Sex and consent in contemporary youth sexual culture: the ‘ideals’ and the ‘realities’

# Details

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Over 80 young people aged 12 to 18

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# Abstract

Sexual consent has increasingly become a central component of
Relationships and Sex Education. This paper draws upon findings
from qualitative research conducted with teenagers in England,
which explored their perspectives on consent within their contemporary youth sexual cultures, including in digital (sexting)
contexts. The findings suggest that young people’s definitions of
consent often did not correspond to the socially- and contextually
contingent realities of negotiating and establishing consensual
sex(ting). While young people’s contemporary sexual cultures
may look somewhat different, longstanding gender norms and
sexual scripts shaped their attitudes towards consent. The implications of the findings for RSE are discussed, including the need
for more collaborative dialogue and exchange between educators
and learners that engages with the situated realities of contemporary youth sexual culture.

# Outcome

"participants had an awareness and understanding of consent... participants conceptualised consent as involving an individual proposing an activity and another responding by giving or refusing
consent, and emphasised the importance of free and informed choice... Most participants attributed non-consensual or unwanted sex(ting) to the nature of
masculine and feminine sexuality (Coy et al. 2010, 2013). Many normalised the idea that
boys have uncontrollable sex drives and will pursue girls for sex, and positioned girls as
gatekeepers responsible for resisting boys’ advances and communicating any nonconsent (Burkett and Hamilton 2012; Moore and Rosenthal 1993). This attribution of nonconsensual sex to heterosexual dynamics according an invisibility to the perspectives and
experiences of LGBT+ youth. Both heterosexual and LGBT+ participants tended to conceive of LGBT+ dynamics as less problematic for consent. They defined these dynamics as
inherently kinder, and more mutual and closely aligned...Participants considered casual sex(ting) riskier for consent due to the intensification
of self-interest and responsiveness to social norms and expectations, and the lack of
communication and mutuality believed to characterise such contexts. Many felt that
boys’ desire for sex and girls’ concerns about pleasing boys and avoiding looking ‘frigid’
trumped more mutual approaches towards negotiating consent. They described feeling
less confident to communicate openly and directly in casual contexts, and some felt
that sex in relationships involved more communication, mutuality and reciprocity
(Carmody 2015).
Participants’ definitions of consent were context specific. Open and direct communication seemingly remained difficult in relationships (see Humphreys and Herold 2003).
Agreeing to unwanted sex(ting) was, furthermore, normalised as part of relationships.
Participants constructed gendered narratives of trust and intimacy, in which particular
practices (e.g. unsolicited image-sharing) were defined differently by context (Hayes andDragiewicz 2018). Some girls seemed reluctant to alienate boys, which shaped both their
agreement to unwanted sex(ting) and how they positioned themselves with respect to
gender equality.
As found in previous research, boys tended to conceive of themselves as initiators,
while girls seemed more attuned to the conditions in which they gave or refused consent
(see Powers-Albanesi 2009). Some boys were worried about consent because of the
perceived risk of accusations of non-consensual sex. The supposed unknowability of
girls’ desires and girls’ tendency to agree despite a lack of willingness meant that some
boys emphasised the need for girls to take greater responsibility for consent. Some placed
responsibility on girls to resist even direct force or pressure." (Setty, 2020: 341-2).