Young People's Sexual Cultures in Contemporary Britain

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with investigating young people's sexual cultures in contemporary Britain. Adolescent sexuality has received much attention in academia, the media and government legislation but recently, this problem has been augmented by concerns around the sexualisation of society. Sex and relationship education plays an important role in controlling young bodies and addressing the 'problem' of teenage sexuality.

The empirical data is obtained from interviews and focus groups with 31 young people in the North East of England. By employing discourse analysis, this project reflects on the discourses available to young people, with particular attention paid to classed and gendered sexual subjectivities. Instead of viewing young people through the lens of sexualisation, that is, as vulnerable and in need of adult protection, the work presented here views young people as the producers of their own distinct cultural practices.

Using the insight of young people themselves, this research concludes that the SRE provision in schools continues to be inadequate, irrelevant to the lived experiences of British youth and to perpetuate many of the themes that concern sexualisation discourse. By assuming a white, middle-class, heterosexual subject, the protectionist paradigm of SRE and similar discourses of sexualisation treat young people as a homogenous group and thus, obfuscate the classed and gendered inequalities which allow some young people to be constructed as sexually deviant. I argue that manifestations of femininity are crucial in the building of sexual reputation for both young men and women and the perception of femininity plays a key role in the production of sexual cultures. I contend that discourses of pressure perpetuate gendered inequalities and there is little support in education or wider culture to enable young women to seek 'pure' sexual pleasure.

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Chapter 1: Introducing the Sexual Cultures of Young People

Adolescence is often characterised as a troubled (and troubling) time, a period in which young people strive to form their own identity, to negotiate puberty and to deal with their emerging sexuality (Bay-Cheng, 2003). The problem of young sexuality is one which has received much attention in academia, the media and government legislation alongside debate over the preceding decades. That there is a problem is widely accepted, yet its nature has yet to be agreed on; is there too much available information about sex for young people or not enough? Is the most pressing issue that young people are having unprotected sex (Allen, 2001), promiscuous sex, non-consensual sex (Coy et al., 2010), porn-style sex (Levy, 2005) or any sex at all? Whether there are any circumstances when adolescent sex is acceptable or whether young people should always be discouraged from participating in sexual activity remains a contentious issue.

More recently, the problem of adolescent sexuality has been augmented by concerns around the sexualisation of society – that is, the increasing visibility and explicitness of sexual imagery in public parlance (Attwood, 2006; McNair, 2002). Sexualisation is widely assumed to have an adverse effect on young people's sexual development, negatively affecting their self-image and inducing them to participate in premature sexual activity (Bailey, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010; Levin & Kilbourne, 2009; APA, 2007). While in theory this should be problematic for all young people, the rhetoric of sexualisation is profoundly gendered, with the most attention focused on young women and girls (Tsaliki, 2015; Renold & Ringrose, 2013; Egan, 2013b; Egan & Hawkes, 2008). The idea that sexualisation is pervasive, oppressive and out of control has led to appeals for legislative change and government-led strategies to protect young people, who, in this discourse, can only be vulnerable, easily influenced and in need of adult supervision and guidance (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Thorogood, 2000).

School, then, becomes established as a key site for the regulation and discipline of young people, in both official subject matter and an informal curriculum that

operates to instruct young people in more subtle ways (Halstead & Reiss, 2006; Kehily, 2004a; Measor, 2004). More specifically, sex and relationship education (hereafter SRE) plays an important role in controlling young bodies and addressing the problem of teenage sexuality. As Bay-Cheng (2003: 62) argues, school-based sex education represents "a fundamental force in the very construction and definition of adolescent sexuality". Applying Foucauldian theory directly to school sex education, Thorogood argues that sex education is a "technique of governance" and responsible for "producing 'normal' (hetero) masculinity and (hetero) femininity" which form the "core categories in the regulation of the social world" (2000:426).

The focus of much current SRE policy is to reduce or delay young people's sexual activity (Abbott, Ellis & Abbott, 2016), and therefore reduce teenage pregnancy levels and the transmission of sexually transmitted infections. These outcomes are specifically named in government SRE guidance as the desirable product of good SRE (DfEE, 2000) despite evidence to suggest that providing young people with sexual information does not necessarily result in behavioural change – what Allen describes as the 'knowledge/practice gap' (2001). However, in recent years, the potential for SRE to also address rising concerns about sexualisation and to offset the ubiquity of sex in the public arena has gained traction (Papadopoulos, 2010).

There is no consensus yet on how the topics of sex and relationships should be broached in schools, who should be taught what, and when. While schools are required to offer biology-based instruction on reproduction, there is currently no mandatory SRE curriculum in UK schools, although this is an ongoing debate by the Conservative government. SRE is thus offered at the discretion of individual schools, resulting in provision which is varied across time and place, yet according to a number of studies, consistently irrelevant (Elley, 2013; Sex Education Forum, 2008; Hirst, 2008) or simply inadequate (OFSTED, 2013; Brook, 2011; UKYP, 2007).

Neither SRE nor processes of sexualisation act upon all young people in identical ways and the diversity of this demographic has been consistently overlooked in much of the previous literature. Any discussion of the effects of sexualisation or

of SRE must take into consideration the differences between people which mediate the extent to which any effects may be felt. For example, Maxwell and Chase, on the topic of teenage conceptions, argue, "community norms supportive of teenage parenthood significantly impact on individual attitudes and decision making" (2008: 305). Thus, an educational agenda which focuses on pregnancy prevention could be less effective for a young person for whom teen parenthood represents becoming a valued adult and who does not fear condemnation from the local community. Similarly, participation in a sexualised society might be negotiated differently by young people with strong religious beliefs, disabilities or those who live in a rural environment.

Issues of gender in SRE have been explored thoroughly in previous studies (some examples include Haste, 2013; Hilton, 2007; Buston & Wight, 2006; Fine, 1988; and the extensive body of work by Louisa Allen). While class-based inequalities in education have been well researched, the way in which social class affects education about sex and relationships specifically is relatively underexplored, with some notable exceptions (for example, Elley, 2013; Thomson, 2000).

Similarly, much of the literature concerned with sexualisation fails to take into account the diversity of young people and the nuances of young lived experiences which have the power to render some forms of culture inaccessible, and some inevitable. This thesis is primarily concerned with the interplay of class and gender as variables which affect the sexual culture to which a young person has access. Instead of viewing young people through the lens of sexualisation, that is, as vulnerable and in need of adult protection, the work presented here views young people as the experts on their own experiences, opinions and cultures (Elley, 2013).

My Contribution

Amidst an established body of literature concerned with sexualisation and young people, there is a dearth of studies which seek to respectfully examine youth sexual cultures as presented by young people themselves. In contrast to a

number of research projects and commentaries concerned with using young sexual behaviour as an example of where adult civilisation has 'gone wrong' (Papadopoulos, 2010; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a; 2006b; Levy, 2005), this project investigates young sexual cultures as distinct and valid in and of themselves.

The assumption that young people are inherently at risk from sexuality permeates sexualisation rhetoric and narrows the potential for alternatives to regulation. For example, research that assumes pornography consumption can *only* have negative consequences for young people, such as Papadopoulos (2010), will naturally conclude with recommendations for censorship. Similarly, the assumption that pornography poses a risk to young people's sexual development permeates the viewpoints of teachers (Baker, 2016; Spišák, 2016) resulting in a dependence on filters and legislation to restrict access (Spišák, 2016). Even when young people have discussed the value they place on pornography as an educational tool (Limmer, 2010; Hilton, 2007; Allen, 2006; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000), this is often dismissed by adults who 'know better' and who can then lament the effects of sexualisation. When these assumptions are allowed to operate as 'truths', a valuable opportunity to excavate alternative meanings is lost.

The aim of this thesis is to address this particularised understanding of young people and, beginning from a neutral standpoint, allow young people to tell their own stories, or in Foucauldian terms, their own truths. Therefore, when young men say that they value porn, for example, I have attempted to interrogate *why* they find it valuable and what they may gain from its consumption. While their consumption may be related to dominant masculine norms or a sexualised cultural landscape as argued by other theorists (Coy et al., 2010; Papadopoulos, 2010; Levy, 2005), I contend that this is not always negative. There is evidence to suggest that young people are not passive consumers of media (Jackson & Vares, 2015a; Gill, 2011; Buckingham & Bragg, 2003; Brown & Cantor, 2000; McNair, 1996), and the young male participants represented here can, in fact, offer considered opinions and critique of pornography. Similarly, there is little space for young women to admit to watching and enjoying pornography as this goes against dominant norms of femininity and a discourse of sexualisation that renders active and desirous female sexuality problematic. I conclude that young

women's professed distaste for pornography actually has a detrimental effect on their sexual subjectivity as they miss out on representations of sex for pleasure.

Similarly, in previous studies, heterosexual relationships amongst young people have concluded that young women lack agency and the primacy of male sexual pleasure is foregrounded at the expense of his female partner (Holland et al., 2004). Yet, these assumptions mean that the many manifestations of female power in heterosexuality are largely ignored. I argue here that some young women are imbued with more power than previously theorised and conclude that femininity is, in fact, all important in the production of working class masculinity. Manifestations of femininity are crucial in the building of sexual reputation for both young men and women and I argue that how femininity in both young men and young women is perceived plays a key role in the production of sexual cultures. This is especially apparent when it comes to the practice of slut-shaming and the predominance of what I have called 'effemiphobia', the fear experienced by young men of being perceived as feminine.

Researching Young People's Opinions

This thesis aims to understand the experiences and opinions of young men and women regarding sex, sexuality, sex and relationships education, the media and social networking. Paying particular attention to young people's sexual cultures, this research is concerned with the development of sexual identities in a culture widely assumed to have been sexualised. In the past, most research has focused on the potential role of sexualisation *or* on the role of SRE in the production of youth sexualities, however, in this research I examine the interplay of these two seemingly oppositional influences in creating subjectivities. While variabilities of gender and class have been the subject of much study in the field of youth sexuality, this thesis investigates the construction of particularly classed and gendered sexual cultures within a wider culture of presumed sexualisation and its concomitant official resistance of censorship and legislation.

Pornography, the internet and social networking, for some young people, are thought to informally 'plug the gap' in sexual knowledge which is missing from a

formal curriculum of SRE that focuses on 'plumbing and prevention' (Lenskyj, 1990) measures rather than pleasure and desire. Previous research has highlighted the dangers of these informal sources of sexual education. Papadopoulos (2010) does this by conducting a literature review, Bailey (2011) asks parents for their opinions. This project foregrounds young voices in an attempt to avoid similar imposition of adult viewpoints and to understand real life impacts of the sexualisation of culture and SRE for young people in contemporary Britain. Thus, drawing on current debates, this project aims to address the following research questions:

1. Where do young people get their information about sex?
2. What role does SRE currently play in contributing to knowledge of sex and sexuality for young people today?
3. Does pornography influence young people's sexual lives in significant ways?
4. What kinds of new technology do young people use to source information and circulate ideas about sex and sexuality?
5. Do gender and class affect the answers to these questions?

Chapter Outlines

The rest of Chapter One gives an overview of the forthcoming chapters.

Chapter Two examines the literature on the sexualisation of society in greater depth. While some theorists view sexualisation as a "false empowerment" for women and inextricably linked to the promotion of consumerism, other scholars see the benefits of a more sexually open society as productive of a "democracy of desire" (McNair, 2002). A proliferation of research reports investigating the effects of sexualisation on young people offer material for deeper analysis on the crisis of sexualisation (and its sister term, pornification) and the subsequent production of a discourse of sexualisation. I argue that this discourse performs an important regulatory function in a contemporary society that problematises youth sexuality, and in particular that of girls and working class young people. I argue that sexualisation discourse offers little potential for young people's sexual

autonomy by always associating sexuality, sex and sexiness with risk, danger and exploitation. When young people are treated as passive consumers of culture, they are afforded few recognised opportunities to adequately challenge or resist dominant modes of behaviour.

Chapter Three reviews the literature on Sex and Relationships Education exploring SRE as a "technique of governance" (Thorogood, 2000) that disempowers young people by the withholding of certain knowledge and the promotion of heteronormative ideals. The "missing discourse of desire" (Fine, 1988) is emphasised as a particularly pervasive system of control, reinforcing women as sexually passive and supporting the primacy of the male sex drive (Hollway, 1984), while acknowledging that simply adding 'pleasure' to a curriculum of SRE is not without issue. I introduce gender and class as variables which can affect the efficacy of SRE and the ability to display agency and resistance to school-based norms. Tensions between the official discourse of the school which routinely 'desexualises' young people and the sexualisation of culture which is thought to incite sexual activity are also explored. I state the case for a more comprehensive, sex-positive curriculum of SRE, which takes further into account the opinions of young people themselves.

Chapter Four locates this thesis within a theoretical framework and describes the research strategy and design in depth. Considering both SRE and sexualisation as discourses, I use discourse analysis to explore these topics in young people's own narratives and I offer a rationale for the chosen methodology. Chapter Five explores the participants' descriptions and evaluations of the SRE that they received in school and discusses how that teaching has contributed to their real-life experiences and expectations of sex. I examine the relevance of SRE to young people and how effective SRE messages are in promoting behavioural change. I propose that SRE denies young people, and in particular young women, sexual agency by fostering notions of age-appropriate knowledge and behaviour and I discuss the impact of sex-negative teaching on young people's sexual understandings. By only discussing sex in terms of relationships, and thus positioning relationships without sex as problematic, I contend that SRE is productive of "compulsory sexuality", despite its stated aims to achieve the

opposite. Finally, I argue that SRE can be seen as a human right and one which is denied by adultist and protectionist governmental legislation.

Contemporary working class masculinities form the basis of Chapter Six in which I argue for a new vocabulary to describe the processes of masculinisation for young men today. I consider the importance of practising heterosexuality for young men as a way to refute accusations of homosexuality and the suspicion that is aroused if a young man steps out of the 'safe zone' of masculinity. A distrust of girls and the association of relationships with 'girly' ways of thinking means that the young male participants reinforce particularly gendered ways of approaching sex and relationships which then influence their subsequent behaviours. Notions of power in contemporary relationships are also explored and I argue that young women have more power in heterosexual relationships than previously assumed or alluded to - that they are, in fact, *instrumental*[1] in the production of all-important masculinity, particularly for working class men.

