

Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto

Amy T. Schalet, "Not Under My Roof. Parents, Teens and the Culture of Sex". Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011, 312 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/72715)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2012

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

L'articolo è messo a disposizione dell'utente in licenza per uso esclusivamente privato e personale, senza scopo di lucro e senza fini direttamente o indirettamente commerciali. Salvo quanto espressamente previsto dalla licenza d'uso Rivisteweb, è fatto divieto di riprodurre, trasmettere, distribuire o altrimenti utilizzare l'articolo, per qualsiasi scopo o fine. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Book reviews

Amy T. Schalet, *Not Under My Roof. Parents, Teens and the Culture of Sex*. Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011, 312 pp.

10.2383/72715

Adolescent sexuality is a traditional social policy issue, intertwined with many crucial social processes: e.g. the socialization of the new generations, the transition to adulthood, the social control of demographic trends. Therefore the younger generation's sexual attitudes and behaviour have become the object of both anatomo-politics of the body, by which individuals manage – and make sense of – their sexuality, and bio-politics of the population, entailing the social planning of reproductive behaviour [Foucault 1976].

In Western countries, the typical sexual “coming of age” among adolescents born after the '60s is having sex at about 17, more and more (also among boys) within a romantic relationship. Notwithstanding this common general trend, the way adolescents experience sex, and the way their parents deal with this topic, show a plurality of national specificities.

The author addresses the topic by comparing two emblematic cases: Karel, a soft-spoken civil servant in the Netherlands, not only would not object if his daughter were to have a sexual relationship, but he would also let her spend the night with a steady boyfriend in her room; Rhonda, a northern California homemaker and former social worker, considers the possibility that her teenage son and daughter have premarital sex as a taboo subject and refuses viscerally to accept their spending a night with their partners under the family roof.

The question which arises is why, given the general trends of liberalization in sexual attitudes and practices throughout Europe and the Usa, do we find evidence of such a striking contrast between Dutch and American parents' positions on teenagers' sleeping over.

Two factors are influential: first, Americans are more religiously conservative than their Dutch counterparts; secondly, the Netherlands provide parents with a higher level of economic security (what are called “social rights”), supporting the younger generation's autonomy and coming of age. However, in the author's opinion, there is more to the story: even when both parents share the same economic level and religious involvement, their position on the question of sleepovers remains different.

The comparison between a specific population segment in two national contexts, therefore, “cannot illuminate important cultural differences within either nation – between classes, races, regions, ethnicities, and religions. But the comparison does illuminate differences between the two countries in the family cultures of two particularly influential groups – differences that are not accounted for by our prevailing theoretical perspectives on adolescent sexuality” [p. 11].

The book aims at going beyond the usual perspectives on adolescent sexuality, dealing with individual risk-taking and the factors which increase or lessen such risks (medical and public health literature); adolescent sexuality as part of a process of separ-

ation from parents which can endanger teenagers' physical and cognitive development (classical developmental psychology); peer relationships and networks impacting on adolescent sexuality (sociology of sexuality); gender inequalities shaping adolescent sexual experience (gender studies).

The author claims that "to solve the puzzle left unaccounted for by the existing literature, we must turn to culture" [p. 13], that is, how people perceive themselves, each other and the world (conceptualizing); how cultural tools prescribe individual behaviour and relationships (controlling); how culture shapes the individual sense of oneself (constitutive). Individuals live through shared structures of meaning, drawing on multiple cultural repertoires and struggling to apply them to make sense of their practices.

On the basis of 130 in-depth interviews (58 individual parents or couples, 32 boys, 40 girls, most of the children being in the 10th grade) with members of the North-American and Dutch "moderate middle classes," that is white, secular or moderately Christian, and living in medium-sized cities in more cosmopolitan areas, and less cosmopolitan areas, the research shows a core difference in what the writer names as the "cultures of individualism": to illustrate this thesis, parenting styles and cultural scenarios in the USA and in the Netherlands are analyzed by focussing on some dimensions of comparison.

A first dimension is represented by the main features depicting the different cultural scenarios shaping sexuality in the two countries.

