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26. YOU CAN LOOK (BUT YOU BETTER NOT TOUCH):

WHO JUSTIFIES CASUAL SEX BEFORE AND
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

Tim Reeskens

Arnoud-Jan Bijsterveld

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and particularly lockdowns that were imposed to curtail the spread of the novel coronavirus have had a profound impact on our sociability, restricting our sex lives as a result. Less is known, however, about the extent to which people have justified casual sex less during the pandemic. Scholarship argues that such moral values are socialised at a young age, remain stable across the life course, and are therefore largely resistant against adverse experiences. The pandemic offers a unique opportunity to test this claim. In this chapter, we analyse data of the European Values Study for 1999, 2008 and 2017, representative of the Netherlands, supplemented with additional data collections in May 2020 and October 2020, allowing for an evaluation of the specific nature of justifying casual sex. The analysis shows that the increase in justifying casual sex came to a halt during the 'intelligent lockdown', which was imposed by the Dutch government to curtail the spread of the coronavirus. During the crisis, strong opposition to casual sex was expressed by Dutch respondents who were concerned about the virus. When lockdown measures were eased, justification of casual sex increased again. Although we find evidence for experiential explanations for justifying casual sex, the results of our study further suggest that these justifications are embedded in modernisation theory.

26.1 Introduction

Casual sex, defined as sexual activity that takes place outside romantic relationships, is one of the manifestations of the sexual revolution that took place from the 1960s onwards (Robinson, Ziss, Ganza & Katz, 1991). In tandem with changes in sexual behaviour are changes in the underlying norms, such as attitudes towards pre-marital sex (Christensen & Gregg, 1970) and justifying casual sex. Without any doubt, the European Values Study (EVS), with Loek Halman for a long time in the driver's seat, has been one of the most important sources to study values change. An oft-invoked theoretical model to explain such change is Inglehart's 'Silent Revolution' (1977), which proposes that older cohorts with traditional values that are socialised in times of war and material instability, are gradually being replaced by younger cohorts with modern or self-expression values that reflect growing up in material economic prosperity. Pivotal in this theory is that values are socialised at a young age and remain stable over the lifespan (cf. Mannheim, 1952; Converse, 1964; Uslaner, 2002; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008). Empirical research on the stability of values such as justifying casual sex, by Inglehart & Welzel (2005) described as a self-expressive value *par excellence*, is scarce however.

An unfortunate event appeared to be a unique opportunity to study the stability or volatility of moral values such as justifying casual sex (see Reeskens et al., 2021).¹ Indeed, what for Loek Halman was supposed to be a smooth *fin de carrière* took a different turn when COVID-19 turned into a global pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic, some argued that a crisis of this magnitude could be an engine for social change (see Harari, 2020) and this would imply a change in values as well. However, if the assumptions of the 'Silent Revolution' (Inglehart, 1977) hold, i.e., that values are socialised at an early age and remain relatively stable over the lifespan, little change in relevant values should be observed during the coronavirus crisis. There has been some empirical evidence that the exposure to existential insecurity has an influence on our value priorities, leading to a short-lived conservative or materialist turn

¹ Also here, we are indebted to Loek Halman who as Chair of the EVS Executive Committee allowed for innovation in the data collection by offering the possibility for mixed mode designs (see Luijckx et al., 2021). By integrating the EVS 2017 Netherlands in the LISS Panel, we were able to reapproach respondents at later stages.

(e.g., Inglehart, 1985). In contrast, results at the onset of the pandemic showed that general values, such as religiosity and political ideology, have remained rather stable, while political preferences, such as political trust, reacted as a response to the coronavirus crisis (Reeskens et al., 2021).

The specific nature of the pandemic requires a more detailed analysis of whether changes in justifying casual sex occurred. While comparatively, the Dutch population on average is very accepting of casual sex (see Lottes & Alkula, 2011), casual sex is behaviour at odds with public health during the pandemic. Indeed, initially being announced as an 'intelligent lockdown', the national government of the Netherlands asked from its citizens to apply social distancing and interrupt their social networks, to limit public exposure and activities. The government put a ban on non-essential shops and contact occupations. Being confronted with this 'intelligent lockdown', people might be expected to have drastically altered their orientations towards casual sex, as it would pose a major health risk compared to pre-COVID-19 times.

