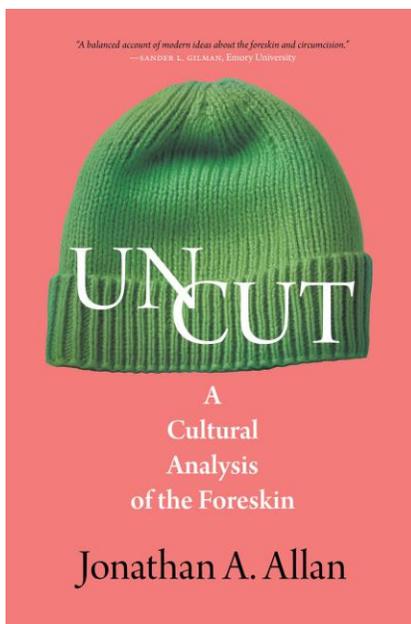


RESEARCH CONNECTION

Studying the foreskin: Intact, natural, uncut

By Jonathan A. Allan, PhD



Why this research is important

The foreskin, which is often thought about as being small and insignificant, easily clipped away like overgrown fingernails, is fifteen square inches of human skin that cover the glans penis. The foreskin is often misunderstood, maligned, and mythologized. The foreskin is imagined as being “foreign,” as when Homer Simpson declares, “How Euro!” upon seeing a baby. Other times, it is imagined as being “ugly” or even as abnormal, as when Charlotte declares, “It’s not normal” in an episode of *Sex and the City*. And it is also understood as dirty and unhygienic, rendering the intact penis at higher risk of all sorts of

What you need to know

To circumcise or not to circumcise? Expectant parents often find themselves tackling this question. The answer to the question is complicated by diverse medical opinions, religious traditions, and secular norms. This project sets out to understand how the foreskin is represented, theorized, and critiqued in the social sciences and humanities, in the biomedical sciences, and in policy documents of medical associations. When completed, this project will be one of the first full-length studies to consider circumcision by way of the foreskin as well as what it is, what it does, and why it matters.

health problems. For a seemingly small piece of skin, there are a lot of ideas about it that merit consideration. Instead of asking about whether or not to circumcise, this book asks us to take the foreskin seriously. In this way, this research hopes to simmer some polarizing ideas and offer a different approach.

How the research was conducted

This research for the book *Uncut: A Cultural Analysis of the Foreskin*, which will appear in November 2024, is done; however, the work continues. New ideas arise, and new questions appear. To do this research, I primarily work with textual and visual material. I read far and wide on anything relevant to the foreskin, which means I read everything from pregnancy manuals to books about puberty to sex advice

columns to marriage manuals to articles in magazines ranging from *Cosmopolitan* to *Hustler*. This work has happened locally at Brandon University with the support of Interlibrary Loans at the John E. Robbins Library and globally at archives and museums across Canada, in the United States, and further afield, in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. Because of the nature of the questions being considered, almost nothing seems “off-limits,” and so I have tried to take an approach that recognizes where these debates are happening and how they are unfolding. Recently, for instance, I have traced a circumcision debate that unfolded in the pages of *Clothed with the Sun*, a nudist publication.

What the researcher found

There are a lot of opinions about the foreskin and circumcision. And it wouldn't be a lie to suggest that people seem “prepared to go to war” over it, as the authors of *Cassel's Queer Companion* suggested. What I have found is that the most commonly cited reasons for circumcision tend to be: “to look like dad” or “to look like peers.” Thus, the arguments are not religious in nature; they are about social inclusion, or even, about aesthetics. What is surprising about the aesthetic argument is that most of the statues we see in museums are intact/uncircumcised. I have also learned here that words matter. Many prefer not to use the words “uncut” or “uncircumcised” because that implies something amiss, and thus prefer words like “natural” or “intact.” So, words also matter, and those words can often be deeply personal. I have also learned that there is still much that remains to be written, especially about the anti-circumcision movement or *intactivism*, and this is where my work is currently taking me. At the end of the day, research led to more research, as it so often does.

How this research can be used

This research will be of value to various stakeholders, including parents, medical doctors, and theorists and

scholars of gender and sexuality, as well as people who are curious about the politics of circumcision. Ideally, this research will participate in policy discussions around routine neonatal circumcision, especially since this research provides a full-length cultural study of the foreskin.

About the researcher

Dr. Jonathan A. Allan is Canada Research Chair in Men and Masculinities and professor in the Department of English and Creative Writing and the Gender and Women's Studies Program at Brandon University. He is the author of *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus* (University of Regina Press, 2016); *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* (Routledge, 2019); and *Men, Masculinities, and Infertilities* (Routledge, 2022).

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