Chapter 6

“Do I Score Points If I Say ‘No’?” Negotiating Sexual Boundaries in a Changing Normative Landscape
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Abstract

Negotiating sexual interactions with a partner is deeply intimate, yet it is also fundamentally influenced by surrounding social norms. We conducted in-depth interviews with 68 ethnically diverse Dutch young men and women (16–21) about their sexual experiences to understand how norms and values shape their sexual negotiations. Narratives showed the continued relevance of heteronormative gender roles, with participants framing sexual negotiations as a contest between opposing sides, dictated by different rules for women and men. Other narratives suggested that the normative landscape may be changing, with women drawing on discourses of autonomy and men using mutuality as a guiding principle. Our findings indicate that while conventional gender norms and scripts continue to prescribe sexual negotiations, many Dutch youth also exercise alternative discourses in their sexual relationships. Efforts to reduce sexual coercion must incorporate attention to both the old and emerging gender norms that govern sexual negotiations.

6.1 Introduction

Recently #MeToo visualised worldwide the interrelatedness of sexual coercion with gender dynamics and power relations. However, many efforts to reduce sexual coercion lack this perspective. Clear and open communication about sexual boundaries is viewed as a key in preventing negative sexual experiences (Mastro and Zimmer-Gembeck 2015; Widman, Choukas-Bradley, Helms, Golin, and Prinstein 2014). This is reflected in public campaigns regarding consent, such as those advocating affirmative consent. These efforts are undeniably important, but may fall short insofar as they rely on individual-focused behavioral models that neglect the dynamic and multidimensional nature of sexual interactions and the complexity of sexual negotiations (Amaro, Raj, and Reed 2001; Vanwesenbeeck, van Zessen, Ingham, Jaramazovic, and Stevens 1999).

Studies of partnered sexual interactions reveal a wide range of experiences that fall between unquestionable violation and unequivocal consent (e.g., Bay-Cheng and Bruns 2016; Impett and Peplau 2003; Katz and Tirone 2009; O’Sullivan and Allgeier 1998; Pascoe and Hollander 2016). Sexual negotiations are also not finite, linear transactions that terminate in a single act (i.e., consent, refusal, or coercion). As Carmody and Ovenden
(2013, p. 802) point out, consent is a dynamic and continuous “process of mutual negotiation rather than a one-off agreement”. During sexual interactions, partners are not simply trying to translate sexual desire into sexual behaviour. Instead, people may want and simultaneously not want to engage in a sexual interaction for a host of reasons, whether sexual (e.g., arousal, curiosity) or not (e.g., to maintain a relationship, for social status; Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005). Gendered norms and conditions complicate and muddy this process of negotiation in many ways. For instance, young women may feel compelled to offer “token resistance” (Muehlenhard et al. 1991) as a tactic to avoid being seen as easy, while young men are socialized to view “no” as an obstacle to be overcome or overpowered (e.g., “working a yes out”; Sanday 2007). Gendered prescriptions and consequences of sexual activity foster ambivalence (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005), uncertainty (Beres, Senn and McCaw 2014), and power imbalances (Amaro et al. 2001; Gavey 2005).

Our aim in the current study was to explore how young people negotiate sexual intimacy and sexual boundaries in the social context in which they are located. We were particularly interested in the impact of gender norms, but also recognize that gender does not operate in isolation from other social identities and forces (Shields 2008). Therefore, we also attended to participants’ intersecting ethnic and class backgrounds. The opportunity to examine sexual negotiations among a diverse sample of Dutch youth is also an important expansion of the literature regarding sexual consent and negotiation, which largely rests on a narrow sampling base of undergraduate women (Elliott 2016; Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski and Peterson 2016). Such diversified, contextualized knowledge is necessary to develop strategies that address the full complement of forces that shape youths’ sexual negotiations and can effectively diminish negative experiences such as regret, self- and victim-blaming, and sexual coercion.

