

‘Why Aren’t You a Woman?’; Gender and Secular Affect in the Dutch Field of Sexual Health*

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Abstract

This article draws on anthropological fieldwork among Dutch sexual health professionals to explore the ways Dutch secular sex education classes are gendered. By investigating how the discourse of liberal secular sexuality becomes reified in the concrete setting of sex education classes, the article brings together two theoretical fields within the study of the secular: secularity and its entanglements with gender and sexuality; and scholarly inquiry into secular bodies and affect. The article argues that these sex education classes communicate a binary heterosexual understanding of sexuality, which ascribes feminine sexuality the role of sexuality managers, and masculine sexuality the role of passive observers. The promotion of these gendered roles in sex education classes implies that feminine sexuality is cultivated to be burdened with a challenging and pressuring responsibility, whereas masculine sexuality is subtly exempted from taking up a responsible role in thinking about sex. This gendered differentiation, cultivated through sex education, helps to sustain secular associations of femininity with responsibilities and roles in managing the private sphere, as opposed to the association of masculinity with roles and responsibilities in the public sphere.

Keywords: sex education, gender, secularity, secular body, sexuality

‘It would be so nice if boys could start these conversations about sex. Just tell them, Jelle. Please, tell boys they should start talking about it [sex]! That would make things so much easier! We really do not care [if they let go of their cool image].’
Seventeen-year-old girl during a sex education class.

Introduction

Gradually, all students enter the classroom. It appears most of them look forward to this lesson, probably because they have been told about the special lesson they are going to have: one that is about sex. One approximately twelve-year-old boy is the first to sit down at his desk at the front of the classroom. He puts down his bag, has a quick look at the posters on the walls of the classroom and then notices me, his guest

teacher. While the other students are still finding their seats, this boy gazes at me for a while, clearly trying to make up his mind about me. After about twenty seconds or so he frowns and asks me: ‘Sir, why are you not a woman?’

Though this lesson took place a couple of years ago, I can still recall my feelings of surprise upon hearing the boy’s question. How was I to answer his question? What did he actually mean by it? As happened most of the time during my fieldwork when a student asked me a complicated or unexpected question that I could not answer straightaway, I just said something unclear and quickly turned my back, pretending to be distracted by something else. However, on this occasion,

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I instantly realized that his question was interesting because it had revealed an important expectation that the boy had: that sexuality education classes were to be taught by women.

This lesson took place near the end of my anthropological fieldwork among Dutch sexual health professionals in the Netherlands as part of a project on religious and secular approaches to sexuality (see introduction). By that time, I had already attended many of their meetings on sex education and had gained some insights into their understandings of sexuality in relation to their views on the role of religion and the merits of secular approaches to sexuality. However, the gendering of sex education classes that we were teaching – which is an important topic of discussion in academic debates on sex education (e.g. Davidson 1996; Allen 2006) – had never been discussed among these professionals. The boy's question thus pointed to an interesting mismatch between what went on during sex education classes taught in classrooms and the features that were discussed by sexual health professionals during their evaluation of these sex education lessons.

In this article, I draw on my anthropological findings to explore how the gendering of sexuality¹ in sex education (e.g. Davidson 1996; Allen 2006), the gendering of the secular² (Cady and Fessenden 2013; Toldy et al. 2015) and secular bodies (Hirschkind 2011; Wiering 2017; Scheer et al. 2019) are related. Building on the work of

¹ I use the term 'sex' to refer to biological, chromosomal and other manifestations in secondary sexual characteristics. Seen in this light, all humans have a sex (XX, XY, intersex), though of course the social obsession with one's sex shows that gender and sex are impossible to separate totally. I employ the term 'sexuality' to refer to sexual practices such as oral sex and intercourse. Finally, I use the term 'gender' as 'a highly inflected concept that is performative and specific to race, ethnicity, geographical location, era, age bracket, education, ability, religion, and other demographic' (Richie 2019: 379).

² In order to relate properly to academic discussions about the secular, I will stick to the terminology employed in these debates and use the term 'secular' to refer to nonreligious phenomena (see Wiering 2020 for a critique on this utilization of the term 'secular').

feminist historian Joan Scott (2018), I employ a post-secularist lens (see also Knibbe 2018), which I understand as one that assumes it is not only religion but also secularity that 'has a purpose and a set of effects that produce a particular vision of the world – a vision that shapes and is accepted as reality, even as it misrepresents history.' (Scott 2018: 9). Many scholars have called for more critical ethnographic inquiry into the secular, but so far not many such studies have been conducted. This article provides such an ethnographic study of secularity.