Surveys on US sexual attitudes and behaviour [Laumann *et al.* 1994; Smith 1994; Petersen and Donnerwerth 1997; Finer 2007] has shown that age at the first sexual intercourse has not dropped so steeply (even among those who came of age in the '50s and '60s a large proportion had experienced sex by the age of 20). What has dramatically changed is attitudes towards premarital sex, from condemnation to acceptance, with the exception of sex among adolescents, which is still largely disapproved of, due to its potential unintended consequences. As a matter of fact, in 2007 the US birth rate among 15–19 year-olds was 8 times as high as in the Netherlands, because the pill is used less and pregnancies tend to be carried to term. Qualitative research has underlined other critical aspects, pointing to the permanence of a strong gendered sexual double standard: few girls report their first sexual experience as pleasurable [Thomson 1990; Thomson 1995]; sex at puberty lowers girls' self-esteem [Martin 1996]; most girls struggle to fully own their sexual desires [Tolman 2002]; boys experience their virginity as a stigma to be cast off as soon as possible [Carpenter 2005] and are encouraged to treat girls as sexual objects [Pascoe 2007].

Shifting attention to the Netherlands, a national survey [Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2003] shows that two out of three Dutch teenagers said their parents would allow them a sleepover with their steady partner. A qualitative study [Ravesloot 1997] supports this view, showing that most Dutch parents accept adolescent sexual experiences as part of youth development, with some social class differences: whereas middle class families are more likely to acknowledge their children's sexual autonomy, working class families tend to impose sexual norms (e.g. sex only within a steady relationship), and strongly religious families oppose sex before/outside marriage (no overnights with steady partners at home). Moreover, large-scale surveys outline, on the one hand, the maintenance of a sexual double standard expecting boys to be more sexually active and

girls to be more passive or defensive [Vanwesenbeeck *et al.* 1998]; and, on the other, a tendency, shared equally by boys and girls, to combine love and lust and to let the partner know what one feels as desirable and pleasurable [Brugman *et al.* 1995].

The two national case-studies contrast in the way adolescent sexuality is defined and managed. In the USA, in the field of public policy and health, teenage sexual intercourse is interpreted as a health risk factor, ideally to be prevented altogether. This view is supported by classical developmental psychology which sees adolescents as inherently risk-prone and subject to impulses that they are not able to handle. Within this perspective, sexuality is part of the young people's separation process from their parents, so it produces tensions between adolescents' sexual feelings and cognitive and emotional skills, and among teenagers and their parents whose role is to communicate their values and to limit their children's sexual risks. American parents use dramatization: "Highlighting difficulties and conflicts, they describe adolescent sexuality, first, as 'raging hormones,' individual, potentially overpowering forces that are difficult for teenagers to control, and second, as antagonistic heterosexual relationships in which girls and boys pursue love and sex respectively. Finally, parents see it as their obligation to encourage adolescents to establish autonomy – and gain the potential for financial self-sufficiency or marriage – before accepting their sexual activity as legitimate" [p.17]. Therefore, their position on the question of sleepovers is "not under my roof."

On the contrary, Dutch parents "engage in a cultural process of normalization. There is a conception of 'regulated love': that is, Dutch parents speak of sexual readiness (...), a process of becoming physically and emotionally ready that they believe young people can self-regulate, provided that they have been encouraged to pace themselves and prepare adequately by using the available means of contraception." [p. 17]. This sexual readiness is linked to relationships, as they acknowledge their children's capacities (boys and girls equally) to get emotionally involved and they feel obliged to give shelter (the sleepover) to this part of their children's life.

Dramatization and normalization of adolescent sexuality are both a form of social control and disciplining bodies; the former entailing overt external social control, the latter mutual social control and self-restraint. Indeed, "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" [p. 3]. Normalization of adolescents' sexuality in the Dutch families' approach suggests an alternative model of adolescent development, in which parents and children remain more closely connected in managing the potentially disruptive elements of adolescent coming of age.

One of the theses of the book is that "parents, policymakers, and intellectuals in the two countries have mobilized different cultural templates to come to terms with the challenges to the sexual, gender, and authority relations that existed before the 1960s" [p. 15]. The two cultural strategies of dramatization and normalization are embedded in different cultures of individualism and control, based on longstanding traditions within each country.

In the USA an "adversarial individualism" [p. 18] has prevailed, "according to which the individual and society stand opposed to each other" [p. 18]; meanwhile in the Netherlands an "interdependent individualism" [p. 18] has prevailed, "in which the

individual and society are conceptualized as mutually constitutive” [p. 18]. The second type of individualism acknowledges social bonds and mutual accommodation as a matter of course.

