person would want to be sexual with a partner: 'If you love each other, then you want to be together, don't you, to have that warmth.'

This relationship-based conception of adolescent sexuality is not only descriptive, it is prescriptive. Dutch parents say that teenagers *should* view sexuality in the context of their emotions for and relationships with other people. One mother approves of sex education in school 'as long as it is indeed about relationships, and not just sex, pure sex'. When sex education is about 'dealing with each other, having understanding for each other', then she finds it 'extremely good'. Another mother reiterates that sex education should include talking about 'feelings, clearly taking the other person into account, for boys as well as for girls'. It is the presence of a 'relationship' which determines whether Dutch parents approve of teenagers having sex. A number of them indicate that the depth and stability of the relationship, rather than age or any other condition, are the criteria that make sex acceptable. One mother approves of sex at 16 'as long as they have a steady relationship, not every week with another person'. Another mother says that young people should not have sex based on a momentary attraction but

... if you are sixteen, and there comes a period of four or five months of going out really steadily, and you don't do any crazy things, then I would think it all right. ... Yes. ... As long as they have a steady girlfriend, or a steady boyfriend, then I think it is all right.

Parents stress that a person should be *er aan toe*. *Er aan toe zijn* means 'to be ready for' or 'at the right moment'. Such readiness is the result of a gradual mental and physical process of development. What distinguishes the Dutch parents from the American parents is their belief that teenagers are capable of being *er aan toe*, or ready for a sexual relationship. Although most Dutch parents do not think their own 16-year-old is ready, eight think it is possible for a person to be *er aan toe* at 16. Another six think this can be the case at 17 or 18. Relative to their American counterparts, Dutch parents have little anxiety about their child becoming sexually involved prematurely. It is generally thought that if a person is not *er aan toe*, he or she will not want to have sex. The assumption behind the concept *er aan toe zijn* is that when a person feels ready and wants to have sex, he is indeed ready.

Unlike their American counterparts, Dutch parents do not envision a battle between bodily drives and rational control. Sexual desire and the personal development which makes it possible to experience sex in a good way are thought to go together. For that reason, parents trust that 'the right moment' will best be recognized by a teenager herself. 'You should ask him that', one mother responds when asked whether she thinks her son is ready for a relationship involving sex.

‘That is something he should decide for himself, whether he is ready or not.’ One father says his daughter was ready for sex at 16 ‘because she herself indicated she was ready’. He had always told his daughters:

I will never have any objection [to a sexual relationship] when they – really out of their own free will, and never because they have to do it or because of coercion or because they feel that they have to belong, or because otherwise the boyfriend won’t like them anymore – but only when they themselves feel the need for that, and when they are themselves ready for it. And when that is, I don’t know.

Dutch parents do not view adolescent sexuality as being dangerous in and of itself. They stress that teenagers should use contraceptives, and frequently mention their own role in urging their children to do so. ‘Without a condom, I will not allow them to make love’, says one mother. One father would object if his daughter wanted to become sexually involved at 16. He says nonetheless, ‘When she has a boyfriend for a while, [her mother] says, “Shall we go to the doctor to get the pill?”’ One mother continually points out the necessity of contraceptives to her son because ‘it must become an automatism’. If her daughter had continued to go steady with her boyfriend, one other mother says, she would have told her, ‘You must go on the pill.’ The Dutch parents do not regard sex as inherently risky because they expect their children will use contraceptives to protect themselves against unwanted consequences of sex. Asked whether he is worried about his daughter’s sexual behavior, one father responds, ‘I do have that trust that if she were to do it, she would use contraceptives, she has a good enough head on her shoulders.’

When they discuss drinking Dutch parents express a similar trust that their child will use common sense. Asked if their 16-year-old is old enough to drink, parents usually respond ‘yes, in moderation’, implying that a 16-year-old is capable of self-imposed moderation. One mother says her son had ‘become acquainted with alcohol’ on a school trip to Rome, where he had gotten ‘good and drunk’. As a consequence he decided ‘out of himself’ not to drink to excess in the future. In a similar way, the mechanism that moderates sexual desire and prevents pregnancy and disease is thought to be internal, within an adolescent. The notion that teenagers possess the ability to restrain themselves and to commit to others enables Dutch parents to normalize adolescent sexuality, to treat it, in other words, as something that neither is nor should be a problem.

Taking a Stance against Teenage Sexuality in the Family

For the vast majority of American interviewees the answer to the question ‘Would you permit your 16-year-old child to have a boy- or girlfriend sleep over at home?’

is unquestionably and obviously 'No'. Their stance on the issue is so obvious, they suggest, that it requires no explanation. One mother says her son would 'not even begin to ask' whether his girlfriend could sleep over because 'he wouldn't even think that I could accept it'. The American parents believe sex at that age is wrong and therefore do not permit it in the home. 'It's like – no, I don't approve', answers one mother. 'I want her to know that I don't approve', says a father. 'So why should I give her permission to have sex here when I don't approve?'

A parent's refusal to permit a teenage child to sleep together with a sexual partner at home is meant both to regulate a child's sexual activity, and to communicate the correct standard for sexual behavior. It becomes apparent that saying no to teenage sexual activity serves a symbolic purpose, above and beyond the control of sexual behavior, when a number of parents indicate that their rules regarding sex in the home do not necessarily have their intended consequences.

They're probably going to [have sex anyway], says one father, 'but as far as I'm concerned, they're not going to. . . . That's how I would feel about it. She'd know how I would feel about it. Whether she does that or not is quite another thing.'

One mother believes that strict rules of conduct must be maintained in a house even if they are not followed in practice. 'It must appear as though certain rules are being adhered to', one mother says. 'But on the other hand, she will sleep here and he will sleep there and then, in the morning, she'll be here and he will be there, but who knows what goes on in between?'

The American approach acknowledges and sanctions conflict between parents and teenage children and the need for parental authority. While the Dutch and American parents alike describe adolescence as a period of growing independence and assign to parents the role of setting 'limits' and 'guidelines', the American parents place more emphasis on the inevitability of conflict and the exercise of parental authority during the maturation process. They call the arrangements regarding what time their teenage children should come home at night 'rules' and sometimes 'curfews'. Other statements convey the idea that the exercise of parental authority is necessary and valid during adolescence. One American mother, a fundamentalist Protestant, says she 'has the right to enforce any degree of discipline or control. . . and the responsibility to do so whenever it needs to be done'. On the other side of the spectrum, a mother who describes herself as liberal says, 'I certainly exert authority once in a while. Drives [my son] crazy.'

