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HETEROSEXUAL EXPERIENCES OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS IN IRELAND: SEXUAL COERCION IN CONTEXT

Abstract

This article reports on data from a wider study on adolescent sexuality in Ireland and focuses particularly on the topic of heterosexual experiences and how these experiences relate to sexual coercion. Data were gathered from 29 focus group interviews with 102 young women and 124 young men, and were analysed using a qualitative research strategy. Drawing on the concepts of social coercion and interpersonal coercion first introduced by Finkelhor and Yllo (1983), we argue that both female and male participants reported a general sense of social coercion to lose their virginity by a certain age. However, narratives of interpersonal coercion were far stronger in the case of the young women compared with their male counterparts, while the young men reported a particular type of social coercion that propelled them to subscribe to expectations of conventional heterosexual male behaviour. We argue that while the distinction between social coercion and interpersonal coercion is far from watertight, it is a useful conceptual tool in identifying broad variations in women's and men's sexually coercive experiences.

Key words: gender; sexuality; heterosexuality, Ireland; adolescence.

Introduction

In this article, drawing on focus-group interview data with secondary school pupils, we consider the heterosexual experiences of young men and women with reference to the notion sexual coercion. In particular, we explore how coercion – a highly contested concept – might best be theorised in light of both existing attempts to construct it, and in relation to our study findings. We endeavour to examine the

manner in which sexual coercion is problematic for young women and men in different ways.

Background

It is almost two decades since Liz Kelly (Kelly [1988] 1996) documented the accounts of 60 British women on the fear and threats they experienced in relation to male heterosexual power. Since then, a range of studies have been conducted that have highlighted women's experiences of coerced heterosex (Holland *et al*, 1996, 1998, 2003, Kalichman *et al* 1998, Fisher *et al* 2000, Hilliard 2003, Hyde and Howlett 2004, Mayock and Byrne 2004, Livingston *et al* 2004, Crown and Roberts 2007). In recent years, a number of new areas of debate have opened up on the topic. Among these are definitional issues about sexual coercion and the notion that experiences of sexual coercion are not confined to women, but are also reported by men. We consider these issues briefly here before moving on to explore the notion of sexual coercion in relation to our data.

A criticism directed at some studies on sexual coercion is that the researchers fail to define what constitutes sexual coercion and how it manifests itself (Beres 2007). The lack of consistency in how sexual violation is defined and interpreted renders it difficult to identify its prevalence and outcomes (Crown and Roberts 2007). Writers such as Marston (2005) argue that in view of culturally embedded meanings in sexual interactions, sexual coercion is impossible to define in any objective way. She draws attention to the manner in which what appear to a detached observer to be narratives of coercion may be interpreted differently by those involved, in view of their understanding of the norms of the culture. In particular, resistance to sexual advances may actually be token resistance, that is, where one masquerades as not wanting sex when in fact one does. This is a central expectation of female behaviour in the 'heterosexual script' that we consider a little further on. Relying on subtle cultural cues, however, opens the possibility of a person unwittingly agreeing to sex by displaying particular behaviours widely understood to be indicative of consent (Beres 2007). This possibility of confusion has led to woman-focused sexual health programmes to promote the notion of directly saying "No" to sex. However, Kitzinger and Firth (1999) argue that there are more subtle ways of doing refusals in everyday culture that have a shared meaning, and directly saying no is not normally a feature

of this culture. They argue that men who claim to have misconstrued an indirect refusal 'are claiming to be cultural dopes, and playing rather disingenuously on how refusals are usually done and understood to be done (Kitzinger and Firth 1999: 310)'.

Marston (2005) proposes that in view of the nebulous status of coercion, it should be superseded by an exploration of conceptualisations of 'good' and 'bad' sex. Evaluations of good and bad sex, she argues, should take into account the retrospective appraisal of the experiences of those involved, and not merely focus on the social processes that occurred at the initiation of the intimacy. However, as Beres (2007) notes, focusing on whether sex was evaluated as good or bad, or as pleasurable or not in retrospect, obscures an understanding of consent, since coerced sex may be assessed as 'good' or 'pleasurable', while the consensual sex may not. Even the very dichotomy between 'wanting' and 'not wanting' sex has been questioned (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005: 16). Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005: 16) found that most young women and men that they studied were ambivalent about sex, 'wanting it in some ways but not in others', a phenomenon they identified as a discourse of ambivalence. An outcome that appears to strongly motivate women to engage in sex appears to be the need to build and sustain a relationship (Baumeister and Leary 1995).

