

The Perceptions and Practices of Dutch and English Fathers in Educating their Children about Physical Maturation, Reproduction and Relationships.

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The Research Question

‘What are the perceptions and practices of Dutch and English parents in educating their children about physical maturation, reproduction and relationships?’



Aims:

- To develop a critical understanding of the practices of parents in the respective countries in engaging in sexuality communication with their children.
- To surface the parents' perceptions concerning their role in engaging in sexuality education with their children.
- To explore the parents' attitudes towards children's sexuality education.

Fathers as sexuality educators: aspirations and realities. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Men can play a significant role in teaching their sexuality but fathers' practices and perceptions remain under explored. This study presents an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of eight fathers' perceptions in educating their ten-year-old children about physical reproduction and relationships. A Foucauldian analysis of governmentality and biopower revealed tensions and contradictions between the fathers' aspirations and their realities, to be underpinned by the dynamic, contradictory nature of fatherhood identities. Whilst fathers wished to be a cultural imperative for father-child emotional closeness between their ambitions and their conduct emerged to be a deeply gendered concept for the fathers as aspirants for an intimate relationship with their children, norms for motherhood and fatherhood prevailed in their role as sexuality educators. The study concludes that challenges to structures and subcultural contexts deter fathers from fully engaging with their sons and that aspects of communication are required.

Introduction

Internationally, young people are a key vulnerable group (STIs) and are more likely than any other age group (ECDC 2015). For the individual, the psychological impact can be significant and for governments STIs incur high costs (Lucas 2013). Early sexual debut is also associated with a frequently associated with significant social, psychological and physical burdens both for young people themselves and their families. Globally, considerable investment has been made in sex education but systematic reviews suggest that traditional approaches have limited impact (Lazarus et al. 2010; Shepherd et al. 2011).

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The silencing effects of the childhood innocence ideal: the perceptions and practices of fathers in educating their children about sexuality

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Abstract This study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore eight fathers' perceptions and practices in talking to their ten year old children about puberty, relationships and reproduction. The fathers participated in face to face interviews which were analysed idiographically initially, followed by analysis at the group level. Interpretations were then developed through critical application of a Foucauldian lens of governmentality and biopower. The results revealed a tension between the fathers' cognitions, accounts and behaviours. Their practices were largely characterised by silence yet they reported positive attitudes towards children's sexuality education and perceived themselves as equipped and willing to take on the role of sexuality educator. They also reported enjoying open relationships with their children. Interpretations centred on contradictions and conflict between the majority of the fathers' aspirations and the compelling nature of the childhood innocence discourse as a technology of governmentality. Whilst all of the fathers felt that it was in their children's interests to learn about sexuality, all but one adhered to hegemonic protective discourses and unquestioningly integrated their normalising effects into their fathering practices which, it is argued, may paradoxically render their children more vulnerable both now and in the future.

Keywords: parenting/parents, sexual health, Foucault

Introduction

Throughout the last decade, a growing body of literature has suggested that parent-adolescent communication about sexuality can be a protective determinant of sexual risk-taking behaviour during adolescence (Cannero et al. 2011; Huebner & Howell 2003; Lehr et al. 2000; Miller

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Parental approaches to teaching children about puberty, relationships and reproduction in the Netherlands.



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Why Fathers?

- Protective relationship between open parent-child sexuality communication and young people's sexual decision making (Flores and Barroso 2017; Widman et al. 2006, 2016).
- Systematic review (Widman et al 2016) suggests that there are gender differences in this relationship - impact appears more significant in mother-child communication than father-child communication.
- Few studies specifically explore father's role, making this relationship difficult to understand (Dilorio, Pluhar, and Belcher 2003; Hutchinson and Cederbaum 2011; Rahman and Jackson 2010; Wilson, Dalberth and, Koo 2010; Wyckoff et al. 2008).

Why The Netherlands?