In what follows, I investigate how Dutch sex educators' notion of liberal and secular sexuality was reified in the concrete setting of sex education classes. The classroom has frequently been identified as an arena for the construction of gender and sexuality, but these observations have only rarely been brought into larger conversations about religion and secularity (see Rasmussen 2012 and Krebbekx 2019 for two exceptions). This article will use these sex education classes as a case study to explore the cultivation of secular gendered normativities. It will nuance the popular narrative that secular forms of sexuality have moved beyond the sexual constraints that religious sexualities are still facing. In addition, it will provide further insights into the cultivation of secular feminine and masculine sexualities, which are proposed as superior secular alternatives.

The article argues that current forms of secular sex education classes in the Netherlands communicate a binary heterosexual understanding of sexuality, which ascribes feminine sexuality the role of sexuality managers and masculine sexuality the role of passive observers. The promotion of these roles in sex education classes implies that many women are cultivated that it is their task to remain burdened with a challenging and pressuring responsibility, whereas most men are subtly exempted from having to take up such a responsible role in thinking about sexuality. Through sex education classes, these differences between masculine and feminine sexuality become deeply ingrained in how students

understand, approach and indeed (will) experience sexuality. One can thus observe how sex education classes serve to cultivate youngsters' particular interpretations of and affects related to supposedly natural feminine and masculine talents, which then help re-establish secular associations of women with responsibilities and roles in managing the private sphere, and men, by implication, with duties in the public sphere.

This article proceeds as follows. First, I present a concise overview of two important fields of research in the study of the secular that I bring together in this article: the study of secularity and its entanglements of sexuality and gender; and the study of secular bodies and affect. Then I turn to debates about the specific context of this article: sex education classes. Subsequently, I present my fieldwork findings to introduce the reader to the emancipatory aims that most sexual health professionals in the Netherlands embrace and how they seek to pursue these goals through their profession in particular ways. Building on this, I reflect on the ways that these professionals integrate their emancipatory ideals in their sex education classes to finally extrapolate these findings to the discussion about the gendering and embodiment of the secular.

Sexuality, Gender and Secularity in the Netherlands

In academia, the idea of religion as *the* troublemaker in clashes over sexuality and gender is increasingly nuanced (Scott 2009, 2018). In a similar vein, the idea that a farewell to religion implies sexual liberation has also received increasing criticism (Rasmussen 2012; Cady and Fessenden 2013; Scott 2009, 2018). Rather, scholars now mostly agree that the encounters between the secular and the religious produce these contestations related to sexuality and gender.

In her 2018 book *Sex and Secularism*, Scott elucidates how in secular societies gender and politics are interconnected. To understand this, it is important to realize that gender on the one hand and democratic politics on the other, are

both characterized by an irresolvable indeterminacy (Scott 2018: 190). Writes Scott:

There is no ultimate explanation for the difference of the sexes and no concrete embodiment for democratic politics. Each relies on the other for certainty: the supposed natural difference of the sexes explains why men predominate in politics (and in many other spheres as well), and the reference to that natural difference as a justification for politics secures gender inequality—explaining it not as a constructed social inequality, but as a fact of nature. (Scott 2018: 190-191)

Scott supports this argument by presenting many examples where men, in various historical and geographical contexts, draw on arguments about the supposed natural place of women in society (the private sphere) to justify the latter's exclusion from, among other things, politics. Gender referred its attributions to nature; politics naturalized its hierarchies by with reference to gender (Scott 2018: 22).

Key to this gendering of secular societies is the latter's emphasis on the private/public dichotomy, which according to Scott is one of the principles that lies at the heart of secularity. The point is that this emphasis not only installs a particular division in society, but that this division is strongly gendered. Thus, while claiming to protect the public sphere from irrational religious baloney and dogmatism, in practice secularism separates women and men into different categories associated with different tasks, affects and qualities (2018: 13). This article explores how Scott's analysis of the entanglements of gender, religion and secularity in relation to the public-private division helps to make sense of the gendering of sex education.

A second area of research inquiry within the study of the secular will shed further light on the entanglements of gender, secularity and sex education: the study of secular bodies, forms of embodiment and affect (e.g. Hirschkind 2011; Wiering 2017; Scheer et al. 2019). The 2019 volume *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions: European Configurations* develops further Asad's (2003) argument about secular appreciations of particular forms of emotions and affects. The

authors argue that a secular body might approve of particular embodied virtues (such as rationality) and disapprove of others (particular emotions). The authors argue that ‘the secularity of a subject will not only be found in her propositional knowledge, but also in the embodied actions of perception, emotion and comportment.’ (Scheer et al. 2019: 5). Surprisingly, however, there is not much literature on how secular bodies or these secular affects are gendered.

