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Sexual discourses and strategies among minority ethnic youth in the Netherlands

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This study explores the way minority ethnic youth in the Netherlands evaluate their sexual experiences, how they frame these experiences in different sexual discourses and how they deal with conflicts between different sexual discourses, both at home and in Dutch society. During 46 narrative interviews, Dutch young people (aged 12–22 years) from different minority ethnic communities shared their sexual histories and their dreams for the future relating to love and sexuality. Different sexual discourses can be identified in the language they used to describe their ideas and their experiences. Young people grow up with a variety of discourses but actively re-shape them according to circumstances and need. In many cases, young people experience a conflict between the discourses of the home and those that are prevalent more generally in Dutch society. Young people's ways of negotiating these contradictory discourses comprise four main strategies: (1) conforming to parents' values, (2) breaking up with parents, (3) leading a double life and (4) integrating competing discourses. By bringing together different sexual discourses and acknowledging diverse strategies, sexual health policies can become more effective in promoting sexual health for minority ethnic youth. Findings from the study add fuel to debate on understanding (sexual) agency among young people, exhibiting the social 'embeddedness' of individual agency.

Keywords: sexual health; culture; migrants; young people; Netherlands

Introduction

In Western countries such as The Netherlands, the sexual behaviour of minority ethnic groups is often considered problematic and seen as deviating from the – 'native' – social norm (Nagel 2003; Lewis 2004; Stokes 2007). The Dutch media regularly portrays the sexuality of young men and women from minority ethnic groups as promiscuous or, in the case of Muslim girls, suppressed. Although empirical research reveals some differences in sexual behaviour between ethnic groups, these differences are not as uniform or as large as is often presented in the media (de Graaf et al. 2012). Moreover, empirical findings do not tell us much about the relevance and meaning of sexual behaviour for young people themselves. This paper focuses on the processes by which young people give meaning to sexuality in order to understand how young people frame their own experiences. The specific research questions were: (1) what factors influence the evaluation of sexual and relational experiences by minority ethnic youth, (2) how do minority ethnic youth frame their sexual and relational experiences and (3) how do minority ethnic youth exercise agency and negotiate between contradictory discourses?

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Sexual discourses

In this study, we explored young people's agency in a context of changing discourses on sexuality and gender roles. The most dominant discourse is that of heteronormativity. As Jackson argues: 'we all learn to be sexual within a society in which "real sex" is defined as a quintessentially heterosexual act, vaginal intercourse, and in which sexual activity is thought of in terms of an active subject and passive object' (Jackson 1996, 23). Allen (2003) adds: 'the dominance of heterosexual identity and discursive practices that support an active male and passive female sexuality are deeply embedded within social and political participation and perceived as normative' (218). The construction of female sexuality is generally one of passivity and vulnerability, whereby women are perceived as having less desire and achieving sexual pleasure less easily than men (Allen 1996). Male sexuality, on the other hand, is seen as active, more rampant and more quickly satisfied. Besides this dominant discourse, other discourses can be discovered both in public debate and in the private life stories and accounts offered by young people.

Agency

Most definitions of agency place emphasis on the autonomy of the individual. Jackson (1996), for example, defines sexual agency in terms of the rights and ability to define and control one's own sexuality, free from coercion and exploitation. Quach (2008) states that 'the agency of an individual reflects how she or he performs within often competing regimes of discourse and practice' (153). Bell (2012) includes social identities and relations in his definition of sexual agency, describing the 'processes where(by) young people become sexually active and the strategies, actions and negotiations involved in maintaining relationships and navigating broader social expectations' (284). According to Bell's definition, sexual agency is not just about an individual's capacity to reach desired goals and outcomes, but links closely to broader social expectations. Mahmood's (2001) contribution to the concept of agency is also valuable in this respect. She argues that while agency is often understood as the capacity to realise one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition or other obstacles, the desire for freedom and liberation is a historically situated impulse whose motivational force cannot be assumed *a priori*, but needs to be considered in the light of other desires, aspirations and capacities. Agency, therefore, should be understood as not merely the capacity for positive change, but also the capacity to endure, suffer and persist, as illustrated by work exploring the concept of 'bonded agency'. Pham (2013, 29) argues that being bonded does not need to be the opposite of being free, but can also be interpreted as a hermeneutic of enduring one's embeddedness in relations of power as well as in thick webs of sociality. Ha (2008, 163) offers a striking example of bonded agency in her paper on married women in Viet Nam, in which she documents women using a range of strategies to negotiate their sexual life, with 'silence' sometimes being used as a form of agency in order to maintain harmony and happiness at home.

