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PARENTS' CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE SEXUAL SELF-PRESENTATION AND SEXUAL CONDUCT OF ADOLESCENTS: DISCOURSES OF GENDERING AND PROTECTING

Abstract

In this article, we explore the discourses on sexuality that a sample of parents drew upon when they talked about teenage sexual self-presentation and conduct. The sample consisted of 43 parents (32 mothers and 11 fathers) of adolescents and pre-adolescents; data were gathered using in-depth interviews and were analysed using a strategy known as modified analytical induction. Findings indicated that while an acceptance of the traditional heterosexual script permeated participants' accounts, and protective discourses in relation to young women were brought to bear, so too were protective discourses invoked in relation to young men. On the whole, young women tended to be cast as sexual subjects who chose to self-sexualize, and this was sometimes presented by participants as a threat to young men. We argue that the discourses that parents connoted were multiple and sometimes contradictory, and our analysis problematizes the notion that conventional discourses singularly cast women as objects of male sexuality. However, the overall picture indicated that in parents' narratives, girls tended to be more heavily regulated and either viewed as needing protection from male sexual advances or castigated for encouraging them.

Key words: Young people; sexual subjectivity; parents.

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Introduction

In this article, based on the accounts of a sample of parents in Ireland, we illuminate the extent to which various discourses about adolescent sexuality were brought to bear when these parents talked about sexuality in adolescence. The focus here is on participants' narratives both of individual interactions with their own adolescent sons and daughters relating to sexuality, and on the discourses they invoked when talking about sexual self-presentation (dress and demeanour in social situations) and conduct more generally in relation to adolescents of both sexes. Our analysis is contextualised against the background of dominant discourses on sexuality, perspectives on masculinity (Mac an Ghail 1994; Wight 1994), and public and academic debates about the sexualization of girls that have proliferated in popular and academic literature in recent years (Lerum and Dworkin 2009; Lamb 2010; Lamb and Peterson 2011; Murnen & Smolak 2011; Goodin et al 2011). Drawing on data, we advance Lamb's (2010) notion that that boys and girls may be positioned as both subjects and objects in certain contexts, and being situated in an object position is not always or necessarily problematic.

Background

The argument that female sexuality is heavily regulated has long been a key perspective within feminist literature. Central to the control over female sexuality is the view that a positive discourse on female sexual desire has been absent in discourses on sexuality, that female sexual subjectivity is denied, and that female sexual pleasure is subordinated to male sexual pleasure (Lamb 2010). These issues of desire, subjectivity and pleasure mediate the 'traditional sexual script' (TSS) (Livingston et al 2004: 294) where 'women should appear at least somewhat sexually willing, while refusing higher levels of sexual intimacy to avoid being viewed as sexually promiscuous'. Normative expectations associated with this script are widely deemed to sustain dominance and suppression in heterosexual relations. In dominant discourses, men's motives for sex are viewed as biologically determined as captured by the discourse of the male sex drive (Hollway 1984: 63), where men are perceived to be 'sexually insatiable and male sexuality as naturally an uncontrollable drive'. This discourse has been associated with parental and school-based sexuality education (Connell and Elliot 2009) where girls have been found to be exposed to a restricted protective discourse casting them as passive and desireless, with boys/men constructed as dangerous, aggressive and as sexual predators (Holland et al 1998; Fields 2008; Wiley & Wilson, 2009). Boys have been found to be already shaped by hegemonic masculinity from their wider socialization and to have preferences for a sex education curriculum that emphasises the male part of the heterosexual script (Forrest 2010).

However, recent scholarship in the realm of critical studies on men and masculinities has drawn attention to the vulnerabilities to which men are exposed in the realm of sexuality. Far from benefiting unanimously from the power they are expected to exercise through normative heterosexual practices, this genre of work proposes that many men, especially adolescents, may actually experience as oppressive the pressure to present themselves as

sexual dynamite (see Mac an Ghail 1994; Wight 1994; Hyde et al 2009).

