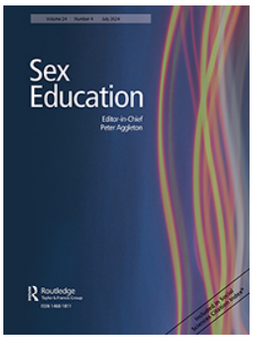

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Young people and sexual consent: contextualising 'miscommunication' amid 'grey areas' of ambiguity and ambivalence

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ABSTRACT

Educating young people about sexual consent aims to help them develop healthy relationships and prevent sexual harm. Yet, there remains no consensus on how to define consent nor the connection between consent and sexual harm. This article discusses findings from qualitative research conducted with young people in England that has explored issues of sexual consent. It engages with tensions around the so-called 'grey areas' and oft-critiqued 'miscommunication model' of consent and suggests that some form of 'miscommunication' may underpin some, albeit not all, experiences of sexual harm among young people. Young people may experience problems articulating and interpreting consent not because of malintent or substandard or disparate communication skills but because of interpersonal and sociocultural power dynamics that constrain the communication and operation of consent. Consent education needs, therefore, to support young people develop the socio-emotional skills and literacy required to navigate gendered and heterosexual (inter)personal pressures, expectations, and sexual scripts. It should involve active participation of young people whereby they identify the conditions in which sexual activity unfolds and the power dynamics that constrain the operation of consent.

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Introduction

Educating young people about sexual consent forms part of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in England. Department for Education (DfE) statutory guidance for RSE (Department for Education 2019) states that young people need to learn the law on consent, what constitutes illegal non-consensual sexual activity, how to communicate and interpret consent and non-consent, and about rights to withdraw consent. Consent is positioned in the guidance as integral to healthy relationships and to keeping young people safe from, what Lloyd and Bradbury (2023) term, sexual harm. Yet, there remains no consensus on how to define consent nor the connection between consent and sexual harm (Beres 2020). Further complexities relate to whether and how consent arbitrates whether sexual activity is, or should be deemed, acceptable or permissible.

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In this article, I discuss findings from qualitative studies I have conducted between 2016–2022 with young people in England that have, either incidentally or by design, explored sexual consent. The research involved interviews, focus groups and observations in elite independent schools, state academy schools, and youth clubs, predominantly in southeast England. I have spoken to young men, young women, and non-binary young people, with most participants being white British and engaged in mainstream state education. I have also worked with socio-economically privileged young people in the independent school sector and with socio-economically and ethnically diverse young people in underprivileged areas and schools. While most of the young people identified as heterosexual, I have also engaged with young people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and other sexualities (LGB+).[1]

Focusing on the legislative and educational context in England, I consider the conceptual, theoretical and pedagogical implications of the findings, drawing also on the wider literature. I mostly examine what I have heard from adolescent boys about consent in heterosexual interactions, because of the emphasis on heterosexual boys potentially holding problematic beliefs and attitudes about consent and, in turn, being a risk *to* girls and others because of their sexual consent practices (Phipps et al. 2018). The gendered power dynamics that shape heterosexual consent cultures have been identified as potentially constraining and jeopardising the operation of free choice for heterosexual young people and so it is these cultures I pay particular attention to in this article. I note that representations and discourses of consent are present in domains beyond law and education, including, for example, media which is part of the cultural resources that young people may draw upon as they make meaning about consent (see Jackson and Scott 2010; Setty 2023). Space precludes full consideration of such domains, but I do not downplay their significance as part of a genuinely ecological approach to understanding young people's sexual consent cultures and which, in turn, should form part of educational policy and practice (see Albury 2013; Buckingham 1998).