Being agentic in the contemporary Dutch social and political context

This paper explores ways in which minority ethnic youth negotiate seemingly contradictory discourses. For his purpose, we will focus primarily on the personal and the social levels. Whereas personal identity primarily focuses on the question of how one can create a meaningful and consistent life story, social identity focuses on the question of how one can combine together different group memberships (Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman 2011). Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman (2011) studied the identity strategies of

Christian gay youth through an analysis of discourses both on community and individual level. They argue that the often cited conflict between ‘Christians’ and ‘homosexuals’ in countries such as the Netherlands is used by both parties to strengthen their identity and to present the other as an enemy (Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman 2011).

In the present study we can see a similar process of political conflict played out concerning the sexuality of young people in multicultural Dutch society. In today’s highly charged public debates, religious and cultural otherness are often presented as incompatible with the values of the Dutch secular societal order (Buitelaar 2010; Verkaaik and Spronk 2011; Mepschen and Duyvendak 2012). Mepschen and Duyvendak (2012, 74), for example, argue that proponents of this new ‘culturism’ (Schinkel 2008, 18) frame migrants as outsiders and emphasise the perceived need for their cultural education and their ‘integration’ into a Dutch, European or ‘modern’ moral universe. Muslim citizens have become the most conspicuous objects of these ‘discourses of alterity’ (Schinkel 2008, 18). Ideas about sexuality and gender equality thereby figure as rallying points around which differences between the ‘enlightened’ secular West and the ‘backward’ Islamic East become articulated and performed, serving to underscore and celebrate the supposed superiority of Western civilisation in general, and Dutch society in particular.

This kind of public debate affects the identities and relationships of individuals. A stronger group identity requires loyalty of the members in the group, which makes it hard for group members to bring together multiple allegiances and a multiple sense of self (Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman 2011). Ganzevoort distinguishes four ways of negotiating identity conflicts among Christian gay youth: the adoption of a ‘Christian’ lifestyle (and with it the rejection of private homosexual identity), the adoption of a ‘Gay’ lifestyle (and hence the rejection of religion or a Christian identity), commuting (involving living in different and separate worlds) and integration (involving the bringing together of identities). This paper explores whether these modes prove useful in making sense of the strategies employed by minority ethnic youth as well.

Methods and participants

This paper draws on findings from a qualitative study conducted among young people from the four main ethnic minorities living in the Netherlands, that is, from those of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Antillean origin (Cense and van Dijk 2012). The notion of ‘origin’ used here entails that young people themselves or (one of) their parents were born in one of these four countries. Native young Dutch people were not included in the sample because the aim of the study was not to effect a comparison between groups but to gain insight into the framing of experiences by minority ethnic youth to deepen our understanding of the diversity of discourses and strategies. In 2011, 11% of the Dutch population was of non-Western origin (Huijnk and Dagevos 2012) and two thirds (65%) of them belong to one of these four main minority ethnic groups.

Data collection

In this study, 46 open narrative interviews were conducted with participants aged 12 to 22 years. Table 1 shows the ethnicity, gender and age of the participants. Half of the group of participants was recruited by including a question about participating in an interview at the end of a large-scale survey on sexual behaviour carried out in high schools. The second half was recruited through links with local youth centres and the informal network of migrant groups who participated in the research. For participants under 16 years of age,

Table 1. Research participants by age group, ethnicity and gender.

| Age group | Antillean | | Moroccan | | Surinamese | | Turkish | | Total |
|-------------|-----------|-----|----------|-----|------------|-----|---------|-----|-------|
| | Girl | Boy | Girl | Boy | Girl | Boy | Girl | Boy | |
| 11–14 years | 1 | | 2 | 2 | | 3 | 1 | 2 | 11 |
| 15–18 years | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 18 |
| 19–22 years | 3 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 17 |
| Total | 6 | 2 | 7 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 6 | 7 | 46 |

parental permission was needed for the interview. Gaining the trust of participants and their parents was important as part of the recruitment process because for some parents the association of their young son or daughter with sexuality was neither obvious nor desirable. Working with interviewers and intermediaries who were known to the parents because they were active community members supported this process. The interviews were conducted by three women and one man from bicultural ethnic backgrounds, namely Dutch, Surinamese and Moroccan. The bicultural backgrounds of the interviewers supported the creation of openness and trust during the interview process itself.

During interviews, participants were invited to talk about their sexual history and their dreams for the future, and to reflect on positive or negative experiences. Prior to the interviews, a literature review had taken place to develop a suitable way of encouraging young people to talk about sexuality. An extra tool was used during the interviews: the drawing of a lifeline. The lifeline is a narrative technique for marking and validating life events as a starting point from which to explore the meaning of experiences (for example see Hanks and Carr 2008). Asking participants to draw or fill in a visual, chronological representation of their life (for instance using life lines, life grids or calendars) can help the respondent to recall events from the past and help the interviewer to ask the appropriate questions (e.g. Berney and Blane 1997). By using such methods, sensitive subjects can be discussed as part of a broader life story of respondents, which prevents individuals' entire life being interpreted according to a certain theme or problem (Wilson et al. 2007). Because respondents could determine which events were discussed, they controlled how and when sensitive events were raised (Wilson et al. 2007). Figure 1 provides an example of a lifeline of one of the participants in our study.