Some studies have attempted to understand the complex dynamics of sexual coercion and sexual consent and the nuances that surround these within the existing norms of a culture (see, for example, Marston 2005). However, other writers have shifted their analyses of sexual coercion to a different level and have problematised the dominant sexual scripts of the culture that influence individual behaviours and the interpretation of a sexual liaison. Oswald's and Russell's (2006) study suggests that certain levels of sexual coercion are so prevalent that those close to the culture do not construct them as such. Thus, instead of attempting to understand how a sexual manoeuvre or utterance might normally be interpreted within the culture, such accounts raise critical questions about the power dynamics that mediate the normative 'heterosexual' script that may elude those living out the script. Livingston et al (2004: 294) describe the normative heterosexual script as follows:

The TSS [traditional sexual script] maintains that women should appear at least somewhat sexually willing, while refusing higher levels of sexual intimacy

to avoid being viewed as sexually promiscuous. Men, guided by TSS, may believe that women engage in token resistance and may persist in their attempts at sexual coercion.'

In particular, criticisms have been made about the way in which normative expectations associated with this script sustain dominance and suppression in heterosexual relations.

Finkelhor and Yllo (1983), in a paper on marital rape, distinguished various types of sexual coercion experienced by women within marriage, including 'interpersonal coercion', 'social coercion', and coercion involving threatened or actual physical force. 'Interpersonal coercion' is constructed as coercion that arises when one individual coerces another (usually verbally) into having sex, while 'social coercion' is defined merely as 'social pressure' (1983: 121) to follow a defined set of practices such as the normative heterosexual script referred to above. However, Finkelhor's and Yllo's (1983) analysis focused exclusively on physical force, and the other types of coercion were merely defined but not developed. While their distinction between interpersonal and social coercion has been referred to in subsequent publications on sexual coercion (Gavey 1989, Beres 2007) the concepts have not been developed; Gavey (1989: 468) notes:

Some . . . forms of coercion, particularly social coercion, are rarely discussed in the literature on sexual victimization. I suggest this is because within the dominant discourse on heterosexuality, such behaviour appears natural.'

As will become clear later in this article, Finkelhor's and Yllo's (1983) distinction is highly relevant to the analysis that follows as it allows us to retain a sense that coercion is still primarily a problem for girls and women, and as an analytical category, coercion must not disappear completely into nebulous notions of gender roles, while at the same time incorporating the difficulties that men tend to experience in relation to normative expectations around sexuality.

Indeed, the experiences of sexual coercion as a phenomenon also affecting men have come to the fore in recent scholarship (O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998, Struckman-Johnson et al 2003, Marston 2005, Oswald and Russell 2006). Oswald's and Russell's (2006) review of the literature cites reports from men of sexual coercion emanating from women as between 4% and 44% across a range of studies. As occurs in the case of women, the two most widely reported coercive strategies reported by men are persistent verbal pressure and continual advances when asked

to stop. When rates of 'unwanted sexual activity' were surveyed in New Zealand, the rates for both sexes were even higher - 67% of boys and 77% of girls reported having engaged in an unwanted sexual activity (Jackson et al 2000). However, engaging in an unwanted sexual activity and experiencing the direct pressure from a partner need to be distinguished; this distinction is something to which we will return later in the paper.