Parallel to scholarship that has produced a new discourse on the vulnerable male is a debate about how to interpret the manner in which young women and girls are encouraged through societal discourses to present themselves in a sexual way. Work in this area has proliferated in the past few years since the original publication in 2007 of the *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* by the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association 2010). The report synthesized what its authors (six psychologists and a member drawn from the general public) deemed to be the best available theoretical, scientific and clinical scholarship relating to sexualization and its impact on girls. It concluded that sexualization, defined with reference to the presence of at least one of four indicators, had a negative psychological and physical impact on girls, and needed to be addressed at a number of levels. The resistance discourse to the sexualization of girls was reinforced by a number of publications that received widespread coverage both in the USA and internationally – Ariel Levy's (2005) *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* and Gigi Durham's (2008), *The Lolita Effect*. Since then, criticisms of the impact of the mass media and marketing on children and young women deemed insufficiently mature to adopt a critical stance or consciousness of the underlying sexism of marketing messages have proliferated (Gill 2008; Lamb and Peterson 2011; Murnen & Smolak 2011; Goodin et al 2011).

However, there are critics of the APA report. While commended for contributing to contemporary discourses on the construction of sexuality and interpretations of girlhood, and for its accessibility to a wide audience, Lerum and Dworkin (2009) took issue with the narrow, uni-disciplinary focus of the report and its exclusion of topical debates on gender and sexuality from other disciplines such as 'sociology, public health, queer studies, media studies, and sexuality studies' (p.251). Moreover, their central critique was of what they

asserted to be the report's narrow interpretation of sexualization as a 'harmful and dangerous process that only has negative impacts on girls and women' (251). They contextualize their own position against a background in which diverse stakeholders advance their own preferred discourse on how girlhood and sexuality ought to be constructed out of a range of possible interpretations. Conservatives favour the regulation of girls' sexuality in order to maintain existing social divides of class, race and gender, they propose, while feminists also oppose sexual commodification, but for different reasons.

Lerum and Dworkin (2009) note that the critique of commodified sexuality shared by conservatives and feminists alike has led to 'awkward alliances' (p.251) between the two, and feminist perspectives on sexuality are themselves diverse. Notwithstanding this diversity, they go on to argue that feminist activists have tended to acknowledge both the pleasures and dangers of sexuality, while the literature used in the APA report focused solely on the negative outcomes of the sexualization of girls. The stance taken in the APA report, they argue, may actually impede the goals advocated within some feminist perspectives of advocating for sexual agency and pleasure, and of promoting sexual rights and sexual health. Lamb (2010), however, argues that the expectation of achieving sexual pleasure runs the risk of being another ideal (among a host of ideals) for which adolescents must strive, even when this has been a challenge for adult women. Moreover, she cautions against the notion of equating pleasurable sex with 'good' sex, and of perceiving pleasurable sex as benign and apolitical. She also asserts that constructing sex as either objective or subjective, active or passive, simplifies the complex nexus of positions that a person can occupy within a mutually respectful sexual relationship and privileges an active position as the 'correct' one, a position traditionally linked with men.

Lerum and Dworkin's (2009) critique was also taken up by Else-Quest & Hyde (2009) who defended the APA position. The latter argued that Lerum and Dworkin had failed to take into

account an important point in relation to girls' sexuality – that girls were just that, girls, and not women and any analysis of their sexuality needs to be mediated through a developmental lens.

Thus, what we know already about this topic is that, historically, female sexuality has been controlled through dominant discourses; however, attention to masculine gender norms in recent years has exposed vulnerabilities and pressures that men, and young men in particular, experience. In the current period, attention has focused on how young women (especially) are sexualized and a debate as to how to interpret this in relation to feminist theorising has ensued. The dominant perspective is critical of the process of sexualisation and some commentators invoke developmental theory to support their stance; a challenging perspective contests the idea that sexualisation is entirely negative, and favours a stance that both embraces sexual power as a goal while simultaneously holding a critical stance on sexual objectification. This is the essence of what is known about the topic from academic literature; what a sample of parents make of it when talking about adolescent sexuality is the focus of this article.

