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NOT UNDER MY ROOF

Parents, Teens, and the Culture of Sex

This is an excerpt from *Not Under My Roof:*
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Chapter 1

Raging Hormones, Regulated Love

Karel Doorman, a soft-spoken civil servant in the Netherlands, keeps tabs on his teenage children's computer use and their jobs to make sure neither are interfering with school performance or family time. But Karel would not object if his daughter Heidi were to have a sexual relationship: "No," he explains. "She is sixteen, almost seventeen. I think she knows very well what matters, what can happen. If she is ready, I would let her be ready." If Heidi were to come home and say, "Dad, this is him," he says, "well, I hope I like him." Karel would also let Heidi spend the night with a steady boyfriend in her room, provided he did not show up "out of the blue." But Karel thinks that he would first "come by the house and that I will hear about him and that she'll talk about him and . . . that it really is a gradual thing." That said, Karel suspects his daughter might prefer a partner of her own sex. Karel would accept her orientation he says, though he grants, "the period of adjustment might take a little longer."

Karel's approach stands in sharp contrast to that of his fellow parent, Rhonda Fursman, a northern California homemaker and former social worker. Rhonda tells her teenage son and daughter that premarital sex "at this point is really dumb." It is on the list with shoplifting, she explains, "sort of like the Ten Commandments: don't do any of those because if you do, you know, you're going to be in a world of hurt." It comes as no surprise therefore that Ronda responds viscerally when asked whether she would let her fifteen-year-old son spend the night with a girlfriend. "No way, José!" She elaborates: "That kind of recreation . . . is just not something I would feel comfortable with him doing here." She ponders her reaction: "I tried to be very open and modern . . . but I am like, no, I'm not comfortable. I don't think I want to encourage that." She has a hard time imagining changing her position on permitting the sleepover, although maybe "if they are engaged or about to be married . . ."

Karel and Rhonda illustrate a puzzle: both white, middle class, and secular or moderately Christian, they belong to the one-hundred-thirty Dutch and American parents and teenagers, mostly tenth-graders, whom I interviewed between the early 1990s and 2000. Despite the fact that both groups of parents are similar in education, religion, class, and race—features that often influence attitudes toward sexuality and childrearing—the vast majority of American parents oppose a sleepover for high-school-aged teenagers, while most Dutch parents permit it or consider doing so under the right circumstances. This book seeks to solve the puzzle of this striking difference, which is all the more surprising given the liberalization in sexual attitudes and practices that took place throughout Europe and the United States since the 1960s. Given similar trends, why do the Dutch and American parents respond so differently? How do the parental approaches affect teenagers' experiences of sexuality and self? To answer these questions, we must look beyond sexuality at the different cultures of individualism that emerged in American and Dutch societies after the sexual revolution.

Not Under My Roof will take us beyond our usual perspectives on adolescent sexuality. Medical and public health literatures conceptualize adolescent sexuality primarily in terms of individual risk-taking and the factors that augment or lessen such risks. American develop-

mental psychologists tend to view adolescent sexuality as part of adolescents' separation from their parents and as an aspect of development that is especially perilous given the disjuncture between teenagers' physical and cognitive development. American sociologists have generally bypassed the parent–teenager nexus to focus on relationships and networks among teenagers—in romance and peer groups. They have examined how peer cultures and networks and the status hierarchies within them impact adolescent sexuality. Finally, gender scholars have examined how teenage girls' and boys' experiences of sexuality are profoundly shaped by gender inequalities—including the sexual double standard.

This book takes a different approach. It focuses on the negotiation of adolescent rights and responsibilities within the parent–teenager relationship as a particularly fruitful, and often overlooked, site for illuminating how youth come to relate to sexuality, themselves, and others. This cross-national comparison shows how much of what we take for granted about teenage sexuality—in American folk, professional, and academic wisdom—is the product of our cultural constructs and institutions. Indeed, the apparently trivial puzzle Karel Doorman and Rhonda Fursman introduce is not just a puzzle but a window onto two different ways of understanding and shaping individuals and social relationships in middle-class families and in the societies at large, which constitute nothing less than two distinct cultures of individualism. Each culture of individualism comes with freedoms and sacrifices: the Dutch cultural templates provide teenagers with more support and subject them to deeper control, while the American cultural templates make the experience of adolescent sexuality particularly conflict-ridden.

Adolescent Sexuality in America after the Sexual Revolution

Today most adolescents in the United States, like their peers across the industrial world, initiate sexual contact—broadly defined—before leaving their teens, typically around age seventeen. Initiating sex and exploring romantic relationships, often with several successive partners before settling into long-term cohabitation or marriage, are normative parts of adolescence and young adulthood across the developed world...

Adolescent Sexuality in Dutch Society after the Sexual Revolution

In a late 1980s qualitative study with one-hundred-twenty parents and older teenagers, Dutch sociologist Janita Ravesloot found that in most families the parents accepted that sexuality "from the first kiss to the first coitus" was part of the youth phase...

Investigating the Puzzle

The previous sections show how across an array of social institutions, adolescent sexuality has been viewed as a problem to be prevented in the United States, while in the Netherlands it has been accepted as part of teenage maturation to be guided by new moral rules. Why do adults in the two countries have such different approaches?...

Medical, Social Science, and Historical Perspectives

In the United States, the prevailing perspective in the field of public policy and health has been that teenage sexual intercourse is a health risk—a potential sickness, which is to be ideally prevented altogether. The primary focus of research in this field is on the various factors that increase and decrease the risks of adolescent sexuality—defined narrowly as acts of intercourse...