Methodology

The broad study aimed to explore post-primary pupils' perspectives on sexuality, sex education, and the discourses and factors that influence their sexual knowledge and behaviour. This article focuses on findings from an aspect of this wider study, namely on understanding young people's heterosexual encounters and how they relate to the issue of sexual coercion (other parts of the study are reported in Hyde and Howlett 2004, Hyde et al 2005a, 2005b, 2008). A qualitative methodology was employed, and since one of the central aims of the study was to identify the discourses invoked by the young people, audio-recorded focus group interviews were used to gather data. However, while focus groups are useful at capturing dominant discourses of a group, they may also constrain the expression of what might be deemed to be unusual or embarrassing views or experiences of individuals (A fuller account of the use of focus groups in this study has been elaborated in Hyde *et al* 2005b.) In total, 29 focus groups were conducted at 10 secondary schools, and involved 102 young women and 124 young men. Each focus group was followed by the distribution to each participant of a brief questionnaire designed largely to obtain biographical information, but which also included a number of key questions about participants' levels of sexual experience and other related issues. One questionnaire item concerned the experience of sexual pressure and will be referred to in a later section.

The secondary schools that facilitated the groups were initially identified from the Irish Department of Education and Science's website which contained information about the location, type and size of schools. A total of ten schools out of 22 that were contacted agreed to facilitate the focus groups. Five of these were located in urban areas, and 5 in rural areas, with a wide range of socio-economic groups included. A volunteer sample was drawn from 3 girls' schools, four boys' schools and

three co-educational schools. Participants were made aware of the aims of the study by teachers at the school and were invited to participate if they so wished. The size of the individual groups was capped at 12 to avoid the groups becoming unmanageable, and was otherwise based on the number of young people who volunteered to participate. Groups (with one exception) were single sex, and each comprised of 5-12 participants. Interviewers observed and subjectively monitored the comfort and participation levels of those in the groups and noted that larger groups tended to be more relaxed than smaller ones, and were no more likely to have a small number of 'quiet' participants. However, in the larger groups, participants did tend to talk across one another to a greater extent, which made the work of transcribing recordings more challenging. The sample included pupils from both the Junior Cycle (15-16 years), and the Senior Cycle (18-19 years). The Junior Cycle terminates at the Junior Certificate examination and the Senior Cycle at the Leaving Certificate examination. Apart from at one school, all pupils were in their examination year.

In terms of participants' general levels of sexual experience, questionnaire data indicated that 13.3% of the girls who were under 16 years reported having experienced penetrative sex, while the corresponding figure for the boys was 20.6%. However, among participants aged 16 years and older the figures had risen (as expected) to 62.3% of the girls and 42.9% of the boys.

The data collection period extended from October 2003 to January 2004. An interview guide was used and was designed to provide triggers for discussion rather than be used as a prescriptive structure for the interviews; the topics included reflected the study's objectives. These topics covered a broad range of aspects of sexual behaviour and attitudes, including issues surrounding normative sexual practices in the social organisation of adolescent intimacy, contraception, crisis pregnancy, STIs, sexual identity, sexual health service use and perceived information and service needs. As indicated, in this paper, we focus specifically on data relating to the young people's experiences of heterosexual encounters with particular reference to the issue of sexual coercion.

Focus groups with adolescents on a sensitive topic hold particular ethical challenges.

Stress or distress may arise among participants due to the intensity of the interaction (Hill 1998). To counteract this in the present study, in advance of the focus groups, participants were informed in writing of the voluntary nature of participation, and of their liberty to leave the group interview at any stage should they so wish. In addition, each focus group began with an outline of the ground rules that stressed the primacy of confidentiality, respect for others' views, the importance of honesty and so on. Participants themselves and at least one of their parents or guardians provided written informed consent. The researchers also clarified to participants their absolute independence from the school. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at the university where the research was carried out.

The method of analysis was thematic content analysis (Patton 1990, Wilkinson 2004). Content analysis is a 'research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns' (Hsieh and Shannon 2005:1278). In the process of content analysis, data were explored for recurrent themes and indeed differences; these themes were then grouped together and theorised in light of their contribution to or problematisation of existing interpretations.