Methodology

The data presented in this article are part of a wider study – the first of its kind in Ireland - of parents' approaches to communicating with their pre-adolescent and adolescent children about sexuality. The aim of this article is to describe and offer some insights into the discourses invoked by parents in describing the sexual self-presentation and conduct of young men and women in their teens. Another aspect of the study, namely how young

people reportedly respond to parents' attempts at sexuality education, has been published separately (Author et al 2009).

The study used a qualitative research methodology and both purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants. In total, there were 43 participants (32 mothers and 11 fathers) drawn from a range of geographical locations throughout Ireland. The data gathering technique was in-depth interviews, 36 of which were individual, two were paired interviews, and one involved 3 participants. The diversity in interviewing techniques arose because a small number of participants indicated a preference to be interviewed with another or others. Since these participants were either partners or friends, the impact on the data was not obvious – the same level of spontaneity was experienced and the broad patterns emerging in data were the similar to those gathered in the individual interviews.

Participation was confined to parents (males and females) with at least one child aged 10-19 years at the time of the interview. Ethical approval for the study was gained from the Ethics Committee at the university leading the research. Prior to the interview, informed consent was obtained from participants, and anonymity guaranteed (pseudonyms are used throughout this article).

Purposive sampling involved the recruitment of participants from a range of locations, mainly through Parents' Committees at schools; local community-based organisations and agencies also served as selection sites. The schools were identified using the Department of Education and Science's website (www.education.ie), as well as schools' own websites. Ten schools, located in a variety of neighbourhoods to ensure socio-economic diversity, were identified in this way. Both primary and second-level schools were included, as well as those in rural and urban locations. Seven of the 10 schools identified actively responded to the invitation to participate, and through engaging with the Parents' Committees at these

schools, contact was made with potential participants. As interviewing progressed, the strategic recruitment of those less well-represented in the early interviews, namely those in lower socioeconomic groups and fathers, was considered necessary. A Resource Centre in an area undergoing community regeneration was used to increase the participation of those in lower socio-economic groups. Access to potential participants here was facilitated by a community development worker and five mothers were recruited in this way; although the community worker had also encouraged men to participate, none volunteered. To address the dearth of men in the study, male-dominated sporting clubs were approached, but to little avail. The strategy of snowball sampling was more successful; nonetheless, while the final sample revealed a reasonable balance of working and middle-class participants (based on O'Hare *et al.*'s (1991) occupational scale), fathers remained underrepresented in the sample (see Table 1). (Difficulties in recruiting men to participate in research has also been a feature of other studies (Patel et al 2003)). Other characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 2 (socio-economic group), Table 3 (civil status of participants) and Table 4 (age range of participants).

TABLES 1-4 ABOUT HERE

To attain consistency in the themes covered across interviews, each interview was guided by a loosely-structured topic guide. The location of interviews varied according to the personal preference of participants, with the majority occurring in their own homes.

Data analysis was guided by a well-established strategy for analysing qualitative data, namely modified analytical induction (MAI) (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). MAI starts with sensitising concepts from the literature, including social theory and empirical scholarship to which the researcher has been exposed. These concepts, or inklings, give rise to tentative

questions that guide the emerging interpretations. A hypothetical explanation, which emerges on the basis of analytical work, identifies the common elements of cases (Punch, 2005). MAI proceeded as follows in relation to this study: the first few (whole) interview transcripts were read and scrutinised by two members of the research team who developed a rough tentative definition and explanation of parents' perspectives on the sexual conduct and presentation of adolescents. This definition and explanation, which were only part of the story at this stage, were then modified as new incoming data that were at variance with this definition were found. Indeed data that did not fit into the emerging formulation were actively sought as additional transcripts were scrutinised. At the final analysis stage, the explanation of the phenomena was redefined and reformulated so that the range of variation was captured within the key findings.