Age at sexual debut

Britain:

Median age at first heterosexual intercourse 16 years with 31% of men and 29% of women having had intercourse before the age of 16 (Mercer et al. 2013).

Netherlands:

By 18.6 years, only half of young people have had sexual intercourse (Rutgers and Soa Aids 2017).

Health Promoting Behaviours

Britain:

A YouGov (2017) survey of 2,007 16 to 24 year olds in Britain identified that 47% of sexually active young people reported having had sex with someone new for the first time without using a condom and 1 in 10 sexually active young people reported that they had never used a condom.

Netherlands:

A joint study of Rutgers and STI Netherlands (2017) found that over 7 out of 10 Dutch adolescents used a condom the first time they had sexual intercourse and World Health Organization (2012) data demonstrates that Dutch teens are among the greatest users of the birth control pill.

Why The Netherlands?

Pregnancies amongst 15 to 19 year olds

England and Wales:

19th out of 21 countries with complete data, with 47 per 1000 per annum.

Netherlands:

Ranked second lowest, at 14 per 1000 per annum.

Births

England and Wales:

Among the highest European rates at 21 births per 1000 15 to 19 year olds.

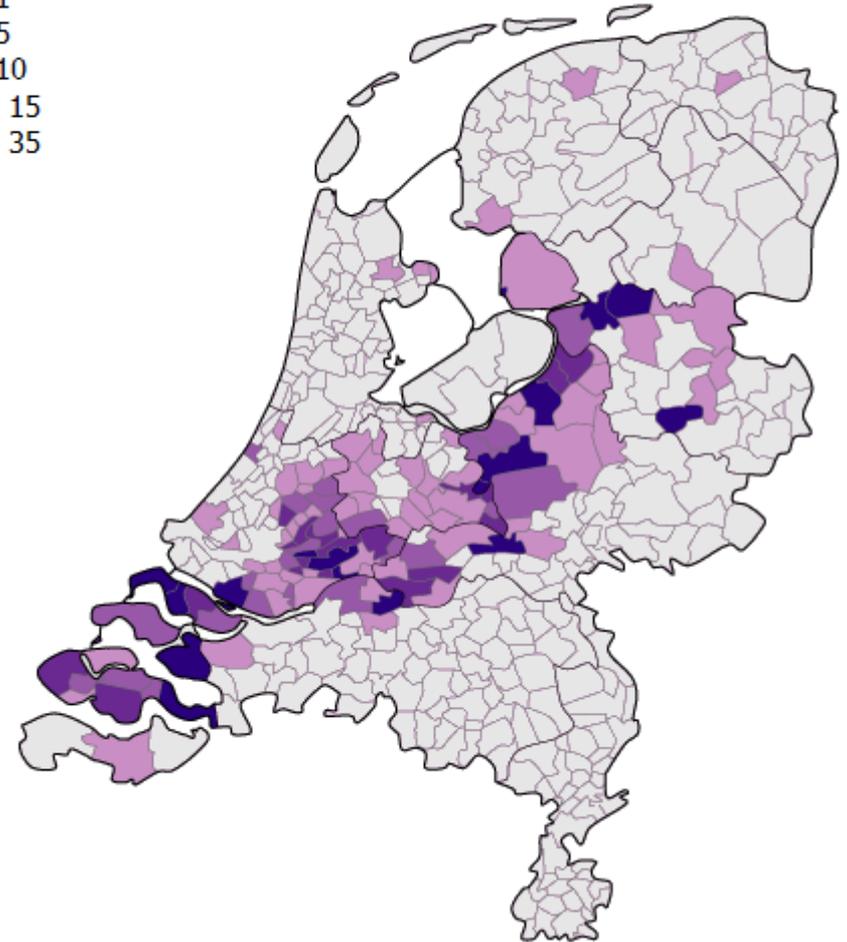
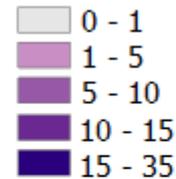
Netherlands:

The second equal lowest at 5 per 1000 (Sedgh et al. 2015).