That the American parents are fairly open about their desire and attempts to exercise authority over their teenage children is illustrated by their frequent use of the word 'control'. Parents often characterize the period of adolescence as a time when they lose control over their children's lives. 'Between 16 and 18', one father says, 'you're really losing a lot of the control over their daily lives.'

Occasions when teenagers socialize in the absence of adults – for instance, parties that lack parental supervision – epitomize the loss of parental control. ‘When kids that age get together, no matter how responsible a handful of them are, word gets out and others involved. . . it’s almost impossible to keep that kind of situation in good control.’ In situations that ‘get out of control’, teenagers are bound to become involved in drinking, sex, drugs and to inflict material and bodily damage. One reason the American parents fear loss of control over their children are the external dangers such as alcohol-related car accidents and violent crime to which American teenagers (much more than their Dutch counterparts) are exposed.

The American parents’ fears of losing control over their children’s lives are not due exclusively to environmental dangers, however. They arise from a tension in parents’ ideas about adolescence as a stage in their children’s lives. On the one hand, parents think of their children as becoming more and more independent, a development which, despite its emotional difficulty for parents, is viewed as a largely positive one. On the other hand, many parents describe adolescents as not-yet-fully moral, not-yet-fully sensible beings who have not internalized sufficiently the moral standards imparted to them. When parents assert that parental authority is necessary to control a 16-year-old’s behavior, they imply that someone this age lacks the necessary self-restraint. Uncertain about whether teenagers can restrain themselves and recognize what is morally right, parents fear that without some form of external constraint, teenagers might become subject to the ‘wrong’ peer influences, make the ‘wrong’ decisions, ‘lose control’ of themselves, and engage in undesirable forms of behavior. In their view, parental authority and parental control protect teenagers from themselves as well as from a dangerous environment.

Alongside the desire to be in control of their children’s behavior, the American parents believe it is necessary to provide maturing children their own ‘space’. The same mother who believes it is her ‘right and responsibility’ to impose the necessary amount of discipline and control later says of her daughter, ‘She’s an independent person. She’s 16 years old. I don’t want to live my life through her. I think she needs space.’ Giving ‘space’ means, among other things, accepting that teenagers are distancing themselves from their parents and their families. One mother describes adolescence as the ‘natural drawing away from the family’. And another says, ‘You’re talking about children that are trying to break away from their home and family.’ Above all breaking away means mental separation, the precondition, some parents say, for a child’s coming into her own. What the concept of space in its various meanings suggests is that to mature into free and independent beings, teenagers must establish a physical and mental territory separate from parents and their influence.

The concept of space enables the American parents to accommodate the discomfort which surrounds the sexual development of their children. It justifies a lack of conversation about the topic. Not openly acknowledging a teenager's sexuality seems a way both to give teenagers the space to explore new feelings without parental intervention and to give parents the space to deal with their own anxiety about it. Thus, a mutually reinforcing relationship exists between the idea that mental separation between parents and children is necessary during adolescence and the shared understanding that teenage sexuality causes discomfort. One mother says, 'I guess you kind of deny it. That your children remain children or something. You kind of want them to remain innocent – as far as sexually and stuff.' One mother says that although she knows her 18-year-old son sleeps with his girlfriend, she would not allow him to do so at home: 'To tell you the truth, I don't know that I can give a legitimate – logical reason for it. It's just, I would be so uncomfortable for very irrational reasons, I suppose.' One mother explains why she would not permit her daughter to sleep with her boyfriend at home:

And I suppose – I mean a liberal part of me says, well, if I felt OK about that, then I'd at least know where they were, what they were doing – but I don't want to know what she's doing. I don't want to know that – I mean – I want to know so that we can get proper protection and all of that, but her sexuality and what goes on is her business. And I don't need to know about it.

Yet, the American parents seem to feel that teenage sexuality, more than merely provoking discomfort, threatens and is hostile to the family. Sexual activity between teenage children, if sanctioned within the home, would violate the integrity of the family. One mother says,

I would just say that [sexual activity] is not acceptable to us. I mean I wouldn't give a damn if he thought he was ready or not. I mean that's one of the things when rules are getting broken: It's not acceptable to this family.

Another explains why she would not permit her daughters to sleep at home with a boyfriend:

I don't know. You know my friends and I talk about this, of course. I think even one of my friends. . . [who] is the most liberal. . . when her son came home with his girlfriend, I think she had them sleep in separate rooms because he was still living, you know, he was still being, he's still under their roof, and I mean you know what they're doing on the outside kind of, but I think if you sanction it, I don't know, *it just maybe changes the value of the family a little bit.*

The idea that 'it changes the value of the family' seems related to a deeply rooted belief that in a 'real family' only the husband and wife have sex. Open and openly sanctioned sexual activity between teenagers therefore means a confusion of the appropriate roles for family members, a confusion which, parents suggest,

both signals and causes the breakdown of a family. Teenage sexuality is associated with family breakdown in more than one way. One mother believes that the only kinds of parents who would allow their children to have sex at home are those 'who think they have no control over it'. Another mother says that teenage girls who come from broken homes are more likely to become promiscuous. This chain of associations makes sense out of American parents' choice to uphold sexual standards in the home regardless of the effect on their children's sexual behavior. Just as the integration of the sexual activity of teenagers into the family would mean the loss of a family's integrity, the exclusion of teenage sexuality from the home symbolically identifies a family as 'real', virtuous and functional. Its symbolic purpose in the definition of a family's identity explains why American parents regard the rule against teenage sexuality in the home as completely obvious and natural – often as a matter of intuition rather than reason – even though, some quite honestly admit, it may have little effect on a teenager's sexual behavior.

Taking Teenage Sexuality into Account

The Dutch parents regard their decision to permit a teenage child to sleep together with a boy- or girlfriend as a rational response to a reality they do not control.⁷ They emphasize that a child determines for himself when to become sexually involved, and that permitting it at home is a matter of accepting that fact. Some parents explain their decision as the consequence of an ideological conviction; parents should respect their children's internal barometers and their decisions with regard to sex. One mother would permit her son to sleep at home with a girlfriend because 'if he wants something with a girl, then he should decide for himself in which environment he wants that. And if he chooses the environment at home, then that is fine, he has his own bedroom.' Other parents emphasize not the ideological justification for a child's self-determination but rather its inevitability. Given that children will have sex when they want to, these Dutch parents argue, to permit a sleep-over is the most pragmatic and sensible parental response:

I do not have any problems with that. That is something that I could forbid, that they sleep here, but if they are away, or in a car, with a car they can also do it. So why should I say that he may not sleep here? That's a bit of nonsense, don't you think?