Data analysis

All the interviews were transcribed and coded by two researchers using qualitative data analysis software. The coding was performed using Crang's (2007) system of 'open' and 'axial' coding. Discourses were detected by looking for oppositions and equivalences, for example the opposition between 'virtuous' and 'bad' and the equivalence between being a good daughter and marrying as a virgin. Statements regarding the obvious were significant markers, often combined with the word 'just' or being 'normal'. For instance, the question 'Do you feel attracted to boys or girls?' was often answered with 'I am normal', therefore presenting heterosexuality as an undisputed 'fact of life'.

Findings

Three sets of findings emerged from the study: (1) factors influencing young people's evaluation of their sexual experiences, (2) sexual discourses in which young people frame

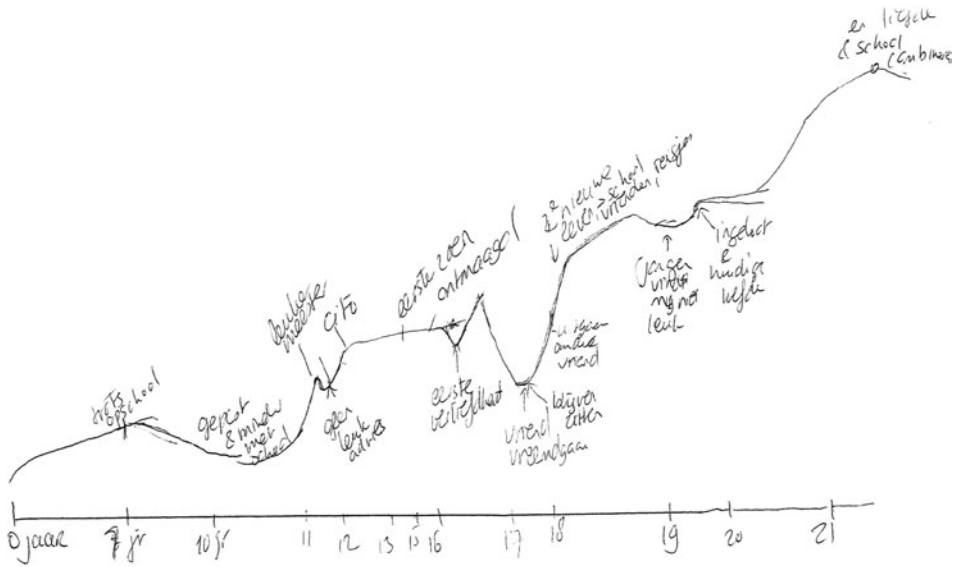


Figure 1. Lifeline of Turkish girl aged 21.

their experiences and (3) the strategies used by young people to exercise agency and negotiate multiple identities.

Young people's evaluation of their sexual experiences

The way in which participants evaluated their sexual and relational experiences was related to many factors such as their age, gender and previous sexual experiences. The youngest participants (aged 12–14) expressed mostly positive feelings connected with their relational and sexual experiences: being in love and their first kiss. In the next age group (15–18 years), most girls reported several positively and several negatively labelled events in the areas of love and sex, whereas the boys reported fewer emotions and fewer events. In the oldest age group (19–22 years), all participants reported many positive as well as negative emotions connected to their experiences.

The only sexual events participants marked on the lifelines were participants' 'first kiss' and their 'first time having sex'. Whereas first-time kissing was usually evaluated as a positive experience, first-time having sex elicited a more varied response, especially for girls. When reporting positive feelings, some girls expressed that it was important that they were in love with the boy. Others put more emphasis on having control over the timing and the setting. Girls expressing regret over their first time having sex felt if they were not ready for it then or felt cheated afterwards:

Everyone had already done it and they said to me, it is so wonderful, believe me. But it wasn't so great at all. I was a little numb, to be honest. And I was afraid because it went so fast. I wanted to take it easy. (Priscella, Surinamese girl, aged 18)

Most male participants experienced sex for the first time with a girlfriend or a girl they were in love with. They mainly evaluated their first time positively and said they felt at ease and ready for it. There were just a few boys who have negative feelings reflecting on their first time having sex. Fabio (Surinamese boy, aged 18), for example, had been disappointed because the girl experienced pain and he could not do what he wanted and

Kevin (Surinamese boy, aged 20) reported feeling guilty afterwards because he was not serious about the relationship.