By drawing on the voices of boys, I aim to complicate the idea that boys are simply poor communicators or seek to circumvent responsibility for heterosexual consent by claiming disparate communication styles between girls and boys. The boys I have spoken to reproduce these narratives but deeper engagement with what they say about so-called 'grey areas' of consent suggests that some form of 'miscommunication' may underpin some, albeit not all, experiences of sexual harm. I have hitherto avoided giving credence to the oft-critiqued 'miscommunication model' of consent. Yet, the normalisation of non-verbal and indirect consent communication in young people's sexual cultures creates ambiguity and a reliance on 'signals' (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Meanings and interpretations of these signals reflect and reinforce wider gender norms, which are internalised into 'sexual scripts' for consent (see Jackson and Scott 2010). There arises the possibility of one person believing consent was present while the other felt violated or, moreover, one or both parties agreeing to unwanted sexual activity. Problems with or constraints upon consent communication may result in unintended sexual harm whereby the causes encompass but transcend individual and interpersonal-level processes and relate to the sociocultural conditions in which consent is defined and experienced.

Young people's problems articulating and interpreting consent may not arise from malintent but from the need to develop and practice the socio-emotional skills and literacy required to navigate gendered pressures, expectations, and power dynamics

within heterosexual interactions (see Powell 2008). Education on consent should, therefore, acknowledge that young people – including adolescent boys – may consider the nature of consent communication to create risks of sexual harm. It must then focus on skills and literacy while critically deconstructing the gendered (hetero)sexual scripts and contextual contingencies shaping how consent is communicated, including through 'signals'. It should involve the active participation of young people whereby they identify the interpersonal and sociocultural conditions and power dynamics that constrain consent.

Defining consent

Consent has been described as an 'internal state of willingness', 'an act of explicitly agreeing to something', and 'behaviour that someone else interprets as willingness' (Muehlenhard et al. 2016, 462). Consent may be communicated directly, indirectly, verbally and/or non-verbally (Beres 2007). While perhaps not an unreasonable starting point, there arise complexities regarding how, in practice, consent and refusals are or are not communicated, what, exactly, is experienced and interpreted as willingness, and whether and how willingness (or lack of) is associated with explicit agreement.

'Explicit agreement' suggests consent must be directly/verbally given and should not be assumed by the apparent absence of a refusal (see Beres 2007). These principles underpin the 'affirmative consent model', which requires the initiators of sex to secure verbal agreement for sex, whereby 'no means no' but also anything less than 'yes' does not constitute consent. Affirmative consent is described as offering freedom from force and coercion through a sex positive 'eroticisation' of consent as the basis for mutually wanted sex (Mueller and Peterson 2012) to which, Piemonte et al. (2022) found, young people may be receptive. Yet, many young people nevertheless interpret the absence of a 'no' or 'no response' signals as passive and non-explicit indicators of consent, and indirect and nonverbal consent communication predominate within young people's sexual cultures (Righi et al. 2021).

The requirement for free and informed choice, given with capacity, is upheld in law in England and Wales (Sexual Offences Act 2003). Legally, initiators need only to have a *reasonable belief* that consent has been given and it does not necessitate explicit verbal agreement/assent but any behaviour that could reasonably be interpreted as consent (Munro 2008). Schools in England must teach young people this law but often also implore them to use direct, verbal communication and not to proceed with sexual activity unless a clear 'yes' has been provided to the initiator (Setty 2021; Gilbert 2018; Whittington 2021).

'Free choice' in conditions of gender inequality

Feminist scholars concerned with the conditions in which consent is formulated, enacted and interpreted have critiqued the emphasis on free choice in so-called 'liberal' models of consent. Some suggest that in patriarchal society there may be no such thing as consent, because (hetero)sex is rooted in male power and dominance over women which precludes women from exercising free choice (MacKinnon 1989; Morgan 1980). From this perspective, there is a distinction between sexual activity as lawful or unlawful and the

wider gendered sexual scripts that render redundant the idea of free choice in heterosexual relations (Chamallas 1987). Going beyond individual agency and responsibility for consent, Munro (2008) argues that models of consent must address how heterosexual relational power dynamics at least *constrain* the scope for free and self-determined agency, which may compromise, albeit not completely invalidate, any consent given. Barker (2013), likewise, suggests that any conceptualisation of consent must be 'sex critical' and account for the sociocultural expectations placed on women to consent irrespective of what they personally want.