Chapter Seven is concerned with the importance of the 'slut discourse' and contemporary practices of 'slut-shaming' (Armstrong et al., 2014) among young women of varying class backgrounds. The sexual double standard whereby young women are punished and young men rewarded for sexual conquest pervades many of the accounts of youthful sexual experience recounted by the participants. In this chapter, I investigate the ways in which the mythical 'slut' figure can serve as a regulatory mechanism for young women and how 'slut' is invested with class prejudice and norms of propriety. Similarly, I explore how a young woman's perceived sexual agency can also affect her vulnerability to 'slut-shaming', illustrating how perceived sexual activity is more important than the act itself.

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[1] Tolman, Davis and Bowman (2016) have also described girls' femininity as *instrumental* for boys as young men struggle to manage their own masculinity. However, they use their findings to argue that girls remain in a subordinate position in heterosexual relationships.

Pornography is the key topic under investigation in Chapter Eight. As previously highlighted, a discourse of sexualisation deems pornography a harmful source of information, particularly for young men, who are thought to then translate the performances they view into their own sexual lives, against the wishes of their female partners. I draw attention to young women's thoughts about the role of pornography in young men's education and what young men say about their own use of porn. I discuss some key issues concerning porn as a source of SRE but also bring to light potential effects of *not* having access to sexually explicit material. A missing discourse of pleasure during SRE classes in school is reinforced by young women's lack of access to representations of 'pure pleasure' and sexual desire/gratification divorced from relationship contexts.

Chapter Nine examines the relationship between youth sexuality, new media technology and social media. The role of social media in young people's interactions is unpacked and social media as a tool for surveillance and regulation are explored. I also investigate the participants' use of mobile phones to communicate ideas about sex and relationships. Moral panics around the practice of sexting and its potential consequences abound in the media, yet there is evidence to suggest that sexting can represent an emancipatory space for young women. I discuss current preoccupations with sexting as a site of pressure as a reinforcement of the dangers of sexuality for young women and the denial of female sexual agency – discourses that are prevalent in SRE and sexualisation.

Chapter Ten concludes by drawing together the themes in this research and situating the thesis within the current landscape. I argue that both discourses of SRE and sexualisation are intimately entwined, both imposing adult viewpoints on young people and maintaining sex within a framework of risk and danger for young women. Thus, both further gendered and classed assumptions which in turn perpetuate practices of slut-shaming and effemiphobia, which play a significant part in young people's sexual cultures.

The different narratives that are available to young people themselves are perhaps, inevitably, inflected with SRE and sexualisation discourses. Although

this could be, in part, an effect of the focus of the thesis, these narratives provide new and extremely valuable insight into young people's sexual cultures that those developing new programmes of SRE should note.

Chapter 2: The Sexualisation of Culture: A Critical Commentary

In recent years, the concept of sexualisation has become a familiar topic of discussion in academic publications, mainstream media and on the governmental agenda. Repeatedly evoked as a symptom of moral decline, sexualisation has been implicated in numerous and diverse cultural maladies such as violence against women (Papadopoulos, 2010), eating disorders (APA, 2007), promiscuity, and poor educational performance (Coy, 2009) and it is often assumed to be detrimental to family life (Buckingham et al., 2010; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). The ubiquity of sexualised images of women in the media and advertising is widely believed to negatively impact the development of young people, and of girls in particular (Coy, 2009; APA, 2007). Attempts by government to intervene with legislation and regulation increasingly utilise the rhetoric of family values and child protection (Bailey, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010). However, a number of scholars have widened the debate, suggesting that sexualisation marks a victory for the rights of women to be seen as sexual subjects and leading to greater visibility of sexual plurality (McNair, 2002). Furthermore, there is criticism of a media-effects model which continually assumes viewers to be a passive, homogenous group (Jackson & Vares, 2015a; Gill, 2011; Buckingham & Bragg, 2003; Brown & Cantor, 2000; McNair, 1996). Media consumers in general, and more specifically, young people, increasingly use new technologies to participate in contemporary culture – the internet, mobile phones and social networking have all contributed to a change in the ways in which young people engage with society and negotiate their sexuality (Tanenbaum, 2015; Dobson, 2014; Hasinoff, 2013; Angelides, 2013; Lenhart, 2009). In this chapter, I would like to critically explore the production of a discourse of sexualisation, and its concomitant 'moral panic'.

The 'Crisis' of Sexualisation

Contemporary Western culture is often said to have become sexualised - in other words, sex is increasingly visible, accessible and explicit (Attwood, 2006) and new forms of sexual discourse are at work. According to Gill (2009a) liberal opinions regarding sexual matters are becoming more prevalent as well as "contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities" (140). The mainstreaming of what may previously have been deemed obscene (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010; Attwood, 2006; McNair, 2002) therefore, contributes to an environment in which sexuality is visible in the media, advertising and consumer culture in more explicit ways than were previously deemed acceptable.

A clear definition of sexualisation is, however, somewhat difficult to pin down. Papadopoulos (2010:17) writes a lengthy report on the influence sexualisation by reviewing the literature landscape and making numerous suggestions to counteract its effects. However, she sidesteps the need for an actual explanation of the term, "It is not the intention of this review to enter into a theoretical debate on the precise definition of sexualisation". There is an expectation that the reader will share the understanding that the concept of sexualisation is so wholly negative and undesirable that it does not need to be precisely defined. Clarissa Smith, when deconstructing the term "pornographication", uses a similar argument which can be applied here, encapsulated in the following quote:

> "The obviousness of the term should alert us to the ways in which pornographication is not something which can be 'discovered', 'uncovered' and 'challenged', but instead it is a means of ensuring that behaviours, practices and actions can be labelled and assessed as problematic without addressing specific issues relating to their history, production and consumption; and that can suggest 'solutions' which are both intensely political and denuded of real politics at the same time." (2010:106).

Similarly, Egan and Hawkes (2008), speaking specifically about an Australia Institute report into sexualisation (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a) but in terms which can be applied to many of the other studies in this area, discuss the ways in which the lack of a clear definition of sexualisation works to legitimise its status. Applying the theory of Barthes, they elucidate, "how a particular phenomenon evades the need for explanation and cultural critique due to its taken-for-granted

and naturalised status" resulting in "exnomination" (Egan and Hawkes, 2008: 312). Thus, without adequate description of sexualisation or, 'normal' childhood sexuality in general, "an exploration into the context and variability" of either is unfeasible (*ibid*).

In much of the literature, sexualisation is considered to be a negative force, something which acts upon all citizens, however most attention has focused on the gendered nature of sexualisation (Tsaliki, 2015; Renold & Ringrose, 2013; Egan, 2013b; Vares, Jackson & Gill, 2011; Egan & Hawkes, 2008). The majority of books addressing this topic feature cover pictures of girls, even when the book title is not explicitly gendered. Tsaliki (2015) draws comparisons between sexualisation discourse and previous moral panics around "gangsta rap", computer games and video nasties. The latter focused on the negative effects on boys, despite the fact that girls also play computer games, listen to music and watch films. Here, sexualisation is preoccupied with outcomes for girls even while acknowledging that boys participate in the same culture. That boys and girls are fundamentally different and navigate the world in gender-distinct ways is a core element of sexualisation discourse.

Women and girls are deemed particularly susceptible to negative outcomes and, thus, sexualisation has been named a causal factor in an exhaustive list of harmful behaviours that are thought to disproportionately affect women. These include domestic violence and sexual violence (Papadopoulos, 2010), low self-esteem, depression and eating disorders (APA, 2007), poor academic performance (Coy, 2009), child prostitution, trafficking and childhood sexual abuse (Rush and La Nauze, 2006a), and increased levels of plastic surgery in order to fit an unrealistic body ideal (Coy, 2013; Gill, 2009; APA, 2007; Levy, 2005). There is a "widely circulating view" that the sexualisation of culture, and particularly of the media, negatively affects young women's self-conceptualisation and sexual development (Jackson & Vares, 2015a: 347). As Duits and van Zoonen succinctly conclude, "The straightforward cause-and-effect model of sexualised images producing sexualised girls meets cultural demands for simple understandings and solutions to complex social problems." (2011:494). Such simplification facilitates an acceptance of sexualisation as a problem which can be easily understood and easily solved, usually by limiting access to

sexualised images or eradicating them completely. I will return to the media effects debate below.

The American Psychological Association (hereafter APA) produced a highly influential research project designed to highlight the consequences of sexualisation on young women and girls (2007). While this report is now almost a decade old, it is still frequently referenced in more recent articles on the topic of sexualisation (some examples include; Tsaliki, 2015; Jackson & Vares, 2015a; Renold & Ringrose, 2013; Kehily, 2012). According to the APA, sexualisation is defined as one or more of the following:

> i.   A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or sexual behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
>
> ii.   A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
>
> iii.   A person is sexually objectified – that is, made in to a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or
>
> iv.   Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

This definition neatly illustrates the preconception that sexualisation is always negative. Furthermore, despite the use of neutral language, the report itself is profoundly gendered, focused upon the destructive ways in which women and girls are influenced by sexualised imagery. Indeed, as the majority of the literature deals with sexualisation as a uniquely female problem, the ways in which young men and boys may be affected by an increasingly sexualised landscape are side-lined. Thus, for example, when boys are constructed as inherently sexual and always in pursuit of sexual pleasure, there exists little space for young men to resist or report unwanted sexual activity (Allen, 2012). Similarly, the implication that young men are never the object of a sexualised gaze is naïve (Allen, 2013; Gill, Henwood & McLean, 2005). When sexualisation is treated solely as an extension of patriarchy, the ways in which patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity can also be oppressive for boys are neglected.

The rhetoric of sexualisation deems it threatening to family life, in particular (Buckingham et al., 2010; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). Papadopoulos (2010), in a government report investigating the links between sexualisation and violence against women, makes a number of references to her own daughter and to her status as a mother, thus locating herself both as an 'expert' mother and advocate of traditional family values. Reg Bailey (2011: 2), chief executive of the Mothers' Union, justifies himself as a suitable candidate to research the sexualisation and commercialisation of childhood despite, by his own admission, being neither "eminent academic or practitioner" by describing himself as, "passionately interested in supporting family life" and through his status as parent and grandparent. This technique is similarly utilised in the book So Sexy, So Soon: The New Sexualised Childhood and What Parents Can Do to Protect their Kids as they address parents directly and advise them that "children desperately need your help" in order to resist the cultural imperative to become sexually precocious (Levin & Kilbourne, 2009: 12). Thus, by utilising child safety and abuse prevention language, the position of sexualisation as a primary threat to young people is augmented (Renold & Ringrose, 2013). This represents a "powerful means of manipulating public attention" (Tsaliki, 2015:511; a point which originates with Buckingham & Bragg, 2004) and can be used to "advance other political agendas" (Smith & Attwood, 2011: 334). Furthermore, when sexualisation is supported by child protection discourses it becomes difficult to mount an opposition – no one wants to be accused of downplaying the devastating effects of child abuse.

Similarly, the website Mumsnet.com, an online community for parents, launched a campaign in 2010 entitled "Let Girls Be Girls" amid anxieties that "an increasingly sexualised culture was dripping, toxically, into the lives of children" (Mumsnet, 2010). The campaign targeted retailers, asking them to pledge not to stock products which contributed to the sexualisation of children, and was very successful, with a number of high-profile businesses signing up and garnering a large amount of publicity. It is an interesting juxtaposition that these works appeal directly to parental sensibilities while simultaneously advocating for legislative measures which place government and/or retailers in a central role and parents on the margins of responsibility.

In contrast, when Buckingham and colleagues involved parents in their research into sexualised goods aimed at children, the researchers were unable to conclude "with certainty that 'sexualised goods' in fact represent a major problem for parents, as compared with other matters" (2010: 6). Further to this, there was a lack of agreement among parents as to what constituted a 'sexualised' product, illustrating the complexity of the issue and the lack of standardised viewpoints.

The New Objectification?

According to a number of feminist theorists, sexualisation can be described as merely a new form of objectification, albeit one which is disguised as empowerment (Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2003). Rosalind Gill suggests that women are, "endowed with agency so that they can actively choose to objectify themselves." (Gill, 2003: 104). Continuing the theme, she argues that while the rhetoric of empowerment alludes to women's ability to 'please themselves', the homogeneity of the results, (that is, the acceptable 'look') suggests that regimes of power are simply operating differently. From a Foucauldian perspective, "power operates through the construction of particular subjectivities" (Gill, 2009b:101) leading to "subjectification". Consequently, this pseudo-subjectivity glosses over the ways in which the male gaze and female self-policing are prevalent in contemporary society (Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2003; Whelehan, 2000) and serves commercial interests more than feminist causes (Gill, 2009a).

Outside of academic circles, this interpretation of sexualisation as 'false empowerment' is prevalent. Popular books abound on the negative consequences of a highly sexualised society. In her book Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture, US journalist Ariel Levy (2005) coins the term "raunch culture" to describe the disproportionate importance attributed to sexiness in modern Western society. She locates female sexual subjectivity within a matrix of self-objectification which borrows heavily from a pornographic aesthetic and which disproportionately benefits men and boys. Natasha Walter, in Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism (2010), suggests that sexualisation leaves young women excessively concerned with their looks and their appeal to men, at the expense of more intellectual pursuits.

A problem with this critique, however, is the suggestion that sexualisation only affects women and "implies that men are not themselves routinely subjected to sexualized looking" (McNair, 2002:150). As van Zoonen states, "it is an argument that denies the possibilities and historical existence of a positive and pleasurable female gaze" which has routinely objectified male performers (1994:87/88). If sexualisation is merely a reformulation of objectification, then the proliferation of depictions of male bodies in recent years could be described as redressing the balance, that "we are all objectified now" (Gill, 2009a:143). However, she argues, this conceptualisation is short-sighted, images of *women* create problematic ideals and negatively affect women. Scant attention is paid to the male perspective beyond the assumption that men enjoy looking at objectified images of women and that by doing so the patriarchal status quo is reinforced.

Moreover, it situates women as the victims of a great cultural deception in which they naively participate in their own subordination while believing themselves to be free. Positioning women as "cultural dupes" (Jackson & Vares, 2015a: 349) leaves little room to consider women as actively involved in their own freedom (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010). To assume that sexualisation only benefits men is to disregard the ways in which women can and do navigate a sexualised environment, and their abilities to respond to, resist or subvert new cultural norms (Egan, 2013a; Attwood, 2009). For example, the ubiquity of pole dancing motifs in popular culture is often held up as an example of the sexualisation of culture, particularly as pole dancing as an exercise activity has increased in popularity recently. However, Evans and colleagues (2010) use it to evidence re-signification, highlighting the way traditional signifiers of objectification can be reclaimed by women and reproduced as empowerment.