This specific lens on bodies and affect provides an interesting perspective with which to investigate the gendering of sex education classes, as it urges one to think about gender on the more secluded level of perception, feeling and sensibility. What kind of gendered embodied actions, understandings and feelings do secular sex education classes advocate? And what ways of perceiving and experiencing sexuality are, perhaps unintentionally, cultivated through such lessons?

Religion and Gender in Sex Education

Many academic discussions about sex education debate the (alleged) differences between comprehensive sex education (CSE) and abstinence-only (AO) education (e.g. Lesko 2010; Lamb, Lustig and Graling 2013). Put concisely, the notion of AO education captures methods that highlight abstinence as the only morally right path, which many participating in these discussions associate with tradition, backwardness and conservative religion-infused public politics. CSE, purportedly in contrast to AO, stands for a broader discussion of sexuality, which in these academic debates is associated with modernity, scientific accuracy and the freedom to talk about and enact sexuality (*idem*).

Recently, however, CSE has increasingly become subject to criticism. It has been criticized for its unacknowledged normative features, such as its tacit anti-religious sentiments (Rasmussen 2012). Others have highlighted that its implicit neoliberal focus champions individual choice (Lesko 2010; Lamb et al. 2013). And yet others have pointed to the particular liberal notion of agency undergirding these lessons, which leaves

little room for other interpretations of agency (Roodsaz 2018).

Though I sympathize with the criticisms of CSE, I have also noted that they often limit their scope to interrogating its written content, thus not examining the practicalities and embodied dimensions of these lessons. As Willemijn Krebbekx (2019: 3-4) argued, one can also explore the variety of practices that together constitute a sex education. I agree with Krebbekx that, in addition to the increasing number of critical studies that aim to unravel the normativities that underpin policy documents or sex education curricula, it is also important to research the ‘empirical mess’ of sex education classes (Krebbekx 2019: 4). As Krebbekx shows, there are many important differences between written course curricula on the one hand and actual lessons taught by sex educators on the other. I suggest that the difference between written theory and embodied practice will undoubtedly influence the ways students come to understand and experience sexuality, particularly on the tacit level of perception and experience.

Many studies of sex education have explored how these classes are gendered, and two major patterns can be distinguished here. First, quite a few scholars have pointed to the lack of attention to feminine sexual pleasure in particular (e.g. Fine 1988; Allen 2006; Lamb 1997). Sex education classes have long limited their focus to discussing sexuality as simply meaning sexual intercourse, which, among other problems, implies a strong emphasis on masculine rather than feminine forms of sexual pleasure. Realizing this, scholars have argued for the inclusion of sexual pleasure in sex education (e.g. Allen and Carmody 2012).

A second pattern relates to the observation that sex education classes often entail an extravagant focus on the notion of boys as ‘sexual predators’ who need to learn to domesticate their sexual urges ((Tolman et al. 2003: 9; DePalma and Francis 2014; Davidson 1996). Seeking to combat sexual violence and other forms of undesired sexual behavior, many sex education classes articulate an image of men as needing

disciplinary moralities in order to learn to control themselves sexually.

Having observed both gendered patterns in their ethnographic study of sex education in South Africa, DePalma and Francis discuss the implications such a gendering of sexuality can have:

A key element of heteronormativity is that girls and boys are socialized into different gender roles in ways that propagate the patriarchy, and these differences are viewed as the natural order of things. [In our own research,] we noticed a tendency for teachers to cast boys as predatory and girls as victims of sexual predation, either by their peers or by older boys or men. Teachers stopped short of questioning these roles as emerging from a heteronormative society, instead feeding into the normative by casting them as natural aspects of male and female sexuality. Such essentialist gendered expectations can serve as self-fulfilling prophecies, and may be transmitted and reinforced unconsciously in well-meaning educational interventions meant to protect girls. (DePalma and Francis 2014: 626)

Considering these observations, I deem it interesting to think about DePalma and Francis's observations in relation to Scott's broader analysis of the gendered binaries between the public and private sphere, and between the secular and the religious. So, how does the cultivation of these gender roles through sex education classes relate to the categories of the secular and the religious?

In what follows, I draw on my fieldwork among secular sexual health organizations in the Netherlands to explore what the gendering of sex education looks like in the Netherlands. Between 2016 and 2018, I conducted thirteen months of fieldwork to study Dutch sex education classes and related activities such as professional seminars on sex education. I observed fifteen sex education classes taught by different professional organizations and also taught thirty such lessons myself as a trained volunteer. The sex education classes aimed at teaching people (students, their parents, other professionals, migrants) about sexuality. In addition, I interviewed several sexologists, some general practitioners and nineteen sex educators.