Findings

During the focus groups, participants of both sexes were asked by the interviewer to comment on young people's experiences, if any, of sexual pressure. When attempting to make sense of what data told us about sexual coercion, we initially confined our analysis to 'direct' examples of sexual coercion. Our focus was almost exclusively on the coercion experiences of young women, which were a feature of the dominant 'heterosexual script' discourse that both the young men and women described (aspects of which we present a little later). However, later in the analysis, when data were considered in relation to wider constructions of coercion in the literature, in particular Finkelhor's and Yllo's (1983) distinction between social coercion and interpersonal coercion, we opened our analysis to consider wider dimensions of coercion, which included the coercion experiences of the young men. Thus, in this data presentation we first consider young women's experiences of social coercion, before turning to their accounts of coercion at an interpersonal level. We

then present the coercion experiences of the young men, which were predominantly social in nature although played out at an interpersonal level. We acknowledge that focus groups are limited in capturing individual personal experiences, but appropriate for gaining a sense of the discourses that influences particular groups of people.

In terms of the questionnaire item on the topic of sexual coercion, all participants were asked the following question, with the word 'boy' or 'girl' appearing according to the opposite sex of the respondent: 'Have you ever felt under any pressure by a [boy/girl] to have full sex?' Almost 31% of the girls answered 'Yes' to this question, while the corresponding figure for boys was 8.1%. It is not known how many either succumbed or resisted such pressure.

Social coercion: young women's experiences

Many female participants reported being aware of those closest to them in their peer group who had experienced penetrative sex. In the following extract, it is suggested that 'peer influence', that is, being influenced by what others in the group are doing, impacts upon the initiation of sexual activity, rather than 'peer pressure', or being directly persuaded or coerced in some way by the group¹.

²P.1: I don't think that there is pressure on any body to have sex. When you are ready you are ready.

Int: So it is not peer pressure really. You just make up your own mind?

P2: Well if you know someone who has not had sex you wouldn't go telling them that they should. You just wouldn't do that, telling her it was time she grew up.

P7: At this age there is some pressure to have sex, that you should be having sex.

P2: Not so much pressure but that it is the done thing and that everybody is at it.

¹A conceptual parallel comes from Mitchell's and West's (1996:47) research into the initiation of cigarette smoking in which the authors problematise definitions of peer pressure based on the notion that young people are bullied or coerced into smoking. Rather, the authors argue that young people's initiation into smoking has more to do with concerns about identity and the influences of group membership than one-way persuasion.

² 'P' indicates that a participant is speaking, and where the identity of the participant was recognized in the course of transcribing, the participant is identified by a number. At times during the interviews, however, particularly when interactions among group members became highly spontaneous, it was impossible to identify who the speaker was. The fact that the young people within particular groups tended to speak with the same accents and the same level of maturity in their voices exacerbated the problem.

Int: At what age?

P: About 16 or 17.

Female, Rural, Leaving Cert, School 1 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 3

Int: Is there pressure to have sex? Is there pressure to reach that stage?

P: I think everyone's quite open about it though. No-one's like 'No'. It's not like that.

P: I don't think there's pressure from friends. I think people put pressure on themselves because they know that their friend's doing it. . . . Or at least did it once.

(Female, Urban, Leaving Cert, School 3/Focus Group 1)

P2: . . . because you are hanging around in a group and everybody has had sex, you're kinda like..

P6: You kind of feel left out or something.

(Female, Urban, Junior Cert, School 6 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 2)

The impact of wider normative influences being brought to bear on individual sexual encounters is also clear in the next quotation. The young woman insinuates that if a young man had experienced oral sex in a previous relationship, she would want to live up to the normative standard set by others and perform it too. In this sense, her rationale for performing oral sex is not based on her own internal sense of readiness, but rather influenced by normative practices of the wider group, and what has come to be expected in an intimate encounter.

Int: Do you think that . . . girls or boys in a way feel pressured to perform oral sex?

General: Yeah

Int: Can you spell it out a little bit ?

P5: Yeah, if your friends are doing it with their boyfriends you feel pressurised, . . . And if your boyfriend was in a relationship before that and did it, you'd want to do it, wouldn't you ?

(Female, Rural, Junior Certificate, School 8/ Focus Group 1)

Another participant in the older age group admitted to having had early sexual experiences to secure a sense of belonging that she later came to regret.

Sure, I had one-night-stands when I was younger [All laugh and some incoherent comments]. No, because I was younger and I was immature and I really didn't know like. I was just doing stuff to fit in with all the crowd, I

thought it was all right [A few 'yeahs' during this], but then you find out when you get older that it just isn't like that.