**Old Rules: Feminine Virtue and Masculine Virility**
Heteronormative gender prescriptions are foundational components of sexual negotiations between men and women (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Gavey 2005; Hird and Jackson 2001; O’Sullivan and Allgeier 1998). These scripts situate men and women in opposition, with young men cast as virile pleasure-seekers who are active, powerful, and persistent and young women serving as their foils, contradictorily characterized as both virtuous gatekeepers and as passive, subordinate, and compliant (Gavey 2005). Studies indicate that even in the Netherlands, widely regarded as a sexually progressive and gender egalitarian nation, such heteronormative prescriptions endure (Emmerink et al. 2015). Thus sexual negotiations are not simply driven by individuals’ immediate sexual desires and impulses, but follow normative gendered conventions that place women and men at odds and confer dominance and sexual entitlement upon the latter (hence Gavey’s [2005] reference to gender as the “cultural scaffolding of rape”).

**New Norms: Agency and Mutuality**
As persistent and entrenched as conventional gender norms appear to be, they are not the only ideological forces shaping youths’ sexual interactions.
Many scholars are engaged in analyses of contemporary manifestations of young women’s sexuality, debating whether these signify empowerment and/or sexualisation (Gill 2008; Lamb and Peterson 2012; Lerum and Dworkin 2009; McRobbie 2008). Bay-Cheng (2015) proposed that popular representations of young women’s sexual agency should be viewed as reflections of loosening gender norms as well as functions of culturally saturating neoliberal ones. She argued that young women are now not only accountable to the gendered moralism of the virgin-slut construct, but also must adhere to the neoliberal valorisation of individual liberty and personal responsibility by making the case that their sexual choices (whether activity or abstinence) and any attendant consequences are entirely their own. In contrast to the more general psychological construct of agency describing an individual’s capacity for willed action, this neoliberal concept of agency operates as a cultural imperative and hinges on one’s presentation as a self-determining and personally responsible actor motivated solely by individual ambition. Bay-Cheng sees this strand of neoliberal ideology as intersecting with gendered norms to create a new normative space in which young women must convincingly present themselves as in control of themselves and their sexualities in order to be respected and to avoid derision.

It is important to note that young women may not have equivalent access to this discursive reframing of sexual activity. Classism and racism have always combined with gendered sexual stereotypes to leave women with low socio-economic status (low-SES) and non-White young women prone to accusations of licentious (as opposed to agentic) sexual behaviour (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong and Seeley 2014; Attwood 2007; Bettie 2003). As Armstrong and colleagues point out, “slut” is used on U.S. college campuses as much as a class-based slur as a gendered sexual one. Finally, Armstrong and Hamilton (2013) also argued that low-SES college women may have less access to a neoliberal discourse of female sexual agency given its mismatch with the prevalence of conventional gender norms in low-SES communities.

Shifting norms surrounding young women’s sexuality have received the bulk of attention from gender and sexuality studies scholars, but masculinity and men’s experiences of sexuality must also be recognized as diverse, complex, and dynamic (e.g., Allen 2003; Carmody and Ovenden 2013; Casey et al. 2016; McCormack 2012; Wilkins 2009). Just as young women may no longer be judged simply in terms of virtue, young men may no longer feel the need to measure up solely in terms of virility. Pushback against hegemonic masculinity’s relational modes of dominance and exploitation (Connell 2005) has been fuelled by glaring evidence and sharp rebukes not only of specific instances of sexual assault, but also the broader norms, attitudes, and systems that underlie and enable men’s sexual assault, exploitation, stigmatization, and objectification of women (i.e., rape culture; Gavey 2005; Kimmel 2005; Pascoe and Hollander 2016). Just as studies of the lived sexualities of young women reveal a far more complex picture than that captured by the Virgin-Slut dichotomy, only a minority of men enact sexualities founded on hegemonic masculinity (Casey et al. 2016). Instead, many studies find that young men are investing in emotional intimacy (Smiler 2008) and aspire to egalitarian relationships founded on mutual care.
and a balance of power (Gerson 2010; Seal and Ehrhardt 2003).