Primoratz (2001) critiques such perspectives for suggesting that consent given in conditions of inequality is inherently illegitimate. He argues that mutuality is impossible to mandate, given sex is unlikely to always be mutual and will inevitably be shaped by extrinsic factors. Hand (2022) questions the relationship between mutuality and harm and contends that sexual activity may take place in contexts whereby the parties are insufficiently acquainted for mutuality. From Hand's perspective, any demand for mutuality may be normalising regarding the condoned situational and interpersonal contexts for sex and, therefore, unjust. At issue, I suggest, is the legitimacy of formal institutions – be that law or education – to mandate the conditions under which consent is valid and invalid.

Yet, decontextualised conceptualisations of consent (see Gilbert 2018) are themselves, potentially extra-legally, unjust because sexual harm may arise from 'complied with' sexual activity particularly when compliance occurs within an unequal distribution of power. Consent education may, therefore, need to address the conditions required for agentic and self-determined – or 'empowered' (see Munro 2008) – consent. Here, consent exists along a continuum whereby wanting/desire, willingness and agreement may not always align, including due to the presence of proximal, distal, direct, and/or indirect pressure (Beres 2014; Lim and Roloff 1999; Whittington 2021). Internal consent is distinct from external consent; the former pertains to feelings of willingness (albeit not necessarily wanting/desire), while the latter is about how consent is enacted and communicated (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Coercion – including consent to unwanted sexual activity – may be social, insofar as it relates to wider relational and cultural demands and expectations in absence of direct interpersonal force or pressure (see Jones, Milnes, and Turner-Moore 2022). It may be difficult for initiators to identify internal consent (Beres 2007) and, therefore, unjust to legally require them to do so (Gavey 1999).

The inadequacies of the law in settling, or being able to settle, these complexities underpinned the rise, actions and demands of the #MeToo movement. While criticised for creating due process risks for men and reifying women as vulnerable to sexual harm, proponents contend that #MeToo inspired a discussion about sex that may not be criminal but is experienced as violating or otherwise harmful (Cooper 2018; Cossman 2018). Cooper (2018) suggests it challenged the power of the law to determine what is acceptable and who is responsible and reframed consent 'in terms of the ethicality of sexual interactions; in the language of respect and desire', not necessarily expanding the law but identifying the need/potential for sociocultural change.

For young people in England, a demand for change in youth sexual consent cultures was evidenced by the #Everyone's Invited movement, which involved thousands of young people submitting testimonials of their experiences of sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools across England. Girls were disproportionately likely to describe being affected by such experiences, while boys were involved in causing harm to girls

both online and offline and as individuals and in groups. #Everyone's Invited sent shockwaves throughout England and led to an official report detailing the extent of the problem (Ofsted 2021). While #Everyone's Invited and the subsequent Ofsted review generated extensive media coverage and public and political concern, the Women's and Equalities Committee has already identified sexual harassment and sexual violence in schools as a problem back in 2016. The Committee recommended that schools address the underlying gender and sexual norms and inequalities via early preventative interventions before they become entrenched in patterns of abusive behaviour. The report informed the development of the DfE's RSE guidance for schools, which states that schools must address the wider sociocultural attitudes and practices that underpin sexual violence and harassment (Department for Education 2019). While young people are, therefore, to be socialised as citizens with knowledge of the law on consent, the law represents a *minimum standard*, rather than final arbiter, of ethical sexual activity (see Beres 2014). To address sexual harm, education must also address, what Hirsch et al. (2019) describe as, young people's 'sexual citizenship' in terms of the normative contexts that shape agency, autonomy, and self-determination vis-à-vis consent.

Young people's gendered sexual consent cultures

Extensive studies suggest young people's sexual consent cultures are shaped by gender norms and expectations. While able to define consent in the abstract, Coy et al. (2013) found that young people typically assess whether hypothetical sexual interactions as consensual or non-consensual based on gendered sexual double standards. These double standards pertain to the normalisation, even celebration, of male sexual desire and pursuit of sex, and the judgement and shame of women for sexual behaviour (Coy et al. 2010, 2013; Hyde et al. 2009; Marston and King 2006). Burkett and Hamilton (2012) found that young women experience a tension managing post-feminist demands to be available and responsive to (hetero)sex while managing reputational risks. Their supposed preference for non-verbal and indirect consent communication has been attributed to a desire to avoid looking 'too willing' (Marston and King 2006), while any resistance is, in turn, interpreted as a reputation management tactic rather than genuine non-consent (Jozkowski et al. 2014; Jozkowski and Peterson 2013).