Interviews with:

- 8 mothers and 8 fathers of children aged 10 years in England
- 9 fathers and 13 mothers of children aged 10 years and under in the Netherlands

Percentage van het aantal kiesgerechtigden



Fathers' Results: England



**A tension between
the fathers'
cognitions,
accounts and
behaviours.**

- Age 43, professional, educated to Masters' level. Lived full-time with wife and son, Henry, age 10.
- Felt he had a close relationship with his son: ... *it's a bit of a, kind of a friend relationship, you know, we're mates.*
- Felt equipped to teach his son about puberty, relationships and reproduction and felt that it was a parental responsibility.
- But ... had not had any dialogue with Henry and did not know how much his son knew about puberty, relationships and reproduction.

We sometimes let him stay up a bit late and there are things on the telly ... we throw a blanket over his head so he can't see [laughs] ... there's an awareness that it's inappropriate for him, which we've said at other times that things are inappropriate for him and he'll have to go to bed or he's got to look away from the telly.

He's very happy to not look and I think he's aware that as long as he's looking away and talking to me keeping the conversation going, or stays under the blanket, he's quite happy as he won't have to go to bed. So we've got around that.

I want them to feel they can come to me and ask me about anything. I don't want it to be like my father, I can see it now like he'd be walking in now and we'd both be so embarrassed. I sort of tease around the edge with Rich, he's ten so a bit early, but he's showing an interest in girls now and I don't think he's equipped to deal with that.

Also society is so different now to when I was growing up. What is accepted is so different. Also what children are exposed to through the internet is phenomenal and I am terrified that their innocence is going to be taken away.

The way Rich talks now, there are things that he may or may not know but I don't want to embarrass him by asking and say come on let's sit down and have a chat.

James: *he's gone out with about ten girls and that doesn't actually mean going out with them but sitting in the bike shed kissing which is very sweet.*

CB: You think he has really kissed ten girls?

James: *Oh yes he has.*

James: *he's started to show self-awareness like he says 'Dad I don't like it when you come in when I go for a wee', whereas all four of us could stand around a toilet before and it wouldn't be a problem. He's obsessed with his hair now.*

James: *If we'll have the talk, I don't know. I think they are starting to do classes at school, so I wouldn't be surprised if their peers are talking. Is it wrong for them to talk to their peers and work it out for themselves? Perhaps to a degree it's fine as long as there is that card in hand at home. So that's probably how we'll approach it, he's a sensible lad mostly!*

Steve: You can see Lydia growing up now, but she – in her outlook and the way she wants to be - she is completely a little girl, drinking her milk out of a baby's cup and playing little girls' games ... So the thought of talking about growing up, sexual relationships and reproduction I just can't see how we will do it, it will come but [tails off]

CB: When you say you can see her starting to grow up how do [interrupted]

Steve: Physically she's starting to grow up, just a little bit. I can remember saying to my wife 'I give her a cuddle and she's different' but my wife says 'just be natural'.

CB: If your wife wasn't at home and Lydia started her periods, how do you think that would go?

Steve: I think that would be very tricky, very difficult and something completely new. It would be sad that really, as she'd be really worried about it. She would probably say something and quickly figure out what to do. That would be a very odd situation as it could actually happen as my wife can realistically be away for a week or something. That sort of thing would often happen to girls before they have the lesson at school. Gosh I really haven't thought this through at all Clare. Bloody hell [laughs]! I really need to go home tonight and see if my wife's spoken to her at all about that. I'm just sort of assuming that Lydia will have picked up on that already. I'm not sure what she knows but I presume she would have spotted toiletry items and things like that and asked what they are for. I'll find out, I'll make sure she tells her now! We've not thought this through at all [laughs]!

I think that's maybe my wife's thing, not mine.

I'd just like her to have an open discussion with her mum where she feels comfortable to ask quite candidly what she needs to know really. And perhaps her mum could do a little steering to what she thinks is important to share with her; that would be my ideal really.