(Female, Rural, Leaving Cert, School 8/Focus Group 2)

While these accounts of social coercion were part of the narratives of the young women, so too were countervailing pressures on them to protect their reputations by demonstrating a level of sexual reserve. (Space prohibits a discussion of this issue here; it is the central topic of a separate publication (Hyde *et al* 2008)). In addition, many the young women related experiences of pressure from individual men in private encounters, an issue to which we now turn.

Interpersonal coercion: young women's experiences

The experiences of interpersonal coercion recounted by the young women took the form of verbal enticement, as well as unwelcome physical advances. Yet, as data presented later in this section will reveal, young women sometimes made sense of male sexual pushiness through discourses of the male sex drive (Hollway1984) that suggested that men could not help their behaviour.

Some examples of verbal enticement are as follows.

P10: [Mimicking a man] 'Would there be some story of a hand job or a blowjob? Go on, do it – put your hand down there.'

P8: They try and make you do it.

P4: And you're just sitting there like and it's like, 'Go on.'

(Female, Rural, Leaving Cert, School 8/Focus Group 2)

P1: Depending on the type of fella, they might be trying hard to get the girl to talk her into having sex with him, that he expected it.

(Female, Rural, Junior Cert, School 1 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 2)

P6: It's kinda like he looks at you the right way and says, 'Please?'

[All laugh]

(Female, Rural, Junior Certificate, School 8/ Focus Group 1)

Verbal pressure to entice an unsure or unwilling partner to have sex has been widely reported elsewhere (Kelly [1988] 1996, Livingston et al 2004, Marston 2005).

A number of female participants described instances of unwelcome physical advances in their encounters with individual men.

P3: So you'd be there and like 'NO, - NO, - NO', so like they're trying every word and you are going, 'NO, - NO, - NO'!

P4: They're so persistent – they are.

Int: So you're feeling kind of responsible to set the limits?

P3: You have to – because if you don't they'll just think that you are okay with it.

P: . . . Well it has come to the point where I've had my hands up like that [indicates using a blocking hand gesture]– You know up against him and he's still going like, 'Oh—'.

P5: Hands everywhere.

(Female, Rural, Mixed, School 5/Focus Group 2)

Some of the young women believed that intoxicated males were more likely to push the boundaries towards masturbation and oral sex, not simply through verbal mechanisms but also with unwelcome physical advances like groping.

P10: Like when a lad is really drunk they try to . . . they really grope you like.

P7: And then they'd be trying it on with you as well and you'd just say, 'Get off me' like.' It's not easy.

(Female, Rural, Leaving Cert, School 8/Focus Group 2)

In another focus group, two participants described instances where they had to physically release themselves forcefully. In one case, the incident resulted in bruising. In both of these instances, the young men continued to socialise in their wider circle in a rural area.

P12: . . . he just forced himself onto me and I just shoved him off and I just ran out and all I had on was . . . and it was awful. But like, now, I'd never put myself in that situation where I was just so. . . I went out and I cried the whole night.

P8: I got in a situation like that once too . . . and the person kept grabbing my hand and I kept saying 'Let me go!' like. And he wouldn't let me go and he kept grabbing me like. And this was behind these trees and I said, 'Let me go!' and he wouldn't let me go and he kept grabbing me like. And I thought he was going to like rape me and I was screaming my head off, 'LET ME GO!' And then some other people came over and then he let go. And then like, and then he went round telling everybody, 'Oh, I rode her last night' and he didn't even like.

P10: You get yourself into situations and then you realise you're in over your

head like and you're trying to get out of it and [interrupted]

P12: I wasn't even drunk, that's why it was so embarrassing, I was stone sober.

P8: And I wouldn't talk to that person, even now like, because the next day I had a couple of bruises on my arms like because he held me down that hard like, all there like [Others talking over: Jesus!]. It was just, but you couldn't say that at the time like. I just had to smile and listen to them all say whatever they want like.

(Female, Rural, Leaving Cert, School 8/Focus Group 2)

It is notable that the young women seems to hold themselves responsible to a certain extent by suggesting that they would never put themselves in a similar situation again.