Findings

For conceptual purposes, data are presented around three themes that captured how parents talked about the sexual presentation and conduct of adolescents namely: reproducing the traditional heterosexual script; protective discourses in relation to young women; and protective discourses in relation to young men. These themes elucidate the contradictions that parents experience in the contemporary period. As the themes unfold, it will become clear that, on the one hand girls were seen by participants to be in need of protection and respect, yet, on the other hand, they were viewed as sexually forward. Boys were perceived both as sexual predators, yet also as vulnerable.

Reproducing the traditional heterosexual script

A strong feature of data was that participants' narratives were mediated by the discourse of

the conventional heterosexual script. The traditional heterosexual script arises from scripting theory (Simon and Gagnon 1986) and purports that society sanctions specific relational and sexual behaviour around romantic encounters at a cultural level (Kim et al 2007). Notwithstanding interpersonal variations in how it is enacted, the female part of the script expects girls/women to manage boys'/men's sexual needs, necessitating the former to play down or devalue their own sexual desires; the male part of the script endorses the practice of boys/men prioritizing their own sexual desires and acting on their sexual needs, with an acceptance of men/boys perceiving their hormones to be in need of control (Kim et al 2007).

A good example of a situation where the traditional heterosexual script was evident in the narrative of a participant, Deirdre, who overtly normalised and approved of her 15-year-old son's interest in pornography, and was keen to ensure that he was aware of her approval of this.

He never told me about them [pornographic movies] but I did find them in his room. And then it came up one time and I kind of said that I'd better let him know that I know he has them, as opposed to having them stashed. But when I brought it up to him, I was like, 'Well you are a boy, it is only natural, I'm cool with it'. . . . And I was trying to be real, you know, it is cool, it is only normal.

(Deirdre, aged 32 years)

Thus, Deirdre conveyed to her son her approval that an interesting pornography was natural, reinforcing the notion that males should acknowledge their own sexual desire, and act on their sexual needs in a heteronormative way as occurs in pornographic sex. Yet at a later point in the interview, when asked whether she thought that her son was sexually

active, her expectations of his girlfriend's sexual behaviour was restrictive – while pornography was deemed to signify normal adolescent male behaviour, having more than one partner for his girlfriend was considered to be unacceptable.

That never entered my head at all [that the couple might be sexually active], it's funny like. But she doesn't seem that kind of girl I suppose. . . . I suppose if I thought she was with every Tom, Dick and Harry I think I would be saying that to [names son].

(Deirdre, aged 32 years)

Notwithstanding the fact that Deirdre was referring to pornography when being permissive with her son, and about actual sexual behavior when being repressive about the sexual behavior of girls, there is a sense that a different standard of female sexual behaviour to male behavior was expected.

The notion of male sexuality needing to be controlled was evident in the account of Corina; in her description of the type of dialogue she had with her teenage son, she conveyed the notion that men will try it on, women should respect themselves, and an honourable man wants sex but will wait for sex.

'This is the way a woman should treat herself like, and a man will probably try this or say that', and 'A girl that respects herself and a man that will wait, you never ever treat a woman like that'. . . .and,

'This is the way to treat a woman.' (Corina aged 35 years)

Similarly, the notion of men as sexually eager and needing to restrain themselves by not 'taking advantage' of opportunities for sex and of displaying 'respect' for girls (assumed not

to be equally interested in sex) is also evident in the following quotation in which a participant, Maureen, described the advice she gave her son.

‘You have to have respect for a girl. You don’t just go out and sort of have sex with them for nothing at all’ – again, to try and instil in them that it is not something that they should be taking advantage of . . . (Maureen, aged 46 years)

Although the heterosexual script is often interpreted negatively as reproducing gendered norms, at the same time Maureen’s reported message to her son conveys a complexity in interpreting subjectivity and objectivity associated with subject positions: the message challenges the view that women be treated as sex objects (‘you don’t have sex with them for nothing at all’), yet simultaneously, traditional notions of the male sex drive and male as sexual leader are assumed and embedded in advising her son to restrain himself sexually and to demonstrate ‘respect for a girl’.

Thus, while there was a tendency for parents to invoke the discourse of the conventional heterosexual script when referring to adolescents, their stance was not singularly to girls/women’s’ disadvantage but may also challenge the tendency to treat girls’/women as sex objects.