A noticeable omission from much of this research, women's voices would add a new dimension to an analysis of sexualisation / objectification. Furthermore, this reading implies women experience sexualisation in an identical fashion. The idea that all women and girls are included in a sexualised society denies the "intersectionality between gendered, classed, racialized and sexualized discourses" (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010:115; see also Egan, 2013a; Kehily, 2012 for similar points) which work to exclude those who do not fit with a homogenized feminine ideal. As Egan articulates:

> "The classed nature of this discourse comes into sharper focus when one sees that the range of concern within the popular discourse on sexualisation is focused primarily on middle-class, white heterosexual girls – girls of colour, queer girls and poor girls are irrelevant, absented or viewed as examples of feminine failure". (2013a: 267)

I would add that age could be an interesting variable to explore given that sexualisation is generally accepted as a new phenomenon, and that youth is often a prerequisite for beauty in contemporary Western society (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010).

Likewise, Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa focus not merely on the more general sexualisation, but more specifically, pornification. They state that pornography has become, to a certain extent, mainstreamed, through the increased citation of "pornographic styles, gestures and aesthetics" (2007: 1) by Western popular culture. McNair (2002) refers to this as "porno chic", the integration of what would previously have been considered obscene into the everyday. According to this analysis, pornographic aesthetics now regularly appear in fashion magazines (Merskin, 2003), fashion and advertising (Rossi, 2007) and music videos (Jackson & Vares; 2015b; Railton & Watson, 2007). However, this analysis depends upon an assumption that pornography operates as a monolithic entity (Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa, 2007). To cite pornography as a reference point for the mainstream implies a lack of diversity within the genre and is, thus, overly simplistic. When discussing this 'pornification' of culture, it is important to recognise that this is implicitly both gendered and heterosexual, and, thus, works to exclude those who do not fit this demographic.

The discourse of pornification is also said to assign a greater importance to sex, while simultaneously divorcing intercourse from intimacy. Janet Holland and colleagues (2004) suggest that young women increasingly prioritise male pleasure at the expense of their own, operating with "the male in the head". From this perspective, a woman's worth depends on her constant readiness for sex and her ability to meet the needs of male desire (Coy et al., 2010; Levy, 2005; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Holland et al., 2004). Yet there are also implications of living in a pornified world for young men which should not be ignored. If pornography represents an unrealistic standard for women, it is equally

idealistic for men. Insecurities about penis size and sexual performance (Elley, 2013), and the pressure on boys to be sexually active and/or promiscuous are often glossed over in this discourse while women are, again, presented as victims of patriarchy.

Democratic Desire

Despite the proliferation of negative associations with sexualisation some academics theorise that it has, in fact, had some positive effects on society. Brian McNair, in his book Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratisation of Desire (2002), counters that major gains for gay rights and feminism have been expedited by an increased visibility of sex and sexual plurality in recent years. He argues that a changed representation of women in the media signifies a subversion of the male gaze and a normalisation of women as active media consumers.

For young people, sexualised imagery can provide a greater openness about sex and a valuable contribution to their sex education. Young men, in particular, express a desire for access to more explicit information than is available in school-based sex education classes (Limmer, 2010; Allen, 2004). Boys particularly refer to porn as a valuable and reliable source of sex education, a visual representation of sex (Hilton, 2007; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000), as opposed to the clinical, de-eroticised diagrams which are presented in SRE (Allen, 2004). While utilising pornography as sex education is problematic for a number of reasons – this will be discussed further in subsequent chapters – the prominent position of sex in popular culture can work to demystify sexuality for teenagers. Likewise, Zillman (2000) emphasizes the role played by conventional media in the attitudes of young people to sexuality, arguing that teenagers attain more awareness of sex and relationships from less explicit representations, such as television, music and movies aimed at a teen market, than from pornography.

While McNair (2002) suggests that sexualisation leads to a "democratisation of desire" which has positive implications for traditionally marginalised sexual identities, we need to be careful of adopting this stance wholesale. Feminism and the gay rights movement may have been furthered by the increased visibility of sex in public discourse, yet the conspicuousness of sexuality can also intensify

the opportunity for control by those with power (Attwood, 2006). Similarly, the dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' sexuality can be enforced more easily if sex is in the public domain. As Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa argue, "Mainstream applications of porn aesthetics are also efficient in establishing new kinds of norms and regulatory effects" (2007: 8). McNair (2002: 12) states that this democratisation engenders a "more diverse and pluralistic sexual culture" yet it could be argued that the increased visibility of diverse sexualities in a society entrenched in heteronormative discourse could serve simply to designate 'other' in a more definite and definitive manner.

Furthermore, greater prominence of sexual sub-cultures opens the door to a standardisation of representation and boosts opportunities for commercialisation. For example, there has been an explosion in products and services catering for the gay consumer in recent years. Civil partnership law, hailed by many as a triumph for gay equality, can also be read as an attempt to regulate homosexuality according to heterosexual norms. A similar point is made by Evans and colleagues when analysing depictions of same-sex kisses between heterosexual celebrities, suggesting that:

> "such popular culture representations both serve to increase the visibility of same-sex sexual contact, and simultaneously have the effect of essentially depoliticizing same-sex sexuality or recuperating the heterosexual norm" (2010: 124-5).

Equally, the popularity of the Fifty Shades series, a trilogy of romance novels by EL James and later a film directed by Sam Taylor-Wood (2015), brought bondage/domination or discipline/sadomasochism (BDSM) practices into the mainstream, spawning a proliferation of corresponding merchandise (Bridges et al., 2015) and a backlash conflating a consensual BDSM arrangement with sexual violence and prevailing sexist attitudes (Altenburger et al., 2016).

 The implications for power relations based on gender, race and class should also not be ignored in this debate – democratic is not necessarily synonymous with egalitarian, in this instance. As Gill asserts, "'sexualisation' is far from being a singular or homogenous process" (2009a:138) and its effects should not be assumed to be uniform. Moreover, the concept of democratic desire must be explored within a cultural context. The idea that homosexuality is more

acceptable in the UK due to more liberal attitudes caused by sexualisation may be valid, but it would be hard to apply similar arguments to the USA, where the Evangelical community regularly demonstrate against gay rights and gay marriage is a major issue in political debate.

Reflecting or Affecting?

Regarding the effects of the media in relation to sexualisation, there are, broadly, two positions present in the literature. The first follows a cause-and-effect model which assumes passive receipt of images which then work as an incitement to certain behaviours. This position is familiar from the radical feminist critique of the porn industry and, as Duits and van Zoonen neatly summarise in the following quote, encompasses much of the current work dealing with the harmful effects of sexualised media:

> "While authors in the 1980s such as Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin introduced the radical feminist slogan 'Porn is the theory, rape is the practice', current policy research identifies a 'continuum of sexualisation' that begins with the sexual evaluation of girls and young women and ends with their physical sexual exploitation: the terminology may be different, but the identification of a mechanism of sexualisation that develops from bad to worse is similar." (Duits & van Zoonen, 2011:493).

Rossi places media imagery in a pivotal role in the construction of cultural norms, playing "an essential part in the societal production of meaning, knowledge and power, thereby shaping the realities we live in" (2007: 128). She argues that sexualised advertisements, which both depict women and seek to attract them, produce knowledge about how to "do girl" (as described by Butler, 1999), reinforcing regimes of femininity and heterosexuality. In keeping with Butler's theory of performativity, advertisements provide a standardised performance of gender which is subsequently repeated by consumers and thus normalised. Furthermore, repeated objectifying images of women can be said to reinforce a patriarchal perspective which denies female subjectivity, and this in turn affects the ways in which individuals interact (Rossi, 2007).

However this approach relies on the assumption that an audience absorbs media messages uncritically and uniformly. Brian McNair (2002) discusses the futility of debating media effects, and specifically the effects of an increasingly sexualised

media, due to the overwhelming mass of variables which can affect personal interpretation. Thus:

> "The content of any media image, and of any sexual representation in particular – fictional or factual, fantastic or journalistic – cannot be reliably predicted to have any effect in isolation from the context of its reception by real people in their physical and social environments" (McNair, 2002:8).

Vanwesenbeeck (2009) suggests that rather than media consumption playing a causal role in sexual behaviour, it could be that sexual identities instigate media choices – a standpoint which is under-examined in the literature. Therefore, for example, rather than pornography 'accidentally' activating sexual behaviour, it is perhaps sought out purposefully and used as a resource to inform sexual subjectivities.

McNair's (2002) critique informs the second standpoint, an approach more rooted in a contemporary media studies framework. This position suggests that media consumers are able to decode what they see in a variety of ways, therefore, there cannot be one reading of a text, but many, diverse interpretations. There is evidence to suggest that young people are not passive consumers of media (Jackson & Vares, 2015a; Gill, 2011; Buckingham & Bragg, 2003; Brown & Cantor, 2000; McNair, 1996), and it is counter-productive to treat them as such. Further to this, Brown applies a Media Practice Model to youth consumption of media and highlights the importance of individual interpretation, "media consumers come to the media with different needs and motives and that what they take away from the media will depend on why they came to it" (2000: 35).

Tsaliki (2015) interviewed female, pre-teen participants about their engagement with the media, popular culture and sexualisation. Her analysis reveals the complex ways in which girls negotiate their mediated worlds, far from simplistic cause-and-effect models, and reflects the agency and power to critique that these young women apply in their media access. Thus, the girls present diverse readings of the same photographs and maintain little interest in emulating the celebrity subject – emphasising instead their desire to have their own style.

However, a disregard for uniform readings should not lead to the conclusion that the media has little impact. Being able to interpret, critique or deconstruct an

image does not signify a lack of effect (Gill, 2011). Furthermore, while a number of variables may affect personal response to an image and therefore make generalisations invalid, it is important to acknowledge a dominant reading of a specific text. If large numbers of women report feelings of inferiority when confronted with sexualised imagery, this would suggest both a dominant reading and an effect which should not be disregarded as personal interpretation. There should also be some emphasis on the ways in which young people incorporate what they learn from the media into their everyday lives, rather than simply focus on interpretation. While what they see and understand in society is undoubtedly important, the ways in which this interpretation informs and alters their behaviour and interactions with others is the crux of the matter.

It is important to note that there is a distinction to be made between material which is sexualised and that which is sexual, a crucial difference but one which is often unacknowledged (Buckingham et al., 2010). Due to the omission of an explanation of what constitutes a sexualised image, the issue is apparently conflated to include all representations of sex and the naked human body, a standpoint from which it is difficult to maintain credibility. What lies beneath this profound distrust of sexual imagery is the fear that sexuality is becoming a commodity.

Consuming Sex

McNair positions sexualisation as intimately conjoined with capitalism and thus, "a further stage in the commodification of sex, and the extension of sexual consumerism to a broader mass of population than have previously had access to it" (2002:87). The proliferation of sexual products targeted at women seems to illustrate capitalism's movement into this previously unexploited market. Feona Attwood in an article entitled "Fashion and Passion: Marketing Sex to Women" uses the example of high street sex-shop chain Ann Summers to illustrate how "late 20th-century discourses which foregrounded female pleasure have crystallized in a new form of sexual address to women. Women's consumption of sexual commodities is regarded as a huge growth area" (2005: 392). Furthermore, sexuality as a 'lifestyle' is becoming more common. The promotion of pole-dancing as an exercise activity, for example, or the current fashion for

vajazzling (decoration of the female pubic area with jewels) help to mainstream aspects of our sexuality (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010; Holland & Attwood, 2009). The explosion of female-authored sex blogs and books of sexual confession is also indicative of a climate in which women are increasingly able to capitalise on their sexuality. The popularity of blogs-turned-books such as Girl with a One-Track Mind (Lee, 2006) and The Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl (de Jour, 2005) put women who unashamedly enjoy sex in the public domain for consumption. Indeed, the discourse of the empowered, sexually confident woman and her status as a consumer of sexual products, marks a sharp turn away from long-standing beliefs in the inherent sexual passivity of women (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010; Attwood, 2005). However, this image of the sexually active and actively consuming female can also prove troublesome.

Gill extrapolates, "This representational practice offers women the promise of power by becoming an object of desire." (2003: 104). Returning to the concept of what Gill terms "sexual subjectification" noted earlier (2009b), feminine sexual agency has often been described as inextricably fused with female objectification. Similarly, Hilary Radner writes:

> "The discourses of consumerism and sexuality produce 'a desiring woman' for whom sexual subjection is compulsory, being made visible through a 'technology' of sexiness in which appearing desirable according to the codes of consumer culture is the sign of her 'desire'" (2008: 98).

Thus, according to these theorists, only by consuming products and making herself a desirable object, can a woman be read as a desiring subject.

It is important to remember that not everyone is invited to participate in consumerism or sexualisation equally. Those who do not fit with a standardised image of beauty or who cannot afford to purchase the required paraphernalia are routinely excluded, and their sexuality is problematized. When discussing the marketing of sexualised goods to children, for example, there is a tendency to look to cheap chain stores for examples (Primark, Matalan and so on) while high-end boutiques which stock child versions of women's wear are rarely mentioned (Buckingham et al., 2010). There is a clear class element here which should not be ignored. In the same vein, it is the aesthetic of short skirts and low-cut tops

which are often associated with working class women which are targeted as indicative of 'bad' sexuality. As noted in the report on sexualised goods marketed at children by Buckingham and associates (2010), it is specifically working-class girls' sexuality which is assumed to be in need of regulation.

Egan (2013b) continues this line of thought, theorising that sexualisation discourse is dependent upon classed assumptions of propriety and the potential for the working classes to be assigned pollutants of middle class morals and values (see also Duschinsky, 2013b). Thus, the 'sexualised girl' represents a contagious contaminant, the state of having been sexualised becomes one which can be passed around a group of young women (Egan, 2013b; Egan & Hawkes, 2008; 2012). It, therefore, becomes acceptable to perpetuate class-based prejudice in order to 'protect' middle class girls and to attempt to rigidly define the borders between 'clean' middle classes and 'unclean' working classes (Egan, 2013b). The defence of (implicitly) middle class young women against the threat of sexualisation has provided the impetus for much research aimed at providing justification for governmental intervention and official regulation.