I'd be more prone to talk to Charlie ... I think it's far more fitting that my wife speaks to Lydia.

Themes

<i>Superordinate Theme 1</i>			
Fatherhood:			
<u>Aspiring to be involved</u> yet <u>largely detached</u>			
			
Subordinate themes	'I want to do a better job than my parents' 'We can talk about anything'	Gendered division of labour 'Truth is I've not really thought about it' Leave it to school	Subordinate themes
<i>Superordinate Theme 2</i>			
Sexuality:			
<u>Recognising the need to talk</u> yet <u>continuing the silence</u>			
			
Subordinate themes	'If I could have a manual it would be lovely' 'It's a parental responsibility'	Discomfort 'I haven't actually approached it'	Subordinate themes
<i>Superordinate Theme 3</i>			
Childhood:			
<u>The innocent "other"</u> versus <u>the "adult in the making"</u>			
			
Subordinate themes	'S/he isn't ready' 'S/he will ask when s/he's ready'	Girls need to know earlier	Subordinate themes

I said that every twenty eight daysish a girl loses the lining of the womb and it leaks out through her vagina so they need tampons and panty liners to stop it being embarrassing, smelly or staining clothes. We talked about girls getting stressed before and that they may be a little more tetchy.

We talked about blokes first of all and sex. It was sort of talking slang terms for penis, vagina and sex. We talked about erections, hard-ons.

We've talked about masturbating.

... it was not awkward or embarrassed it was just a frank discussion.

... I didn't feel awkward talking to him and I didn't feel he felt awkward talking to me.

Social Constructions of Childhood: Innocence and Protective Discourses



- Contradictions and conflict between the majority of the fathers' aspirations and the compelling nature of the childhood innocence discourse.
- Majority felt it was in their children's interests to learn about sexuality, but adhered to hegemonic protective discourses and unquestioningly integrated their normalising effects into their fathering practices.
- The fathers wished to minimise risk which they managed, paradoxically, by suppressing sexuality dialogue.

Fatherhood: Aspirations and Realities



A contradiction between cultural expectations and the conduct of fathering emerged which appeared to relate to masculinities, gender ideologies and primary socialisation.

Sexuality: An Enduring Taboo



- Body Awareness /Body Blindness
- Bracketing Sexuality

Fathers' Results: The Netherlands

Gender and age distribution of children discussed by the nine fathers.

Age (years)	Boys (n)	Girls (n)	Total (n)
1	0	1	1
2	1	0	1
3	1	0	1
4	1	0	1
5	1	1	2
6	1	0	1
7	1	3	4
8	1	0	1
9	1	1	2
10	2	2	4
Total	10	8	18

Theme one: A commitment to sexuality education

- Differed significantly in relation to religious beliefs and personal experiences of learning about relationships and reproduction.
- All equally committed to teaching their children about their bodies, relationships, sex and reproduction, regardless of their child's age.
- Open communication is positive for children: learning to enjoy their bodies, positive perceptions of their bodies, to have fulfilling relationships and to know their boundaries.
- Likely to lead to safe choices - abstaining, using condoms and oral contraception and choosing a safe place to have sex.

Theme two: Asserting Personal Boundaries



Significant emphasis on the need for children to be able to assert their personal boundaries and to define what is acceptable and not acceptable to them.

Supported by a wider movement in schools: 'Stop, Hou Op'.

Emphasis on safeguarding.

Theme three: Body Comfort and Body Awareness



- Greater sense of body comfort in general everyday life: museums, art, nude beaches, non-applicator tampons dominant, sanitary products visible in mixed gender toilets, baby changing areas not behind closed doors.
- Cycling culture and outdoors way of life - 'corporeality' and body confidence.
- Talked intimately about sexuality with ease in front of children. Within minutes of the interviews commencing used words such as vagina, penis and vulva without embarrassment.