Each form of individualism is related to a form of social control: “Adversarial individualism permits, encourages even, individuals to attain autonomy by breaking away from social ties and dependencies, and only after that break to form intimate relationships” [p. 18]. This paradoxically requires overt external social control. “Interdependent individualism, by contrast, encourages individuals to develop their autonomy in concert with ongoing relationships of interdependence” [p. 18], making external control less necessary.

The author adopts both a microsociological and a macrosociological analytical perspective. On the one hand, she 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” [pp. 2-3]. Therefore, she qualitatively investigates how teenagers’ parents conceive and face their adolescent children’s sexuality, offering interesting access to intimate life and to its management under the family roof. On the other hand, she contextualizes parenting styles within specific cultural scenarios, identifying two “cultures of individualism” linked to different political cultures, the American “winner-take-all” versus the Dutch “politics of accommodation and consensus-seeking.” In so doing, the book reconstructs different levels of sexual scripts [Gagnon and Simon 1973], providing “a comprehensive picture of coexisting processes occurring at the intrapsychic, interpersonal, familial and societal level” [p. 22].

Two interesting findings are worth pointing out for further discussion on two core dimensions: gender and social class.

First, the book illustrates how, within different cultural scenarios and cultures of individualism, gender inequalities shape adolescent sexual experience. American parents remain strictly linked to a gendered sexual double standard: therefore the actual object of dramatization seems to be the management of girls’ sexuality, implicitly referring to a naturalized notion of boys’ sexuality as being out of control and thereby requiring both parents’ control and girls’ gatekeeping. On the contrary, Dutch parents normalize their adolescent children’s sexual readiness by equally acknowledging boys and girls’ capacities to get emotionally involved. Interdependent individualism, compared to adversarial individualism, appears to support a more gender-balanced notion of adolescent sexuality.

Secondly, the author acknowledges that, by focussing only on the middle classes, other social class distinctions become blurred. However, the book provides a more nuanced picture of middle class’ notions of sexuality, centered upon the value of respectability [Skeggs 1997]. Both dramatization and normalization deal with an idealized respectable sexual subject, the former as a “risky business” to be managed through overt external social control of adolescents’ sexual behaviour, the latter as an attainable aim to be promoted by sustaining adolescents’ sexual experimentation.

Raffaella Ferrero Camoletto
University of Turin

References

- Brugman, M.G.A.
2007 *Emerging Adolescent Sexuality: A Comparison of American and Dutch Women's Experiences*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Maine.
- Carpenter, L.
2005 *Virginity Lost. An Intimate Portrait of First Sexual Experiences*. New York: New York University Press.
- Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek
2003 *Jeugd 2003: Cijfers en Fieten*. Voorburg/Heerlen: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek.
- Finer, L.B.
2007 "Trends in Premarital Sex in the United States, 1954-2003." *Public Health Reports*, 122: 73-78.
- Foucault, M.
1976 *La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Laumann, E.O., Gagnon, J.H., Michael, R.T., and Michaels, S.
1994 *The Social Organization of Sexuality. Sexual Practices in the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Martin, K.A.
1996 *Puberty, Sexuality and the Self: Girls and Boys in Adolescence*. New York: Routledge.
- Pascoe, C.
2007 *Dude, You're a Fag. Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, Berkeley-Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Petersen, L.R., and Donnerwerth, G.V.
1997 "Secularization and the Influence of Religion on Beliefs about Premarital Sex." *Social Forces*, 75: 1071-88.
- Ravesloot, J.
1997 *Seksualiteit in de Jeugdfase Vroeger en Nu: Ouders en Jongeren aan het Woord*, Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.
- Gagnon, J.H., and Simon, W.
1973 *Sexual Conduct: The Social Sources of Human Sexuality*, Chicago: Aldine.
- Skeggs, B.
1997 *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable*, London: Sage.
- Smith, T.W.
1994 "Attitudes towards Sexual Permissiveness: Trends, Correlates and Behavioural Connections." In *Sexuality Across the Life Course* edited by A. Rossi. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thomson, S.
1990 "Putting a Big Thing into a Little Hole: Teenage Girls' Accounts of Sexual Initiation." *The Journal of Sex Research*, 27: 341-61.
1995 *Going All the Way. Teenage Girls' Tales of Sex, Romance and Pregnancy*. New York: Hill and Wang.

Tolman D.

2002 *Dilemmas of Desire. Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Vanwesenbeeck I., Bekker M., and van Lennep A.

1998 "Gender Attitudes, Sexual Meanings, and Interactional Patterns in Heterosexual Encounters among College Students in the Netherlands." *Journal of Sex Research*, 35: 317-27.