Many Dutch parents admit they did or would feel some resistance or discomfort about a teenage child's sexual involvement. One mother says she accepted her daughter's sexual relationship 'but with difficulty, for a time'. Another mother says she had anxiously anticipated her son's girlfriend spending the night in their

house: ‘You make such a drama of it [beforehand] thinking, “How should I handle all of it?”’ Yet these feelings of discomfort or resistance do not usually translate into a decision not to permit the sleep-over. Most parents believe it is right and useful to accept and adjust oneself to the sexual maturation of one’s child rather than acting on one’s emotional reservations. Some parents present this adjustment as a logical reaction to a serious love relationship: ‘You permit it when you see they love each other.’ Others see the adjustment as a matter of leaving behind the stifling sexual morality of the past and embracing more progressive sexual practices: ‘We were so prudish. One didn’t dare do anything. Look at how the children now interact with each other, luckily a bit freer.’

Yet beneath these more overtly ideological justifications seems to rest a more taken-for-granted ideal: to react pragmatically, rather than emotionally, to something that need not be – but might otherwise become – a ‘problem’. Parents emphasize their own ability to be flexible. One mother would prefer her daughter’s boyfriend not to sleep over, but she adds, ‘You do grow toward it, as a family, as a household, I mean.’ Some parents even express a hint of pride when they describe the lack of friction involved in their adjustment to their children’s sexuality. The mother who anticipated ‘a drama’ says, ‘Actually, it sort of rolls by itself.’ Another mother says, ‘I have no problem with that [the sleeping over]. . . . No, never had any problems with that.’ Finally, one father says that if his son were to have a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend, ‘I wouldn’t like it, but I wouldn’t make an issue out of it.’ ‘Oh, no. Neither would I’, replies his wife.

One thing that appears to motivate parents to adjust – even if it means compromising their own emotional reaction – is a desire to keep teenage sexuality from becoming a ‘wedge’ that separates or divides the family. One mother illustrates this aptly when she describes how she reacted when her teenage children wanted to start taking their partners upstairs to their bedrooms, and how she looks back on it now.

I thought, ‘Must I also approve of all this?’ But you grow into that, that goes very gradually, it is not scary. . . . We went into marriage as virgins. That is not so much part of it anymore. But I guess I had it in me, I dared to face it. I kept my family together this way.

The pride parents take in their ability to be flexible is embedded in their larger conception of how and why to regulate behavior in the family. Compared to the American parents, the Dutch parents seem more at ease with situations where teenagers are left without adult supervision. It is not uncommon, for instance, for Dutch parents to permit a child to go on vacation alone with friends at some point between the ages of 16 and 18. And compared to the American parents, the Dutch parents seem less at ease with the concept of parental authority. While rules about such matters as watching television, spending money and coming home at night

are not uncommon, many Dutch parents emphasize that they are not fond of strict rules about what children 'have to' or 'may not' do. When Dutch parents talk about parental authority, they tend to qualify, apologize for or even make fun of their desire to exercise it. One father, for instance, says that he used to have rules about when his daughters should come home at night. Part of that, he says, was 'still that authoritarian bit you think you can have in order to decide things about [a] child'. His use of the word 'authoritarian', with its decidedly negative connotation, indicates that he thinks the desire to control one's child is not completely valid.

Where the American parents often use the concept of vertical respect – that is, the respect of children for parents – as a justification for rules, the Dutch parents more often use the concept of horizontal respect or mutual consideration. Parents are explicit about the need for a child to conform to general guidelines for social behavior within the family. These consist of showing consideration for and awareness of other family members and their needs. They are often phrased in terms of 'taking each other into account'. One mother thinks:

When you all live in one house it is always important that there are rules, for all parties. . . . That you call if you are not coming to dinner, that you announce that you are home when you come in at night, that there are also rules that when you agree on a certain time that you keep to that, and that you call otherwise. That you take the other person into account.

A father illustrates how 'taking each other into account' regulates sexuality:

You [live] here with each other, [so] you have to take each other into account. That means that it can be necessary to consult with one another about what television program to watch, or what time to eat dinner. From time to time, someone will have to compromise. We [the parents] too. [This applies also] to whether boyfriends can sleep here, or whether they cannot because we have other guests.

The meaning of 'taking each other into account' goes beyond consideration for others. It implies the ability to consider oneself as part of a larger whole, where members attune themselves to one another to achieve a certain degree of unity. One mother uses a common Dutch expression to make the point that communal considerations are important in a family: 'It is not each for his own and God for us all, but when you are with the family, you go about things differently.' Parents indicate that the unity of a family requires a regular and coordinated structure. One mother says rules are important because 'there must be a certain regularity'. Another thinks that 'up to a certain point [rules] are important. . . . [So] that they know where they stand and there is regularity in a household.' Regularity and coordination ensure moments of shared everyday experiences which, in turn, foster a sense of pleasant togetherness known as *gezelligheid*. Nowhere is the need for regularity, rules and *gezelligheid* more recognized than in the area of food and

eating. Keeping to the communal dinner time is the most common – and in some cases the only – explicit rule parents have. ‘We do try to eat together’, says one mother. ‘That we do find important.’ Another mother says, ‘I find it very important that meals be eaten together, that is just *gezellig*.’

Another concept that structures the management of sexuality is ‘openness’. A number of Dutch parents say there should be ‘no secrets’ among family members, and that ‘everything should be open to discussion’. One mother is apologetic about the discomfort she felt in providing her son with sex education. ‘Yet, we’ve never held secrets from each other’, she says, ‘and I hope we’ll never have them either.’ Parents feel compelled to permit their children certain behaviors since they perceive the secretiveness that a prohibition might lead to as more disturbing than the behavior in question. One mother says she lets her sons drink at home because ‘they should not go and do it secretly – that I do not like at all’. As another mother illustrates, the belief that a family with integrity does not permit secrets among its members also compels Dutch parents to accommodate their children’s sexual relationships.