The aim of this chapter is to test the stability or volatility of justifying casual sex over the course of the pandemic. In order to do so, we briefly review the available literature, present average trends from 1999 to October 2020 in justifying casual sex for the Dutch population, and explain the determinants of this moral value before the pandemic (2017) and during the pandemic (May 2020). We conclude this chapter with a reflection on the nature of justifying casual sex.

26.2 How COVID-19 Affected Our (Sex) Lives

On 23 March 2020, in a speech to the nation, the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte coined the term 'intelligent lockdown' to announce measures to curtail the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus (Rijksoverheid, 2020). In addition to sanitary measures like social distancing, the closure of schools, restaurants and bars, and the suspension of contact occupations, the imposed 'intelligent lockdown' asked people to stay at home as much as possible and only to go out if there was a good reason to do so: going to work in crucial

jobs, shopping for groceries, or giving informal social care. Individuals affected by the coronavirus, those having been in close proximity of people infected by it, or those showing symptoms, were asked to stay at home anyway. The ‘intelligent lockdown’ differed from full lockdowns in other countries where people were unable to go out freely, for example France, where a special form needed to be filled in to go out. The ‘intelligent lockdown’ appealed to the Dutch culture of individual responsibility, as it asked to carefully balance the necessity to go out with the risk of contributing to an immanent health crisis.

Initial reports by the Dutch public health institute RIVM (2022), later backed by scientific publications (de Haas, Faber & Hamersma, 2020), showed that the Dutch strongly abided by this imposed ‘intelligent lockdown’: public life came to a halt. 80 percent of the people reduced their outdoor activities. Grocery shopping was done less frequently, people exercised less, and visiting others became very rare (de Haas, Faber & Hamersma, 2020). Further analyses indicate that while these patterns were present among all age groups, they were more pronounced among the elderly, who were shown to be more at risk of adverse consequences of SARS-CoV-2 (see Jordan, Adab & Cheng, 2020). It is important to note that future intentions were also studied: people expressed the intentions to continue to adjust their behaviour, i.e., work more from home, walk and cycle more, and fly less (de Haas, Faber & Hamersma, 2020).

Studies on sexual behaviour also indicate that the lockdown had a negative effect (Hensel et al., 2020; Mercer et al.; Ko et al., 2020). For instance, in Australia, while 31.4 percent of the respondents of an online survey (oversampled among 18–29-year-olds) reported casual sex before the coronavirus crisis, 7.8 percent reported having casual sex during lockdown (Coombe et al., 2021). An online survey in the US also showed that several sexual activities decreased amidst the lockdown as well (Hensel et al., 2020). Of relevance for the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic is the expectation that not all groups (i.e., variation in household composition), and not all sexual behaviour (e.g., the authors looked at several sexual activities, including sexting, masturbation, and oral and vaginal intercourse) was equally influenced by the pandemic. E.g., the study by Hensel et al. (2020) shows that individuals experiencing

stress because of the pandemic, both in terms of medical and social consequences, report mixed changes in their sex life: whereas overall, sexual activities were reduced among those with greater perceived risks, not all activities were strained.

Less studied is the extent to which the pandemic affected values undergirding sexual behaviour. As is known, individuals’ behaviour depends, among other things, on people’s values, as they can facilitate or inhibit certain actions (Ajzen, 1991). In this, it is important to study the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic affected sexual attitudes, in particular opinions towards casual sex as such behaviour violates the ‘intelligent lockdown’. Existing research documents the importance of the context for such attitudes: Lottes and Alkula (2011, p. 87) report that the Netherlands shows all features that explain why the Dutch averagely justify casual sex more than populations of other European countries: “high economic development, good health indicators, high gender empowerment, low support for traditional gender roles, mostly Protestant religious affiliation, and low religiosity”. The argument underlying most of these contextual characteristics is modernisation theory (Inglehart, 1977), which explains a gradual shift from material to post-material values, including the individual autonomy over one’s own sexual life.