Improving Dutch Sexual Wellbeing

While learning about sexuality by spending time among sexual health professionals, I soon came to understand that most of my interlocutors had reflected extensively on the topics of sexuality and gender. Most of them identified as women who, through their work, sought to improve marginalized people's sexual wellbeing and their position in society more generally. They wanted to support those they considered to be in need: HIV-positive people, people who felt rejected by society because of their sexual orientation, girls and young women who (had) experienced sexual violence, and so on. Motivated by their stories, my interlocutors had chosen a profession through which they sought to support people in similar situations. Janneke's account exemplifies this trajectory. Janneke was a 32-year-old woman who taught and coordinated sex education classes for students but also parents. She explained what motivated her:

Well, I worked abroad with women's groups, student groups, and we worked on social issues [like] pregnancy, and there was a lack of awareness related to that topic. But also about abortions, which happened a lot there. And abortion was a topic that one could not speak about there, so I think that has triggered me to make sure that [conversations about abortion] do take place here. When I came back to the Netherlands, I wanted to initiate conversations [about issues like abortion] among children at school. [...]. To let people speak about sex.

Many interlocutors similarly perceived the lack of conversations about sexuality in the context of their work to be rather problematic, as they were convinced sexuality was an important topic.

In most of my interviews, my interlocutors provided me with concrete illustrations of how their work, be it voluntary or paid, had proved relevant. Isa, for instance, a 57-year-old woman who had worked for the CHS for a long time already, illustrated numerous times why she finds it so important that migrants should be provided with reliable, factual information about sexuality. For instance, she said:

A lot of people in asylum-seekers' centres come from societies where proper education is rather rare. It happens very often that they start asking me: 'Yeah, but how, uhm, can you explain to me how one gets pregnant?' Well, so [you see] people come across a lot of stuff on the internet, and they can't really determine which source is reliable and which is not. [...] Yeah, so, if nobody stops me from doing it, I try to provide as many sex education classes for these groups as I can: up to eight lessons even!

Isa was convinced that these migrants benefited from her lessons, and she kept on providing examples which, according to her, illustrated this. For example, she mentioned that people are often convinced that it is easy to spot the difference between a broken and an unbroken hymen, which she considered nonsense.

Both Janneke and Isa were convinced they were contributing to improving people's (sexual) wellbeing, and this was the case for most of my interlocutors: each of them appeared passionate about their (volunteering) work, and they deemed a successful execution of their job to be both of individual and social importance. This shared motivation, importantly, also influenced the ways in which these professionals did their job. In pursuing the aim of improving people's sexual wellbeing, for example, my interlocutors particularly accentuated the need to change the gendering of sexuality. Most sex educators I spoke with, for example, had integrated a particular emancipatory aim into their lessons. They stressed that girls also had the right to kiss as many boys as they wanted. Sometimes this was a message they had integrated themselves, but sometimes the message was part of the discourse that the organization they worked for had integrated. We thus observe how my interlocutors tried to integrate an emancipatory agenda in their work, which hints at the normativity undergirding sex education curricula.

Anouk, a twenty-year-old sexual health consultant, told me that, during sex education classes, she sometimes pretended to have a slip of the tongue, as she casually said 'a boy and his boyfriend'. Often a student would correct her, after

which she could point out the student's heteronormative assumptions. I have also seen how the 32-year-old CHS employee Miranda took quite some time and patience to convince a boy in class that men too might not be in the mood for sex. Both Anouk's and Miranda's endeavours corresponded to their broader aim of improving people's sexual wellbeing by correcting the gendering of sexuality. To correct someone, however, implies that one is convinced of one's own correctness. So, what is assumed to be correct?

The Social/Natural Body Distinction

Most of my interlocutors departed from the idea of a clear distinction between the body's natural and social features. The natural features were seen as characteristics that the body was believed just to happen to have, which implicitly meant they were ascribed a lot of authority. Examples I came across were the colour of one's eyes and the shape and size of one's genitals. Of course, one could influence or adapt these features, and hence invite the social, but I noted a tacit disapproval among my interlocutors regarding such modifications of the natural body, even those that are common in Dutch society. An example here is the practice of shaving one's genitals. Though Miranda, in one of her sex education classes, admitted that this is a frequent practice in the Netherlands, she nevertheless emphasized three times that one was by no means required to do it.

The body's social features, however, were considered to be the outcome of socially inspired modification, and hence they were taken as malleable and not given much authority. They were articulated as matters that people had ascribed to the body themselves. Some were interpreted as positive (e.g. transforming one's body if one *genuinely* felt this was the right thing to do), but most as negative (e.g. changing one's body as a consequence of experiencing social pressure). Natural features, in contrast, were ascribed a veracity: they were deemed to constitute the body in its raw and unspoiled form.