These sexual double standards normalise male pushiness for sex and the responsibilisation of young women as 'gatekeepers' of consent (Coy et al. 2013, Hyde et al. 2009; Muehlenhard et al. 2016; Powers-; Albanesi 2009). In research with adolescents, Jones, Milnes, and Turner-Moore (2022) found that heterosexual 'initiator-gatekeeper' power dynamics are primarily shaped by gender; initiators were deemed inherently powerful and gatekeepers less powerful, with boys being powerful because of their normative role as initiators. While some boys felt that girls are powerful because they 'gatekeep' and, therefore, make the final decision as to whether sex happens or not, gatekeepers were typically defined as less powerful. The initiator-gatekeeper dynamic was also inflected by other relational and social factors and Jones, Milnes, and Turner-Moore (2022, 10) conclude that intersectional power dynamics meant 'that roles within sexual encounters were constructed … as non-consensually assumed, rather than negotiated'.

Most of the boys I have spoken to in schools in England about the education they have received on consent believe that *some* boys may directly pressure and coerce girls for sex

and knowingly engage in unwanted sexual activity. They described these boys as 'bad', over-sexualised, and 'out of control' when aroused (Setty 2022). Most distanced themselves from such boys, yet sometimes firmly, but more often implicitly, held girls responsible for resisting. While they claimed not to want to harm girls, they were concerned about inadvertently perpetrating non-consensual sex. They felt they might not realise if a girl is not consenting either because girls are, supposedly, poor communicators or they, as boys, may 'lose control' due to arousal and stop paying attention to cues. These boys may simply be using miscommunication and the male sex drive as an excuse (see O'Byrne, Rapley, and Hansen 2006, 2010). However, as I elaborate below, interpersonal and sociocultural pressures and expectations may constrain consent communication in ways that create risks of unintended non-consensual sex.

(Non-)Consent and sexual harm

Heterosexual gender dynamics may explain why girls and women are disproportionately likely to experience non-consensual or unwanted sex (e.g. Barter et al. 2009; Berelowitz et al. 2012; Beckett et al. 2013), while young men use (and normalise the use of) coercive tactics and techniques with young women (e.g. Teten et al. 2009). Gender norms may, furthermore, disadvantage boys and men because their consent is always assumed (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Some young men report being sexually assaulted (Peterson et al. 2011) and may agree to unwanted sex because they feel awkward or uncomfortable about refusing (O'Sullivan and Rice Allgeier 1998) including due to external pressures to conform to dominant expectations regarding masculinity (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2010). Boys I have spoken to are concerned about experiencing unwanted sex, but typically deem themselves responsible for obtaining consent, even when not initiating (Setty 2022). Some related this to how consent is taught in school (i.e. that they are responsible for obtaining it), while others said it arises because, whoever initiates, they are more powerful than girls, so even when initiating, girls may be ambivalent or otherwise vulnerable, thus it is incumbent on boys to ensure girls are genuinely consenting.

Conceptualising consent as a transaction may delimit scope to recognise boys and young men beyond the role of initiator or of having unwanted sexual experiences. It also raises the prospect of sexual activity occurring that is unwanted by both parties if each agrees to unwanted sex, or sex about which they feel ambivalent. Boys have, for example, told me that they may agree to, or even initiate, unwanted sex because of the norm that boys *always* want sex and so their female partner would be offended if they said no or do not initiate (Setty 2022). Social norms (the male sex drive), interpersonal concerns (not offending one's partner), and personal goals (retaining the relationship with the girl) shape this understanding of agreement to unwanted sex. Gender norms are, therefore, 'made real' through (inter)personal processes of internalisation and enactment (see Jackson and Scott 2010). While idealised, or 'hegemonic', masculinity may act as a powerful norm, boys may feel ambivalent about it (inter)personally (see Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2017). Heterosexualised 'sex talk' and ensuing coercive sexual practices may nevertheless be normalised within adolescent male peer cultures and reward economies (see Flood 2008). Hence, boys may pursue sex that is personally unwanted, about which they feel ambivalent, and/or is unwanted by girls because of the social capital it provides (see Jones, Milnes, and Turner-Moore 2022).