Reporting Sexualisation – The Production of Discourse

There has been a proliferation of high profile reports in recent years which purport to investigate the effects of sexualisation on young people (Bailey, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010; Buckingham et al., 2010; American Psychological Association, 2007; Rush & La Nauze, 2006a, 2006b). The premise of the majority of these reports is to use the findings to make recommendations on ways to counteract sexualisation and protect children from negative consequences. It would appear that sexualisation is the new, fashionable subject of concern in Western culture and an area which requires not only investigation but formal regulation. The influence of these reports on policy-making, and the ways in which they have been disseminated to a wide audience by their repeated citation in the mass media facilitates an acceptance of their findings as facts. These reports serve an important function in ensuring that sexualisation remains in the public consciousness. Duits & van Zoonen suggest that studies backed by government funding or carried out by "old, big and established" institutions such

as the American Psychological Association can be assimilated as 'truths' with greater ease (2011: 493).

In light of this, I would like to spend some time unpicking these reports, not only to highlight some of their limitations, but to emphasise and acknowledge the complexities of this area of study. I will address each project individually, with a more in-depth discussion of Papadopoulos (2010) as this work is specific to UK culture. While most of the reports reference and support each other, the report by Buckingham and colleagues (2010) sets itself apart by its criticism of the previous work in this area and will, thus, be referred to throughout.

Corporate Paedophilia

Rush & La Nauze from the Australia Institute published "Corporate Paedophilia" in October 2006, followed by "Letting Children Be Children" in December of the same year, setting a precedent for similar research. The former discusses the ways in which marketing and advertising directly sexualise young women, denouncing such advertising as "an abuse of both children and public morality" (2006a:3). The inflammatory title and general tone of outrage masks the often confusing claims within the report. Hence, "The essential point is that children are dressed in clothing and posed in ways designed to draw attention to adult sexual features that the children do not yet possess." (*ibid*) The report goes on to analyse a particular image, and focuses on a necklace, "with the ends dangling where her cleavage would be if she were older" (2006a: vii). Yet there is a fundamental problem with this kind of analysis, namely that it reads the image as if the subject were an adult. It is the child's *potential* for adult sexual features, in this instance cleavage, which is cited as a problem - presumably if the subject of the image was male, there would be no cause for concern. Thus, the authors have deliberately interpreted the image in a sexual way, imposing on the subject a sexuality, which by the authors' own admission, the child does not yet possess (Buckingham et al., 2010). Female sexuality has historically been portrayed as threatening, yet in this instance it is the mere possibility which is deemed dangerous. Furthermore, there is the assumption that pictures of girls are read in the same way as images of adult women.

The study claims that "fully three quarters of the content" of Barbie magazine is sexualised, yet they do not give details as to how this been quantified. As Buckingham and associates (2010) state, there is a lack of clarity and consensus about the meaning of sexualisation which makes it almost impossible to measure in an accurate way. It is not sufficient to denote examples of sexualisation as anything referencing beauty and fashion without including an examination of context or actual content. Without an intricate explanation of what was and was not included in the study as an example of sexualised material and a detailed analysis of the reasoning behind the choices, there cannot be any certainty that we are all talking about the same thing. The writers go on to outline two consequences of sexualisation – firstly, that young women will be pressured to engage in sexual activity before they fully understand the consequences and secondly, that sexualised images of minors will attract the attention of paedophiles.

In relation to the former, a number of criticisms have been noted. A lack of attention to the variability of class, race, religion and developmental level of young people in their interpretation of media imagery mean that, once more, childhood is presented as a standardised experience. An over-emphasis on girls and girlhood sexuality not only suggests that only boys can benefit from sexualisation, but recycles old ideas of the deviance of female sexual expression and the corruptible nature of female purity (Egan & Hawkes, 2008). Further, the report does not separate young people in terms of age, melding the distinct developmental stages of childhood and adolescence (Egan & Hawkes, 2008). To deny that the huge leap in sexual awareness that occurs during puberty has an effect on the ways young people navigate a sexualised landscape, renders much of the discussion ineffectual. Nor does the report offer any analysis of other factors which may influence the timing of sexual initiation, such as a decrease in the age at which puberty begins, for example. Further to this, the problem is named specifically as sexual activity with an unawareness of the consequences, yet fails to address how this could be managed and the role sex and relationships education could play in preventing this lack of knowledge.

With regard to paedophiles, the authors claim that the "profoundly irresponsible" advertisers who seek to present children in an apparently sexualised manner,

give the tacit indication that children are sexually available. As asserted by Emma Rush in an article for the Sydney Morning Herald, this is of particular importance "given that it is known that paedophiles use not only child pornography but also more innocent photos of children" (Rush, 2006 quoted in Egan & Hawkes, 2008: 313). This acknowledgement proves problematic in two ways. Firstly, the core of the report's argument seems to be the conflation of child pornography and "*innocent*" imagery. Secondly, the admission that paedophiles use innocent pictures of children makes discussion of sexualisation, in this context, redundant. Therefore, if paedophiles can and do sexualise *any* image of children then legislation would, surely, involve censoring all pictures of minors.

The second paper by Rush and La Nauze, "Letting Children Be Children", is more specifically concerned with prohibiting the sexualisation of children with the use of state intervention. They suggest that only by targeting "sexualising pressure at its source, advertisers and marketers" (2006b: v) will children be free to develop at their own pace. Yet, from the data they include in the report, it would appear that the problem is somewhat exaggerated. For example, in the period 2002-2005 there were 407 complaints to the Advertising Standards Board (ASB) in the 'Sex, Sexuality and Nudity' classification, which includes, but is not limited to, complaints about the sexualisation of children. In this period only two complaints were upheld. The authors of the report cite this as evidence of poor regulation (and, implicitly, moral decline) as opposed to an indication that most of the complaints were unsubstantiated. Furthermore, the report cites advertisements in this category which feature adults as contributing to "indirect sexualisation of children" and suggests that the ASB do not take these aspects of complaints into consideration. Yet this is a problematic assumption. For example, nudity in an advertisement may have an effect on young people's perceptions of themselves, yet unless a complainant directly refers to the consequences of that advertisement for young people, it should not be inferred that this is an aspect of their complaint. To assume that a complaint about sex or nudity must be a complaint about the effects on children is simply conjecture.

The objective of these two reports seems to be increased surveillance of the advertising industry, regulation and censorship of the images used in advertisements and an eradication of sexualised content in the media. While the

tone is very persuasive, I have shown that the broad claims about sexualisation are poorly evidenced and fail to stand up to a critical reading.

Criticism for American Psychological Association report

In 2007 the American Psychological Association (APA) released a paper entitled "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls", which quickly became an authoritative and much-cited source on this relatively new area of concern. The APA paved the way for similar reviews on related issues in the UK in spite of a wealth of criticism on both content and methods. Some of the problems raised will be explored here.

One major and reoccurring criticism is the bias within the report, that sexualisation is a negative force which must be prevented. This is assumed from the outset as the paper aims to "evaluate the evidence suggestive that sexualisation has negative consequences" thus omitting anything which supports the notion of sexualisation as neutral or affirmative (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). As Vanwesenbeeck elaborates, "There is no consideration whatsoever if or how sex, sexualisation, or even objectification can be self-controlled, intrinsically positive, empowering or lust enhancing. The report radiates sexual pessimism" (2009:269). The report fails to validate its approach by accounting for the rejection of "a potentially large body of theory and evidence" (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009:253) which may have contributed to a somewhat different conclusion. Further to this, the lack of longitudinal data examining the effects of sexualisation renders much of the report's conclusions speculative (Fortenberry, 2009).

As Rossi asserts, "Images do not function as a 'mere' reflection of the world. They play an essential part in the societal production of meaning, knowledge and power, thereby shaping the realities we live in" (2007: 128). As concepts of sexual agency and desire (as opposed to desirability) are often utilised in adverts aimed at female consumers (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009) a narrative not necessarily of sexual objectification but perhaps of sexual power may be initiated.

One of the aims of the feminist movement was to deviate from hegemonic scripts of female sexual passivity and into a future of sexual agency (Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). The increased visibility of the actively desiring female subject in consumer

culture and, correspondingly, those empowered by sexualisation to practise sexual autonomy in real life have little to do with the objectification motifs perpetuated in the APA report. To collate all sexual or sexualized images under one umbrella of significance is a simplification of a very complex issue, and one which ignores the validity of representations of female desire. Vanwesenbeeck elaborates on this point in her assertion that being sexy and being sexual are not the same. She argues that the APA's "narrow focus on the risks of sexualisation as being "the sexy object,"" lead to a dismissal of "the rights of sexualisation as "being the sexual subject"" (2009:270). From this perspective, any display of sexuality by a young woman is deemed to be a consequence of sexualisation (Buckingham et al., 2010) leaving little room for the development of sexual autonomy (Ringrose, 2013; Egan, 2013a; Kehily, 2012). Further to this, as Lerum & Dworkin point out, despite the APA's stated desire to empower young women and its many recommendations on doing so, "not one addresses the need to facilitate girls' ownership of their own sexual desires" (2009:256).

Sexualisation and Violence against Women

Dr Linda Papadopoulos (2010) was commissioned by the Home Secretary to conduct an independent review into the sexualisation of young people, and the ways in which this contributed to violence against women. Given the agenda, it appears that the outcome had been decided from the outset – that there is a link between violence and sexualisation, and that the latter must be combated in order to tackle the former. The report ends with a list of recommendations, 36 in total, a point to which I will return later.

Papadopoulos relies heavily on the APA's report, reproducing many of its findings in her own research and, thus, producing a project similarly biased. The problem with this approach is that it assumes cultural uniformity between the UK and the USA. As Buckingham and colleagues (2010) emphasize, there are a number of fundamental differences between the two nations, which should make one wary of wholesale adoption of the report's conclusions. They cite higher levels of teen conception in the USA and the power of the religious Right to push its own agenda, particularly in this debate. To these I would also add the prevalence of abstinence-only sex education in the USA as an important distinction, affecting

not just how adults view young people's sexuality (and therefore their concerns about sexualisation) but also how young people navigate a sexualised society. Papadopoulos goes on to claim that:

> "Unless sexualisation is accepted as harmful…..we will miss an important opportunity here: an opportunity to broaden young people's beliefs about where their value lies; to think about strategies for guiding children around sexualisation and objectification…." (2010: 14).

Here the reader is expected to collude with the author, without offering any real justification. In the same vein, Papadopoulos neglects to give any explanation regarding her meaning of 'appropriate' when speaking of sexual imagery. She uses the term throughout the report without any acknowledgement that the very concept of sexualisation hinges on the lack of consensus about what is appropriate and at what age.

By tackling the subject matter from this perspective, Papadopoulos, herself, misses the opportunity to debate the positive aspects of an increased visibility of sexuality in society, although this is not part of her remit. It has been argued that sexualisation can be a gateway to better communication and therefore better prospects for sex education (McNair, 1996). For example, contemporary society is awash with images and representations of the actively desiring female. This constitutes a significant change from decades of the sexually passive woman as the norm and something which can be construed in a constructive manner from a feminist, sex-positive perspective (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010; Attwood, 2006). To deny any ways in which sexualisation may have had a positive impact is to suggest that the progress of both feminism and the gay rights movement have not been advanced by a greater visibility of the plurality of sexual desire (McNair, 1996).

Furthermore, in her analysis of pornography, Papadopoulos falls into the trap of attaching a "unitary meaning" (McNair, 1996) to pornography with little attention paid to the fact that pornography, as any other media, can be decoded by the consumer in a variety of ways. As individuals, there are a number of variables which affect how we 'read' the world around us – class, race, age, sexual orientation, nationality and so on. Papadopoulos treats young people as a

homogenous group, covering all bases by saying, "the issue of sexualisation is not confined to either a single race or class" (2010: 7). In this sense she implies that across the board young people read pornography and the mainstream media in exactly the same manner and she pays scant attention to the nuanced nature of childhood and teenage experience.

Nor is the question of why certain young people may access pornography addressed – the assumption is simply that they do, and this is problematic and must be stopped. Yet understanding the motivations could have made Papadopoulos' theories more credible. For example, young people report using porn as a source of information because school based sex education fails to address their needs (Albury, 2014; Hilton, 2007; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000) and they are interested to learn about the pleasure of sex and the diversity of sexual practices. Taking this into consideration, Papadopoulos could have recommended a more explicit and pleasure-orientated SRE curriculum with which to fill that gap in young people's knowledge. It would appear that Papadopoulos, perhaps understandably as she is funded by the British government, is more interested in banning, restricting and controlling than actually advocating for change.

Moreover, there is a failure on the part of researchers to allow young people a voice in the project. Although, in her introduction, Papadopoulos states that she has "spoken to young people" (2010: 3), there is just one quote that makes it into the final report. Thus, there is a silencing of the very demographic with which the project purports to be concerned and a collection of adult views imposed upon children. This is ironic given that the imposition of adult themes, namely sexuality, on young people is the nature of her complaint with sexualisation. This is a glaring omission in a report specifically about young people, and a particularly patronizing viewpoint when coupled with assumption that young people constitute a uniform group.

Statements such as the following, "Both the images we consume and the way we consume them are lending credence to the idea that women are there to be used and that men are there to use them" (2010: 11) superficially touch on the idea that there is an element of interpretation in the way that images are consumed

without taking the trouble to acknowledge subjectivity in interpretation or make any analysis of the varied ways in which images can be utilised. Moreover, it assumes that images themselves are also uniform.

The research itself is also short on actual evidence (Smith & Attwood, 2011). While Papadopoulos is keen to report a "clear link" between sexual imagery and violence against women, she offers very little evidence to back this up. More specifically, she states that, "There is consistent and reliable evidence that exposure to pornography is related to male sexual aggression against women" (2010: 12). By using such matter-of-fact language, Papadopoulos strives to make her point incontestable, yet she fails to mention what evidence or the fact that there has been heavy criticism of this standpoint (Smith & Attwood, 2011). What can be discerned, however, is Papadopoulos' apparent distaste for pornography and a desire to portray it as dangerous and immoral. Furthermore, citing sources from the 1980s and 1990s to illustrate a purportedly new phenomenon is illogical (Smith & Attwood, 2011) as media research completed before the conception of the Internet will have limited relevance to a generation of young people who have grown up online.