I find it extraordinarily hypocritical to give them two bedrooms while you know that when they are somewhere else, they go to bed together anyway. Then I think, come on . . . that’s nonsense. Once the situation is such that they want that, even if you are yourself not a supporter of it, but you know that they do it, then it should also be [allowed] in your own house. Not ‘if it doesn’t happen under my roof, OK, but under my roof, no’.

One way the Dutch parents manage the tension between their desire for openness and feelings of discomfort is by joking. One mother’s anecdote illustrates this:

I always used to say to my children, ‘Well, when you have a wet dream, then I do think you should tell me because then I will have to clean all that up.’ [They would then say] ‘O, no, we will take care of that ourselves, none of your business.’ And I have never had to clean anything up, so how they take care of that, I don’t know.

One might argue that to maintain openness and mental closeness among family members, Dutch parents must downplay what American parents play up, namely, the dangerous side of sexual desire. Instead of emphasizing the threat that emerging sexuality might pose to the individual or to the family, Dutch parents emphasize its comical quality. The Dutch parents who gave their children gold-colored condoms for Christmas certainly did not expect their children to go and use them. It was a way of acknowledging and ‘normalizing’ a potentially difficult transition in the family’s development.

While the Dutch parents do not embrace the concept of authority, they exert control in more subtle ways. First, ‘taking each other into account’ requires a high degree of self-regulation. A teenager must suspend those inclinations that

threaten the family's structure or *gezelligheid*. That teenagers are expected to have, and parents seek to develop in them, a self-regulating capacity is apparent from the frequent use of the word *afpraak* ('agreement' or 'arrangement'). Many parents who shy away from the word 'rule' make 'agreements' instead, for instance, about when a child is to come home. Second, 'taking each other into account' and being open often involve elaborate verbal communication. Parents who are most averse to the overt exercise of parental authority find talking particularly important. The requirement of talking can have a controlling dimension. Asked whether he wants to control the movies his teenage children see, one father responds:

I think it must be open to discussion, and not more than that. Because we don't exercise control over what they see, because that is impossible. . . . I do think we have the right to talk with them about it and they don't think that is strange either.

The practice of negotiation builds on the notion that teenagers are capable of self-restraint and that family members should openly discuss their preferences. One father describes such a case:

Last year on his sixteenth birthday, there was a discussion about whether he would or would not be allowed to have a crate of beer at his birthday party. What came out of that was that he got half a crate of beer and half a crate of alcohol-free beer.

One mother says that to decide what time her son comes home 'we negotiate. . . . It's discussed, "Well, what time do you want to come home?" What is decided is acceptable to them too, and then we average out.' Another mother says that when her children were questioning whether they should continue to go to church, she responded by 'never really saying [they] have to go with us'. She continues: 'We did talk about it. . . . When you put the choice before them, then they think it is awkward to stay home.'

The third and most subtle way in which 'taking each other into account' and openness control teenage behavior is by assuming – and thus producing – a certain commonality between parents and teenagers. 'Taking each other into account' derives its moral force from the presumption that family members are bound together by a shared desire and need for familial order and *gezelligheid*. Within this moral worldview, the value of *gezelligheid* is not subject to question, nor is it something about which a teenager – or any family member for that matter – is permitted to disagree. That is why partaking in the shared evening meal is the only-but-holy rule in some families, and a 'pre-rule' expectation in others. Furthermore, the practice of negotiation is based on the idea that given reasonable dialogue, parents and teenagers can and should agree with one another. This expectation seems to rest on a deeper assumption, namely, that the basic values

and interests of parents and teenagers are commensurable. The assumption that parents and children are basically compatible makes it possible to regard 'secrets' among family members as undesirable and unnecessary. One can imagine how the ideal of openness and taking each other into account has the effect of creating real bonds of commonality between Dutch parents and their children.

The irony is that while Dutch parents regard the sexual development of teenagers as beyond the control of parents and the use of parental authority to regulate teenage sexuality as inappropriate, they may, in fact, influence the sexual behavior of teenagers to a very large extent. Through conversation and family practices, Dutch parents address and negotiate, rather than prohibit, their teenage children's sexual involvement. But the terms in which teenage sexuality is addressed and on which it is negotiated are decided by parents. They are willing to recognize and accommodate their children's sexuality only when their children move within the culturally prescribed parameters for sexual involvement: that is, they must be involved in a steady, love relationship and use contraceptives. Yet, it seems that the control that Dutch parents exert over the sexual behavior of teenagers stems less from the negotiations that happen when a child becomes sexually involved than it does from the type of person which their family ideals and practices sanction and help fashion. The notions of self-regulation, social orientation and *gezelligheid* through which Dutch parents construct family life are ideally suited to produce teenagers who enact their sexuality in a 'normal', i.e. relationally based and socially responsible, manner.

Adolescent Sexuality and Culture

The American parents I interviewed dramatize adolescent sexuality. They assume a fragile and fluid teenage self caught in a battle between individual biological urges and social pressures. This fluid and fragile teenager requires clear external standards and control on the one hand, and the space to differentiate and separate on the other. Since teenagers are neither capable of controlling their impulses nor of forming meaningful relationships, sexuality is a drama. It is a drama for parents also because it requires them to simultaneously control and separate from their children. As a controlling and a distancing mechanism, the exclusion of adolescent sexuality from the family 'solves' these contradictions.

The Dutch parents, in contrast, normalize adolescent sexuality. They assume that teenagers are capable of, and not threatened by, meaningful emotional involvement with another person. Equipped with the capacity for self-regulation, Dutch teenagers are seen as able to reconcile sexual desire with psychological and physical health. Adolescent sexuality is normal because, and as long as, it takes

place in the context of a relationship and in a socially responsible manner. The inclusion of teenage sexuality into the family not only builds on the assumption that teenagers possess the capacities to experience sexuality in a normal manner. It also provides Dutch parents with an opportunity to model for their children the very qualities they wish them to develop. By accepting the sleep-over of girl- and boyfriends even against their own feelings of discomfort, they exhibit exactly the type of emotional control and willingness to compromise on which the openness and *'gezelligheid'* which they so value depends.