The evaluation of sexual experiences rarely focused on the physical experience, but more often concerned the emotional and social consequences. Little was said about sexual pleasure. The evaluation of sex depended mostly on the emotional relationship with the person concerned and the course of the relationship with them afterwards. For example, Jualice, a nineteen-year-old Antillean girl, who had undergone an abortion when she was aged 15, evaluated this positively, because her boyfriend stayed with her and her mother supported her decision. Serisha, another nineteen-year-old Antillean girl, looked back on her sexual experiences with bitterness, although she would show in the statistics as 'sexually healthy' because she has not been confronted with an unwanted pregnancy, a sexually transmitted infection or sexual coercion. Nevertheless, she felt deeply disillusioned by boyfriends who had been unfaithful or who had humiliated her.

Sexual discourses

Six different discourses on sexuality could be identified in the way the participants talked about sexuality.

Heteronormative discourse

The first of these discourses was that of heteronormativity. Several participants of various ethnic backgrounds assumed that men had an active sexual role and women a more passive one:

Boys are quicker in making a move. Girls are shy. Girls want boys to approach them. (Ricky, Surinamese boy, aged 16)

For a girl feelings are involved. A boy is just driven by physical needs and that's all. That's different for girls. (Najat, Moroccan girl, aged 19)

This discourse is characterised by a sharp dichotomy between boys and girls, in which boys play an active, sex-oriented role and the girls a passive, more love-oriented one. Because boys are always looking for sex, they are not to be trusted in a relationship. A lot of boys and girls strongly disapproved of girls who were seen as (too) sexually active. In line with this dichotomous distribution of sexual roles, the ideal picture of the romantic, heterosexual relationship emerges. A number of stories reflected this unequal power balance between men and women:

Life is about getting married and having babies. Passing on the generation. Having a job or a career is not seen as important for girls. Men are the providers of the family income; women have to become housewives. (Zeynep, Turkish girl, aged 19)

The dominance of the heteronormative discourse was also evident in young people's beliefs about homosexuality. Some participants argued, for instance, that homosexuality is not 'normal' and not 'natural'.

Virginity discourse

This second discourse concurs with the dichotomy of sexual roles and inequality between the sexes, but seeks to place the expression of sexuality purely within the domain of marriage. The discourse was prevalent in religious circles, both Muslim and Christian: girls and boys have to be virgins until they marry, but both sexes agree that the rule for girls is more binding. For some, the virginity of girls is closely connected to the reputation

and honour of the family. Women should be virtuous and their behaviour should not lead to gossip about the social position of the family. Young people who used this discourse often demonstrated a strong connection between their sexual behaviour and their moral judgements of themselves:

When you are in love, you like each other and you want to touch each other. But it is not allowed, so you feel very bad about yourself. In my family, it is emphasised again and again, be aware, watch yourself, and think about your honour and the community and the shame. I cannot, no; I just can not be intimate with somebody. (Meral, Turkish girl, aged 19)

You're not going to marry a girl that has been touched by everyone. I think nobody from my cultural background wants that. (Ilias, Moroccan boy, aged 14)

Like the heteronormative discourse, this discourse is based on a double standard towards the sexual behaviour of boys and girls. Some Muslim boys judged Dutch girls as having no self-respect and stated that Muslim girls in the Netherlands were becoming too Westernised. Some indicated they want to marry a more virtuous girl from their country of origin. Some boys are aware of the disparity in the application of virginity rules, but accepted it all the same.

Exchange discourse

A third discourse was connected to the heteronormative discourse but locates sexuality within the domain of power and self-esteem. Here, sex is linked to power between men and women, as sex is basically a medium of exchange for women to obtain something else in return: a relationship, love or material goods. Within this research group this discourse was mainly present in stories of Surinamese and Antillean young people. Internationally, there is a growing body of research on 'sexual exchange' or transactional sex (for example see Kaufman and Stavrou 2004; Wamoyi et al. 2010). Two Surinamese young people put it quite clearly:

If I can get a man who comes to collect me by car, why should I be content with a boy with a bicycle? (Noori, Surinamese girl, aged 20)

It is like a market. If there is no scarcity, everything would be very cheap. Women around me know how to play this game and it gives them a certain power. Because you have something that everybody wants, but you are the one who determines who gets it. And then you put your price up. If you figure how the game should be played, women can benefit from it. Free food and drinks, new bags, perfume, flowers, chocolate. Some men go very far. But they also expect that a woman is going to pay back with love and sex. And then the problems arise. (Marlon, Surinamese boy, aged 20)

Antillean and Surinamese girls indicated that they considered it important that a future partner worked and earned money. Antillean and Surinamese boys mentioned that they wanted to be successful in achieving social status, including having money, a car and a nice house, so they would be a good 'catch' for a woman.