On the topic of magazines and advertising, Papadopoulos claims that, "advice on hairstyles, cosmetics, clothing, diet and exercise attempt to remake even young readers as objects of male desire" (2010: 7). Here, replicating the mistakes of Rush and La Nauze (2006a), Papadopoulos participates in that which she is so eager to condemn, she attaches an adult sexuality to children. Weber & Mitchell (2008) warn of the disparity between adult and teen interpretations of terms such as 'sexy', citing an example of one young interviewee who understood the term as a synonym of 'cute' or 'pretty' rather than in a specifically erotic sense. Papadopoulos, having already decided that the magazines carry this message of sexual objectification, wilfully reads the media in such a way in order to 'see' sexualisation everywhere, without considering how a young person might read it. It is not new or unusual or, in fact, dangerous for girls to be interested in clothes and their appearance. She, as an adult, applies a sexualised meaning to what is essentially innocent and, in most cases, a normal part of growing up. In this instance, the report becomes disoriented. The notion of sexualisation is applied indiscriminately, issues as unrelated as hairstyle advice and violence against

women are conflated and convincing evidence to back up those claims is not supplied. Thus, the weakness of the report's argument is highlighted.

When speaking about sexualised clothing and accessories marketed at children, the report makes further claims that do not stand up to closer inspection. The first is to suggest that use of the Playboy bunny logo, high-heeled shoes and bras aimed at pre-teens make it "acceptable to impose adult sexual themes onto children, and potentially relate to children as sexual objects" (2010:8). The suggestion that someone might view a Playboy pencil case as a marker of sexual availability seems somewhat extreme. The second is that the sentence veers dangerously close to the old stereotype that what a person is wearing invites sexual attack (Smith & Attwood, 2011). While I am not suggesting that Papadopoulos actually believes this to be true, there is something distasteful and decidedly anti-feminist about the suggestion that clothing, particularly on a child, invites the dangerous sexual urges of adults. A further quote renders this more explicit:

> "An issue of concern is that the sexualisation of girls is contributing to a market for child abuse images…..The fact that young girls are styling themselves in overtly sexually provocative ways for other young people's consumption….makes them potentially vulnerable" (2010: 13).

Thus, what might be termed the "paedophilic gaze" (Renold & Ringrose, 2011: 390) is, in this report, normalised, the implied argument being that if children are to wear sexualised or sexually provocative clothing, it is to be expected that adults will view them as sexual objects. Girls should, therefore, modify their behaviour in order to avoid becoming victims of sexual abuse, a standpoint which is as outdated as it is problematic. And yet, Papadopoulos makes no recommendations regarding adult attitudes or behaviour, but focuses solely on getting these clothes off the market.

The vast majority of recommendations made by Papadopoulos focus on censorship (blocking access to various websites), state-sponsored babysitting for everyone (selling electronics with parental controls switched on and which would then need to be unlocked) and a plea for increased funding for more of the same research. Her project is not, apparently, an academic one, but an excuse for sex-

negative propaganda and increased levels of social control. In light of the report's desire to protect young people, what is implicit is the idea that adolescents are unable to manage their own emerging sexual identity, and gives credence to the good/bad dichotomy of not only teen sex but sexual experience in general (Bay-Cheng, 2003).

The report seems to advocate a total lack of privacy for young people, ostensibly for their own safety, particularly regarding the internet and mobile technology. Yet the report is predicated on the notion that all children have a positive and open relationship with their parents and a platform to discuss sex and relationships. It disregards the fact that for many young people the internet is a major source of sex education, possibly because they cannot speak to their parents about such matters. Furthermore, young people report that the sex education they get in school does not answer all their questions and increasingly they look to other sources of information, such as the internet or magazines (Brook, 2011). To censor the sexual content of some of these sites and publications would be to take away a valuable source of knowledge for a great many curious young people. There is evidence to suggest that young people use the media and new digital technologies to help form identities (Weber & Mitchell, 2008), practice sexuality in a disembodied and therefore 'safer' way (Chalfen, 2009) and for educational purposes. It is important to acknowledge these reasons, and fully consider the implications of prohibiting access, before advocating for censorship.

This famous quote from James Halloran sums up much of what is wrong with this review: "We must get away from the habit of thinking in terms of what the media do to people and substitute for the idea of what people do with the media" (Halloran, 1970; quoted in McNair, 1996:89). The report might have been more useful had this idea been the starting point.

Conclusion

The prevailing feeling of these reports is one of pessimism, a story of innocence prematurely lost and a wealth of pressures, inadequacies and fears. As Westly Evers and colleagues conclude:

"The discourse (of sexualisation) perpetuates the understanding that young people are endangered, corrupted and harmed by the relationship between the media, sex and sexuality" (Westly Evers et al., 2013:271)

Yet, as I have argued, these reports do not stand up to close examination – anything more than a superficial reading renders explicit their aims to establish causal links where little evidence exists, advocate for increased censorship and support for a singular concept of femininity which precludes self-serving sexual desire. Young people's agency, interpretative skills and confidence to resist are similarly absent.

This discourse prevails and is highly influential, yet young people themselves are barely afforded an opinion. While decrying the imposition of adult sexual themes on young people, the discourse of sexualisation itself imposes adult ways of thinking on young people. The very nature of such a protectionist and adultist viewpoint is to deny the object of protection empowerment and the capability to make their own decisions. Thus, while sexualisation laments the lack of choice to *not* be sexual(ised), it simultaneously removes the ability to choose to *be* sexual(ised).

Furthermore, such discourse accepts uncritically the existence of two distinct cultures – one of (non-sexual) childhood and one of (sexual) adulthood. That young people occupy a borderland between both and, therefore, may indeed operate within their own, distinct, sexual cultures is overlooked. This thesis is concerned with investigating youth sexual cultures and how these may be impacted by the discourse of sexualisation. Commentators on sexualisation describe the possibility of counteracting negative cultural messages within school based SRE (Bailey, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010; APA, 2007). Thus, an examination of the body of work focused on theories of sex and relationships education follows in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Straight Talking: Biology and Heteronormative Discourses in the Classroom.

This chapter aims to map the current landscape by critically engaging with UK government guidance on SRE and contemporary theoretical standpoints. I examine SRE's official attempts to regulate the sexuality of young people in opposition to unofficial discourses embedded in both the hidden curriculum operating within the school and a broader 'sexualised' culture. The implications of teaching sex solely within a biological framework and the issues with both omitting pleasure and simply adding it into the curriculum are addressed here. Finally, the importance of class and gender on young people's sexual agency and the efficacy of SRE messages are explored.

Government Guidance on SRE

The Department for Education and Employment (hereafter DfEE) in the UK offers this description of school-based sex and relationships education in schools:

> "It is lifelong learning about physical, moral and emotional development. It is about understanding the importance of marriage for family life; stable and loving relationships, respect, love and care. It is also about the teaching of sex, sexuality and sexual health. It is not about the promotion of sexual orientation or sexual activity" (DfEE, 2000:1[2])

The uniqueness of sex education in relation to other school topics and its contentious nature are implicit in the very existence of such guidance. Naming moral development as part of SRE and the inclusion of a paragraph of "useful values statements to think about when talking with your child" (2000: 1) explicitly ties sex education with moral instruction and brings to mind concepts of decency

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[2] Sundaram & Sauntson (2016), state that government guidance on SRE was described as 'updated on 7th January 2014' and republished without any amendments. I could not find evidence of an updated document and the DfEE continues to link to the original document. Therefore, throughout this thesis, references to UK government guidance are dated 2000.

and virtue. It is interesting to note that while the guidance repeatedly makes reference to morality and values, there is little consideration given to pupil's own moral framework (Monk, 2001) or that to speak broadly of values is to suggest that everyone shares the same standards or ideals. I will return to the issue of morals and values in sex education later in this chapter. Furthermore, the guidance offers the following rationale for talking to young people about sex:

> "Young people who have good sex and relationship education at home and at school, start sex later and are less likely to have an unplanned pregnancy or to get a sexually transmitted infection"(DfEE, 2000:2).

Thus, SRE is positioned as a tactic to achieve social goals, namely a reduction in teenage pregnancy and infection rates and the delay of the onset of sexual activity. What is not made clear is whether this assertion is backed up with evidence from research, or indeed, what sex and relationship education is 'good' enough to achieve these goals. What is clear is that SRE tuition in the UK is inconsistent and insufficient in both quality and quantity. A survey by Brook (2011) found that 26% of young people got no SRE at all in secondary school, and 26% of those who did receive lessons thought sessions were not taught well. 40% of 22,000 surveyed young people described the SRE in their school as 'poor' or 'very poor' (UKYP, 2007). According to OFSTED (2013), almost 50% of secondary schools surveyed required improvement in their SRE provision.

Forrest and colleagues (2004) conducted a large scale research project designed to address the concerns and needs of young people regarding sex education, and particularly the relationship between these expressed needs and UK guidance on sex education policy. Thus, government guidance focuses on "stable and loving relationships" as the appropriate situation in which to have sex. However, there is little discussion on what constitutes a stable relationship or how to know when you are in love, which researchers noticed was a cause for concern among young people. Furthermore, Forrest and colleagues note that, "The importance of love as a legitimizing factor for having sex with someone was also highlighted" with young people believing that, "If you have sex with someone, it

shows you love them" (2004:345). As government guidance is keen to emphasise the importance of being in love and in a stable relationship before having sex, this demonstrates young people's uptake of one of the key messages of SRE. Yet, this can conversely lead to pressure on young people, as illustrated by the following cliché, "if you loved me, you would". The project concludes that, "There was clearly some dissonance between the concerns and interests raised by the young people in this study and the direction of current UK government policy" (2004: 348) which highlights the importance of gathering the opinions of young people in order to inform a new policy.

Multiple opinions on what is appropriate, necessary or useful in SRE have meant that formulating a prescribed curriculum has become difficult. Certain elements of SRE are statutory, namely those which form part of the National Curriculum for Science and which deal with the biological facts of reproduction. However, other elements that may be included in SRE, such as sexual practice more broadly, relationships, sexual orientation, pleasure and consent are taught at the discretion of individual schools. The contentiousness of these issues is recognised by the government, which allows parents the option to withdraw their child from these elements. Epstein and Johnson (1998) draw attention to the privileging of parental concern over the needs and wants of the child, highlighting that there is no recourse for appeal by a young person who wishes to attend school sex education classes from which they have been withdrawn by their parents. This is despite the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which includes Article 13: "Every child must be free to say what they think and to seek and receive all kinds of information, as long as it is within the law." (UNICEF, 1990) For other topics which may be covered by SRE, successive governments in the UK have opted for guidelines to help schools develop their own, individual sex education policy, a copy of which must be available to parents, as opposed to producing a mandatory curriculum. There is widespread support and campaigning for all elements of SRE to be made compulsory from groups such as the Sex Education Forum, the End Violence Against Women coalition, the United Nations (2016), 86% of surveyed adults (YouGov, 2013a) and 83% of teachers (YouGov, 2013b).

It is interesting to note that the compulsory elements of sex education fall under the heading 'science'. It would appear that sex is thought to be unobjectionable as long as it is dealt with as a set of scientific facts. It is when sex is located in the context of social relationships that it becomes problematic, moralistic and potentially challenging. Crucially, when asked about how sex education provision could be improved, young people consistently suggest more information on relationships and emotions rather than more biology (Tanton et al., 2015; Brook, 2011; Allen, 2008; Hilton, 2007; Forrest et al., 2004; Fromme & Emihovich, 1998; Epstein & Johnson, 1998). The implications of a biologically focused sex education programme will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

The government guidance strives to promote the complimentary relationship between school and parents, yet this does not seem to be the case in practice. Fromme and Emihovich cite previous research from as early as 1915 that concludes that "parents are seldom the first or the most significant source of sex education for their children." (1998: 176). In 2011, a survey of 2,029 14-18 year olds commissioned by a sexual health service for young people, found that "only 13% of 14-18 year olds learn most about sex from their SRE teacher, and just 5% from Mum and 1% from Dad at home." (Brook, 2011). More recently, Tanton and colleagues (2015) concluded that only a minority of young people cited parents as a primary source of sex education. The results of this survey indicate that, far from sharing the duty of educating young people about sex, both schools and parents are effectively abdicating responsibility resulting in an 'information void' which is filled by other sources, including peers, partners, media and the internet.

An example of a more neutral definition of sex education can be found on the Sex Education Forum, a space designed to promote quality sex and relationships education by supporting professionals, sharing resources and advocating for the rights of young people. They offer the following:

> "Sex and relationships education (SRE) is learning about the emotional, social and physical aspects of growing up, relationships, sex, human sexuality and sexual health. It should equip children and young people with the information, skills and values to have

> safe, fulfilling and enjoyable relationships and to take responsibility for their sexual health and well-being." (2010:1)

In contrast to government guidelines, this definition avoids equating sex with love and/or marriage and highlights the goal of pleasure and safety within relationships. Furthermore, this definition takes into account diverse sexual practices and orientations by including the broad term "human sexuality" and does not seek to proscribe teaching on particular subjects. By seeking to give young people the tools to take responsibility for their own well-being, the Sex Education Forum treats adolescents as autonomous and capable of decision-making rather than as children in need of protection. I will return to this point later in the chapter.

The World Health Organisation offers this definition of sexual health which has implications for sex and relationships education:

> "Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence." (WHO, 2004: 3).

While this definition is not specifically in relation to young people, the idea that sexuality should be approached positively and should not focus solely on disease prevention seems particularly pertinent for teaching young people about sex.

The Hidden Curriculum

It has been argued that sexuality is simultaneously taboo within the school environment yet also an inescapable element of school life (Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2003). The absence of a formal curriculum does not mean that young people are not being informed about sex by the school environment. As pointed out by Halstead and Reiss (2006) a vital difference between sex education and other subjects is the pervasiveness of the "hidden curriculum" or the "informal school" (Kehily, 2004a). The hidden curriculum includes thoughts or ideas which

are not explicitly taught but rather implied by modes of behaviour and learnt by observation or assumption. As such the hidden curriculum is at work in all subjects, as young people become indoctrinated into the norms of acceptable conduct. As stated previously, it is difficult to separate SRE from morality so the hidden curriculum becomes a major source of unintentional learning about values, the appropriateness of certain kinds of behaviour and the production of youth sexual subjectivity (Halstead & Reiss, 2006; Holland et al., 2004; Sears, 1992). Kehily discusses the oppositional theories of the formal and informal schools:

> "In the domain of the sexual, for example, the discourse of the official school assumes that children are sexually innocent and in need of protection while the discourse of the informal school assumes an active and knowing sexuality manifest in peer relations and social interactions more generally." (2004a: 66)

Measor (2004) highlights the importance of understanding the informal culture of adolescents in order to evaluate young people's responses to formal school-based sex education. For example, the insistence of the school on treating young people as sexually ignorant conflicts with pupil's own perception of themselves as sexually knowledgeable and can cause them to view sex education classes with scorn (Kehily, 2002b). Mac an Ghaill makes the following point informed by his previous work with gay, male students in 1991:

> "In contrast to the silence of school policy-makers, management and teachers, young people recognise that sex and sexuality are pervasive within the official and hidden curriculum while at the same time being made 'invisible'" (1996: 192).