The Dutch and American parents whom I interviewed construct sexuality on the basis of the cultural building blocks available to them. That one set of parents emphasizes sex's biological properties whereas the other set emphasizes sex's social properties depends, I argue, on the images of human nature which their cultures provide. The cultural concepts that structure sexuality are not always obviously related to the sexual realm. For instance, the Dutch concept of *'gezelligheid'* and the American concept of 'space' lead parents to expect, as well as hope for, a different organization of their children's sexuality. The first is conducive to the notion of teenage sexuality as something that fits seamlessly into normal domesticity. The second promotes a conception of teenage sexuality as something that is and should remain outside of the family. Terms such as 'restrictive' and 'permissive' are insufficient to grasp the way culture affects sexuality.⁸ Not only do these terms have different meanings in different cultures, they also obscure the fact that 'permissive' cultures have 'restrictive' components and vice versa. While Dutch *'gezelligheid'* may make parents open to sleep-overs of their children's committed partners, it does not promote, for instance, dating multiple partners simultaneously. The 'restrictive' American parents are more likely to endorse this practice since it underscores the importance of preserving space and autonomy.⁹

The 'liberating' and 'constraining' potential of each cultural paradigm also come into play when one considers their effects on perceptions and experiences of sexual orientation and gender. By conceptualizing adolescent sexuality as relationships that are unproblematic and essentially similar to those of adults, the Dutch parents are more likely to accept non-heterosexuality in their children than are the American parents who conceptualize adolescent sexuality in terms of individual desires and play up its dangers and 'differentness'.¹⁰ By emphasizing the fluid nature of the adolescent self, however, dramatization may endorse an experimentation with one's sexuality, which is less likely to be encouraged by the more static notion of self implied by normalization. By placing conflict at the heart of adolescent sexuality, the American paradigm also suggests an inherent antagonism between boys and girls, unlike the Dutch paradigm according to which negotiation and agreement can overcome difference. Dramatization may take a particular toll on American girls

who, caught between parental prohibitions and boys' pressures, are unable to experience themselves as sexual subjects (Martin, 1996). However, it is possible that the relational model of sexuality and social life that the Dutch parents apply limits girls in other ways. The premium normalization places on harmonizing oneself with others may discourage Dutch girls from fully developing their own talents outside the context of relationships and family.¹¹

If cross-national research into adolescent sexuality can benefit from taking culture seriously as a complex, multifaceted, structuring force, then the sociology of culture too, can benefit from the comparative study of sexuality. As an emotionally loaded arena, governed by deeply held notions about what is natural and right, sexuality has proven fruitful for the analysis of cultural processes. Comparing attitudes towards sexuality has allowed me to discern subtle, yet consequential, differences in the culture of the American and Dutch parents whom I interviewed. Tracing the phrases, forms of reasoning and common practices that parents use, I found that at the heart of this seemingly private and taken-for-granted domain are distinct conceptions of the individual and social life. By illuminating the constellation of cultural conceptions that lead Dutch and American parents to different conclusions about the definition and management of adolescent sexuality, this study has shown how elements of culture interrelate and reinforce one another, constituting together a 'cultural logic'.

To argue that cultures possess a certain internal logic or coherence is not to assert that they constitute seamless, closed wholes without contradictions and tensions. It does not mean, for instance, that the language people use is the same as their actions (Derné, 1994). That the Dutch parents claim to avoid secrets and conflicts does not mean that personal information is always easily or openly shared.¹² That the American parents valorize differentiation and separation does not mean that children are actually that different from their parents. Nor does the concept 'cultural logic' mean that people do not struggle over the meaning of 'normality', 'space', '*gezelligheid*' or 'being out-of-control'. When I argue that Dutch and American parents each operate according to a distinct cultural logic what I mean is that they appeal to a different set of shared concepts. These shared concepts are powerful organizers of social life and claims to validity. And the power of these concepts comes, in part, from their interplay with other shared assumptions and common practices, without which the former would be un-persuasive or even unfathomable. To argue that cultures possess a certain logic means, in short, that they do not consist of autonomous bits of meaning which people choose or appropriate as they wish but rather that they constitute structures of interdependent meanings which constrain and enable people's thinking and action in systematic ways.

Sexuality and Modern Personhood

Abram de Swaan and Cas Wouters have argued that during the 20th century, particularly since the 1960s, a shift has taken place in people's relationships and psychological make-up. Old fears and prohibitions regarding emotional and sexual impulses were radically reduced. People came to fear sexuality less because they came to expect a high level of self-control from themselves as well as from others. 'Traditional' modes of controlling behavior based on inequality lost their validity and viability as the use of violence, power and the desire to place oneself above another person became taboo. A new way of managing social relations emerged which involves mutual consideration, negotiation, flexibility, verbal expression and consent. This 'management by negotiation' or 'informalization' has become possible exactly because individuals have become so well-equipped at monitoring and restraining their emotional and sexual impulses. While the pressures towards this shift originated outside the family, they profoundly affect the way parents interact with one another and with their children. Parents socialize their children according to the new norms for social interaction producing the type of individuals capable of functioning and thriving within them.

Yet the Dutch and American parents I interviewed differ along three dimensions which de Swaan and Wouters argue are common features of modern societies. First, they differ in the degree of self-restraint they expect from teenagers. The American parents assume that sex and teenagers are essentially unrestrained and asocial. The Dutch parents, by contrast, assume that teenagers can control their sexuality and express it in a socially acceptable form. Second, they exert different types of power. The American assumptions about lack of self-control justify an unequal mode of interaction between parents and teenagers in which parents impose clear rules and a rigid sexual morality. While the Dutch parents endorse a less blatant inequality, they demand a more far-reaching orientation and adaptation to the social norms within the family. Finally, the Dutch and American parents have different expectations about conflict and social compatibility between people. The American parents expect sex to produce inevitable conflicts and separation not only within the adolescent but also in the relationship between parents and children. Assuming a greater continuity and harmony between parents and children, the Dutch parents expect to resolve conflicts through consultation and compromise, thus preventing separation between family members.

The question is what, if any, conclusions about general differences between the US and Netherlands can be drawn from my study. Since all interviewees are white and most are well educated, it is quite likely that the analyses I have presented are

more applicable to the white middle class than they are to other segments of the Dutch and American populations. In both the US and the Netherlands people conceptualize sexuality and personhood in a variety of ways. Variations in education, race, religion, and region all affect how Americans view sexuality (Klassen et al., 1989; Laumann et al., 1994; Smith, 1994). In the Netherlands class, religion, politics and residence also have significant – but small – effects on attitudes toward sexuality (van Zessen and Sandfort, 1991). Not only are there variations within each country, there are also overlaps between the two. A subsection of the American population has a ‘relational orientation’ towards sexuality which makes them more accepting of sexuality among teenagers as an expression of a loving relationship (Laumann et al., 1994). And among strictly religious people in the Netherlands (whether they be Protestant, Catholic or Islamic) sexual morality may be more similar to the American version I have discussed than to the Dutch one (Brugman et al., 1995; Ravesloot, 1997: 127).