However, this reasoning departs from the assumption that justifying casual sex is a moral value that is socialised at a young age and remains stable over the lifespan. The magnitude of the COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique opportunity to test the specific nature of the stability or volatility of justifying casual sex. We can assume that if the COVID-19 rules have been followed, and people might have seen reductions in their sexual behaviour, this will reflect in shifts in people’s values. The expectation in this exploratory study is that people are justifying casual sex – evidently risk behaviour for the spread of the novel coronavirus – less when the threat of the virus is at its highest, i.e., during the first wave of the coronavirus crisis. In addition, we can also expect that in these most dire times when the ‘intelligent lockdown’ was in effect, people who experience more insecurities because of the coronavirus, for instance because they consider their health to be poor, and people who express concern over the coronavirus, will be justifying casual sex less. We further

expect that the most common explanations for justifying casual sex, evolving from modernisation theory (e.g., a positive relation with postmaterial orientations, educational levels, and income, and an inverse relationship with age and religiosity), continue showing an influence on these opinions during the pandemic.

26.3 The Acceptance of Casual Sex in the Netherlands Over Time

The EVS has questioned orientations towards casual sex since the 1999 data collection as part of the “permissiveness” items. These items have been surveyed using the question “Please tell me for each of the following statements whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between,” with “having casual sex” being one of the items in the list. The response scales ranged from ‘never’ (1) to ‘always’ (10). To map the pandemic effect on justifying casual sex on a longer trend, we compare the Dutch 1999 survey (n = 1003), the 2008 survey (n = 1554), and the 2017 web survey² (n = 2053). Subsequently, participants of the 2017 web survey have been reapproached in May 2020, and additional respondents were invited to participate, leading to 1614 respondents. This survey was fielded amidst the first wave of the pandemic, when the curve of infections was already in decline. Again, these respondents have been reapproached in October 2020 (n = 1468), after a summer with little restrictions, thereby at the onset of what became a second wave of the pandemic.

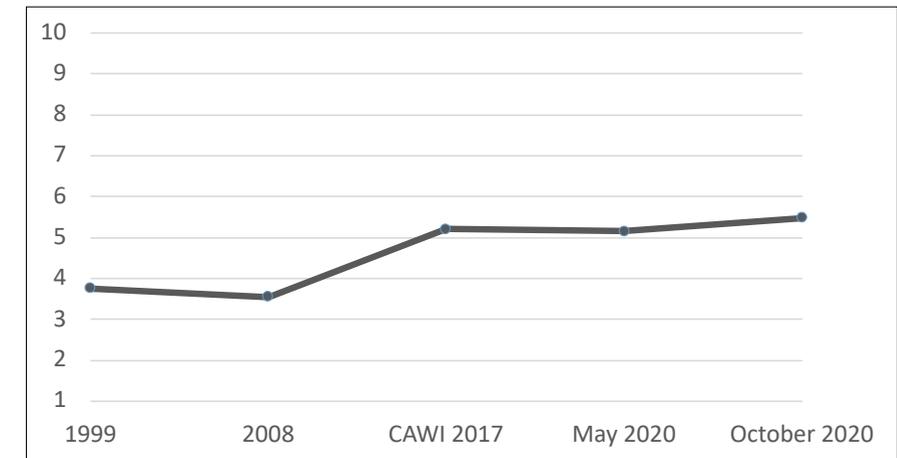
While comparative research shows that the Dutch are quite permissive towards casual sex compared to other European countries (Lottes & Alkula, 2011), descriptive statistics show that at no point in time, they exceed the scale average of 5.5 (on this scale from 1 to 10). In 1999, the first time this item was fielded in the EVS, the average scale score was 3.72 (sd = 3.04). It dropped slightly to 3.50 in 2008 (sd = 3.95). Permissiveness towards casual sex increased

² As documented by Luijkx et al. (2021), the EVS for the first time opened the opportunity for a web survey in its 2017 data collection. The Netherlands took this opportunity and fielded its survey face-to-face by I&O Research (n=686), and integrated its web survey as part of the LISS Panel (n=2053). In this chapter, we will use the web survey only.

to 5.21 (sd = 3.04) in the 2017 fieldwork. During the first wave of the coronavirus crisis, justifying casual sex decreased to 5.16 (sd = 2.94). The October 2020 survey shows an increase in justifying casual sex, i.e. to 5.49 (sd = 2.84). A Tukey test reveals that the opinions in October 2020 differ significantly from the ones in May 2020 and 2017.

Summarized, the EVS data show an increase in justifying casual sex that came to a halt in the first wave of the pandemic. In a more relaxed stage of the pandemic, albeit at the onset of the second wave, individual orientations towards casual sex became more relaxed again.