6.2 Method

Procedure
The study was conducted by Rutgers, a Dutch nongovernmental organization focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights, in order to develop a new public health campaign to prevent sexual coercion among youth. The research was conducted according to Dutch legal and ethical guidelines for responsible research, including voluntary participation, safeguards against participant identity disclosure, and respect for participants (Code of Ethics for research in the social and behavioural sciences involving human participants 2016). All names in this paper are pseudonyms.

We interviewed Dutch young people (aged 16-21) about their motivation to engage or refrain from sexual intimacy, their understandings of sexual boundaries, and their negotiations of sexual interactions. We approached this work with an interest in the various systems and circumstances in which sexual negotiations are embedded, including immediate factors during an interaction, interpersonal dyadic dynamics, and broader cultural norms. We listened not just for how they actually behaved, but for how participants formulated these scripts in the interview itself as a way of discerning the surrounding normative forces.

We posted an invitation to participate in the study on different websites for young people and advertised it on a popular urban radio program, FunX. We also asked educators and social workers to help recruit participants through individual outreach to youth with whom they worked. The call invited people between 16 and 21 years old to participate in interviews about sexuality to guide a new youth sexual health campaign. The interviewers went to youth centres and schools to meet prospective participants and lower the threshold to participate. The interviewers’ team consisted of one male and four female interviewers, including the first and third author. Two thirds of the male participants were interviewed by the male interviewer, as the expectation was that men would talk more freely about sexuality and gender norms with another man. However, we did not identify differential response patterns based on the gender match between interviewers and participants. The confidentiality of participants was strictly safeguarded. Each interview was categorized and analysed with a nickname. Interviews lasted around one and a half hours and took place in different locations as per participant preference, including in a private office at Rutgers and at schools, youth centres, cafes, and hotel lobbies. Participants received 15 euro as compensation for their time. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

Participants
We interviewed 68 young people (37 women; 31 men) between the ages of 16 and 21 (M = 18.24; SD = 1.81) living in towns and rural areas spread across the Netherlands. The participants formed an ethnically diverse group, with slightly more than one-third (23) identifying as White Dutch. One half of the sample identified with one of the four largest ethnic minority groups
in the Netherlands: 12 identified as Moroccan Dutch; 10 as Surinamese Dutch; nine as Antillean Dutch; and three as Turkish Dutch. The remaining 11 participants identified with other non-White ethnic minority groups, including but not limited to Chinese, Afghan, and Nigerian. Two young women identified as bisexual; all the other participants identified as heterosexual. The sexual diversity within the sample was limited, therefore we decided to focus the current analyses only on heterosexual interactions, leaving sexual minority youths’ negotiations of sexual encounters for a future study. No participants openly identified as transgender or intersex people, or as having limited mobility or disabilities, so we do not include these positions in this paper either.

Participants were fairly evenly divided in their level of education: 36 had received vocational training or attended a secondary school in the least academically-oriented track of the Dutch system (categorized as “vocational training”); 32 either were attending higher level secondary school and likely bound for university or were university students at the time of the interview (categorized as “academic education”). Table 1 displays demographic characteristics of the sample by gender.

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**Table 1  Participant Characteristics**

**Interview Protocol**

The interviews followed a semi-structured protocol designed to explore the motivation of participants to engage or refrain from sexual intimacy, their understandings of sexual boundaries, and their negotiations of sexual interactions. Interviewers asked participants to describe their past relationships and sexual encounters, including any negotiations of sexual boundaries. Participants were also asked to describe both ideal and unwanted hypothetical sexual experiences to collect narratives about their social norms and expectations. Examples of these exploratory questions included: “What do you think an ideal sexual relationship would look like?”; “What is important to you in a sexual relationship?”; “What do you see as undesirable or disappointing when it comes to dating and sex?”; and “What kind of situation or behaviour would you consider as going too far or crossing a line when it comes to sex?”