My interlocutors' categorization of embodied features as natural was rarely contested by students. On those few occasions when it was, as when a student questioned it during a sex education class, the teacher simply stated that research had proved it to be a natural characteristic of the body. Alternatively, the sex educator might defend the categorization as natural by giving a personal account they believed underscored the identification. Miranda, for example, re-classified the supposedly natural characteristic that boys are always in the mood for kissing as a social expectation that could be disproved by objective research. She pointed out to one class that one in seven Dutch boys experiences 'unacceptable sexual behaviour' ['Grensoverschrijdend gedrag']. One boy in class immediately contested this, as he found her statement rather hard to believe. 'A guy being groped?' he loudly said, expressing his scepticism. Miranda then said:

Well, once a boy in my class told everyone how he was being chased by a girl in a discotheque. She tried to kiss him all the time, even when he had made his disinterest really clear. The boy then asked the doorman to help him, but he just smiled and said that it [kissing] was nice, so he should just enjoy it instead.

Miranda sought to debunk the social conception that masculine sexuality implies one is always into kissing by highlighting how research findings (one out of seven boys experiences unacceptable sexual behaviour) and her personal experience (the story of the boy in the discotheque) articulate a different, ontologically more accurate natural body.

I noted that this differentiation of the natural body versus the social body provided my interlocutors with a helpful and persuasive scheme through which they could communicate particular notions of sexuality. By distinguishing the natural body from the social body, my interlocutors were equipped to correct supposedly incorrect assumptions of sexuality or gender among the students they were teaching. If features of the body were categorized as social, they could

simply be put forward for discussion in class and, because of their 'socialness', corrected.

For example, a couple of times I observed a sex educator insisting on the impossibility of verifying a woman's claims of virginity by examining the visual appearance of her vagina. They told the class that this idea had simply been made up and that a relationship between the appearance of the vagina and virginity was not a natural characteristic of the body. This example also illustrates how the natural/social differentiation can be used to problematize undesired cultural and/or religious norms. In this example, the social body/natural body binary is implicitly mobilized to condemn the ostensibly questionable practices of Muslim Others. As Isa's comments above indicates, the lesson about the hymen is considered particularly relevant for Muslim migrants, as they are assumed to have learned differently in their country of origin. This, then, also shows how secular knowledge is proposed as a superior, natural alternative to religiously constructed knowledge.

Because of the usefulness of the social body/natural body distinction, people who knew a lot about such natural facts, or who had the knowledge to separate the natural body clearly from the social body, were highly respected. In fact, since I told all my interlocutors that I was doing research on sexuality and worked for a university, people expected me to have mastered such knowledge. For example, during one of Jacintha's trainings for upcoming sex educators, the group, including me, was shown an unfamiliar object. Unfortunately, nobody in the group could answer Jacintha's question as to what this object was. Jacintha then turned to me, but I did not know either. Then she was a little puzzled and after a short while she said 'I expected *you* of all people to know this, Jelle!'. Sadly, I had unintentionally disproved her hypothesis that a researcher studying sexuality always would be aware of what the organ of the clitoris looked like in its entirety.

The strategy of categorizing embodied features as either social or natural appeared very

effective in convincing students about the (il) legitimacy of particular practices and notions. Most sex education classes I attended therefore focused on separating the two. Cases that perhaps were not so easy to allocate to one of these categories were often avoided because of the large amount of time that it would require to elucidate the complexities here: a lesson most often only lasted about fifty minutes. Homosexuality, for example, was thus often avoided because sex educators knew that this topic would evoke a lot of controversy and was difficult to explain. From my own experiences as a sex educator, I found that a lot of students consider homosexuality gross, and it requires a lot of time and skill to deal appropriately with the controversy that emerges when one begins to talk about the topic.

From the examples discussed here, we can already see that gender plays a big role in the social/natural distinction, with the category of the 'natural' being harnessed for emancipatory purposes, such as closing what my interlocutors called 'the orgasm gap'. In the following, I dig more deeply into the underlying notions of the gendering of sexuality that are navigated in sex education classes.

Developing Protocols versus Disciplining Oneself

As I stated earlier, most people in the field where I conducted my research identified as cis-gender women.³ For example, all the sex educators from CHS I spoke with were women. In the organization where I volunteered I happened to be the only male volunteer, and indeed, male sex educators in the Netherlands are quite rare. This observation, catapulted by the question of the boy described in the introduction, made me wonder about the consequences of this imbalance and the image of sexuality that it conveyed to students.