 As sexuality is part of young people's everyday existence, the position of the teacher as 'expert' – a status upheld in other subjects - is weakened (Limmer, 2010; Fromme & Emihovich, 1998; Jackson, 1978). Thus the hidden curriculum is not only an essential component in *what* students learn about sex and relationships, it could also affect *how* they approach formal lessons. Nayak and Kehily, using the example of the Inquisition in 1591, argue that the imposition of official proscriptions on sexual behaviour lead to, in Foucauldian terms, an 'incitement to discourse' (2008). In the same way, it can be said that a

reproduction-based or prohibitive approach to sex education can work to incite "a plethora of illicit sexual activity" (Nayak and Kehily, 2008: 111).

Slovin (2016) highlights how schools are constructed as sites of knowledge, thus what is taught in SRE, as in other lessons, is often considered accurate simply because it forms part of the official, institutional discourse. Sears (1992) goes further to contest that the hidden curriculum is at work when sex education is placed within a biologically-focused framework – by speaking of sex solely in terms of reproduction, the normality of heterosexuality is reinforced (see also Slovin, 2016). Sex becomes a science, the *facts* of life, and "reduces very complex concepts, which involve social, cultural and psychological factors, to simple biological determinism" (Whatley, 1987 cited in Sears, 1992:15). Yet, as discussed earlier, the biological model presents the least problems when formulating a sex education policy, primarily because it *is* concerned with facts (Tiefer, 2004).

The Trouble with Biology

Because other areas of sexuality education are so contentious, sex education falls back on scientific reproduction – implying that "natural" sex is heterosexual, penetrative and for the conception of children (Slovin, 2016; Allen, 2004; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000). This is interesting as government guidance is very clear that SRE is not concerned with "the promotion of sexual orientation" (DfEE, 2000:1), yet suggests that SRE be taught within a framework that actively promotes heterosexuality. I will return to a fuller discussion of this agenda later in this chapter.

A biological framework for SRE breeds its own problem, that is, by denying the pleasurable aspects of sexuality, young people, and young men in particular, become alienated from the class. The focus on reproduction facilitates "the separation of physical bodies from feelings such as pleasure, desire and hurt; and the construction of a social sexual identity" (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003: 276). As Limmer concludes, "…for young men sex is exciting, it is affirming, it is pleasure" and the subject of sex education classes should reflect that (2010: 356). Although Limmer's study focuses on boys, I think the above quote can and

should also be applied to young women. As Allen (2004: 152) argues, a reliance on the biology of sex invalidates young people as "sexual subjects who can experience sexual desire and pleasure" and implies that the only reason to 'morally' participate is to procreate. Yet, for Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford (2003) the inclusion of pleasure in sex education classes proves highly political, as it can be assumed to be an incitement to sexual activity, something which government policies are keen to avoid.

The empowerment of young women to expect sexual pleasure, to be active agents in the sexual marketplace and to control what happens to their own bodies undermines the masculine privilege to 'know' and to desire. There is considerable pressure on young men to be seen to be knowledgeable about sexual matters (Brook, PSHE Association & Sex Education Forum, 2014; Holland et al., 2004; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000). What this creates is a confidence in young men that they "just know" (Holland et al., 2004; Kehily, 2002a) while in reality, girls have been found to have more comprehensive knowledge in all areas of sex education than boys (Winn, Roker & Coleman, 2008). Even when boys are aware that they are lacking in knowledge, there is pressure to keep up the pretence, which can then affect their behaviour and subsequently what they derive from lessons (Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000; Allen, 2006). The sex education class becomes a forum for "the particularly strident exercise of hyper-heterosexual performance" both to demonstrate sexual knowledge and to distance themselves from accusations of homosexuality (Epstein & Johnson, 1998: 181). It is important to take into account this pressure when interviewing young men about their sexual knowledge.

Therefore via sex education and in particular the hidden curriculum - that is, what is implied as opposed to what is taught or in this case, not taught – the unequal balance of power is maintained, that men desire and women are desired (Sundaram, Maxwell & Ollis, 2016; Allen, 2011; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000). On this point, Epstein and Johnson (1998) draw attention to a comparative study of SRE in the UK and the Netherlands by Ingham. Ingham concludes that the higher rate of teenage pregnancies in the UK cannot be attributed to differences in

sexual activity or age of sexual initiation (1997 cited in Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Rather, that SRE in the Netherlands equips young people with:

> "…a much greater comfort with sexuality, more confidence in negotiating sexual encounters and, importantly, less expectation that particular gender roles must be performed in particular ways in heterosexual relations". (Epstein & Johnson, 1998: 173)

From this research, it would appear that challenging prescribed gender roles could be the key to lowering the number of teenage conceptions in Britain.

Michelle Fine in 1988 drew attention to the "missing discourse of desire" in sex education, and this has not been addressed in the intervening decades (Fine and McClelland, 2006). In denying the sexual subjectivity of young people, Allen (2004), arguing for a "discourse of erotics" in sex education, contends that a vital part of the sexual health message is lost, namely that safer sex is not just about contraception but also about sexual practices which are lower risk in terms of pregnancy and disease transmission. Part of the problem in a perceived "hierarchy of sexual knowledge" whereby practical experience is valued higher than the theoretical knowledge imparted during sex education classes (Allen, 2001:113). Furthermore, while young people often have a broad understanding of the dangers of sexual contact, such as pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease and also the reproductive process, they would like more pleasure-centred information, such as, "how to get what they wanted out of a sexual relationship" (Allen, 2004:115; see also Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Fromme & Emihovich, 1998 for similar points).

The absence of the spectrum of sexuality, and female desire in particular, in the curriculum can be attributed, at least in part, to two assumptions. The first, the male sex drive paradigm posited by Hollway (1984), relies on the widespread belief that sex is something which men need, a biological urge which must be satisfied. Secondly, the coital imperative (Potts, 2002; Segal, 1994) insists that the only sex that matters is penis-in-vagina penetration. Tiefer goes so far as to label the biological model of sex as "anti-feminist propaganda" (2004: 440) while Measor and colleagues describe most sex education programmes as "actively heterosexist" (2000:157; see also Epstein & Johnson, 1998).

Following on from this, Elliott (2003) discusses the way in which the vagina is represented in the words and images from sex education textbooks used in schools. Naming this the "vaginal discourse", her article on "The Hostile Vagina" highlights young women's disconnection from their genitals when the vagina is discussed purely in terms of reproduction, as functional rather than sexual. The vagina as a "passive receptacle of the male sex organ" (2003: 136) reinforces the notion of the active, sexually desiring male while saying nothing of female sexual impulses. Similarly supplementary SRE guidance co-produced by Brook, the PSHE Association and the Sex Education Forum (2014: 9) includes the following:

> Children need to learn the correct biological/medical names for the genitalia and reproductive organs. Having the right language to describe the private parts of their body – and knowing how to seek help if they are being abused – are vital for safeguarding. Being open and honest about the words for genitalia will support girls at risk of female genital mutilation (FGM).

While advocating for the use of the correct terminology, this is justified as part of a safeguarding framework, in order to help abused children seek help or in order to prevent FGM. This reinforces the notion that vaginas are both passive and vulnerable, there is little in this guidance that acknowledges the potential for pleasure. Thus, methods of sex education which are reproduction-based (and therefore neglectful of the plurality of sexual practices) and preventative (that is, those which are focused on the dangers of sex and vaginas for young women) can give credence to these paradigms and make them appear as 'truths'. Discussion of the vagina as a site of pleasure (as opposed to an instrument to provide pleasure) could be beneficial in providing alternative sexual practices to counteract the centrality of heterosexual, penetrative sex. This would be more inclusive of non-heterosexual young people and would also offer options for lower-risk (in terms of pregnancy and STI transmission) sexual activity.

Heteronormativity, a concept which constructs and maintains gendered power relations by assuming that heterosexual intercourse is both natural and something that men are biologically driven to pursue, has been the focus of much research in recent years (some examples include; Slovin, 2016; Abbott, Ellis & Abbott, 2015; Allen, 2013; Holland et al., 2004). Rich (1993) discusses

"compulsory heterosexuality", which confirms the innate nature of female/male attraction and is therefore a powerful tool in perpetuating female subordination. Rosalind Coward states, somewhat dramatically, "women as a subordinate class are bound to the master class by the powerful bond of sexual relations and sexual desire" (1987: 308). The manner in which teenage boys and girls talk about their sexual experiences reflect this gendered power inequality. Thus, male sexuality is often constructed as 'active' (Egan, 2013b) whereas girls often referred to sex as something that 'just happened' to them (Tolman, 2002). Measor, Tiffin and Miller (2000) found that young men were encouraged to treat sex as a conquest (see also Coy et al., 2010) and were less likely to express regret about a sexual encounter than girls. Research into the motivations for participating in sexual activity has also demonstrated gendered differences. Fromme and Emihovich offer the summary of one 19-year-old participant in their study of young men's perceptions of women and sexuality: "Guys will give love for sex, and girls will give sex for love." (1998:175)

The discourse of heteronormativity can be said to be actively promoted in school sex education through the focus on reproduction, the lack of discussion around diverse sexual preferences or practices, the advocacy of sex within marriage or a stable relationship context and government guidance that no school should offer "direct promotion of sexual orientation" (DfEE, 2000:13). While the term sexual orientation is frequently employed to differentiate gay, lesbian or bisexual identities, in this instance, the lack of discussion of alternative sexualities means that the norm of heterosexuality remains unchallenged, precisely because it suggests normality (Slovin, 2016). Thus, in seeking not to discuss sexual orientation, schools merely continue to endorse heterosexuality as the dominant manner of sexual expression. Even when educators purposefully aimed to be inclusive, research found that these attempts often simply reinforced the heterosexual norm (Slovin, 2016; Abbot, Ellis & Abbott, 2015). Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli refer to the "silencing of sexual diversity" as a major component of young people's ideas that sex education is a site for the management of alternative sexual practices (2003:275). Indeed, 85% of young people have never received any information in school about the physicality of same-sex relationships (Brook, PSHE Association & Sex Education Forum, 2014) and youth identifying

as LGB often report finding SRE irrelevant to their needs (Thomas & Aggleton, 2016).

From a Foucauldian perspective, the state seeks to police people and regulate behaviour by controlling their sex and their knowledge of sex (Foucault, 1979). By dispersing the discourse of heteronormativity through the institution of the school, it comes to appear "natural" and therefore unquestioned (Potts, 2002; Slovin, 2016). Mac an Ghaill considers the intertwining of heterosexuality with notions of normal which make it difficult to challenge:

> "In English schools there is a tendency to see questions of sexuality as something primarily to do with gays and lesbians. The sexualisation of heterosexual subjectivity is frequently unacknowledged because heterosexuality signifies 'normality' and dominance." (1996: 193).

Kitzinger and Wilkinson describe the persistent assumption of heterosexuality as a "tyranny" (1993a) and explain that those identities which are deemed 'normal' are "less well theorised, less articulated, less self-conscious, than are oppositional or oppressed identities". In another paper, they conclude that "lack of reflectiveness is the privilege of power" (1993b: 32). Because of this, scant attention is paid to the processes of constructing a heterosexual identity and therefore, normative heterosexuality "retains its power because it is invisible as a political institution" (Tolman, 2006: 74; see also Slovin, 2016).

What is omitted is equally as important as what is articulated, silence on certain topics forms part of discourse, meaning that the absence of any discussion on female pleasure is part of the heteronormative discourse (Foucault, 1979). By applying Foucauldian theory directly to school sex education, Thorogood argues that sex education is a "technique of governance" and responsible for "producing 'normal' (hetero) masculinity and (hetero) femininity" which form the "core categories in the regulation of the social world" (2000: 426). As Lois McNay highlights, "the construct of 'natural sex' performs a certain number of regulatory functions….it bolsters a regulatory notion of a 'natural' heterosexuality" (1992: 29). In their research on masculinity and schooling, Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli found that the boys they interviewed reflected the policing nature of sexuality

education in school as "overwhelmingly heteronormative and gendernormative" (2003: 275).

Furthermore, what is normal is defined by whoever has the power to define (Mac an Ghaill, 1996) resulting in the promotion of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity as the norm and feminine passivity as its necessary counterpart (Holland et al, 2004: 51). Aside from the implications of this regarding how girls view their bodies and sexuality, young men may also be affected by limitations on their understanding of the plurality of masculinities and by being guided to adopt a particular identity. As noted earlier in this chapter, the role of the education system in the sexual construction of young people is crucial. Judith Butler's theory of the "performativity" of sexuality and gender (1999), the dominant idea of what it is to act out masculinity / femininity, is reinforced in schools by not discussing or raising awareness of alternatives to the gender binary or the spectrum of sexuality. Teachers treat children differently based on their gender and socialise them into behaving according to the gendered norm (Smith, 2015; Ivinson & Murphy; Wajcman, 1998). Within a peer group, single sex friendship units reinforce and regulate normative (heterosexual) masculinities / femininities (Kehily, 2004a; 2004b) which need to be constantly acted out in order to maintain their position of privilege (Nayak & Kehily, 2008). By continual repetition, these heterosexist norms appear natural (Butler, 1999) and become a reference point whereby anything else is classed as 'deviance' (Tiefer, 2004). Jackson (1978) contends that in school, gender-specific behaviours are promoted, such as dominance for boys and passivity for girls, which will develop erotic significance as pupils mature. Heterosexuality is automatically presupposed and this, along with misogyny and homophobia, is a key element in "sexual boundary maintenance, policing and legitimisation of male heterosexual identities" (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2003; also Mac an Ghaill, 1994).

Allred and David (2007) recognised this establishment of heterosexual masculinity by noting the instances when young men made sexist or homophobic comments in the context of a sex education discussion. However as the sample was very specific – single-sex, all permanently excluded from school, and with participants drawn from particularly disadvantaged estates – it is unwise to draw

conclusions for young people as a whole. In this instance, we can make comments about working class masculinity, but there would be value in investigating changes in the way masculinity is performed under other circumstances, such as in a mixed sex or mixed class environment for example. Also the researchers do not clarify what is meant by a sexist or homophobic comment, and it must be acknowledged that to a certain extent, this is open to subjective interpretation. Furthermore, there is an important distinction to be made between comments which are intentionally offensive and/or indicative of an actual belief, and those which are employed for other purposes such as humour.