Maturity discourse

The fourth discourse seeks to locate sexuality within the domain of maturity. In this discourse young people are seen as having the developmental task of reaching adulthood without problems, and realising the conditions necessary to live a good life, which includes marriage and raising children. Young people have to finish school and find a good job in order to earn money to buy a home and support a family. Sexual activities and relationships while still on the path to this goal can obstruct schooling and divert attention from this ultimate ambition. Unlike virginity discourse, maturity discourse establishes no

clear-cut dichotomy between the roles and responsibilities of girls and boys. It is also beneficial for girls to finish school and become financially independent. The discourse identifies a strict order for events in life:

My mother is very clear on that. You can do what you want, as long as it is not at the expense of your education. Despite the fact that my mother is illiterate. She said she missed out herself and she doesn't want the same thing happening to her children. (Rachida, Moroccan girl, aged 20)

My mother and I think exactly the same. Lately we had a talk about my future. I said I wanted to finish my study, earn money, get a good job and a nice house. And afterwards there will be plenty of time to fall in love and all that. And she said she thought exactly the same. (Marilou, Antillean girl, aged 11)

Risk discourse

In the fifth discourse, sex is directly linked to risks. Here sex (before or outside of marriage) is seen as easily leading to misery: pregnancy, being cheated, losing one's reputation or being forced to marry. This applies to both girls and boys, but more so to girls because they can become pregnant and because they are seen as emotionally and socially more vulnerable. Within this discourse, it is not morally reprehensible to be sexually active, but it is reckless or foolish. The risk discourse was present in the language of participants of various ethnic backgrounds:

The boy is not damaged in the end. He can do whatever he wants. Ultimately, it is the girl who gets pregnant and it is the girl who is deserted. A woman is, after all, very fragile and much more fragile than a man, so to speak. (Fatima, Moroccan girl, aged 19)

Sexual rights discourse

The sixth discourse is based on the sexual rights of individuals. Here, young people are seen as having the right to start relationships and to practise safe sex without coercion and within an equal relationship. Ideally, the norm relating to morally approved sex is based on one's own beliefs and perceptions and is not imposed by the environment. The sexual rights discourse is present in Dutch sexual health policies and in sexual education in Dutch schools, as well as in international definitions and standards such as those of the World Health Organisation (see, for example, WHO Regional Office for Europe 2010).

Aylin talked about first sex at 17 as follows:

I felt totally at ease because I trusted him. I had told myself that the first time I would make sure it happened with someone I trusted and liked. It was just fine, normal, good and no problem. (Aylin, Turkish girl, aged 20)

Intertwined discourses

Crucially, young people do not live within just one discourse. In the stories we listened to from most young people, multiple discourses occur. Raoul (Surinamese, boy, aged 16) told us that sex at a young age was 'unwise and inappropriate'. Unwise here referred to the maturity or the risk discourse, whereas 'inappropriate' referred to the heteronormative discourse in which standards are assumed about when and with whom sex is 'appropriate'. Akar wanted to stay a virgin until she gets married because her family expected her to and because of her religion (the virginity discourse), but sex was also linked to risk:

In a marriage you have security and stability. If you have sex with someone and then you become pregnant and he goes away, then you end up with the child. Abortion is not allowed in my religion. If my parents found out, I would have a big problem. (Akar, Turkish girl, aged 21)

Strategies

The social and cultural environments in which young people grow up does not only determine the discourses people access at home, but also the freedom young people experience to switch between different discourses or to develop their own views. The dominant view in the Netherlands is that young people are supposed to break away from the standards of their parents in order to become autonomous, independent adults (Schalet 2011). This is different from some minority ethnic groups in the Netherlands, where obedience and loyalty to the family is more highly valued and families often have a clear hierarchy, in which parents have their say. For some participants it was self-evident that they followed the path their family expected them to. In other cases, young people experienced conflict between different discourses at home and in Dutch society.

The connectedness of the participants to cultural or religious groups influenced their room for manoeuvre however. Many Turkish and Moroccan participants felt strongly related to a cultural and religious community. The moral precepts and the social community were experienced as an anchor in their life. Probably, hostile public debate on the issue of Islam plays an important role in the commitment that some Turkish and Moroccan young people feel towards their cultural communities. In contrast, Antillean and Surinamese youth made less strong statements about their sense of belonging to a group. They felt connected to their parents, especially to their mothers, but not so much to a larger community.

As most discourses are not gender-neutral but seek to impose different social norms for the two sexes, it is not surprising that girls reported the most severe clashes between the different discourses they experienced at home and elsewhere. Specifically, Muslim girls reported tough challenges in navigating between different social positions. Family hierarchy, religious rules and broader processes of social exclusion of Muslims can lead to an education in which girls have very little room for manoeuvre.