Without denying the variations within each country, and the overlaps between the two, I would like to suggest that the strands of American and Dutch culture highlighted in this article are the dominant ones in each country. I use ‘dominant’ in two senses of the word. First, it refers to the attitudes and practices that are most common. I expect, for instance, that while Americans and the Dutch may differ among themselves in their approach to adolescent sexuality – depending on their class, religion, race and ethnicity, and residence – normalization is the most common approach in the Netherlands whereas dramatization is the most common in the US.¹³ Existing studies confirm that Dutch parents generally do not regard the sexuality of their adolescent children as a problem which they must control (Brinkgreve and van Stolk, 1997: 180–1; Du Bois-Reymond, 1992: 108; Ravesloot, 1997: 159). American adults, by contrast, generally oppose and want to control sex among teenagers (Laumann et al., 1994; Luker, 1996). Some aspects of the analyses I have presented, however, may be more class-specific. For instance, negotiation-based relations between parents and teenagers are more prevalent among Dutch upper middle-class families than among working-class or lower middle-class ones (Du Bois-Reymond, 1992), suggesting that management by negotiation is not the only form of child-rearing among the Dutch.¹⁴

If aspects of my analysis are specific to particular socio-demographic segments of each society, there is nonetheless reason to believe that the two cultures I have highlighted are dominant in a second meaning of the word. Probably because, rather than despite, their prominence among members of the white middle class, the precepts of normalization and dramatization have a disproportionate influence on their respective societies. Certainly, they permeate much of Dutch and American social scientific discourse on adolescent sexuality. They also structure

pregnancy prevention initiatives in the two countries (Rademakers, 1995; Jones et al., 1986). But beyond that, I would argue that the types of individuals and relationships implied by normalization and dramatization have become dominant norms. The idea that 'modern families' are made up of relatively equal members who negotiate with one another, take one another into account and find common agreements is a recurring theme in much of Dutch social scientific and journalistic writing about the family. A vision of the family which prioritizes cooperation, mutual respect and social ties exists in the US but a more individualistic, conflict-based discourse has prevailed (Lakoff, 1996; Varenne, 1977). Likewise, the notions of agreement, negotiation and cooperative individualism structure the way the Dutch organize public schools (Holtrop, 1996), public spaces (Stephenson, 1989) and immigration policies (Soysal, 1994) while a more radically self-reliant and combative image of the individual dominates American political attitudes (Bellah et al., 1985; Lakoff, 1996).

If this argument is correct, this suggests that the US and the Netherlands emerged quite differently from the historical shifts of the past decades. To a certain extent, the emergence of 'management by negotiation' and 'informalization' describe 20th-century developments that have taken place in both Dutch and American society.¹⁵ However, these concepts are much more applicable to the Dutch historical trajectory, and they are less well suited to contemporary American culture.¹⁶ They certainly do not capture the American form of emotional and relational management which I have highlighted. This 'dramatization' of personhood and social relations entails an emphasis on the volatile elements of human nature, their dangers as well as their potential. As such, it justifies the use of violence and power, both as a logical outflow of human nature and as a means to control it. Much more than de Swaan or Wouters predicts, 'dramatization' permits ambition, self-aggrandizement and social difference. It assumes movement and conflict, both within and between people. As a mode of social organization which prioritizes individual drives over social orientation, and which 'punishes' rather than 'disciplines',¹⁷ dramatization presumes and produces less common ground between people than 'management by negotiation' or 'informalization' does. Consequently, the reproduction of the social order is more contingent, less secure.¹⁸

To suggest that 'dramatization' better captures the strand of American culture described in this article than 'informalization' or 'management by negotiation' is not to invalidate these concepts or their theoretical frame. Rather I am arguing that these models need to specify the conditions under which social relations in a society can become managed by self-restraint, mutual consideration, negotiation and consent. A comparative study of cultural and institutional change in the US

and the Netherlands during the 1960s might provide such a specification.¹⁹ This article can only offer a tentative suggestion: I found that one of the conditions for the Dutch parents to believe that they can manage teenage sexuality through mutual consideration and negotiation is the notion that parents and children share enough common ground to reach agreements together. An interplay between cultural concepts and family practices creates this expectation and experience of commonality. Might it be that prior to the changes of the 1960s, a similar interplay between cultural concepts and institutional practices had created the sense of commonality and compatibility among the Dutch necessary to make mutual consideration, flexibility and consent appear viable principles for social order?²⁰

Notes

An earlier version of this article was presented at the First International Conference Beyond Boundaries: Sexuality across Culture, July–August 1997, Amsterdam, and at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, August 1998, San Francisco. I am grateful to Suzanne Kirschner and Justin Suran for their help during the early stages of the project. I want to thank Ann Swidler, Teresa Gowan and Ann Wood for the many ways in which they contributed to the development of this article. I also benefited from comments by Jorge Arditi, Robert Bellah, Christien Brinkgreve, Gil Eyal, Arlie Hochschild, Christopher Jewell, Trudie Knijn, Anna Korteweg, Charles Lindholm, Kristin Luker, Karin Martin, Raka Ray, Ali de Regt, David Riesman, Geert de Vries, Cas Wouters and two anonymous reviewers.

1. When repeated in 1991 the survey group found that the original difference in attitudes between countries had grown (Ester et al., 1993).

2. In the mid-1990s, slightly over half of American and slightly under half of Dutch 17-year-old girls had had sexual intercourse. Yet, 59 percent of American versus 47 percent of Dutch 17-year-old boys had experienced sexual intercourse (Brugman et al., 1995; *Facts in Brief*, 1998).

3. For another perspective see Archer (1985).

4. The ‘equanimity of the welfare state’ refers to the peace of mind people get from the awareness that the state will provide for their basic needs when necessary (van Stolk and Wouters, 1983).

5. This movement is not absolute. Wouters, for instance, argues that contemporary societies vacillate between ‘formalizing’ and ‘informalizing’ processes. However, the latter dominate.

6. While de Swaan and Wouters both argue that the new form of relational management permits more variable outcomes of human behavior, they also assume these varieties conform to the relational model they have outlined.