Figure 26.1 Justifying Casual Sex in the Netherlands, 1999-2020



26.4 The Correlates of Justifying Casual Sex Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

In this part, the aim is to test the structuring of justifying casual sex before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. We expect that the 2017 web survey data display how justifying casual sex is structured among the Dutch population (i.e., which groups are justifying casual sex more or less). Deviations in the 2020 data collections could display ‘intelligent lockdown’ effects. While both waves allow for more causal leverage, as they can be used as in a panel design, for the exploratory purpose of this contribution, we exploit the cross-sectional design of both waves.³

The variables we include are first of all the materialism-postmaterialism index, measuring individuals’ political priorities, with as options (a) maintaining order in the nation, (b) giving people more say in important government decisions, (c) fighting rising prices, and (d) protecting freedom of speech. Options (a) and (c) are materialist responses while responses (b) and (d) are postmaterialist options. Combined, it allows to distinguish materialist respondents (reference), mixed-materialist, mixed-postmaterialist, and postmaterialist respondents. Religiosity is measured using the item “How often do you pray outside religious services?” with the response categories ‘never’ (1) to ‘every day’ (7). We further include age,⁴ with the youngest respondent being 16 and the oldest is 99; we divide age by 10 to obtain meaningful parameters. We further include socioeconomic status, from the idea that higher socioeconomic groups hold less traditional values. We look at education, distinguishing lower (reference), middle and higher educated respondents, and at income, which is measured in income deciles. Because we expect that single respondents are more accepting of casual sex, we include a dummy separating those that are partnered (reference) from the singles. Even though studies do not show gender differences in justifying casual sex in the Netherlands (Lottes & Alkula,

2011), we distinguish between men (reference) and women. Finally, we also look at proxies for COVID-19 risk exposure. First of all, self-assessed health is considered using the item “All in all, how would you describe your state of health these days?” ranging from ‘very poor’ (1) to ‘very good’ (5). Second, a particular item only present in the 2020 waves is included that asks respondents “To what extent are you generally concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic?”, ranging from (1) ‘not at all’ to (5) ‘very much’.

The analyses demonstrate how strongly justifying casual sex is intertwined with modernisation theory. First of all, the materialism-postmaterialism index is positively and in a linear way associated with holding tolerant views towards casual sex. Related, religious respondents are justifying casual sex less than nonreligious respondents. Additionally relevant from the viewpoint of modernisation theory is that, in spite of the limitation of not being able to distinguish cohort-effects from lifecycle effects, we observe a negative age-effect: elderly respondents are justifying casual sex less than their younger counterparts. Socioeconomic status relates inconsistently with justifying casual sex. On the one hand, in both waves, the higher educated are justifying casual sex more than the lower and middle educated. On the other hand, income shows no effect whatsoever. Our findings reveal that characteristics of the life course are relevant in explaining orientations towards casual sex: singles are more likely to justify casual sex than those in a relationship. Confirming previous studies, in the Netherlands, no gender difference exists in justifying casual sex. Last but not least, health variables, highly relevant because of risk exposure to COVID-19, show mixed patterns. On the one hand, perceptions of health are unrelated to justifying casual sex. On the other hand, being concerned about the coronavirus crisis is negatively related to justifying casual sex amidst the pandemic: people who express concerns about COVID-19 justify casual sex significantly less than those with no concerns.

³ The number of respondents is reduced in the multivariate analysis compared to the descriptives because of item nonresponse of the independent variables in the models (n for 2017 = 1355; n for 2020 = 1377).

⁴ An ideal test of the modernisation theory implies estimating cohort effects. Because of the simplicity of the analysis, as well as because age was a risk of adverse health effects of the coronavirus, we prefer to estimate age over cohort effects.