There ensues some 'power' ostensibly for young men within their male peer cultures, at the expense of young women. Yet, boys articulate a conundrum; some have told me that all they *really* want is a 'nice' relationship and feel inexperienced, nervous and unskilled in heterosexual relationships (Setty 2022). Moreover, while hegemonic masculinity may be a construct around which boys organise their subjectivities (Frosh et al. 2002), it nevertheless feels unattainable to some boys who, in turn, feel at risk from the social policing of masculinity (Setty 2020). Girls then become symbols in male peer groups which, while potentially derogatory and misogynistic, involve performances that may not align with personal subjectivity (Setty 2022). Some boys show critical awareness of the implications for developing positive and healthy relationships with girls. Others, however, articulate oppositionality to girls who they deem the source of the problems they face through being *different* in their supposed nature and intent (see Frosh et al. 2002), which is discussed further below.

Sexual harm and (un)intentional violations: the possibilities for miscommunication or misinterpretation

The 'miscommunication model' of sexual violence, attributed to Tannen (1992), holds that a 'dichotomy in conversation style exists between the sexes, making miscommunication almost inevitable . . . neither the man nor the woman is able to interpret the other's verbal and non-verbal cues accurately' (O'Byrne, Rapley, and Hansen 2006, 134). The model implies that miscommunication is a problem for heterosexual partners and, moreover, that there is not necessarily malice or inherent deficiency on the part of the man or woman but relates to fundamental differences in communication styles. Yet, given refusals are 'dis-preferred actions' – particularly for young women who experience ambivalence and feelings of obligation – evidence suggests they are typically performed in line with normative cultural performances for refusals, which are often indirect and nonverbal, and are legible to young men (Kitzinger and Frith 1999; O'Byrne, Rapley, and Hansen 2006). Following on, Hansen, O'Byrne, and Rapley (2010, 48) describe miscommunication as a 'rape myth' because 'young men's claims to insufficient knowledge' are impossible to sustain when 'drawing attention to the shared commonsensical knowledge of how everyday refusals are normatively accomplished . . . '.

Miscommunication may, resultantly, be an excuse proffered by those who knowingly or recklessly violate someone's boundaries. Alternatively, I would posit that young people are experiencing and navigating ambivalence and ambiguity in their sexual consent cultures (Beres 2014; Muehlenhard et al. 2016). In the absence of direct/verbal communication, each party is trying to infer what is wanted by the other and, moreover, to avoid what Hardesty et al. (2022) describe as the 'social blunder' of directly asking for consent too soon or in the wrong way. There is vulnerability entailed in sequential verbal consent that can be avoided through nonverbal initiations (Magnusson and Stevanovic 2023). What 'counts' as a discursive performance of consent then goes beyond the directly verbal (Hardesty et al. 2022) and ambiguity may itself support joint control between partners if predicated upon a lack of assumed consent (Magnusson and Stevanovic 2023). While acknowledging ambiguity does not, therefore, justify sexual assault, if ambiguity involves a reliance on gendered sexual scripts (Kubota and Nakazawa 2022) it may create

the possibility of unintended violations that reflect and reinforce wider norms and patterns of gender inequality.

It seems that young men are concerned about the risks of perpetrating non-consensual sex due to the distinctions between affirmative consent standards and their actual consent practices (Hirsch et al. 2019). Young adults nevertheless suggest that it is often 'obvious' whether or not someone is consenting (Beres 2014) and so direct/verbal communication is not usually necessary (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). There arises a contradiction here. The adolescents I have spoken to do not even claim to consider it obvious; instead, the emphasis on girls being responsible for 'saying no' in the face of pushy and over-aroused boys appears more to be a hypothetical disavowal of responsibility by boys, and a claim of agency by girls, amidst ambiguity and ambivalence about consent. Among boys, it seemed to reflect an exaggerated articulation of their anxieties about – often hypothetical, given their professed inexperience – (hetero)sexual interactions (Setty 2022).