Theme three: Body Comfort and Body Awareness



Several made reference to siblings teaching each other about their genitalia by showing each other and children learning by asking to look at their parents' genitalia.

Theme three: Body Comfort and Body Awareness



'...it starts with belief that if you're willing to have a relationship during your life, you have to be happy with yourself, not only with your mind but also with your body'.

Theme four: Self-efficacy

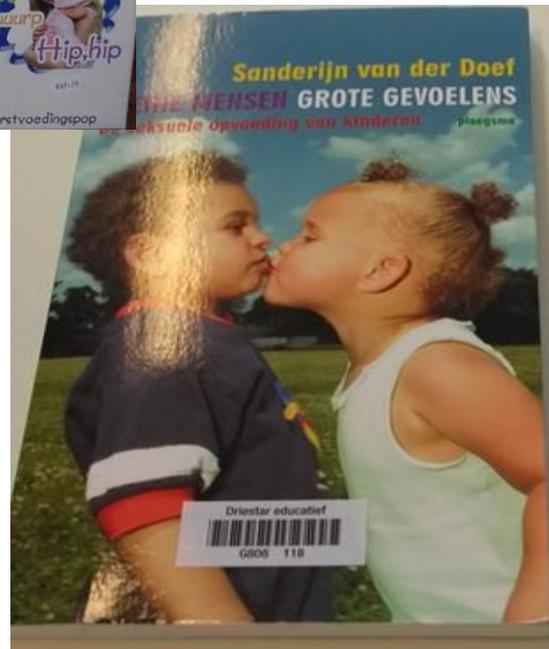


- Very confident in their ability.
- Plethora of resources available: Many and varied books available in bookstores and Rutgers' teaching materials, local health facilities, websites for parents and web resources that would be useful for their children.

Theme four: Self-efficacy



- Reactive and proactive.
- Confident to engage in far-reaching discussions.



Theme five: Perspectives on childhood



- Societal perspectives.
- A staged approach to imparting information.
- Emphasised the differing perceptions of children's understandings regarding sexual relationships and adult understandings. *'Okay that's it'*.
- No fixed perceptions regarding a minimum age for children to have sexual relationships.
- Emphasis on the child's individual developmental progress, emotional readiness, mutual respect [children respecting their own bodies and emotions as well as those of others].
- Consensus that by commencing the conversation early, the parents believed that they were setting the foundations for positive attitudes and shaping their children's sexual decision making during adolescence.

Theme six: Normalisation

- Acknowledged the challenging nature of parent-imparted sexuality education.
- Television programmes, advertising campaigns, governmental messages and the plethora of resources from Rutgers had normalised sexuality communication.
- Pre-school age children know how babies are made and sex organs are called the correct name.
- Desire for sexuality communication and sex to not become *'a thing'*.
- Majority identified schools had been instrumental in supporting them but this was not uniform. Rutgers' Spring Fever Campaign and 'Wonderfully Made' by Driestar.
- However, children may still be reticent.