There were several other accounts indicating that young women had come to expect male pushiness as a pervasive feature of their intimate encounters.

Int: So say you really like someone and you're going out with him for the first time, do you know how far you will go?

P6: Unless he pushes.

(Female, Rural, Junior Certificate, School 8/ Focus Group 1)

I know a lot of friends whose boyfriends have just been pushing them into stuff.

(Female, Rural, Mixed, School 5/ Focus Group 1)

In other narratives, in the course of recounting aspects of the culture of adolescent intimacy, references to sexual pressure emerged as an aside that were almost treated as unremarkable. In the following extract, the focus of the story was about people being sexual in public, yet male sexual pushiness features as an incidental component of the culture.

P5: . . . then they went down to the back of the disco and em, he dropped a hand on to her and he's pushing her to do it and she won't . . .

(Female, Rural, Junior Certificate, School 8/ Focus Group 1)

Similarly, in a narrative focusing on relationships with mothers, one participant inserted a reference to having experienced sexual pressure.

P: Once you hit 6th year, I find with my mother, like I can go out every night if I want to and she doesn't say anything to me. She asks me what I'm doing

with my boyfriend and I tell her what I'm doing with my boyfriend.

Int: Do you?

P: There's no point in lying to her. My last boyfriend put pressure on me to have sex and I told her and later broke up with him, so.

(Female, Rural, Mixed, School 5/ Focus Group 1)

Other researchers have noted that for women, sexual interactions that occur against their will may be so prevalent within their culture that they have become normalised (Crown and Roberts 2007).

While a dominant theme in the interview data of the focus groups with females was male sexual pushiness, it is important to point out that many female participants indicated that not all men were pushy when it came to negotiating sexual boundaries. Our data suggested that the young women's experiences of sexual pressure depended to a large extent on the individual men whom they encountered. While the notion that all men want sex and will push for it tended to be invoked as a dominant discourse by the group, this view was sometimes challenged. However, although diversity in the experiences of the young women was reported, it was impossible to dismiss the considerable number of participants who reported interactions with individual men in which the latter had used various tactics from verbal cajolery to physical force to stretch the boundaries of physical intimacy.

As indicated in the following extracts, some young women believed that the coercive dimension of heterosexual encounters was so subtle that young males themselves did not even recognise it as pressure. This suggests that young women may exonerate pushy male behaviour because of their belief in the 'male sex drive'.

I think they should mix the guys and the girls [in sex education classes] whether the guys mess around anyway . . . because then the guys will kind of find out what the girls are thinking and they really don't know anything that we are thinking. They don't notice that girls are pressured into doing oral [sex] for them so they should get this across . . . to find out stuff like that.

(Female, Urban, Junior Cert, School 6 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 2)

Int: And is there a kind of pressure around you, lose your virginity?

Various: Yeah, yeah, definitely

P4: Especially from the boy.

P6: Sometimes they don't mean to put a pressure but you see a pressure, yeah.

P4: They don't mean to do it but you just feel it.
(Female, Rural, Junior Cert, School 1 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 2)

In our data, some young women recounted their sense of obligation towards men whom they believed they had aroused.

P4: Start off with the first stage of oral and then there's the other oral.
Int: And what's the first stage of oral?
Several: A hand job. [masturbation]
P2: Well like the equivalent of a hand job for a girl is like fingering.
Several: Yeahs
P2: Usually the guy starts it [a hand job] off first like and then you feel obliged.
All: [Laughter].
(Female, Rural, Mixed, School 5/Focus Group 2)

P8: You'd feel tight . . . it would make you feel tight for not doing it [agreeing to sex].
(Female, Rural, Junior Certificate, School 8/ Focus Group 1)

The sense of obligation reported here has been a feature of other studies that found that women consented to unwanted sex because their partners had already become sexually aroused (Walker 1997, Marston 2005). However, within the same focus group in our study, other participants stated that they would not feel obliged to perform masturbation or oral sex under such circumstances. Nevertheless, that some young women feel responsible for male arousal, and do not have the negotiating skills to assert their boundaries and needs signals concern for the practise of safer sex.