Similar to the four coping strategies outlined by Ganzevoort, van der Laan and Olsman (2011) in relation to Christian gay young people, the strategies young people in this study used to negotiate contradictory discourses and exercise agency can be grouped into four types: (1) those that were conforming to parents' values, (2) those that involved breaking up with parents, (3) those leading to a double/secret life and (4) more integrating discourses. Although these strategies can be found in the life stories of participants of different minority ethnic backgrounds, the life stories of young Muslim girls demonstrate their struggle with contradictory discourses most vividly. Therefore we will use their stories to illuminate these strategies.

Conforming to parents' values

The first mode of response involves conforming to the moral codes set by parents. Young people who experience conflict between themselves and their parents sometimes consciously conform to the rules as they do not want to hurt their parents. They feel they cannot live without their support or do not want to cope with the consequences of choosing a deviant path. They experience a form of 'bonded agency', as illustrated in the following case. Esra's parents had emigrated from Turkey to the Netherlands when they were children. Esra herself did not have any sexual experience except kissing, although she had fallen in love a couple of times: 'I did not have that urge, because of my religion and my culture. It is not possible, or allowed. I stick to the standards at home.' Although she experienced no inner conflict about remaining a virgin until she got married, she was experiencing social pressure to get married soon:

My mother feels life is about getting married and having children; having a career is not important for girls. But nowadays life is different; a woman can have her dreams too. But well . . . my nieces got married and of course I start wondering whether I should marry too. If you hear it all the time at home, it gets to you. I really feel I have to marry soon, or she will stop seeing me as a good daughter. My mother herself married at a young age. She wants me to follow the same path, which means marrying a good man who can look after me and who shares our religion. (Esra, Turkish girl, aged 18)

Although she did not feel happy with the path that lies ahead, Esra felt she would follow that route as she needs the support of her mother. 'My mother is the number one person. My parents gave me life and a future. I would not be able to hurt my parents or to damage their reputation. That would be too painful for me.'

Breaking up with parents

A second possible mode of response is the exact opposite. It involves radically breaking free from the social norms of home. In our research group there were several young people who had adopted a sexual rights discourse and struggled with their parents. If there is no room for dialogue, and obedience is demanded, this disagreement can get out of control. This was the case for Miriam, a Moroccan girl living on her own in a big city. Miriam was 15 when she fled from her family because she was experiencing increasing conflict with her father:

I was allowed no freedom at all, whereas my brother could do anything. He could even bring Dutch girlfriends home! I just needed to be free. I believe in my God, in Allah, but I also believe in my own way. Respect and love are important, more important than, for example, praying five times a day or wearing a headscarfe. (Miriam, Moroccan girl, aged 22 years)

The main reason for the conflict was that Miriam's father found out that she had a boyfriend: 'My father just wanted me to obey him. I simply had no say.' After she had left the house she did not see her father for more than a year. She remained in contact with her mother however: 'In our culture the man decides and the woman has to follow. So my mother just agreed with what my dad said.' After a year and a half, contact was slowly restored: 'Now he has seen that I can live on my own and despite the fact that I left home so early, I am still in school; I work and live independently. He is finally proud of me.'

Miriam's parents support her in her school career and work ambitions but in terms of future relationships there are still problems. Her father wants her to marry a Moroccan man, but she does not share that point of view:

I don't fancy Moroccan boys, although I am Moroccan myself. Of course, there are good boys among them, but most of them are still traditional. They don't think in a liberal way, at least not where a woman is concerned.

So the choice of a partner remains problematic:

I have told them, once I have found true love and I want to marry a man, I will, whether he is Muslim or not. Yes, even though my parents may not agree. My mother might accept it in the end, but my father, no . . .

Leading a secret life

In a third possible mode of response, these different extremes are combined in what Ganzevoort, van der Laan and Olsman (2011, 219) eloquently call a 'commuter approach to identities'. Here people are viewed as moving from one identity to the other, belonging to mutually exclusive groups in what can be seen as parallel worlds. Often these different worlds may be located in different physical places, but they involve at least different groups,

individuals and values. We can see this mode of response in operation in the strategies of girls and boys that are subjected to strict rules and expectations by their parents. At home they behave like dutiful daughters and sons; outside they live a different life. Of course, many young people do not tell their parents what they are doing in terms of relationships and sexuality, but these young people may face severe consequences if their secret life became public. Some people can live this way quite easily while others feel alienated because they inhabit different identities in different worlds. Young people also report feelings of guilt, fear of being caught and remorse because it feels like betrayal to their parents. Although these young people experience some room for manoeuvre, they also experience a kind of 'bonded agency'.