**Analysis Strategy**

In the current study, we looked for the gendered norms on sexuality young women and men of different ethnic and educational backgrounds perceived and how these affected their negotiations of heterosexual interactions. We
adopted an inductive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). The first author began analyses by reading through ten transcripts, selected at random, noting apparently common and contrasting thematic elements among the samples, and drafting a preliminary coding scheme. This initial codebook tracked participants’ descriptions of sexual negotiations, their use of normalizing and/or problematizing themes in these accounts, and information they shared about the social norms they perceived. The third author examined the same ten transcripts using the codebook. The first and third authors then discussed discrepancies in their conceptualizations and amended the coding scheme accordingly. The first and third author then separately coded all remaining transcripts. When complete, the authors met to resolve any discrepancies, so that all applied codes were mutually agreed upon.

6.3 Results

Old Gendered Rules

Playing by the rules
Participants, women and men alike, used various game metaphors (e.g., references to scoring, playing by the rules, losers, players, winners) to describe partnered sexual interactions and negotiations. In this game, women and men are competitors with opposing objectives (for men, to have sex; for women, to get attention without damaging their reputation by having sex) and distinct sets of rules and strategies.

For young women, much of the game hinged on accurately decoding young men’s objectives and desires. Laura: “Do they [men] really expect me to have sex immediately or do they expect me to wait? Do I score points if I say ‘no?’” (White, 17, academic education). Others cited different tactics they used to remain in control and to defend themselves against men’s advances and potential aggression (e.g., paying attention to what they wear, not getting drunk, stay alert, avoiding certain places, having friends close by). As Tessa, like many other women, described, she was constantly assessing and guarding against risks: “When I go out with somebody, I have a whole checklist in my head, checking if this is OK. It’s just, I don’t want to end up in an alley with some guy, you know?” (White, 18, academic education). Other women talked as though they welcomed the contest and preferred for men to challenge them. They felt they could have the upper hand in sexual negotiations if they were strategic. Lisa: “It’s not masculine when a man is shy. I want a man with guts. I can set my own boundaries. Girls are in charge. You just have to play it right.” (White, 20, academic education).

Male participants also referred to the rules of sexual negotiation, including behaviour they considered out-of-bounds. For instance, one young man felt that it was unfair for women to change their minds too far into a sexual encounter. Boris: “I feel that if you are in the middle of it, you cannot back off. That is a horrible turn down. I mean, you could have thought about that earlier” (Russian, 19, vocational training). Others expressed wariness of crossing the line into coercion. Leroy: “There is a boundary between insisting and putting pressure, and seducing. Seduction is a game, insisting
is serious” (Surinamese, 20, academic education). The same participant explained the different value assigned to men’s ability to secure a woman’s sexual consent: “[i]t is a bigger achievement for a guy to get a girl in his bed than the other way around. Boys will always say ‘yes.’” Several men described how gendered sexual norms directed negotiations of sexual consent: that men are driven by an urgent and insatiable desire for (hetero)sex and that women are expected to resist their advances and are responsible for setting boundaries. No participants mentioned the costs to men if they did not display the sort of sex drive ascribed to hegemonic masculinity, but several participants – both women and men – criticized women who deviated from the virtue expected of them. Ryan: “A girl should have class... she should not be cheap” (Surinamese, 16, vocational training). Mary: “If you’re easy, well, you shouldn’t expect them [guys] to pay much attention to you” (White, 20, academic education). Although some participants expressed that they rationally reject the sexual double standard applied to women, they also admitted to judging women for being too sexually active. Fabian: “Well, when you see guys moving quickly from one girl to another, at most they’re seen as careless, as players. But when a girl behaves like that, she’s seen as a slut. I admit, that’s a bit problematic, but still...” (Aruban, 18, academic education).