Protective discourses in relation to young women

Participants’ reports suggested that they drew on protective discourses where they believed that their daughters might be exploited or objectified sexually. While invoking protective discourses to regulate girls’ sexuality is a well-established theorization in existing literature,

here, we elucidate the complexity of protective discourses insofar as parents justified these with reference to the developmental age of the young woman, and/or embedded protective discourses with messages about sexual agency.

In the following quotation, a mother reports on her advice to her daughter about negotiating intimate encounters. The apparent rationale for proposing the use of refusing skills is the daughter's developmental level (as indicated by the participant's reference to 'confidence'). Thus, although the mother invokes a protective discourse, it is based on the mother's perceptions of the daughter's sexual competence (autonomy of decision-making and readiness to enter into the sexual encounter without duress (Wellings et al 2001)).

. . . 'You never let anybody put any pressure on you and if you are in a situation that you are not confident with just say 'No', those are the typical words, just say 'No'. (Sinead aged 44 years)

While the message suggested in Sinead's account implies the construction of sex as dangerous and something against which one should be on one's guard, arguably it is also a message promoting sexual agency and about establishing subjective control over one's sexual choices.

In the quotation that follows, Philomena invoked more directly the discourse of the male sex drive and the construction of sex as perilous – with changes to the body presented through the lexicon of danger, ie, 'warning'. However, her notion of the male sex drive was mediated by a concern that her daughter may be misconstrued as older than her years in view of her apparently advanced physical developmental, with the implicit notion that psychologically the daughter may not be sufficiently mature for the level of sexual engagement that may be normative for an older girl.

My young one [aged 14] has a chest [bust] and all, she has gone from...last year she got measured, she was a 34B and she got measured 2 weeks ago and she has gone to 38D and I'd be afraid of young fellows taking advantage because she does look a bit older than what she is and when she is wearing make-up and all. But I would warn her, her body has changed now and things can happen. (Philomena aged 34 years)

The discourse of the male sex drive permeated a number of other narratives, where the objectification of the young women in the face of the male gaze was a concern. In the first of the quotations that follows, the age of the teenager was problematized, while, in the second, it was the apparent age differential between the young women and the men who reportedly gazed at her that drew criticism.

. . . that is your daughter and the others are nice-looking girls but they are young and you know that guys being guys they are going out and about and they'd be eye candy for a lot of guys,. . . my concern is how other people who might be attracted to her how they would control themselves. (Billy aged 47 years)

She [daughter] would have been about 19 and she had a mini skirt and boots and all. And I kind of felt walking into the pub, them dirty old lads are looking at her . . . they shouldn't be looking at her, they are too old to be looking at her like that. (Ann aged 43)

In addition, some fathers reportedly drew on the discourse of the male sex drive, for example, one reportedly cautioned his daughter to 'Mind those boys, I don't trust those

boys' and another passed a remark about 'know[ing] what young men were like', reinforcing the discourse of the male sex drive (Hollway 1996 [1984]). While data for fathers are very limited, they appeared more likely than mothers to make direct reference to the male sex drive.

The complexity of protective discourses was also evident in some narratives, where young women were deemed to need protecting from the *discourse* of the double standard, that is, the construction of sexually promiscuous women in a negative light. In the following narrative, it was not so much the sexual readiness of the young women that was the principal concern, but rather protection was needed from the negative impact of the discourse itself. Thus, we see the regulating impact of the discourse itself, a discourse that has long been associated with controlling female sexuality through a tarnished reputation. Greater emphasis was placed by this mother on the fall-out of a contaminated sexual reputation than on the negative impact of sexual activity in the context of the young woman's possible poor sexual competence.