This is illustrated in the case of Leyla. Leyla (aged 19), who lived with her parents and two brothers. Her parents come from Turkey, though she was born in the Netherlands. Her parents set strict rules. She is not allowed to meet boys or have male friends. Leyla does see boys, but keeps the fact hidden from her family. This is not difficult because she sees boys at school and her parents do not understand her mobile phone. However, she cannot go out like her friends. 'It's exciting and I want to join them. I am 19 years old. They all smoke and have sex. They do everything and I can do nothing. I can only go from home to school to study.' She sticks to a number of rules, but not to all. Where she does not comply, she hides her movements:

I do not tell them [my parents] everything because they will think badly of me. If they knew I had contact with boys. . . . It sometimes feels like I lead a double life. If I didn't care about them, it would be easy but I do care, for they are my parents. And not only that, it is also the whole community that makes it very difficult. So it's not just that my parents protest, but it's difficult when other people spread gossip and then my parents get embarrassed. (Leyla, Turkish girl, aged 19).

Sex before marriage is taboo within Leyla's cultural community:

It's important to me too. But look, if you are in love, then you are attracted to that person and you want to touch each other. I want to know what it's like [having sex]. All the Dutch girls in my class talk about their sexual lives and then I feel so squeamish. A friend of mine, however, lost her virginity. I really wouldn't want that. I mean, people are going to judge you as a slut and whore . . .

Leyla felt angry about the double standards used by boys.

Boys always want to marry a virgin. I actually find it so hypocritical because they can do whatever they want, but whenever a girl has sex, even once, she is a whore. But I do not want to lie. I want to speak the truth.

Integrating discourses

The fourth strategy involves the seamless integration of different identity elements. Here, young people adopt and connect elements of different worlds bringing together, for example, specific parts of the virginity discourse with the sexual rights discourse. Young people thereby show their connectedness to different social groups and exercise bonded agency so as to navigate the expectations of different people in different places. This is illustrated in the case of Mouna, a Moroccan girl aged 19. Mouna lived with her sister and her husband. Her father had moved to Holland as a migrant worker; her mother followed later. She does not experience many limitations in her freedom of movement as a girl:

I have more freedom than my Moroccan peers, even girls that are older than me. Sometimes they react like 'Are you allowed to do that?' Yes, I am. I think my parents trust me, and because of that, I will do my best not to harm that confidence. As they say, forbidden fruits taste the best. My parents are quite liberal in most things.

Mouna's mother however plays an important role in the freedom she experiences:

My mother is in charge at home. My headscarf is my own choice; my sisters don't wear it, only one of them. So it is about what I want. My parents asked 'Do you really want it? Then you have to go for it'. To be quite honest, I do not attach much value to culture but I do value religion. Culture is about traditional things. I feel like 'What does that have to do with me?' Surely this is nonsense? In the Moroccan culture, men dominate women. My mother is very clear about this: according to Islam it is not like that. According to Islam the man is equal to the wife and the wife is also equal to the man. (Mouna, Moroccan girl, aged 19)

Mouna wants to study. Gaining a diploma is an important objective in her life. 'My mother always says: don't count 100% on a man because that makes no sense.' Mouna wants to stay a virgin until she marries: 'Because my religion, Islam, is quite clear about that – that is how it should be'. For Mouna her religion is an anchor:

I am very firm. I can be very clear in my wishes and boundaries. Of course I get to know boys who think they can move beyond my boundaries, but I won't let that happen. Just walk out the door. I am really adamant.

Although her mother is very important to her, the partner she chooses to marry will not depend on the approval of her parents:

Look, I make my own choices and of course, if my mother agrees, I am happy, but otherwise, it's a great pity for her. Ultimately, I am the person who ends up with him and not my mother.

Together these four modes of response constitute temporary outcomes arising from negotiation between conflicting identity elements. Young people may shift to another response mode when their circumstances change (through marriage for instance or by falling in love), or through the changing public debate that may influence both their parents and their peers.

Conclusion

Although empirical research reveals some differences in sexual behaviour between different minority ethnic groups, these differences are not as uniform or as large as is often suggested (de Graaf et al. 2012). Moreover, these empirical variations tell us nothing about the meanings of sexual behaviour for young people themselves. The present study aims to remedy this deficiency by providing knowledge of the way young people evaluate and frame their experiences. Over 40 narrative interviews with Dutch young people from ethnic minorities yielded up six different sexual discourses. Young people grow up with these discourses, but also actively reshape them. Significantly, these sexual discourses are not just a private matter but resonate with broader public debate about cultural and ethnic differences. Individuals who feel connected to particular social groups, as is the case with many minority ethnic young people, have a hard time negotiating their sometimes complex affiliations. The strategies young people use to exercise agency are temporary outcomes of the negotiation between conflicting identity elements. Future research should consider the inclusion of longitudinal research to reveal how young people negotiate their identities over time, what effect their growing sexual experience has on the discourses they use, and how they evaluate their past experiences of different episodes.