Crossing a line
The opposed positions of young women and men in negotiating sexual intimacy reflect the different rules and expectations applied to them. Whereas young men were presumed to be singularly focused on their own desires and on one objective (sex), young women must balance multiple obligations and objectives. Young women articulated this double bind, feeling trapped between their own interests and competing social injunctions, resulting in unwanted or coerced sexual activities:

Just before we started kissing, I felt that I didn’t want to go on. But he’d travelled all the way from his home town to visit me and well, it’s stupid of course, but I felt I had to do it. Of course I should have said, “I’m sorry but I don’t want to go on with it,” but I felt I had provoked it, so... (Brenda, White, 17, academic education)

It’s hard to pick the right moment to stop, because I don’t want to ruin the atmosphere. I don’t want to make a bad impression, being prudish or something. [...] So I try to stop, but when I feel like a guy doesn’t want to stop, I try to find a balance, to keep the relationship all right. (Rachel, Antillean, 21, academic education)

Two other excerpts exemplify the divergent positions of young women and men. Kim (White, 19, academic education) felt ambivalence and uncertainty in the lead up to a sexual encounter, in part because she felt torn between priorities:

Well, if you like somebody a lot, but you don’t know if you want to go further, that’s hard. Because you want to pay attention to the other person and you don’t want to be rude. [...] And well, if you’re
in a situation where you don’t want to say bluntly “no” but you don’t feel a heartfelt “yes,” either… So, then it is difficult, in the ten minutes before your clothes are off, to figure out what you do or don’t want. (emphasis added)

In contrast, Derek (White, 19, academic education) reflecting on his relationship with a former girlfriend, described negotiating their sexual interactions with a sole focus on his own interests and feeling little responsibility for hers:

With my ex-girlfriend, well, maybe she didn’t want it [sex] as much as I did. Those times, I just tried to create a nice atmosphere, you know, and to talk nicely, and well, in the end I got what I wanted. Well, in the beginning, that was the way it worked. She didn’t make her boundaries clear. Only if she really didn’t want sex, she would say so. She’d say, “Don’t you even try!” So that was clear. It’s a learning process you know? I never forced her, no, but I wasn’t paying much attention to what she wanted, either.

Contrary to Kim who explained that “you want to pay attention to the other person,” Derek conceded that he hadn’t been “paying much attention.” And while he “got what I wanted,” she struggled to filter through competing priorities in order to decipher “what you do and don’t want.” And as a final point of contrast, whereas she worried about seeming “rude”, he shifted responsibility for any unwanted experiences to his girlfriend who “didn’t make her boundaries clear.”

It is notable that Derek’s narrative suggests some awareness and regret for his previous self-centred approach (“I wasn’t paying much attention to what she wanted, either”). As we explore in the next section, some participants did not simply adhere to a hegemonic discourse of antagonistic heterosexuality and of sexual negotiations as a contest between men looking to score and women playing defence. Some young men expressed respect for girls who took the initiative and disdain for other men who coaxed and coerced women (e.g., “Guys who try to persuade girls, saying ‘Baby, come on…’ they’re actually just whining. That’s pretty sad.” [Boris]), and some young women were unapologetic about being sexually assertive. We analysed these narratives for signs of new gender norms shaping youths’ sexual negotiations.

New Gender Norms

Autonomy among women
In contrast to the dilemmas articulated by young women who struggled to satisfy multiple and often conflicting expectations, other women asserted that they operated with complete autonomy in their sexual relationships. This included young women who were sexually abstinent as well as those who were sexually active. In the case of the former, these young women described their abstinence as an affirmative, willed choice that reflected fortitude rather than passive obedience or a lack of opportunity. Their
accounts cast abstinence in terms of fidelity and commitment (e.g., to parents or religious beliefs) but in ways that also asserted one’s agency. Aicha: ‘Being a virgin is your honour. I am proud to be a virgin. I see many people nowadays having sex, they see it as a game. But I am proud that I am one of the people who did not do it.’ (Moroccan, 16, vocational training).