While much theoretical work has been done in the gender studies field on gendered power dynamics and inequalities, there is little evidence that this has trickled down into sex education practice (Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000). Coleman and Roker (2008) discuss the accessibility of academic research on sex education to those actually working in the field, suggesting that while academia may advocate a more progressive approach, such changes are rarely implemented in practice. Indeed, sex education can be said to actually emphasise gendered power relations by teaching masculine privilege in relation to sexual activity (Smith, 2015; Holland et al., 2004). Male students are taught that certain behaviours are considered admirable in boys such as dominance, strength, lack of emotion and aggression (Sex Education Forum, 2006; Hall, 1998; Jackson, 1978) while female pupils are taught the dangers of engaging in sex and to take responsibility for maintaining the boundaries for sexual activity and managing contraception (Batchelor, Kitzinger & Burtney, 2004; Sex Education Forum, 2000; Jackson, 1978). While the content of SRE classes can reinforce particular ideals, Smith (2015) argues that what is missing from classes also forms part of the hidden curriculum. Thus, while the topic of sexual intercourse is a focus for SRE, "issues of rape and consent are rarely examined, suggesting sex is a man's right and women have no choice of partner" (Smith, 2015: 45). Going further, Jenkins and Dambrot conclude that, "rape and sexually coercive behaviors can be viewed as extreme forms of normative male behavior supported by customs, values, and attitudes" (1987: 890). Thus, if boys are taught that sexually aggressive behaviour is the norm, and it is suggested that girls should set the limits on sexual activity, the

implication is that ultimately women are accountable for their own experiences of sexual violence.

Problematising Pleasure

The conspicuous absence of female sexual pleasure on the curriculum and a focus on the negative consequences of intercourse particularly for girls reinforces the message of female passivity and a code of sexual morals for young women. This, in turn, leads to Janet Holland and colleagues' concept of "the male in the head" (Holland et al., 2004) which sees young women rejecting their own needs and viewing sex as an activity primarily or entirely for male pleasure.

Yet, including a discourse of sexual pleasure, and specifically female pleasure is not without problems. Firstly, for pleasure to be taught, someone has to teach it. If some teachers are already uncomfortable teaching the biology of sexual intercourse and the logistics of contraception, it is unlikely that they will relish the opportunity to teach the biological processes of sexual arousal, for example. Ollis describes the complexities of training teachers to be confident to teach sexual pleasure, and found that while some trainee teachers acknowledged the importance of including sexual pleasure, this acknowledgment did not preclude them from feeling uncomfortable with the graphic nature of the resources (Ollis, 2016b). Similarly, Hanbury and Eastham note that sexual health consultations often do not include discussion of pleasure due to providers' "concerns of 'impropriety'" (2016:259), a point which is also applicable to teachers and which highlights the complexities of simply adding pleasure into a programme of SRE.

As Lamb and colleagues point out, "Pleasure is not merely a biological experience; it is defined, controlled, and evoked through context" (2013: 315). These researchers discovered that numerous programmes of sex education attempt to give pleasure and desire a more central role, yet this is often accompanied with discourses of risk and danger, which include the uncontrollable nature of desire, the ways in which pleasure and desire can be used to pressurise or coerce and the danger of victimisation. By locating young people as vulnerable, irresponsible and ignorant of the consequences of sexual pleasure, "discussions

of sexuality will be as superficial as the kind of sex these curricula are trying to prevent" (Lamb, Lustig & Graling, 2013: 316).

Furthermore, to 'teach' desire and pleasure in school can lead to further opportunities for regulation and a sanctioned list of approved pleasures on the curriculum, with whatever is omitted becoming, by default, unacceptable. This has implications for youth with non-normative sexualities, for example, those who identify as LGBT. It seems unlikely that the pleasures of anal intercourse would be permitted on a school-based programme of sex education. Therefore, a hierarchy of pleasure and desire is automatically created of who can feel what kinds of pleasure, where, when and with whom? The inclusion of pleasure and desire in school also suggests that everyone experiences (or should experience) sexual desire and this becomes a requirement and an expectation for sexual activity, what Allen describes as the "pleasure imperative" (2012: 462). This then works to inadvertently 'other' those who do not feel sexual desire or who have not had pleasurable sexual experiences. As Allen and Carmody state, "the queer notion of pleasure as a site of possibility is not easily reconciled with the regulatory practices of schooling" (2012: 465).

Pleasure is a highly personalised concept, and one which is not immune to the cultural influences which inflect on a subject's experiences. As Rasmussen (2012) notes, sexuality education facilitates particular definitions of 'good' pleasure and desire, which do not necessarily relate to the experiences of young men and women from varying backgrounds. It seems impossible to separate sex, sexuality and sexual pleasure from the influences of gender, class, race, religion and so on. Furthermore, the expression of female sexual desire and the pursuit of sexual pleasure by women and girls is not a universally positive affair. Lamb, Lustig and Graling (2013) use the example of Black girls from low socio-economic backgrounds to illustrate how, for these girls, sexual expression leaves them exposed to the 'ho' stereotype.

For Louisa Allen, it is the very conceptualisation of 'pleasure' which proves problematic. As discussed earlier, she has written prolifically on the topic of sexuality education and has long advocated for the inclusion of a "discourse of

erotics". In a recent article examining how the concept of pleasure has been taken up, she reflects on her original premise,

> "My hopes for pleasure were that these were conceived in their broadest sense to avoid a standardisation of particular practices or regulatory ideas about what 'pleasure is'. For instance, sexual pleasure need not be conflated with bodily sensation, emotional response or cerebral decisions, neither is it necessarily a route to, or evidence of, 'empowerment' or 'sexual health'. While it might be, its relationship to these things is more arbitrary and by no means guaranteed." (Allen & Carmody, 2012: 459)

Deborah Tolman notes a change in discourses of female sexuality since her early work in the 1990s, stating that "sexual agency, sexual desire, and entitlement to sexuality are increasingly being identified as developmentally salient for girls" (2006: 72). While this may be the case within academia, there is little evidence to suggest that this has trickled down into sex education practice with any success. However, the appearance of new discourses is not always wholly positive, as greater public visibility can lead to greater opportunities for regulation (Attwood, 2006). Furthermore, there seems to be a lack of attention to the nuances of class, race and other variables which affect sexuality and development of a sexual subjectivity. While girl's sexuality may have moved out from the margins and into mainstream research, it is hard to fully agree with Tolman's assertion given the lack of class or race analysis. For young working-class women, for example, there may be entitlement (or even inducement) to sexuality as a form of social capital (Skeggs, 1997). However, young working class women's reproductive capacity is increasingly problematised this demographic faces the most societal condemnation for procreation (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001) in a culture that conflates teenage pregnancy with poverty, benefit dependency, unemployment and domestic abuse (Abbott, Ellis & Abbott, 2016).

Furthermore, there is tension here between sex-positive discourses for young women and the discourses of sexualisation discussed in the previous chapter. At what point does sex positivity and discussion of the importance of female desire/sexual pleasure become the pressure to live up to an unsuitable ideal and the imposition of sexuality on a subject? Similarly, the inclusion of female

pleasure can result in a further sexual responsibility for young women (Allen, 2012; Allen & Carmody, 2012; Lamb, 2010), who are entreated to enjoy themselves but given little guidance on how to achieve sexually fulfilling relationships (Allen, 2004; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Fromme & Emihovich, 1998).

I would also like to contend that while there are huge amounts of literature discussing the impact of a pleasure-based sexuality education curriculum on young women, young men are all but forgotten. In the same way that sexualisation is viewed as a primarily female concern, with little attention paid to the potential effects on boys (as discussed in the previous chapter), the inclusion of (female) sexual pleasure is located firmly within a feminist politics which inadvertently sidelines the needs of young men. Furthermore, ideas that male sexual pleasure is implied by the very act of sex, that it is guaranteed (Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003) and it is a primary concern for all young men are assumptions which mean that there are few accounts of young, heterosexual men talking about pleasure in terms of "equality and mutual satisfaction in relationships" and little data that shows positive examples and role models for boys (Hirst, 2012: 10; see also Allen, 2012; Beasley, 2008). When young men are constructed as always desirous and ready for sex, there exists little space for them to turn down unwanted activity (Allen, 2012). The focus on the 'missing discourse of desire' for young women may have succeeded in changing the way female sexual subjectivity is theorized, as Tolman (2006) suggests, but in doing so it may have left the boys behind.

The Importance of Class

Sex education does not take place in a vacuum - rather it takes place in a classed, gendered, and racialised society. More generally, sexuality itself cannot be separated from these other social interactions, those "differences which make a real difference" (Epstein & Johnson, 1998: 109). Similarly, the school as a site for the production of particular ideas about sex and sexuality should not be viewed as a singular institution, but rather, a product of the intermingling of other social structures regarded through the matrix of classed, gendered and racialised (among others) social relations.

In her seminal book Formations of Class and Gender (1997), Beverly Skeggs acknowledges the impact of class on the availability of discourses for the women in her study. As she states:

> "This book is not an account of how individuals make themselves, but how they cannot fail to make themselves in particular ways…..There are limitations on how they can *be*" (162, emphasis in original).

She goes on to highlight that sexual subjectivity in particular was experienced outside of individualist discourse, individualism being regarded by participants as a class-based privilege that they were not licensed to enjoy. For some young, working class girls, sexuality can be seen as providing a route to breaking out from this reality (Maxwell & Chase, 2008; see also McAvoy, 2013 for a discussion of social status produced by sexual choices). Thus, for the women in Skeggs' study, sexuality, "was more about tradings in power and accruing local exchange value than about an expression of their inner selves" (1997: 163).

As Thomson, drawing on Bourdieu's theory of 'logics of practice' asserts, "a particular skill or attribute can be understood in terms of its worth within a particular local economy which is likely to reward those values that are consistent with the *status quo*." (2000: 409, *italics in original*). Thus, it could be the case that young, working class women use their sexuality as capital because this attribute is one which is most richly rewarded in "local economies of value" (*ibid*). Archer, Halsall and Hollingworth (2007) go further to suggest that while social capital is important to young, working-class women, the requisite devotion to relationships, physical appearance and sexuality can also be productive of acknowledgement, respect and respectability.

However, this capital is context specific, and may not be acknowledged or appreciated in other circumstances. As Epstein and colleagues note, "What can be said, enacted or embodied in some places, is not possible in others." (Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2003: 7) Going further, working class sexuality is subjected to different regulations than other classes. As stated earlier, it is the reproductive capacity of young, working class women which is often problematized and low

income areas are often the focus of strategies to combat teenage pregnancy. So while female sexuality can be used to accrue value in certain local cultures, it can also be used as to differentiate between 'them and us' and can become "a powerful mechanism for the control of social mobility and the reproduction of inequality." (Thomson, 2000: 409)

Skeggs (1997) considers the importance of respectability for working-class women. She discusses how heterosexuality and its concomitant pursuits of marriage and motherhood can serve to normalize women of the working classes, while a 'deviant' sexuality such as lesbianism or promiscuity can result in marginalization. Skeggs asserts that the women who participated in the study were, "directly educated to be heterosexual" (1997: 125) and that marriage was weighted as "the only acceptable future positioning" (126). Government guidelines which insist that sex is emphasized as part of a committed relationship (DfEE, 2000) underline the status of marriage as the respectable way to have sex. More contemporary studies demonstrate that little has changed since the publication of Skeggs' work and that, as discussed in detail above, heteronormative discourse is still prevalent in the education system (Slovin, 2016; Smith, 2015; Holland et al., 2004; Allen, 2004; Kehily, 2002a; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000).

Social class is also an important dimension in young men's sexuality. Mac an Ghaill has identified the three Fs which he claims are characteristic of working class boys' masculinity, 'fighting, football and fucking' (1994:56). From this perspective, in the absence of academic ambition, having sex becomes one of three ways in which young working class men can perform a masculine identity, sex becomes a goal to be attained. In other words, the three Fs are productive of male cultural capital.

Furthermore, what is implicit in Skeggs' (1997) study is that sexual categorization is, to a certain extent, more important than actual sexual practice – therefore not necessarily what a person does but how they are perceived by others relates to attainment of respectability. It should be noted that the women represented in her study are all in post-compulsory education and as they are not receiving formal sex education as such, what is being studied is actually the effects of the hidden

curriculum, the implied ideology associated with sex and relationships. It would be interesting to explore how younger women recognize and resist heteronormativity within the compulsory education system, when they do not necessarily have lived experience to draw on.

However, we should not neglect the resources that young people mobilise to enable them to resist the hidden curriculum. Studies have demonstrated that students can and do recognize the implicit meanings in what they are taught and can challenge them. Mac an Ghaill quotes Matthew, a young man who describes an instance when he challenged a teacher who he perceived as both tacitly sexist and homophobic:

> "The teacher was mad. It was gays that were supposed to be the problem and I turned it round to show the way it really is. Straight men are dangerous to us all, women and gays." (1994: 168)

Similarly, Skeggs (1997:126) states that the women in her study, "clearly recognize the underlying messages about class, but not about heterosexuality" suggesting that students may sense inferred meanings about parts of their identity of which they are sensitive – that is to say, the women in the study all recognized themselves as working class and recognized that this could be a reason for prejudice, therefore they were sensitive to messages which they perceived implied their inferiority. Matthew, the young man quoted above, is gay, which could give him a somewhat heightened awareness of messages which he understands as homophobic. Yet, it could be that some identities are so ingrained it is difficult to discern concealed assumptions. Consequently, for example, they are "unlikely to challenge the inevitability of heterosexuality" (Skeggs, 1997: 126) as heterosexuality is so normalized.

Both of the studies quoted above are now many years old, and there is space for a more contemporary project. The wealth of work which has been done in the intervening years to tackle homophobia and the intense media scrutiny given to any changes in the sex education curriculum could have effected change in the ways in which young men and women interact with ideas of heteronormativity. Furthermore, as explored in the previous chapter, advances in technology have

changed the ways in which young people relate to the media and to each other, in ways unimaginable during the 1990s and this must be taken into account. By exploring the intersections of class and gender in relation to sex education, we can build a picture of how young people negotiate heteronormativity, its effects on their emerging sexual subjectivity and the different resources available to them to resist dominant ideologies. As Archer and Leathwood state:

> "It is clear that whilst the precise form and expression of inequalities may alter over time and place, 'old' injustices are still being reproduced and class is still very much a pressing issue for the educational agenda" (2003: 232).