7. Seven Dutch parents had, in fact, already permitted a teenage child to sleep with a boy- or girlfriend in the home.

8. Laumann et al. (1994) have also argued that these terms do not do justice to differences in sexual attitudes.

9. According to the Dutch sociologist Paul Schnabel, the Dutch never embraced the notion of experimentation with multiple partners (Schnabel, 1990: 24).

10. Among a broad sector of the Dutch population it has become ‘not done’ to express prejudice against homosexuals (van Stolk, 1991). My own data, and that of others, indicate that particularly upper middle-class Dutch parents are relatively accepting of same-sex attractions and relationships (Brinkgreve and van Stolk, 1997: 147). It is interesting to note that those who successfully strove for

the emancipation of homosexuals in the Netherlands during the 1960s spoke of homosexuality in terms of love and the realization of one's nature, rather than in terms of sex, lust or experimentation (van Stolk, 1991).

11. The labor participation of Dutch women (53.4 percent) is quite a bit lower than that of American women (66.7 percent). Moreover, a surprisingly small percentage of Dutch working women have full-time jobs (33 percent) (Praag and Niphuis-Nell, 1997: 48–53).

12. For instance, Ravesloot (1997) concludes that while Dutch parents believe in being open about sexuality with their children, Dutch teenagers do not actually talk very much with their parents about their sexual feelings and experiences.

13. This argument is confirmed by Geert Hofstede's finding (1998) that, on the whole, the Dutch and American populations differ significantly in their attitudes toward sexuality. Extrapolating from a variety of sources, Hofstede argues that Americans are more likely than the Dutch to interpret sex in biological terms, see it as an achievement rather than a relationship and place a taboo on homosexuality. Hofstede attributes these differences to the 'feminine' nature of Dutch culture and the 'masculine' nature of American culture.

14. While management by negotiation may be more common among the upper middle class than among other classes in the Netherlands, the Dutch population as a whole tends to express more egalitarian attitudes regarding child-rearing than does the American population. Americans are almost twice as likely as the Dutch to believe children owe their parents respect and obedience regardless of the parent's behavior (Ester et al., 1993: 111).

15. Wouters provides some evidence that during the early part of the 20th century something akin to informalization took place with regard to the relations between the classes and the sexes in the US (Wouters, 1995a, 1995b).

16. The historian Peter Stearns (1994) has argued also that Wouters's and de Swaan's models do not describe the American case. According to Stearns, the decisive break in American emotional management came prior to the 1960s.

17. I am referring to Foucault's (1977) well-known work on the different modes of power. While Foucault draws attention to a historical change in the nature of power, I use his concepts here to indicate a difference across nations.

18. Recently Wouters has noted many aspects of what I call dramatization in the US, and has provided an interesting argument to account for them. According to Wouters, the relatively open competition and uncertainty of status in the US have led to a lack of faith in internalized forms of self-control, as well as to a fear of conflict: 'America's class system of open competition prevented a further rise in the societal level of mutual trust or mutually expected self restraints, which made Americans more dependent on external constraints' (1998: 296).

19. My dissertation includes such a historical examination.

20. There is reason to believe that this is indeed the case. Wouters (1986) himself alludes to the ideals and practices which prior to the 1960s instituted the notions of harmony and mutual cooperation between the classes and the other social groups in the Netherlands. According to historian James Kennedy (1995), one reason the US and the Netherlands experienced the 1960s very differently was that the former battled an array of social problems and conflicts while the latter was relatively crisis-free.

Bibliography

- Archer, Margaret S. (1985) 'The Myth of Cultural Integration', *British Journal of Sociology* 36(3): 333–53.
- Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton (1985) *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper and Row.

- Biernacki, Richard (1995) *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640–1914*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Brinkgreve, Christien and Bram van Stolk (1997) *Van Huis Uit: Wat Ouders Aan Hun Kinderen Willen Meegeven*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff.
- Brugman, Emily, Hans Goedhart, Ton Vogels and Gertjan van Zessen (1995) *Jeugd en Seks 95: Resultaten van het Nationale Scholierenonderzoek*. Utrecht: SWP.
- Delft, Marjolein van and Evert Ketting (1992) *Anticonceptiegebruik in Nederland: Ontwikkeling en Vooruitzicht*. Houten/Zavenstein: Bohn Stafleu van Loghum.
- Derné, Steve (1994) 'Cultural Conceptions of Human Motivation and their Significance for Culture Theory', pp. 267–87 in Diane Crane (ed.) *The Sociology of Culture: Emerging Theoretical Perspectives*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Dieleman, A.J., F.J. van der Linden and A.P. Perreijn (eds) (1993) *Jeugd in Meervoud: Theorieën, Modellen en Onderzoek van Leefwerelden van Jongeren*. Utrecht: De Tijdstroom.
- Dobbin, Frank (1994) *Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain, and France in the Railway Age*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Du Bois-Reymond, Manuela (1990) 'Huiselijkheid en Onderhandeling', pp. 84–103 in Ger Tillekens (ed.) *Nuchterheid en Nozems: De Opkomst van de Jeugdcultuur in de Jaren Vijftig*. Muiderberg: Dick Continho.
- Du Bois-Reymond, M. (1992) *Jongeren op Weg naar Volwassenheid*. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff.
- Elias, Norbert (1994) *The Civilizing Process*, trans. Edmund Jephcott. Oxford: Blackwell. Orig. 1939.
- Ester, Peter, Loek Halman and Ruud de Moor (eds) (1993) *The Individualizing Society: Value Change in Europe and North America*. Tilburg: Tilburg University Press.
- Facts in Brief: Teenage Sexual and Reproductive Behavior* (1998) New York: Alan Guttmacher Institute.
- Foucault, Michel (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, Michel (1978) *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973a) 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', pp. 3–30 in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973b) 'Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali', pp. 360–411 in *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Griswold, Wendy (1987) 'The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies', *American Journal of Sociology* 92(5): 1077–117.
- Halman, Lodewijk C.J.M. (1991) *Waarden in de Westerse Wereld: Een Internationale Exploratie van de Waarden in de Westerse Samenleving*. Tilburg: Tilburg University Press.
- Hart, J. de (1992) 'Jongenswereld – Meisjeswereld? Jongeren over de Relatie met Hun Ouders en Leeftijdgenoten', *Comenius* 48: 430–49.
- Hofstede, Geert (1998) *Masculinity and Femininity: The Taboo Dimension of National Cultures*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Holtrop, Aukje (1996) 'Een Basisschool onder de Loep: Een Amerikaan in een Amsterdamse Klas', *Vrij Nederland*, 1 June: 25.
- Jones, Elise F. et al. (1986) *Teenage Pregnancy in Industrialized Countries. A Study Sponsored by the Alan Guttmacher Institute*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Kennedy, James C. (1995) *Nieuw Babylon in Aanbouw: Nederland in de Jaren Zestig*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Ketting, Evert (1990) 'De Seksuele Revolutie van Jongeren', pp. 69–84 in G. Hekma, B. van Stolk, B. van Heerikhuizen and B. Kruitthof (eds) *Het verlies van de Onschuld: Seksualiteit in Nederland*. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff.
- Klassen, Albert D., Colin J. Williams and Eugene E. Levitt (1989) *Sex and Morality in the U.S. Middletown, CT*: Wesleyan University Press.