Those who were sexually active were unequivocal about their control over themselves and their sexual interactions, as Lisa who preferred “a man with guts” since, as she asserted, ‘I can set my own boundaries.’ It was mostly White women with academic educations who held strong opinions about their sexual freedom, making claims such as: ‘It is my life, you know, I just do what I like and what I enjoy, and who cares?’ (18 years old); and ‘Well, I’m single, but I do have a guy in my bed upstairs now. I’ve been seeing him for a while now, but I don’t know, I don’t like to be fenced in. I like my freedom’ (19 years old). Aligning with Bay-Cheng’s (2015) argument that a neoliberal construal of agency incites the degradation of others, many young women used downward comparisons to distance themselves from those who were “loose” and “easy”:

I have friends who started having sex when they were thirteen. They were very busy with it, while I… I didn’t feel the urge at all. Meanwhile, we were at the same school, playing the same sport… But well, they were from a different social background. Of course it’s up to them, but well, if a girl approaches a lot of guys… Well, it’s fine, of course. But personally, I definitely think it’s kind of slutty. (Jennifer, White, 20, academic education)

While these divisive manoeuvres reify some aspects of traditional gendered sexual moralism, they also signify young women’s efforts to enlist neoliberal ideology in order to legitimize their sexual rights and autonomy.

Mutuality among men
Young men in the study also offered counter narratives of negotiating sexual consent. Unlike young women, whose primary challenge is in staking their claim as sexual agents, young men’s sexual agency is taken for granted (and their sexual drive is expected). The striking deviations from traditional gendered sexual norms among the young men in our study came in their prioritization of mutuality during their partnered sexual interactions. As examples:

- I asked her, “Are you ready for it [sex]?” I won’t just start if I don’t know if she wants to go further. If she doesn’t enjoy it, she’ll regret it and then I will, too, and feel like I didn’t do it right. (Jason, Surinamese, 16, vocational training)
- I wouldn’t be happy if I pushed her boundaries and was just selfish. (Niels, White, 18, academic education)
- I really feel you should have something together. That someone cares for you. And you for her. Because only then, you know, it’ll be about making love. (Ben, Surinamese, 16, vocational training)

This norm of mutuality introduced an element of uncertainty for men as they were wary of crossing girls’ boundaries but were not always sure where
these lay. As Ryan (16) put it: ‘Girls often puzzle me. When I think she wants to move further, she doesn’t. And when she says ‘no,’ she actually wants me to make another move. I’ve experienced that a lot and it really is quite confusing’. Others felt the old gendered rules and expectations of boys taking the initiative interfered with open communication.

Sometimes when I go out with friends, they [girls] are watching us, but I don’t know how to interpret these signals. Does she smile like that at every guy or just me? I’d like a girl to take the first step, and approach me. Or be clearer about what she wants, in words. Not that she has to say immediately that she wants to kiss me or anything, but just talking, showing some interest, so that I know she’s interested in me […] (Elmer, Indonesian/Dutch, 19, academic education)

Intersecting Norms: Gender, Ethnicity, and Class
We observed both long-standing gender norms as well as emergent ones related to agency and mutuality among participants of varied gender, class, and ethnic backgrounds. However, we also noted that non-White participants often merged discourses of agency (among women) and mutuality (among men) with minority cultural (including religious) values. Importantly, they did not seem to regard those values simplistically, nor were they simply compliant. For example, the ethnic minority women in the study often referred to gendered prohibitions against sexual activity, a finding that echoes previous studies of diverse Dutch youth (Cense 2014). But instead of experiencing cultural norms as constraining, the young women described leveraging these to rebuff unwanted sexual overtures and to assert their sexual boundaries and rights. Rachida: ‘My faith is very important to me, including the rule of virginity. So I feel, these are my boundaries and if you don’t like that or if you want to move beyond that, then it’s over for me.’ (Moroccan, 21, vocational training)