Comparisons

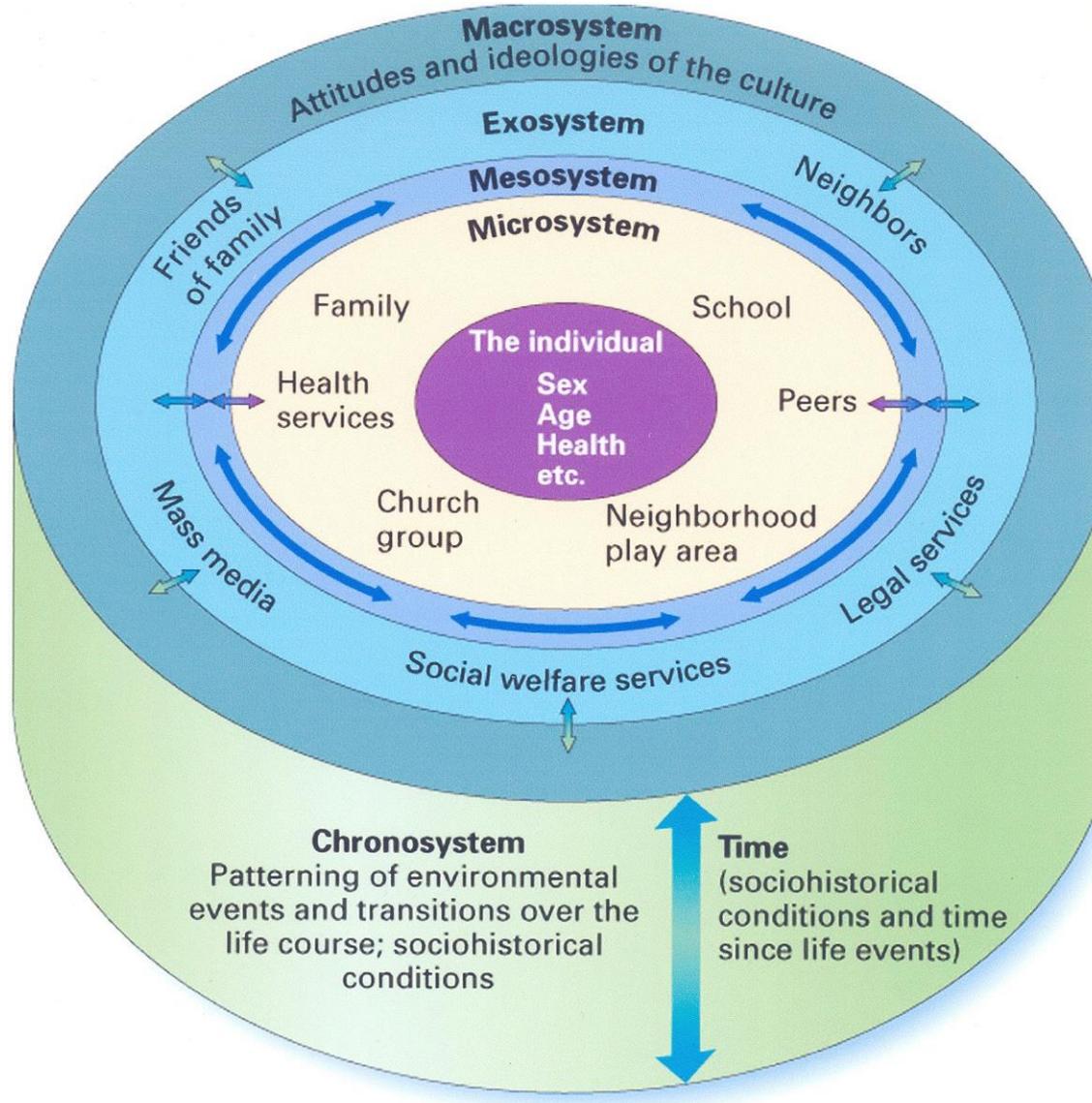
- English Fathers: ‘Childhood Innocence’, ‘Sexuality: An Enduring Taboo’ and ‘Aspirations and Realities’. None of these themes emerged in the Dutch data.
- Differences in socialisation.
- English fathers anxious and embarrassed – Dutch fathers open and relaxed.
- English fathers focussed on risk - Dutch approach was positive *‘... first you have human interaction and then you have the human body before you have the diseases. I think the natural course is the way it should be, because interaction with people is much more important than the actual sex part’*.
- Gendered divisions of labour – Gender equality
- English fathers avoided the subject or adopted ‘the talk’ - Dutch fathers adopted a gradual, informal approach to sexuality communication, largely unplanned and spontaneous but deliberately repetitious. Differences in the use of books.

Study Limitations

- Purposive sample.
- Small numbers.
- And ...



Bronfenbrenner's Social Ecological Model



Fathers as Sexuality Educators: An International Comparison



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