The persistence of gendered sexual scripts may explain why indirect and behavioural cues may be 'obvious' but it does not resolve the potential for non-consensual sex because, whether direct or indirect, any cues may not necessarily reflect internal consent, including dynamically within sexual encounters (see Hirsch et al. 2019). Several young people have, essentially, told me that 'yes may not always mean yes', – insofar as external consent (the 'yes') may not mean that the person internally *felt* 'yes' – due to social and interpersonal pressures and the difficulties of refusing unwanted sex. A further problem relates to the conceptualisation of consent as a discrete transactional exchange rather than a continuous process of (re)formulation, (re)articulation and (re)interpretation (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). I have heard from young people that not only is it difficult to refuse at first but also to later withdraw consent and, despite what they have been taught, consent is rarely 'checked' on as sexual activity progresses (Setty 2022).

Gender norms and sexual scripts may then be used to interpret what is happening and what individuals are or may be thinking and feeling. Gray (2015), for instance, found young adults interpret 'signals' not as consent but of potential interest in sex and young men may *hope* for sex based on these signals while not assuming consent. The boys I have spoken to likewise read sexual interest from signals, including in rudimentary and sometimes sexist ways. There appear to be 'unwritten rules' shaping these processes beyond the 'formal rules' embodied within law and affirmative consent. For example, transitioning from a social to a private setting is often interpreted as willingness among both young men and young women (Jozkowski and Willis 2022) and previous sexual activity with a partner ('sexual precedent') is associated with less self-reported use of consent cues, perhaps because of assumed tacit knowledge about what is and is not consented to (Malachi and Jozkowski 2019).

The issue here may not, however, be the use of signals or contextual cues *per se* but how they are identified, given meaning, and interpreted in a gendered sociocultural context and if and how they create dynamics of expectation and obligation. It may not, for example, be a problem for flirting and agreeing to go to someone's bedroom to be interpreted as sexual willingness. It may, however, be a problem if such acts oblige a person to engage in sexual activity, limit their right to refuse or withdraw, and/or make them responsible for unwanted sex (see Hardesty et al. 2022). Interpreting cues may be difficult for some young people because feelings of wanting and willingness may

change in ways shaped by the interpersonal and sociocultural context at play, and these feelings may be difficult to identify and articulate (Hardesty et al. 2022; Hirsch et al. 2019). A lack of (inter)personal skills and literacy may lead some young people to over-emphasise when and how someone can be deemed *responsible* for whatever cues are given off (see Beres 2010) rather than how to (inter)personally explore and establish what is wanted and agreed to.

Consent and intoxication

Challenges in identifying and communicating internal and external consent may be exacerbated by intoxication through by alcohol and/or other drugs. At issue is whether any ostensible external consent reflects internal consent and is given with capacity (Smith, Kolokotroni, and Turner-Moore 2021). Internal feelings after consuming alcohol can be interpreted as willingness and desire (Jozkowski et al. 2014) and alcohol use is associated with perceptions of sexual availability among both men and women (Jozkowski, Manning, and Hunt 2018; Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Alcohol consumption is, however, also associated with reduced feelings of safety and comfort during sex and less use of consent cues (Jozkowski and Wiersma 2015). Smith, Kolokotroni, and Turner-Moore (2021) identify a problem of expectation and assumed consent in contexts involving alcohol or drug use. They suggest that capacity to make sexual decisions must be addressed when considering such contexts.

Studies identify that young people perceive alcohol/drug-use to *compromise* but not inherently negate internal consent, depending on the degree of intoxication (Carline, Gunby, and Taylor 2018; Debby et al. 2019; Shumlich and Fisher 2020). Yet, perceptions of capacity and labelling of sexual experiences as consensual persist even with high levels of intoxication (Drouin et al. 2018) and subsequent memory loss (Matthew et al. 2019), including among adolescents (Coleman and Cater 2005). While those in established relationships tend not to label sexual activity when intoxicated as non-consensual (Malachi, Marcantonio, and Jozkowski 2021), those who engage in sexual activity with new or casual partners after consuming alcohol describe less use of consent cues (Jozkowski et al. 2014). Among those having sex with established partners, alcohol use was associated with less use of active consent communication and an over-reliance on or interpretation of tacit knowledge that the sex is consensual (Marcantonio, Willis, and Jozkowski 2022).