Others described subverting dictates to a certain degree, such as Miryam (Moroccan, 17, vocational training) who had secretly dated four boyfriends and enjoyed sexual experiences with them, but drew the line at vaginal intercourse: ‘Although I must admit I would like to move a step further than messing around… but I can’t, not yet.’ Bicultural roots can enable young women to navigate a course between hegemonic and minority cultural norms by granting access to diverse perspectives to draw on and push against. This was evident in the narrative of Sitara (Indo-Surinamese, 21, academic education), who reflected at length on individuating from others’ ideals (i.e., parents, peers, broader cultural norms) while also being influenced and informed by them:

Your parents warn you [about sex] all the time and then at school you see other things. You have to find your own path in between. At home, my father warned me that men want only one thing and that a girl has to protect herself while boys keep attacking. That idea. But that’s not reality. And my first boyfriend was so nice, so gentle, and so patient. That was important, because I was 14, and I wanted
to be part of the group, and well, you don’t want your boyfriend complaining that you’re no fun! I’ve always thought, “I’ll only do what feels right.” That’s always been my principle. There were times when I thought I wouldn’t have sex before marriage, but when I got older, my views changed. I felt like, if it’s respectful and doesn’t feel wrong, there’s no harm in it. And I never regretted it.

Just as some ethnic minority women in the study integrated cultural norms with sexual agency, some of the ethnic minority men incorporated these into their discourse of mutuality by casting abstinence as an expression of partners’ shared bond to a common set of values. As Fatih (Turkish, 21, vocational training) explained, ‘My girlfriend and I have been together for two years now. For me personally, when you know you will marry someone and there is so much love, it would be ok to have sex. But with my religion and her religion? No. We really have to wait until marriage. So that’s it, just wait.’ Mohammed (Moroccan, 16, vocational training) used religious norms to justify and strengthen his resolve in deviating from the hegemonic code of sex-driven masculinility: ‘I’m not tempted, I have my own rules. I follow my religion. If I follow these rules, I won’t be seduced. If I say to myself, I won’t have sex, then I won’t’.

We tracked participants’ educational background as one indicator of their class status. We did not discern any patterned differences related to education among the young men in the study. Both those with vocational training and those with academic preparation drew on “old rules” of conventional masculinity and on the “new norms” mutuality. Similarly, we observed young women with various educational backgrounds adhering to conventional femininity and exploring the possibilities of sexual agency. More highly educated women appeared more aware of this emerging discourse, but were still hampered by gender prescriptions and structural barriers.

### 6.4 Discussion

Participants’ narratives show the impact of gendered social norms on youths’ negotiations of sexual boundaries. Several of their accounts, particularly those that frame these interactions as contests between rivals with different objectives, rules, and tactics, show how easily coercive and unwanted sex can occur. Some young men describe attending solely to their own gratification and goals and assuming that young women would present obstacles to achieving them. Several young women, on the other hand, struggled to respond to multiple demands and expectations, often losing sight of their own desires or entitlement to them. Through this lens, it is apparent that sexual negotiations are not just a matter of personal feelings or interpersonal dynamics, but are also infused by broader social norms.

Many participants voiced gendered perspectives and dilemmas that previous studies of sexual coercion and consent have unearthed (e.g., Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arrai 2008; Gavey 2005; Hird and Jackson 2001; O’ Sullivan and Allgeier 1998), while others offered signs of how social norms shaping sexual negotiations may be shifting. Several young women framed their
sexual behaviour in neoliberal terms of self-control, self-interest, and self-determination. This normative change may be favourable for young women insofar as those who are sexually active can invoke ideals of personal liberty and free choice to reject gendered moralist sanctions. Sexually abstinent women can use this framework as well, to rebut condescending depictions of them as mindlessly obedient.