Social coercion: young men's experiences

In the narratives of the young men, peer influence was a major factor in the initiation of sexual activity in a similar way to that described above in relation to the young women. The social pressure to fit in is described in the following quotation.

Int: How would the pressure come about then?
P4: Just your friends like. They are doing it, they have talked about it and you want to know what is like, so you feel pressured into doing it.
P1: It would be you yourself that feels pressured cos if all your friends have

done it, you must think that there is something wrong with you that you haven't.

(Male, Urban, Junior Cert, School 4/Focus Group 2)

The impact of the influence of peers was such that some young men began to speculate that that they were somehow unusual or defective if they had not had sex, or to see themselves as 'losers'.

(Male speaker): I know it sounds kind of corny but I didn't want to have sex before I got married really because of being a Catholic or whatever . . . my opinions have changed in the past few years about it – I haven't had sex yet . . . You wouldn't feel under pressure but you would feel like a loser. I have had that. I have one group of friends that aren't like that at all like. . . and another group of friends like they have all got steady girlfriends and they just like have sex with them. Every time that we go out and I am pretty much just stuck there with all. . . feeling different.

(Male/Female, Urban, Leaving Cert, School 6 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 1)

A few others described a feeling of pressure but were unable to identify particular outside sources that directly influencing their thinking.

P: I wouldn't say 'pressure' now.

P: When you say 'pressure', like no one pressures you into it.

P: If you are with the lads and they have done it all and you are all sitting there.

P5: Yeah but you never get pressured like nobody ever says anything - you feel the pressure yourself.

(Male, Urban, Leaving Cert, School 7 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 3)

P5: There's pressure with yourself.

Int: What do you mean pressure with yourself, do you put pressure on yourself is it?

P5: Yeah.

[A few nervous laughs]

(Male, Urban, Junior Cert, School 6 (Co-ed)/Focus Group 3)

These data on the social coercion that young men experienced are remarkably similar to the narratives of the young women. However, while female participants tended to describe the countervailing pressure to protect their reputation and demonstrate a level of sexual reserve, the young men tended to describe a pressure to live up to the standard of the dominant male, with an expectation that they would

lead, control and know what to do in sexual encounters (see Mac an Ghail 1994, Frosh *et al* 2002). Homophobia was a central feature in presenting oneself as a proper male. This is a different type of social pressure (though not unrelated) to the more general pressure to lose one's virginity to someone of the opposite sex. It is a social pressure, emanating largely from the male peer group, to adhere to the heterosexual script. Although focus group data indicated no differences between rural and urban young men in the extent to which hegemonic displays of masculinity were manifested, male participants in schools located in areas of high social deprivation tended to 'act out' traditional masculinity to a greater degree than their middle-class counterparts, and tended to be more extreme in expressing homophobia.

Young men, social coercion and the heterosexual script

Although 8.1% of the young men answered in the affirmative to the question, 'Have you ever felt under any pressure by a girl to have full sex?', descriptions of interpersonal coercion from individual women were virtually absent from the young men's narratives. This is, in part, likely to have been a feature of focus group interviewing which most likely inhibited the disclosure of individual experiences by the young men where such experiences were unusual and not shared by others in the group. However, what did feature prominently were fears of 'what if' situations, where young men described their anxieties about how they might feel in situations where they did not live up to the yardstick of the dominant male. This kind of social coercion towards displaying attitudes and behaviours consistent with a particular version of masculinity appears to push men to manifest a level of interest in heterosex that they may not have, and may propel them into sex with women when they are unwilling, in order to distance themselves from any notion of homosexuality.

P2: If you said No [to heterosex] and all your friends find out you'd be slagged.

P1: They'd probably say you were a bottler, a wimp.

P3: Like I said no and the first thing that happened was that three or four of them turned around and said "you're just a wimp".

Int: Really.

P2: They'd say "oh you're a queer" or something.

Int: And is there a lot of slugging about being a queer?

Various: Yeah.

Int: Is that what you'd say to each other?

Various: Yeah.

P1: They'd say you're a faggot or something.