Alcohol consumption and intoxication are implicated in sexual assault (e.g. Antonia et al. 2004) Among 18–19-year-old Norwegian young people, Stefansen, Roar Frøyland, and Overlien (2021) found sexual assault when intoxicated may be less about intentional perpetration tactics employed to coerce or exploit intoxicated victims, but more about, what they term, 'sexually violent effervescence' or 'emotionally charged collective atmospheres'. They argue that normative spaces of intoxicated sexual activity and, in turn, sexual assault take place give rise to 'chaotic sexual interactions that somehow go wrong' (p.1384). While participants may attribute non-consensual sex within these contexts to the male sex drive and pursuit of opportunities for sex, Stefansen, Roar Frøyland, and Overlien (2021) attribute it to 'the permissiveness of the situation and the difficulties involved in engaging in drunk sex'. Some of the boys I have spoken to indeed relate their concerns about alcohol-involved sexual activity, particularly 'casual' intoxicated sex at

'parties', to the constraints on internal and external consent that they perceive to exist within these contexts. As Stefansen, Roar Frøyland, and Overlien (2021) found, they rationalised these concerns through narratives that over-aroused boys may 'take advantage' and unintentionally 'violate' a girl. They believed that intoxicated sex is not inherently non-consensual, but that consent is compromised, particularly between new/casual partners.

Debby et al. (2019) suggest that rather than telling young people that intoxication always and immediately invalidates consent, a more nuanced approach is required that addresses the nature of choice when intoxicated. Echoing Stefansen, Roar Frøyland, and Overlien (2021) suggestion of sexually violent effervescence, they emphasise the relationship between pleasure and alcohol-involved sex. Thus, while I have observed young people being taught that intoxicated casual sex is *dangerous* for consent, it is necessary to explore *why* it is dangerous, what constitutes danger, and how to create safety rather than mandate avoidance of particular scenarios, which may ultimately be ineffective if young people deem such scenarios normative, exciting, and/or pleasurable (Cameron-Lewis and Allen 2013; Demant and Bruvik Heinskou 2011).

Consent as a 'negotiated transaction': suspicion, hostility and 'false accusations'

A current – albeit longstanding – narrative frames boys and men as 'under attack' from feminist-inspired attempts to reconceptualise heterosexual gender relations and, therefore, as vulnerable parties (see Coston and Kimmel 2012; Gotell and Dutton 2016; Jaki et al. 2019). Several boys I have spoken to believe, for example, that the law would be 'against them' if a girl says that sexual activity was non-consensual (Setty 2021, 2022). They told me that girls are 'instantly believed', although some felt the justice process is more fraught and uncertain for both parties. Those with concerns referred to social media content regarding personal stories of, and general prevalence claims about, 'false accusations', and I have heard from girls who 'sympathise' with such concerns (Setty 2021).

While such perceptions should not be endorsed, not least because even a brief perusal of the data on rape complaints and convictions suggests they are inaccurate, there are issues to take into account, including boys' and young men's experiences of victimisation (Gotell and Dutton 2016) and the ways that sociocultural power may not always be felt or experienced at the subjective level (Setty 2020, 2022; Jackson and Scott 2010). While 'false accusations' may be rare, some boys I have spoken to describe not just intentional 'lies', but a concern that girls may not want sex but feel pressured or believe they communicated their non-consent in ways the boy did not identify (Setty 2022). They also felt that girls may regret sex and so (re)construct the experience as non-consensual. These boys felt they may genuinely believe sex was consensual while the girl genuinely felt otherwise.