The study’s participants also offered a novel perspective on how the normative landscape might be changing for young men. The narratives of many young men showed them to prioritize and validate mutuality as a guiding principle in their sexual negotiations. Contrary to asserting the dominance and entitlement that are fundamental to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) or the neoliberal ideological hallmark of personal responsibility, the mutuality articulated by these participants resonated with Pham’s (2013) notion of response-ability. Response-ability grounds ethical relationships and interactions in cooperation and interdependence, thereby displacing individualist celebrations of competition and goals of self-sufficiency. The young men in our study who described sexual consent as jointly and mutually experienced, rather than a good (possessed by women) to be bargained for (by men), may embody a meaningful shift toward caring as a component of masculinity (Elliott 2016) and of sexual ethics (Lamb 2010).

The intersectional analysis of ethnic and class diversity among participants allowed us to consider the convergence of various social norms in youths’ sexual lives, including contradictions of the common assumption that “liberal” cultural norms are progressive and that ethnic minority youth are held back by “traditional” ones (Haggis and Mulholland 2014; Kendall 2012; Whitten and Sethna 2014). For instance, the White, highly educated young women in the study often articulated a self-interested sexual agency aligned with a permissive sexual rights discourse that is dominant in White families in the Netherlands (Schalet 2010). However, they did not operate entirely free of gender prescriptions. Furthermore, we observed young women from cultures and religions with explicit sexual prohibitions use these to establish clear sexual boundaries and to prompt critical reflection on both minority and dominant sexual mores. Similarly, some of the ethnic minority men who valued mutuality saw this as fused with a partner’s common cultural orientation to sexuality. A limitation of the study is that it does not show how the interplay of gender norms, sexual negotiations and sexual identities work out for people who identify as homosexual, bisexual, lesbian, transgender or intersex. Future studies should also address how gender norms and sexual boundaries are negotiated by people with disabilities.

While we find participants’ perspectives of shifting sexual norms compelling, we are also aware that our study engaged a group of young people who were comfortable enough with the topic to volunteer for our in-person interview study. Our use of different modes of participant recruitment allowed us to learn from participants with varying levels of comfort in discussing sexuality, including many who might never have responded to our original advertisement. Our Dutch sample occupies a distinct sociocultural location. The Netherlands is widely recognized as being at the forefront of
the move toward egalitarianism and sexual openness (Elliott 2016; Schalet 2010). Thus despite the diverse sexual discourses present within various social, cultural, ethnic groups (Cense 2014), all young people are also exposed to a national culture in which gender equality and sexual rights are treated as established, commonly-held values. Dutch youth may feel freer than peers in other countries to explicitly align themselves with alternative discourses of sexual consent and engagement.

It is important to note that participants’ challenges to the “old rules” of gender and heteronormativity were not uniform or unequivocal. Many still approached sexual negotiations as a contest between opposing sides and/or felt the pressure and sway of gendered norms. Thus while young men’s narratives of response-ability are encouraging, substantial progress toward sexual negotiations centered on mutuality will be stymied as long as young women feel tongue-tied by gendered cultural sexual scripts. Moreover, we are concerned that while a normative shift toward young women’s sexual agency gives the illusion of loosening such prescriptions, it does not remedy systemic sexism and offers individual liberty at the expense of collective solidarity.

As adults and youth alike work to reduce the incidence of sexual coercion, it is crucial that we view sexual negotiations in the full, multisystemic context of personal desires, interpersonal dynamics, and old and emerging social norms. This perspective broadens the scope of sex education and other interventions beyond lessons in saying yes or no or in heeding a partner’s wishes. Any effective and meaningful efforts to reduce sexual coercion and to promote sexual well-being must incorporate critical reflection and revision of the gendered rules and norms that govern sexual negotiations.

Acknowledgements
Parts of this article were presented at the 2017 Annual Conference of the European Network on Gender and Violence in Milan, Italy. The authors would like to thank the participants who took part in this study and our co-interviewers Henri van den Idsert, Esma Linnemann and Thera Knopperts.