Table 26.1 Justifying Casual Sex Regressed on Relevant Covariates

	2017	May 2020	
		Without COVID-19 item	With COVID-19 item
Intercept	6.81*** (0.49)	6.61*** (0.49)	7.51*** (0.55)
Postmaterialism (Ref: Material)			
- Mixed material	0.54* (0.22)	0.83*** (0.19)	0.81*** (0.19)
- Mixed postmaterial	0.88*** (0.22)	0.83*** (0.19)	0.81*** (0.19)
- Postmaterial	1.13*** (0.26)	1.48*** (0.31)	1.41** (0.31)
Praying	-0.38*** (0.03)	-0.41*** (0.03)	-0.41*** (0.03)
Age (in 10 years)	-0.38*** (0.05)	-0.33*** (0.04)	-0.29*** (0.04)
Levels of education (Ref: Lower)			
- Middle education	0.31 (0.19)	0.30 (0.19)	0.31 (0.19)
- Higher education	1.06*** (0.22)	0.77*** (0.20)	0.77*** (0.19)
Reported income	0.06 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)	0.05 (0.03)
Single (Ref: Partnered)	0.56** (0.17)	0.79*** (0.18)	0.78*** (0.18)
Female (Ref: Male)	-0.25 (0.16)	-0.04 (0.14)	0.01 (0.14)
Self-assessed health	0.01 (0.10)	-0.11 (0.09)	-0.162 (0.10)
Concerned about coronavirus crisis			-0.32*** (0.09)
R ²	0.25	0.23	0.24
N	1355	1377	1377

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. Weighted data.

26.5 Conclusion

Research on human behaviour amidst the pandemic has shown the coronavirus crisis to negatively affect people's sex life, including casual sex. As such, the government entered the bedroom, because in their sexual behaviour people responded to the government's request to reduce social contacts and practice social distance, as well as other relevant measures communicated as an 'intelligent lockdown'. This chapter has demonstrated that in terms of orientations, the nationwide lockdown not only influenced sexual behaviour but also affected justifying casual sex: the gradual upward trend in the justification of casual sex from 2008 onward was halted during the first wave of COVID-19. Evidently, the theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) explains that the link between values, attitudes, and actual behaviour, i.e. casual sex during the lockdown, is a rather complex one. Nevertheless, our findings support the hypothesis that justifying casual sex is more than just a moral value that is socialised at a young age and remains stable over the lifespan. Rather, the findings that singles justify casual sex more, and that people concerned about COVID-19 justify casual sex less, imply that current experiences influence orientations towards casual sex as well.

In addition to these experiential explanations to justifying casual sex, the analysis nevertheless gives overwhelming evidence that justifying casual sex aligns to a self-expression value, as such reflecting modernisation theory. The analysis shows that all indicators proxying postmaterialism (such as the Inglehart index, religiosity, and age) included in the regression model are significantly related with justifying casual sex. Moreover, these findings are relevant to understand the consequences of the pandemic on casual sex norms, because research has demonstrated that there was a materialist reflex in response to the crisis (Reeskens et al., 2021). This materialist reflex caused people justifying casual sex less.

This brings us to the limitations of this study. First and foremost, the full potential of the panel design has not been exploited to keep the exploratory approach of this chapter intact. Because the COVID-19 questionnaires of the EVS Netherlands were integrated in the LISS Panel, many respondents of the

original 2017 data collection were present too. This allows for refined panel regressions, because our study with average changes over time does not reveal whether some groups increased their justification of casual sex while others became more opposed to it. To give but one example: is it indeed the case that Dutch respondents who shifted towards postmaterial orientations became less accepting of casual sex? In addition, whereas we surprisingly do not see a health effect in justifying casual sex (which might be caused by the fact that abstinence might have an impact on people's perceived health), it might as well be that people who perceive an increase in their health over time might be justifying casual sex more, while those who saw their health deteriorate might be less accepting. Panel regression allows for a better test into the causal claims underlying these cross-sectional results.

Second, the EVS as a comparative and longitudinal research project with an emphasis on relevant moral, social, and political values, has not yet reached its full potential because of limitations in the sociodemographic variables surveyed. With an increase in non-traditional family forms (see, e.g., Popenou, 1988), the EVS does not allow for a refined analysis on for instance LGBTQI-respondents. Nevertheless, the literature documents that it is theoretically and empirically relevant to distinguish sexual behaviour of heterosexuals and homosexuals during the pandemic (Shilo & Mor, 2020; de Sousa et al., 2021). This leads to subsequent questions whether underlying norms about sexual behaviour in response of the pandemic also differ across both groups. In spite of these limitations, which hopefully are remedied in future surveys, thanks to Loek Halman's continuous efforts to keep the EVS relevant, we finally do have some more information about the nature of people's orientations towards casual sex.

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