I decided to re-visit my notes, which drew me back to the sex education classes I had attended

at the beginning of my fieldwork. Some of these classes were developed especially for parents. In these lessons, parents were taught how to stimulate their children to engage in dialogues about sexuality. Such education classes were held at schools and featured a theatrical performance of a scenario that many parents would recognize. After the performance, the parents in the audience were then asked to evaluate and discuss the behaviour of the parents as shown in the performance.

The first performance was about a mother who attempted to initiate a conversation with her eighteen-year-old daughter. Her daughter was planning to embark on a holiday to Spain, her first vacation without her parents. Her parents expected her to engage in her first sexual encounter during this trip. This expectation, and the parents' conviction that a conversation was needed to avoid the daughter engaging in sexual activity that she later might regret was not contested by the audience. Some parents pointed out that the conversation should have taken place a few years earlier, but none of them disputed the general requirement for a dialogue on this issue. The second scenario addressed a boy who had been caught watching porn on his father's laptop. Again, a conversation about sexuality was presumed to be required, and again none of the parents disputed this. Additionally, all the parents in the audience appeared to agree with the father's message to the boy: porn was fake, and, among many other problematic features, very unfriendly towards women. The parents in the audience advised the father to emphasize that porn was not like real sexual activity at all.

The two scenarios illustrate how girls are perceived as being in need of a conversation that serves as a protective measure, whereas boys are not considered to be similarly in need, except perhaps to discipline themselves. The actors and the parents in the audience both appeared a little anxious about the fact that the daughter would probably become sexually active, a concern which was not similarly depicted in the context of the son's developing sexual activities. Instead,

³ An important exception here should be made here for people taking up higher positions in organizations.

it was only emphasized that the son should become sexually active in a proper way in order not to harm anyone. Bearing the social/natural body paradigm in mind, we can observe how the girl is encouraged to develop her feminine sexuality by what is suggested to be her natural body: to ignore forms of social pressure that would force her to do things she might later regret, and instead to discover and clarify her natural preferences. The boy, on the other hand, is advised that he needs to discipline his masculine sexuality: that, in contrast to the men in the porn, he needs to respect women and treat them in ways corresponding to their wishes. In sum, feminine sexuality is about discovering one's natural body and remaining faithful to it, while masculine sexuality invites socialization.

Another sex education class sheds further light on this gendering of sexuality. Again, it concerned an educational theatre play, though this time it was aimed at students. In this performance, a girl (Linda) and her boyfriend (Nick) have been engaged in a long-distance relationship for a year or so. The audience is told that they will meet each other during the upcoming holidays. We are also informed that Linda has told Nick via WhatsApp that she will be up for sexual practices during that holiday. Since both are still virgins, this implies they might each experience their first sexual encounter. However, during these holidays, when both perceive the moment to be there – Nick surprises Linda with a late-night picnic – Linda suddenly changes her mind and says: 'I would prefer to do this another time, is that alright with you?'. Nick says he understands, though he clearly appears a bit disappointed. Later in the show, Linda does agree to have sex because she feels pressured as a consequence of having said no the previous time. After the sex, she runs off stage crying.

During the plenary discussion afterwards, a boy and a girl from the audience are asked to come to the stage and to help out the characters with some advice. The boy from the audience is asked to help Nick, and the girl to help Linda. The boy tells Nick: 'If a guy wants to have sex with

a girl, he can only do so if the girl really wants that as well.' Nick agrees with him, but he also insists that Linda had, in fact, already given her agreement via WhatsApp. Therefore, he maintains, he does have the right ['ik heb er recht op'] to have sex with her. The boy from the audience rejects this argument by stating that a girl is simply allowed to change her mind.

The girl from the audience advises Linda that she should have been clearer both to herself and Nick about what she wanted. Linda, however, retorts that she is not so sure about that because that might cause Nick to leave her. The girl from the audience is not impressed by this counter-argument and tells Linda that, in that case, Nick would not have been an appropriate boyfriend anyway. The discussion's moderator does not need to interfere much: the conversation goes exactly according to plan.

Again, I believe this performance reflects how feminine sexuality is cultivated to be about conceptualizing personal, indeed supposedly natural boundaries and to communicate these clearly. This is a recommendation that hinges on the assumption, concretely depicted in the play, that girls may otherwise run the risk of engaging in sexual acts that they might later regret. Masculine sexuality, on the other hand, is articulated to be about domesticating themselves, which includes being attentive to what girls like and do not like. In contrast to men in porn, boys need to sense and take into account the protocols that girls have developed, including when girls themselves are perhaps not so clear about these. They need to learn to deal with their discomfort regarding sexuality in proper ways – which is often given as the explanation for boys' problematic behaviour – and not to turn to inappropriate forms of assertiveness as a way out. Girls are taught what to do, boys are taught what not to do.