(Male, Urban, Transition, School 9/Focus Group 3)

P1: If a girl like came up to you and said like "Let's have sex" it would be a bit weird but if you didn't do it you'd get a lot of stick over it because you're the fella and you're supposed to be the one that wants to do it, so there's pressure like. Fellas are expected to want to do it more than girls, so if the opportunity came up and they didn't take it they'd get a lot of stick over it.

(Male, Urban, Transition, School 9/ Focus Group 1)

A number of the male participants believed that men were under greater pressure to have sex by their late teens because not having sex with a woman could threaten their masculine identity with labels such as 'poof' and 'gay'.

P1: It's a bigger issue later on, once you turn 19 or 20 and you're still a virgin you'd be considered like ...

P2: A poof.

P1: ... gay.

(Male, Urban, Transition, School 9/Focus Group 3)

Thus, while male participants shared with their female counterparts a general sense of social coercion to lose their virginity, they also reported a social pressure to display an eagerness for sex arising from heteronormative discourses. However, they were less likely than female participants to report experiences of interpersonal heterosexual coercion.

Discussion

We have theorised young women's and men's heterosexual encounters in relation to the concept of coercion, by invoking Finkelhor's and Yllo's (1983) distinction between social coercion and interpersonal coercion. Our data indicated that both young women and men experience social coercion from their peer group in a general way to be seen to have experienced penetrative sex. Other research has found elements of

this type of peer influence; Burtney's (2000) study noted that adolescents who had friends who were sexually active were more likely to be sexually active themselves, and those who were not sexually active were more likely to have friends who were not sexually active.

However, beyond this, the types of coercion experienced by the young men and women in our study tended to differ: young women's narratives indicated high levels of interpersonal coercion, while young men reported pressure from dominant heteronormative discourses to present themselves in a particular way in sexual encounters that were consistent with versions of hegemonic masculinity (whether or not they were heterosexual). The findings of the questionnaire item on sexual pressure support the qualitative data, though they also identify overlaps between the experiences of the young men and women in indicating that interpersonal sexual coercion does not appear to be exclusively a female experience.

In deploying Finkelhor's and Yllo's (1983) distinction between social and interpersonal coercion, we acknowledge that these are not neat and discrete categories; rather, both are influenced by the subject positions taken up by the social actors involved. Indeed, both social and interpersonal coercion are constituted by dominant discourses of heterosexuality operating at different levels. These discourses promote sexual passivity, boundary maintenance and pleasing a partner in the case of women, and sexual eagerness and taking control on the part of men. However, separating out these types of coercion does facilitate an important distinction to be made between types of coercion, namely indirect pressure that leads people to participate in sexual experiences when they do not particularly want to, ostensibly with consent, as opposed to more direct forms of coercion with more obvious pressure brought to bear during sexual encounters. While keeping in mind the definitional problems of sexual consent and coercion that we outlined earlier, and post-structural analyses that decentralised more traditional notion of coercion as power as held by one group (men) over another (woman), it is important that the notion of coercion is not theorised out of existence. Distinguishing between social and interpersonal coercion, though not watertight categories, facilitates the retention of sexual interpersonal coercion as a political issue for feminism, while acknowledging that it is also a problem for men, though to a lesser extent.

The notion of social coercion is useful in problematising the romantic heterosexual script that prescribes particular interactions. Other accounts of sexual coercion have failed to problematise existing wider gender relations within the culture, instead taking local meanings as the starting point in attempting to understand sexual coercion in a particular context. We argue that particular social discourses characterised by heteronormativity become available to women and men in the culture at a particular time, that propose behaviours that present themselves as 'natural'. The experiences of the young men and women are thus constituted by the social and linguistic processes of the culture in the time and space in which they live. Women and men take up subject positions in their world, and their experiences are contextualised within the culture. Thus, to the subject, particular sexual experiences may be perceived as natural and legitimate, which when viewed from a different vantage point may be interpreted as clearly coercive. From particular subject positions, heterosexual gender relations can thus be reproduced, and we argue, need to be problematised. Simply because social actors do not view their experiences as coercion, or excuse these as normative social practices of the culture does not mean that the matter should rest. In particular, there are implications of both social and interpersonal coercion for the practise of safer sex.

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