- Kooy, G.A. (1978) *Seksualiteit, Hhuwelijk en Gezin in Nederland: Ontwikkelingen en Vooruitzichten*. Deventer: Van Loghum Slaterus.
- Lakoff, George (1996) *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know that Liberals Don't*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamont, Michèle (1992) *Money, Morals and Manners: The Culture of the French and American Upper-Middle Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Laumann, Edward O., John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael and Stuart Michaels (1994) *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practice in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- LeVine, Robert A. (1984) 'Properties of Culture: An Ethnographic View', pp. 67–87 in Richard A. Shweder and Robert A. LeVine (eds) *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Luker, Kristin (1996) *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Martin, Karin A. (1996) *Puberty, Sexuality, and the Self: Girls and Boys at Adolescence*. New York: Routledge.
- Praag, C.S. van and M. Niphuis-Nell (eds) (1997) *Het Gezinsrapport: Een Verkennde Studie naar het Gezin in een Veranderende Samenleving*. Rijswijk: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.
- Rademakers, Jany (1995) 'Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy: Model Programs and Evaluations', *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 24(3): 358–60.
- Rademakers, Jany (1997) 'Adolescent Sexual Development: A Cross-Cultural Perspective', paper presented at first international conference Beyond Boundaries: Sexuality Across Culture, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
- Rademakers, Jany and Janita Ravesloot (1993) 'Jongeren en Seksualiteit', pp. 260–78 in A.J. Dieleman et al. (eds) *Jeugd in Meervoud: Theorieën, Modellen en Onderzoek van Leefwerelden van Jongeren*. Utrecht: De Tijdstroom.
- Ravesloot, Janita (1997) *Seksualiteit in de Jeugdfase Vroeger en Nu: Ouders en Jongeren aan het Woord*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- Rispens, J., J.M.A. Hermanns and W.H.J. Meeus (eds) (1996) *Opvoeden in Nederland*. Assen: Van Gorcum.
- Schnabel, Paul (1990) 'Het Verlies van de Seksuele Onschuld', pp. 11–50 in Gert Hekma, B. van Stolk, B. van Heerikhuizen and B. Kruithof (eds) *Het Verlies van de Onschuld: Seksualiteit in Nederland*. Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smith, Tom W. (1994) 'Attitudes Toward Sexual Permissiveness: Trends, Correlates, and Behavioral Connections', pp. 63–97 in Alice S. Rossi (ed.) *Sexuality Across the Life Course*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Soysal, Yasemin N. (1994) *Limits of Citizenship: Migrants and Postnational Membership in Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stearns, Peter N. (1994) *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth-Century Emotional Style*. New York: New York University Press.
- Stephenson, Peter H. (1989) 'Going to McDonald's in Leiden: Reflections on the Concept of Self and Society in the Netherlands', *Ethos* 17(2): 226–47.
- Stolk, Bram van (1991) 'De Kracht van de Moraal: De Doorbraak in het Emancipatieproces van Nederlandse Homoseksuelen', *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* 18(1): 3–33.
- Stolk, Bram van and Cas Wouters (1983) *Vrouwen in Tweestrijd: Tussen Thuis en Tehuis*. Deventer: Van Loghum Slaterus.
- Swaan, Abram de (1981) 'The Politics of Agoraphobia: On Changes in Emotional and Relational Management', *Theory and Society* 10: 359–85.
- Swidler, Ann (1986) 'Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies', *American Sociological Review* 51: 273–86.

- Tobin, Joseph Jay, David Y.H. Wu and Dana H. Davidson (1989) *Preschool in Three Cultures: Japan, China, and the United States*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Varenne, Hervé (1977) *Americans Together: Structured Diversity in a Midwestern Town*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Vogels, Ton and Ron van der Vliet (eds) (1990) *Jeuɡd en Seks: Gedrag en Gezondheidsrisico's bij Scholieren*. Den Haag: SDU Uitgeverij.
- Waal, Mieke de (1989) *Meisjes: Een Wereld Apart*. Meppel/Amsterdam: Boom.
- Weeks, Jeffrey (1985) *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meaning, Myths and Modern Sexualities*. London: Routledge.
- Wouters, Cas (1986) 'Formalization and Informalization: Changing Tension Balances in Civilizing Processes', *Theory, Culture & Society* 3(2): 1–18.
- Wouters, Cas (1992) 'On Status Competition and Emotion Management: The Study of Emotions as a New Field', *Theory, Culture & Society* 9: 229–52.
- Wouters, Cas (1995a) 'Etiquette Books and Emotion Management in the Twentieth Century, Part One: The Integration of Social Classes', *Journal of Social History* 29(1): 107–24.
- Wouters, Cas (1995b) 'Etiquette Books and Emotion Management in the Twentieth Century, Part Two: The Integration of the Sexes', *Journal of Social History* 29(2): 325–39.
- Wouters, Cas (1998) 'Etiquette Books and Emotion Management in the Twentieth Century: American Habitus in International Comparison', pp. 283–304 in Peter N. Stearns and Jan Lewis (eds) *An Emotional History of the United States*. New York: New York University Press.
- Zessen, Gertjan van and Theo Sandfort (eds) (1991) *Seksualiteit in Nederland: Seksueel Gedrag, Risico en Preventie van Aids*. Amsterdam/Lisse: Swets & Zeitlinger.

Amy Schalet is a PhD candidate in sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. Her dissertation further develops the research and arguments presented in this article. She has also studied and written on conceptions of the welfare state in the United States and the Netherlands.