But [14 year-old-daughter] is after having I don't know how many [liaisons], but she is not going out with them, she is meeting [kissing] them. . . . And I keep telling her, 'You know the way boys think and all those boys are going to be talking to each other and they'll be saying that you are easy.' I am trying to teach her to have a bit of respect for herself. . . . she just thinks it is funny, she just thinks it is no harm . . . she's only a young one. The boys would be ending up saying that she is easy. (Philomena aged 34 years)

While Philomena's overarching concern in the above narrative was her daughter's reputation, there was nonetheless a sense that she was also encouraging a subject position for the girl (who apparently interprets multiple intimate liaisons as fun) by advocating self-respect. The account reveals the complexity of the situation insofar as the seeking of pleasure and fun by the daughter are contextualised by the mother in a developmental framework with reference to the daughter's age.

Later in the interview, the same mother voiced concerns again about her (other) daughters' sexual reputations as follows:

Philomena: I think they [eldest daughter and her boyfriend] are kind of lucky because [names daughter's boyfriend] is her first boyfriend and I think he is the same . . . but I think it is going to be harder with the other two [daughters] now because you have to watch them because you don't know who they are going to be with . . . so you have to tell them they have to be careful.

Interviewer: So you seem to be worried about their reputation of the girls.

Philomena: Well for their sake you would be, I mean I try to teach them to have respect for themselves, they have to learn to look after themselves and their bodies. . . . I think girls are more [of] a worry though. . . . maybe it is because they can get pregnant. . . . The girl's always got to watch herself still, no matter what, for her own sake.

Interviewer: Do you think that is unfair?

Philomena: That's life isn't it, you have to learn, that is the way it is.

(Philomena aged 34 years)

In the above narrative, Philomena appeared to be positively disposed to one of her daughters being aligned to one man in a heterosexual relationship ('they are lucky'), but expressed concerns about the other daughters whose sexuality was not bounded by heterosexual monogamy ('you have to watch them'). The mother conveyed the view that girls are more of a worry than are boys, to an extent because of the possibility of an unanticipated pregnancy, reinforcing the notion that sex is dangerous. Moreover, while Philomena acknowledged the sexual double standard as something unjust, her narrative suggested that she accepted it as an aspect of life. In this way, the discourse of the sexual double standard was reproduced. Nonetheless, Philomena's narrative - a classic example of the presentation of sex as dangerous, of sexual reputations at stake and a sense of resignation to the injustice of it all - also reveals elements of sexual agency being promoted in the message: 'I mean I try to teach them to have respect for themselves, they have to learn to look after themselves and their bodies.' Thus, nested in a classic message about the perils of sex for women is a message that they should learn to take control and care of their own bodies.

Protective discourses in relation to young men

Protective discourses invoked by participants were not confined to accounts relating to young women. A strong feature of data was the extent to which protective discourses over young men were also drawn upon. There was a sense in which women's traditional role as gatekeeper of sexual morality was being eroded by new standards, and this signalled a need to protect young men. The perception that women's sexual behaviour had shifted from the previous generation is captured in the following quotation; the participant was a secondary

school teacher. In the narrative, girls are cast as sexual leaders and sexual subjects, and boys as the objects of their interest and instruction.

Now I think the girls would be much more into the sex side of things, in which case the fellows are getting wised up very quickly, they are being told by the girls. So I would see the girls as being the leaders. So the mummies might say that their son, until he gets to 15 or 16 or he is not involved with a girlfriend, I would say he is picking up a hell of a lot more in school than she realises. (Joseph aged 53)

A number of parents expressed the view that young women projected what were deemed to be inappropriate signals by their sexy dress and demeanour. In both examples, the age of the young women in question was a factor for participants, suggesting that parents took a developmental approach when appraising the appropriateness of the public presentation of the young women.

You watch, especially girls, going in [to a junior disco] and God almighty, mini skirts and the high heels and those clothes are way too old for a 12 or 13 year old girl. . . Now the boys were horsing together when they came out and the girls came tottering in heels. But it seemed to be a different code for the girls than it was for the fellows. It didn't look right. I felt that the girls were putting out a message in the way that they were dressed. The young boys weren't interested. Now I would say if there were older boys there it would be completely different. (Sean aged 42)

I would have a big thing too about the way that girls do portray themselves. . . . As in young girls wanting to look and not dress appropriately for their age, it is a big thing I think, a bad signal to be sending out. . . . the low tops and the shorts. (Sinead aged 44 years)

In both of the examples above, the young women are positioned as sexual subjects choosing to present themselves in a sexual way.