Defining and Identifying Culture

To solve the puzzle left unaccounted for by existing literatures, we must turn to culture. But as the British sociologist Raymond Williams famously noted, culture is one of the most complex words in the English language...

Dramatization and Normalization

The first step to solve the puzzle of the sleepover is to see that Dutch and American parents engage in different cultural processes as they interpret and manage teenage sexuality...

Adversarial and Interdependent Individualism

The second step in solving the puzzle is to see that the normalization and dramatization of adolescent sexuality are embedded within different cultures of individualism and control that have come to prevail in Dutch and American societies...

Connection through Control and Control through Connection

…In both countries, adolescent experimentation with sexuality and alcohol are sources of potential parent-adolescent conflict. However, the methods by which parents establish control and connection shape how those conflicts are experienced...

Individualism and Gender

…The different cultural templates for individualism and control also shape interpretations and experiences of gender. The American parents often mention differences and conflicts of interest between girls and boys. In fact, in some, though certainly not most, families, the American boys report receiving implicit or explicit encouragement from fathers to pursue sexual interests...

Coming Full Circle

Having set out to solve a puzzle, in the end *Not Under My Roof* reveals a comprehensive picture of coexisting processes occurring at the intrapsychic, interpersonal, familial, and societal levels. For, as we will see, there are striking parallels between policies governing the household and the polity itself...

Culture's Costs

…Teenagers do better emotionally when they can remain connected to their parents during adolescence. But with sexuality culturally coded as a symbol of, and a means to attaining, separation between parents and children, an important developmental experience becomes cause for disconnection in the parent-teenager relationship...

The Book's Organization

Chapters 2 and 3 illuminate normalization and dramatization as cultural processes, respectively. Analyzing the interviews with the Dutch and American parents, they highlight the cultural frames on which parents draw to interpret adolescent sexuality and make sense out of their decision to permit or to not even consider a sleepover. The chapters show, moreover, how normalization and dramatization each operate as active cultural processes through which parents constitute themselves as well as their children as distinct types of individuals. At the same time, the two chapters illuminate the "holes in the webs": the silences in the cultural languages that parents use, the ways in which they negotiate differences between themselves and their children, and between cultural expectations and lived experience. Finally, the chapters show how the interpretation and management of adolescent sexuality are grounded in experiences of history.

Chapter 4, "Adversarial and Interdependent Individualism," delves into the dilemmas faced by parents and public authorities in the post-1960s and 1970s era, namely, how to make space for the autonomy of subordinates while inculcating restraint and maintaining social order. With the fixed hierarchies and social roles that had previously structured family life and other social institutions challenged if not entirely eradicated, middle-class parents in the two countries use the cultural tools available to them to handle gray areas of the adolescent parenting project—the inculcation of self-restraint, the exercise of legitimate authority, and the fostering of autonomy. How parents in the two countries interpret and handle the three dilemmas differently illuminates the two different models of individualism on which they are drawing. These different models—of adversarial and interdependent individualism—create the cultural logics that give the normalization and dramatization of adolescent sexuality their common sense.

Chapters 5 and 6, "Connection through Control" and "Control through Connection," show how the American and Dutch teenagers, respectively, view and experience the negotiation of sexuality, alcohol, and other potentially contentious issues within the parent-teenager nexus. In Chapter 5, we see that despite sometimes radically different parental responses to their sexuality, American girls and boys engage in a psychology of separation from home. Encouraged to make their adolescent experimentation furtive, when they do, teenagers often lose partial or complete connection with their parents, despite an earlier closeness in the relationship, making it necessary for their parents to exercise overt control to reestablish that connection. In Chapter 6, we see that Dutch girls and boys receive more similar treatment, and that the parental strat-

egy of exercising control through maintaining connection induces a psychology of integration. Nevertheless, we see evidence of tension, especially among girls, some of whom say they want to keep their sexuality and the parental home at arm's length.

Just as chapter 4 compares parents in the two countries with regard to their shared dilemmas of autonomy and authority, chapter 7, "Romantic Rebels, Regular Lovers," compares teenagers in the two countries with regard to their shared dilemmas of gender. This chapter shows that in the United States, the construction of sex as risky, promulgated in the home and school, makes sex appear by definition dangerous to boys and not just to girls, as folk wisdom and gender theorists assume. In the Netherlands, by contrast, girls and boys assume that the risks of sex can and should be controlled. However, in practice, it is teenage girls on whom much of the work of prevention falls. The bulk of the chapter focuses on the teenagers' negotiation of sex, gender, and relationships in relation to peer and popular culture. It shows how in both countries girls and boys encounter the double standard, but that the meaning and experience of this gender construct are mediated by culture-specific conceptions of love and lust.

Chapter 8, "Sexuality, Self-Formation, and the State," demonstrates the parallels between the conception, control, and constitution of individuals in family and in the polity. It shows how the interpretation and management of adolescent sexuality express core cultural ideals and contradictions about individual and collective well-being. It also shows how economic and political institutions in the two countries support and constrain parents in their childrearing choices. We see how concerns about sexuality are vehicles through which parents and teenagers engage in processes of self-formation—processes through which they develop capacities that serve their participation in society at large. In the book's concluding chapter, I address the problem of culture's costs and the potential for cultural creativity. With sexuality a symbol of, a means for, and a potential threat to attaining autonomy, teenagers in the United States do not receive the support they need to navigate sexual and emotional maturation. To change this situation, we must engage in processes of cultural and institutional innovation.