Taking these understandings into account, the idea that women are slightly better suited to teach sex education makes sense. Boys are not those who set up the protocols; they are the ones who have to live up to them. To take care of sexu-

ality, it seems, becomes a women's issue. It is not difficult to see how these gender roles hinge on – and thus discursively communicate – a notion of boys as predatory and of girls as potential victims of sexual predation, which was also observed in the sex education classes in South Africa referred to earlier (DePalma and Francis 2014).

What is more, looking at this point from the perspective of a former sex educator, I recall how I myself noted how my own embodied experience and gender influenced how I replied to students' questions. Many questions from students, for example, required an answer that (partly) built on my own experiences and views. While performing as a teacher, I have been asked about issues such as relationships, one-night stands, how to ask someone out, and so on. Regardless of my training, which emphasized to me the importance of at least trying to downplay my own views and experiences and instead to encourage the students to develop their own opinions, I am sure that my own perspectives, obviously influenced by sex and gender, often were reflected and thus communicated in all my classes.

Considering how gender or sex may influence one's sexual experiences, one may wonder whether, sometimes, sex education classes taught by women may relate more to girls than to boys, as (sexual) experiences are obviously gendered. Moreover, taking into account the large majority of female teachers in the field, one could say that this imbalance might even further confirm associations of women as sexuality managers, resulting in a circularity. Both these suggestions, therefore, might also invite another question: how does the gendering in the context of sex education classes relate to perceptions of gendered difference in society at large?

Discussion

If one agrees with my argument that the sex education classes I presented here convey an image of sexuality where the responsibility for the proper performance of sexual practices lies within the duties of feminine sexuality – while masculine sexuality is subtly granted exemption

from this challenging task – one can also reflect on the larger social understandings this representation might evoke or prolong. Scott's work, introduced earlier in this article, is helpful in this regard. Let me briefly recall Scott's argument: in many secular societies gender refers its attributions to nature, whereas politics naturalizes its patriarchal hierarchies with reference to gender.

In light of my own observations of sex education classes, I suggest that a similar interpretation can be developed. We observe how a presumed feminine talent to teach about sexuality is cultivated, which is then pointed at, and thus employed, to explain the imbalance of feminine engagement with issues in the private sphere. Or, looking at this circular argument from the other side, we can observe how a particular incapacity ascribed to masculine behaviour (a supposed natural incompetence to take responsibility for sexual practices) serves to cultivate in boys an estrangement from responsible sexuality, and thus between masculinity and the private sphere.⁴ Consequently, sex education, which is a private topic *par excellence*, is tacitly understood as best being taught by women, and the lack of male educators in Dutch society serve as evidence to some that this is indeed the case. The young male student's question: 'Why are you not a woman?' seems to stem from such an understanding. According to the boy, women should be teaching about sexuality, not men.

The possibility that this lack of male sex educators could be ascribed to the fact that masculine sexuality is taught as being about taking up a passive role in communicating about sexuality, because males are considered to be 'always up for it' and in danger of becoming predatory, is not considered in this line of reasoning. Moreover, if, like the men discussed in Scott's work,

⁴ One could argue that teaching at a school is a professional and public activity, which hence is part of the public sphere rather than the private sphere. However, since it concerns teaching about sexuality, a topic that many consider to be a rather intimate and private one, I do consider teaching about it as an activity that falls within the scope of the private sphere.

one departs from a dichotomous and naturalized notion of men versus women, the perception that women are more talented in communicating on private matters may steer them away from participation in other domains, for which they are not considered to have a similar talent. Hence it seems to me that Scott's argument is relevant here: interpretations of supposedly natural talents help re-establish particular gendered differentiations in society.

Building on the observations presented here, I would also add that the construction and cultivation of sexuality as a feminine topic might discourage forms of communication, which subsequently may contribute to problematic misunderstandings and situations. Men's assigned passive role regarding thinking about and discussing sexuality, obviously combined with a lot of other factors that go beyond the scope of this article, may lead to situations where they might not themselves feel motivated to partake in conversations about sexuality, nor take any responsibility. And if they join in the conversation, they easily make mistakes and are disciplined for them, as their masculine sexuality dictates that they take a more passive role.