Two important points about agency can be identified. First, this study supports Mahmood's (2001) view that the desire for freedom should be seen in the light of other desires. The strategies adopted by young people in this study clearly illustrate a plurality of desires, which collide with the dominant notions of sexual agency among young people that form the basis of sexual health promotion in the Netherlands. By understanding the inner conflicts, minority ethnic youth may experience, counsellors can become more effective in supporting young people to navigate between pitfalls.

The study also provides support for Bell's (2012) conclusion that better understanding of different forms of sexual agency among young people is needed to support the development of health programmes informed by 'the grounded realities of young people's sexual lives' (294). However, a more fundamental challenge lies in discussing the specific conceptions of selfhood and sexual freedom that derive from sexual rights discourse and that form the basis of the current sexual health promotion. By recognising not only sexual rights, but integrating and respecting other sexual discourses, sexual health policy and practice may be made more inclusive and effective in promoting sexual wellbeing and health.

Secondly, young people's accounts in this study show that the road to sexual agency is not confined to freeing oneself from social and cultural bonds or obstacles so as to allow a true, 'authentic', inner-self to emerge and flourish, but may also consist of more subtle strategies. The life stories of young people in this study provide important lessons for the development of new ways of interpreting sexual agency in which expressions of subjectivity, identity and sexual desire creatively combine autonomy with forms of belonging and 'bondedness'.

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Résumé

Cette étude a exploré la façon dont les jeunes issus des minorités ethniques aux Pays-Bas évaluent leurs expériences sexuelles, les intègrent dans différents discours sur le sexe et gèrent les conflits qui émergent des différences entre ces discours sur le sexe, à la fois dans leur foyer et dans la société néerlandaise. Au cours de 44 entretiens narratifs, des jeunes néerlandais âgés de 12 à 22 ans et issus de diverses minorités ethniques ont raconté leur histoire sexuelle et fait part des rêves qu'ils avaient pour l'avenir, en ce qui concerne l'amour et la sexualité. Différents discours sur le sexe ont pu être identifiés dans le langage utilisé par eux pour décrire leurs idées et leurs expériences. Les jeunes grandissent avec ces discours, mais en fonction des circonstances et des besoins, ils peuvent aussi les reconstruire activement. Nombreux sont les cas où les jeunes expérimentent un conflit entre les discours dominants dans leur foyer et ceux qui prévalent, de manière plus générale, dans la société néerlandaise. Les stratégies qu'ils déploient pour négocier ces discours contradictoires se regroupent en quatre catégories principales: se conformer aux valeurs des parents; rompre avec les parents; mener une double vie; et intégrer les discours. En rassemblant différents discours sur le sexe et en acceptant la diversité des stratégies, les politiques de santé sexuelle peuvent gagner en efficacité à travers la promotion de la santé sexuelle auprès des jeunes issus des minorités ethniques. En démontrant « l'ancrage social » de la capacité à agir, les résultats de l'étude alimentent le débat sur la compréhension de la capacité à agir (au plan sexuel) parmi les jeunes.

Resumen

En este estudio se analiza cómo valoran los jóvenes de minorías étnicas en los Países Bajos sus experiencias sexuales, cómo forman sus experiencias en diferentes discursos sexuales y cómo abordan los conflictos que surgen de los diferentes discursos sexuales tanto en el hogar como en la sociedad neerlandesa. En 46 entrevistas narrativas, los jóvenes neerlandeses (con edades comprendidas entre los 12 y los 22 años) de diferentes comunidades de minorías étnicas compartieron sus historias sexuales y sus sueños para el futuro en el contexto del amor y la sexualidad. Podemos identificar diferentes discursos sexuales en el lenguaje en que solían describir sus ideas y experiencias. Los jóvenes crecen con estos discursos, pero también los modifican activamente según las circunstancias y necesidades. En muchos casos, los jóvenes tienen un conflicto entre los discursos en el hogar y los que suelen predominar en general en la sociedad neerlandesa. Podemos clasificar el modo en que los jóvenes negocian estos discursos contradictorios en cuatro estrategias básicas: aceptar los valores de sus padres, romper con sus padres, llevar una doble vida e integrar los discursos. Las políticas de salud sexual podrían ser más eficaces a la hora de fomentar la salud sexual de los jóvenes de minorías étnicas si se agrupan los diferentes discursos sexuales y se reconocen las diversas estrategias. Los resultados del estudio avivan el debate sobre cómo entender la capacidad de acción (sexual) de los jóvenes mostrando el arraigo social de la autonomía individual.