In the quotation that follows, a mother's account indicating her disapproval of the sexual appearance of young women outside a social venue attended by her son suggests a protective discourse over the young man. This is expressed in her relief that her son had constructed the women in question as sexually contaminated 'slappers' and his distancing himself from them, socializing instead only with young women defined in ways that distinguished them from 'slappers'.

I used to pick him [son] up [after disco] and I used to say to him, "Jesus, look at them girls, what's on them is belts, not even a skirt." . . . He'd just say, "They are all slappers . . ." But you see he has his own circle of friends and that is who he sticks with . . . and he wouldn't go near them. He'd say, 'Sure I wouldn't look at them'. . . so that was a relief. (Anita aged 45)

In implicitly colluding with her son's construction of the provocatively-dressed young women as 'slappers', the mother positioned herself within the double-standard discourse and reinforced it. The mother's protective stance over her son is evident again later in the

interview when she expressed her sense of hope that the son's relationship with a girl had ended. Her son's age, she revealed, was associated with her sense of disquiet:

Anita: I am hoping the thing with this young one has passed . . . he is my baby, you know what I mean? I think I'd be afraid he'd get hurt.

Interviewer: And you think that if he had sex too young, maybe at this age that he would . . . [participant interrupts].

Anita: I think he is far too young. Maybe I am far too over protective, I don't know. (Anita aged 45)

It was not just the appearance of young women that came in for criticism by participants; young women's emotional disengagement from relationships was also castigated within some narratives. While the dominant view conveyed was that young women and men should both be emotionally engaged when embarking on sexual relations, this was contemporaneously presented, as indicated earlier, with the discourse of the male sex drive. Young women were more likely than young men to be singled out for criticism for emotional detachment. This implicitly suggests that a higher standard of affective engagement may be expected of young women in sexual liaisons.

I think girls have a terrible attitude, more so than boys, about sex . . . I just don't think they understand the emotional side of sex the way they should. (Therese aged 50 years)

In the following quotation, Christina, the mother of a 17-year-old girl, also registered concern about the demeanour of the young woman in sexual encounters. In her narrative,

the view that females would ultimately have responsibility for contraception is conveyed and is linked to how young women conduct themselves. In this sense, the traditional notion of women as guardians of sexual boundaries and with responsibility for contraception mediates the narrative.

Christina: I think it is often the girls and I'd be less likely to blame the guys . . . I think it is less that the guys are pushy than the girls are just out of their trees [intoxicated with alcohol]. . . . but I actually do think girls let it happen . . . because the girls then won't insist that he wears a condom . .

Interviewer: And just on that note, do you think that the girls have to insist because they guys won't?

Christina: On what?

Interviewer: On using condoms?

Christina: I think they are too out of it [intoxicated].

Interviewer: But what I am saying is do you think that it should be the girl's responsibility to insist on using the condom?

Christina: No, but it is her body. (Christina aged 37 years)

Although at the end of the extract, in response to a direct question posed by the interviewer, Christina presented contraception as a dual responsibility; the substance of her narrative was that girls should shoulder greater responsibility for contraception and their behaviour 'let[s] sex happen'. This represents a traditional perspective of gendered norms of sexual intimacy. Yet, while conventional gendered lines of responsibility for contraception are proposed, the girl in Christina's narrative is also positioned as someone who should assert her sexual subjectivity by insisting on condom use and in commanding ownership over her own body and the need to protect it. It should also be noted that many parents

reported that they advised their sons to use condoms (a detailed analysis of this will be published separately).