An example of such disciplining occurred during a sex education class I attended when a boy asked the female teacher a somewhat special question that was not well received by his classmates. He said: 'Miss, can I ask. Let's say I have sex with a girl, and I am wearing a condom. Then, I go out [of her vagina], upon which she gives me a blowjob. Can she then get an STD [from herself]?' One of the girls attending then loudly expressed her amazement: 'What kind of weird ideas do you have man, ha-ha.' The whole class laughed loudly, and the teacher smiled and said, 'Well I do not really think this is likely to happen, but if so, she can get a STD from herself indeed. It will spread.' Back then, sitting at the back, I was quite sure that the boy would not dare to ask any other question, and indeed he did not. Nor did any other boy, which suggests that the class's laughing had indeed disciplined the boy, and discouraged others from asking questions.

However, the sexual behaviour that is claimed to constitute feminine sexuality may similarly lead to difficulties that hinder productive forms of communication about sex. Women, as we have seen, are pressured to become experts in developing protocols, which also implies that dialogues about sex are expected to be initiated by them. On one occasion, I taught a class where some girls lamented that they hated the fact that boys always expected *them* to initiate a conversation about sex. This was the lesson where the seventeen-year old girl whom I quoted in the introduction asked me to encourage boys to initiate conversations about sex. She was unhappy about the complex task of always having to take care of the conversations about sex that she felt were allocated to her.

This gendering of responsibilities concerning communication regarding sexuality also extends to informal education on sexuality. As one sexual health professional and mother once told me, in the Netherlands women are often expected to have 'the talk' with their children and are most expected to take care of contraceptives. Moreover, the ostensibly best way of engaging in sexuality healthily, referred to by my interlocutors in sex education classes as 'double Dutch', suggests that men bring a condom, while women use the physically and mentally obviously much more demanding birth control pill.

Conclusion

Beginning with the observation that most of the people I worked with were motivated women who aspired to improve the lives of young women, in this article I have explored the gendering of sexuality as conveyed in sex education in the Netherlands. In pursuing their aim of improving sexual wellbeing, my interlocutors often sought to correct supposedly incorrect assumptions about gender roles among both students and parents. In the case of women, my interlocutors focused on pointing out natural features of their bodies that are often downplayed. At the same time, my interlocutors drew on these natural features to problematize and correct

other features they considered social and hence made up.

In the case of boys, however, it was mainly their natural bodies that were supposedly in need of domestication. Boys were encouraged first to observe and carefully consider girls' protocols and signs of communication. These understandings of the natural body are questionable, to say the least. For example, women are encouraged only to engage in sexual behaviour that they will not regret later. However, regret has very much to do with the complex social and personal meanings assigned to sex, which indicates that what may feel naturally 'good' to these women is not just natural. This is of the many examples that shows how secular sex education classes in the Netherlands cultivate particular sensibilities and affects.

I have also suggested that these cultivated feminine and masculine forms of sexuality contribute to an understanding of sexuality as a women's topic, which further (re-)establishes conventional understandings of sexuality. The transmitted roles assigned to masculine and feminine sexuality imply that many women are burdened with a challenging and pressuring responsibility, whereas most men are subtly exempted from having to take up an active role in thinking about sex. Women are made responsible for sex, whereas the main culprits of sexual harassment and sexual violence (men) are discouraged from thinking about sex or taking up an active role in conversations about it.

Similar to what Shannon (2016) observes in Australian sex education curricula, not only the implicit assertion that only two genders and two sexes exist, and that both result from the other, but also the significant disregard of LGBTQ+ sexuality in sex education classes, illustrates the problematic dominance of the heterosexual gender matrix in the Netherlands (Butler 2007). So, regardless of the Netherlands' often ascribed status as largely secular and 'thus' as sexually progressive, my fieldwork shows it is no guarantee of the acceptance of homosexuality, nor of gender equality more broadly.

This article also provides empirical substantiation to the many claims about secular normativities, as it exposes some of the gendered, embodied and naturalized assumptions that both underpin and enable secular sexual politics to operate in the first place. Sometimes, as in the case of Isa's lesson about the hymen, it becomes very explicit how the secular body is put forward as a superior, supposedly natural alternative to the religious constructed body.

However, much more often, the inculcation of secular affect takes place more implicitly. This article's focus on both the gendering of the secular *and* secular bodies and affect is shown as important in this regard, as it helps to shed light on the more tacit normativities of the secular. Like Scott in her 2018 book, this article has presented some of the gendered and embodied notions of sexuality and sexual experience that accommodate and support forms of gender inequality in secular societies, and which become re-established through the cultivation and gendering of particular feelings and understandings in sex education. It illustrates how dichotomous representations of both the natural and social body are developed and drawn upon to communicate understandings of sexuality that support emancipatory ambitions, but which, paradoxically, also contribute to a further entrenchment of undesired patriarchal notions of feminine and masculine sexuality.

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