The term 'false accusation', seems, therefore, to represent a discursive label for complexities that are not captured under, and may be exacerbated by, binary, transactional models of consent. While any accompanying sentiments of hostility and distrust towards girls may constitute resistance or entitlement, it additionally or alternatively underscores the need for a model of consent – or an account of heterosexual interactions more generally – that goes beyond transactional initiator-gatekeeper framings (Gilbert 2018; Whittington 2021). Furthermore, if non-consensual sex is deemed to arise from

a 'willingness to cross boundaries and injure others' (Beres 2020, 236), then experiences of sexual harm or violation in absence of malintent may not be recognised. I have indeed recently heard from young people about how a binary of 'true' or 'false' attributed to an allegation of sexual harm means that if the allegation is not upheld (e.g. by school or police) then the complainant *must* have been, and is treated as having been, lying.

Conclusion: implications for consent education

What then is the purpose of educating young people about consent – is it an end or a means to an end? In other words, do young people need to know what consent is, as codified in law, to be *socialised* as citizens (see Emily and Dobson 2023)? If consent is meant to help address sexual harm and promote positive and healthy relationships, then educating about legal (and/or affirmative) consent may not suffice. Beres (2014) argues that abstract and applied versions of consent are not necessarily the same. While perhaps an extra-legal endeavour, educational interventions must address why, in what contexts, and with what consequences, sexual activity takes place (see Hirsch et al. 2019). Mutuality need not be mandated; yet, as Hand (2022, 678) identifies, there is a 'messiness of moral life' whereby 'the onus [is] on moral agents to exercise judgment'. Young people need to identify what moral judgement is required and how to exercise it, including when different dynamics of mutuality co-exist. A boy may, for example, bond with male peers based upon mutual objectification of a girl that creates sexual harm for that girl. Over-simplified and over-rationalised demands for direct verbal consent communication does not resolve such dynamics (see Bragg et al. 2021; Gilbert 2018).

Whether risk-oriented, sex positive, skills-based and/or sociocultural, educational interventions must take a participatory approach to programme development, teaching and learning (Bragg et al. 2021; Burton et al. 2023). Sociocultural interventions may, for instance, be critical and social justice oriented, while not necessarily addressing the norms that matter to, nor in ways that resonate with, young people. Likewise, skills-based interventions must relate to the realities of young people's lives and feel realistic to apply. I have observed boys offer nuanced contributions to discussions in consent lessons, for example regarding power dynamics or the nature of consent communication. Many teachers then overlaid these contributions with implorations that 'there are no grey areas', and told them that they must obtain a direct yes before embarking on sexual activity. At best, such instruction does not address boys' concerns, at worst, it may encourage a persistent pursuit of a 'yes' including through pressure whereby 'yes' is interpreted to validate sexual activity as consensual regardless of the force employed to obtain it (Setty 2022).

'Sex positive' may, furthermore, be better than 'risk-oriented' consent education (Burton et al. 2023) but requires engaging with meanings and experiences of pleasure and desire, dynamics of expectation and obligation and, in turn, the conditions required for sex positivity (see Jozkowski 2015). Pleasure is, furthermore, not necessarily distinct from risk, insofar as pleasure may create or derive from risk (see Cameron-Lewis and Allen 2013; Demant and Bruvik Heinskou 2011). Sex and intoxication, including in contexts such as parties, creates complexities around perceived willingness, loosened inhibitions, obligations, and less resistance to pressure (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Yet, it may also be the very lack of certainty and rationality that gives

sexual activity its excitement. While entitlement and obligation – or assumed consent (see Hardesty et al. 2022) – is a problem, this does not negate the feelings of excitement and pleasure.

Lastly, this article has focused on gendered and heterosexualised dynamics of pleasure, power, risk, and reward in young people's sexual consent cultures. Gender identity among young people, and in schools, is in flux, with some, perhaps even many, young people identifying in ways contrary to and beyond gender binaries and biological sex, at least some of the time. There ensue questions regarding the nature and meaning and power within non-binary and non-heterosexual contexts. Power dynamics may apply to consent practices and cultures among LGBT+ youth in ways that differ from the gendered and heterosexualised patterns discussed in this article.

Note

1. LGB+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual and other non-heterosexual identities (e.g. asexual, pansexual).

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