A few parents commented that they were aware that adolescent girls displayed a sexual interest in their sons, but in their narratives, boys - particularly in early or mid-adolescence – were positioned as not appearing to notice this since they were more interested in their peers and in sports. Parents tended to present their sons as somewhat oblivious to the young women around them, whilst the latter were reported to make every effort to get noticed. Some parents blamed either other parents, social pressures, social media, poor role modelling and sometimes themselves for the way in which young women often seemed to present themselves. Nonetheless, overall there was a sense from both mothers' and fathers' accounts that adolescent girls were more independent and sexually suggestive while adolescent boys were deemed to be sensitive and emotionally vulnerable.

When participants were challenged about whether advice about respect was gendered, they tended to correct any impression that they had given that their focus was on girls (and not boys) needing to respect themselves. Many were keen to present themselves as advocates of equality discourses, although the latter tended to be voiced in response to direct questions from the interviewer about participants' perceptions of lines of responsibility (that is, who - male or female - should be responsible for what). Thus, their assertion of equality was at variance with their unprompted narratives.

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, three broad themes were in evidence in participants' narratives on the sexual presentation and sexual conduct of adolescents. First, the discourse of the conventional

heterosexual script featured strongly in parents' accounts. Second, parents used protective discourses when talking about female sexuality and the potential for young women to be the object of a male gaze; protective discourses were also invoked to shield young women from the negative fallout of the discourse (itself) of the double standard. Third, protective discourses over young men were also drawn upon in the wake of the possible corrupting influence of precocious and seductive young women. However, mediating parents' accounts were a number of issues that have recently been debated in academic literature, most notably the problematization of the simplistic dualism of subject/object positions in relation to sexuality advanced by Lamb (2010) and the argument proposed by Else-Quest & Hyde (2009) that the developmental status of the young person needs to be factored into discussions about how sexuality should be approached.

If we consider data in relation to Lamb's (2010) deconstruction of the subject/object dualism, the complexity of the position of parents with regard to adolescent sexuality becomes clear. Even though the male stereotype of the male as biologically driven by sex positions men as sexual subjects, data suggested that in narratives where this discourse was reproduced, the notion of women as sexual objects was also challenged. Moreover, in our data, we found that protective discourses casting sex as dangerous may simultaneously transmit messages that promote sexual agency and sexual assertiveness for girls. At the same time, young women who presented themselves in a culturally provocative way were the subject of criticism within participants' narratives in a way that positioned them as choosing to self-sexualize. It was far less usual for parents to spontaneously describe girls in sexualized clothing with reference to the influence of social marketing of conventional models of sexuality. (See Murnen and Smolak (2011, p.1) on the distinction between the subjective, internal sense that a girl 'has control over her sexuality and sexual behavior and social forces that might influence her sexual empowerment.')

The dominant tone of

participants' narratives about the sexual presentation and conduct of young women was condemnatory, and only when prompted as to why they believed girls dressed and acted in this way did participants acknowledge the wider picture of cultural influences.

The issue of the developmental stage of the young person is also a factor that cross-cut parents' accounts on sexuality and adolescence. As noted in an earlier section, Else-Quest & Hyde (2009) argued that the developmental status of the young person needs to be factored into discussions about how sexuality should be approached, as adolescent girls are not yet women. They cautioned against considering issues associated with sexualization, such as the erotic as a source of power, in the same way for girls and women. In our data, notions of emotional maturity and physical development were peppered throughout participants' accounts, and their seemingly conservative approach to sexuality was justified by them in the context of a developmental framework.

To summarize, narratives from our sample of parents young women tended to cast young women as sexual subjects who chose to self-sexualize, and this was sometimes interpreted as a threat to young men. Yet contemporaneously, the same parents at other parts of their narrative drew on the discourse of the male sex drive, with girls needing to protect themselves from sexually zealous men. On the whole, the discourses that parents brought into play were multiple and sometimes contradictory, and did not fall neatly into categories of unproblematic sexual stereotyping that casts men as sexual subjects and women as sexual objects singularly in need of protection. The implications of these conflicting discourses on young people's sexual conduct is beyond the scope of this article since only parents were interviewed. However, the overall picture indicated that girls tended to be more heavily regulated and either viewed as needing protection from male sexual advances or blamed for encouraging them.

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