Agency and Resistance

Discourses of youth often designate the teenage years as a particular time for resistance, rebellion and 'deviant' behaviour (Thorogood, 2000) and a critical stage in the formation of identity (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Furthermore, adolescence is seen as a transitory period, neither child nor adult, and a time when sexuality is "emergent but as yet not conclusively fixed" (Thorogood, 2000:429). It is, thus, deemed a site which is in particular need of regulation. Bay-Cheng argues that teenagers are thought to be at the mercy of their sexual impulses, a state of "hypersexuality" which "succeeds in giving inevitable and natural cause for adult intervention and surveillance" (2003:62). As Epstein and Johnson suggest, "This sense of danger with regard to adolescent sexuality is combined with a general lack of certainty about when adolescents stop being children" (1998:153).

The World Health Organisation denotes that sexuality "is a central aspect of being human" (WHO, 2004). It could be added that sexuality is also thought to be a key part of being an adult (Thomson, 2004), particularly in the Western world where the sexuality of childhood is consistently ignored or treated with suspicion. The argument that childhood 'innocence' should be preserved is one which is often used by those seeking to restrict access to sex education due to its presumed corrupting nature and the assumption that it provides encouragement to sexual experimentation (Hirst, 2012). Yet, teenagers can be said to be occupying the borderlands between adult and child, neither fully one nor the other, and

simultaneously capable of rational decision-making but also in need of guidance and protection.

Allen and Carmody argue that while there are attempts to limit young people's sexual expression, there is also resistance to these boundaries, with many "smart travelers" finding "embodied pleasures for themselves and their partners and also pleasure in pushing against the borders of the dominant culture" (2012:465). Challenges to conventional constructions of female sexuality, in particular, are evidenced in a number of research projects in this area (for example; Hirst, 2012; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2012). While young people may be able to develop their own norms within adolescent culture, this practice cannot be divorced from the institutions and the institutional processes in which they learn (Ianni, 1989, cited in Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000).

Louise Archer and colleagues (2007) discuss the ways in which the young working-class women they interviewed attempted to express agency by behaving in ways which dissociated them from the prevailing discourses of the quiet, submissive, ostensibly middle-class female pupil. These girls would 'speak out', being loud and sometimes disruptive, and were generally disengaged from schooling and education. In short, they utilized what are generally considered to be typically masculine behaviours in order to render themselves visible in the school context (see also Francis, 2010). However, the authors contend that:

> "The actions they do take – whilst demonstrating agency, generating social capital amongst peers and bolstering a sense of self-worth – are ultimately paradoxical because they play into oppressive power relations." (Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007: 552)

As the interviews with the young female participants document, many actively tried to alter their behaviour over the course of the study, suggesting that while avenues to resist and challenge dominant discourses are available, young women are further limited by "their concern to also conform to gender and class based discourses around moral worth, namely to be recognized as 'good underneath'" (*ibid*).

It is interesting to note that a femininity which is constructed as loud, assertive and active is valued and normalized in some working-class cultures and amongst certain ethnic groups, yet by displaying these types of femininity, young women are placed in conflict with dominant school values. The school, as a 'civilizing' institution, attempts to homogenize these girls into the model of white, middle-class passivity, a femininity which does not express contrary opinions and which never causes a disruption. Archer and colleagues found that racial stereotyping was particularly visible within the accounts of teachers and other professionals, with whole groups of pupils marked as 'loud' or 'hard-working' depending on their ethnic background (Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007; see also Rahimi & Liston, 2011 for particular discussion of teachers' racial stereotyping in relation to sexuality and sexual harassment in schools). This is encapsulated in the following quote, "In this sense, we would suggest that gender, class and 'race' relations between teachers and pupils mean that schools can be experienced as alien spaces for 'other' femininities" (Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007: 558). As there are a number of schools in the UK in which the majority of pupils are not white or middle-class, this can prove particularly problematic, when 'other' femininities make up the mainstream in a school's culture but are not recognized or valued as such. Therefore, as Archer and colleagues conclude, young women's non-conformity and 'loudness' could be read as "attempts to generate symbolic capital and visibility/recognition for themselves within schools" rather than as a particularly anti-school discourse (2007: 565).

Going further, Francis (2010) notes the crucial difference between gender-transgressive behaviours and appearances, highlighting that gender and gender (non)conformity, while most often discussed in terms of physicality, can also be conceptualized as 'disembodied'. Using the example of one female participant, Francis emphasizes how, while this young woman may display characteristics and behaviours more commonly associated with masculinity such as confidence, aggression and competitiveness, her simultaneous "commitment to the heterosexual matrix (and binarised gender roles within this)….and her aesthetic presentation" (2010: 487) mean she cannot be exemplified as an embodiment of female masculinity.

Terry Lovell contends that the issue "is not simply whether individuals are able to act in a transgressive way, but whether those transgressions have authority" (cited in Thomson, 2009: 37). Clearly, the young women studied by Archer and colleagues (2007) and Francis (2010) have the ability to violate the norms of the school, yet if these transgressions are considered to be merely the acting out of one's class background or ethnicity, then ultimately such disobedience has no authority or value.

Interestingly, Suki Ali demonstrates how certain character traits are classed and can lead to perceptions about class in teacher/pupil interactions, which may or may not accurately reflect the economic/social reality. Hence, "In the case of girls from all other backgrounds, loudness and naughtiness are automatically positioned as unlady-like, and so immediately and by default, *working class.*"(2003: 275; *italics in original*). Ali argues that for young women, it is their variety of femininity, and its concomitant cultural capital, that are the markers of social class in schools, whilst she also acknowledges that the meanings ascribed to both femininities and class are changeable across time and place.

There are implications here for sex education in schools. If, in the broader context of school life, young women are punished for standing up for themselves, for expressing agency and divergent opinions, for being active in their choices and in their ability to say 'no', then how can we expect them to be able to use these tools to negotiate their sexuality? It has already been stated here that school-based sex education can reinforce notions of female passivity and sexual submissiveness by dissociating sex from pleasure, yet it also implicitly suggests that young women should be the guardians of sexual activity. There is a fundamental inconsistency here. How can girls resist pressures to be sexually active when resistance and agency are regularly punished within the school environment?

Morals and Values

As illustrated earlier in this chapter, sex education and morality are inextricably linked. Schools act as sites of discipline, providing explicit and implicit instruction

on which behaviours conform to the moral code and which are deemed unacceptable. As Wolpe explains:

> "Because the moral code is closely identified with sexuality, when the moral code is translated into concrete parts of the curriculum, it is taught under the heading of sex education. Sexuality as a phenomenon becomes contained within this context. Other forms of sexuality may therefore be ignored or overlooked in the school unless they are seen as some form of deviance or 'abnormal' behavior" (1988: 102)

Yet, this association between sex and morality is problematic given that sex and, particularly, sexual morality are and have been "a moral and political battlefield" for centuries (Weeks, 1985: 4). I would argue that while discourses of sexualisation have permeated popular culture in recent years, as discussed in the previous chapter, ideas of sexual morality and the plurality of values within education have remained distinctly stagnant. Attempts to "desexualize" the school space (Epstein & Johnson, 1998) have been undermined by a general liberalizing of the media and the saturation of popular culture with representations of sex and sexuality. Therefore, for example, sex education's preoccupation with marriage or stable relationships as suitable environments in which to have sex, is seemingly at odds with representations of youth sexuality in mainstream media culture. Furthermore, the government's fetishisation of the nuclear family proves problematic when considering the range of family set-ups experienced by the UK's diverse and multicultural population of young people. Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford offer insight into this predicament in their study of young Somali women whose family backgrounds are not considered "normatively heterosexual" (2003: 72) in Western culture, and by extension, in school. In this context, it would appear that sex education is not reflective of the realities of modern British society, which can lead to young people's dissociation from the lesson content.

Papadopoulos (2010), as previously noted, advocates for revised sex education in schools in order to combat the damaging effects of sexualisation on young people, one of a total of 36 recommendations in her report. However, she neglects to offer suggestions as to what would constitute *better* or how this may be practically achieved. I would counter that the increased visibility of sex and sexuality in popular culture could be used as a tool to facilitate a more open

dialogue within the classroom. Rather than attempting to fight the tide of sexualisation, sex education could work with it by using examples from the media which resonate with young people and which therefore "responds to the realities of children and young people's lives." (Papadopoulos, 2010: 76). Epstein and Johnson agree that by utilizing popular culture in sex education it is possible "to build on the resources which students already have" (1998: 190). Indeed, Secor-Turner and colleagues established that young people were less likely to have engaged in unprotected sex if they had received sex education from *any* informal source (Secor-Turner et al., 2011) which emphasizes the efficacy of SRE messages when contextualized within popular culture. Going further, by expanding sex education beyond the parameters of the promotion of a specific moral code, "young people would have access to some fairly explicit considerations of sex outside of the more familiar contexts of media representations." (Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2003: 67). In the same vein, a critique of media representations across the educational curriculum and subjects such as drama and English working in tandem with SRE would offer a more holistic, integrated approach. Therefore, this approach can be used to achieve both goals – sex education can be used to critique sexualisation and depictions of sexuality in popular culture while the media can be used to debate issues of sexual morality within sex education.

Epstein, O'Flynn and Telford discuss the difficulty young people have in negotiating a mind/body split within education. School is said to occupy the mind side of this divide and "education, as a process, privileges rationality" (2003: 71). This stands in stark opposition to young people's embodied realities, which see them preoccupied with their own changing bodies and those of their classmates. They go further to suggest that "dominant identity groups, especially those which are white, male and middle-class" (*ibid*) come to represent rationality and are therefore privileged, while identities which do not conform to this demographic are seen to represent desire - a problem for schools that seek to disembody and, crucially, to desexualize young minds and bodies.

Conclusions

Sex and Relationships Education in schools in the UK has often been criticized as being both inconsistent and insufficient. This is not just the viewpoint of official inspection bodies, academics or youth workers (in other words, adults), but a fact recognized by young people themselves. Successive governments have effectively abdicated responsibility for the sexual education of young people, producing guidance instead of a curriculum and a steadfast refusal to make all elements of SRE compulsory despite external pressure and lobbying. This goes against a body of evidence that identifies the positive effects and health outcomes that good SRE can facilitate – while the theory may be accepted, this has yet to 'trickle down' into practice. The importance of allowing young people to contribute to the content of sex education lessons cannot be overstated. Failure to acknowledge what young people *want* to know can lead to SRE messages being undermined or simply ignored (MacDonald et al., 2011).

Teaching SRE within a reproductive, biological framework is said to promote heteronormativity, privilege male sexual desire, construct sex as dangerous for young women, deny legitimacy to sexual practices other than vaginal penetration including same sex relationships, reject young people as agentic sexual actors and further particular ideals of romance, love and propriety. Thus, SRE operates as a 'technique of governance' (Thorogood, 2000), delimiting the acceptable ways in which young people may express themselves.

A key element missing from current SRE is pleasure, especially for young women, placing it at odds with a 'sexualised' cultural world that is said to not only encourage but to demand sexual gratification. Simply adding pleasure into a curriculum is not unproblematic as some writers question the point at which an inclusion of pleasure becomes an imposed sexuality (Allen, 2012; Allen & Carmody, 2012). SRE also ignores cultural, social and developmental differences between young people, constructing certain behaviours as deviant, with little regard for diversity of morals and values.

The chapter does not intend to paint an entirely negative picture, young people can and do resist and challenge such norms and, in previous research, have

shown themselves to be savvy consumers of SRE, who are able to critique SRE messages and offer suggestions for improvements (Allen, 2008; Hilton, 2007; Buckingham & Bragg, 2004). It is the aim of this research to further this data set, asking young people to evaluate their own experiences of school-based sex education in order to identify the key areas which inform youth sexual cultures, and those discourses which are discarded. The discourses of official SRE and unofficial sexualisation of society, work to influence young people in seemingly oppositional ways. It is crucial to understand this interplay before an intervention into SRE is possible.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This research aims to investigate youth sexual cultures by examining the saliency of school-based SRE in young people's lives, particularly within the context of a social landscape widely assumed to be "sexualised". While much has been written previously on SRE (prominent writers include Louisa Allen and Sharon Lamb, for instance) and on sexualisation from a variety of perspectives (some examples include; Egan, 2013b; Gill, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010; Attwood, 2009), this research attempts to study the interconnectedness between both topics and highlights how youth sexual cultures are developed in accordance with, and in opposition to, discourses of SRE and sexualisation. By interviewing young people themselves, I aim to centralise their opinions and evaluations, offering a youth centred understanding of sexual culture – something which is often missing from academic and media accounts of sexualisation. Indeed, that young people may participate in sexual cultures, and these cultures may be distinct from those typically associated with adults, is often bypassed in research that seeks to offer understandings of youth written by and for adults. Thus, drawing on current debates, this project aims to address the following research questions:

- Where do young people get their information about sex?
- What role does SRE currently play in contributing to knowledge of sex and sexuality for young people today?
- Does pornography influence young people's sexual lives in significant ways?
- What kinds of new technology do young people use to source information and circulate ideas about sex and sexuality?
- Do gender and class affect the answers to the above questions?

The Sample

In total, 31 young people took part in this study. The study sample was opportunistic and as inclusive as possible. Requisite characteristics included being at least 16 years of age, having received at least some secondary education in the UK and being able to give informed consent. As long as participants met the criteria and were taking part voluntarily, they were considered suitable participants. I contacted most participants via youth services and in these instances, interviews and focus groups took place in youth service buildings. Both youth services continued to support young people up until the age of 25, thus I used this to guide my upper age limit. The oldest participant had just turned 26 years and was still accessing the youth service and was therefore included. While he was considerably older than the next oldest participant, he took the research seriously, had an interest in the subject matter and offered a valuable voice to the group.

All but one participant identified as white, the exception was one young woman who identified as mixed race. All but one participant identified as British, one young woman originally from Poland was also included as she had had the majority of her secondary education in Britain. One male respondent self-identified as gay, and two female participants disclosed bisexual sexual experiences. The rest of the participants identified as heterosexual. None of the participants disclosed disability. While I acknowledge that the sample here is not particularly diverse nor representative in terms of race, sexual orientation or ability of the UK today, this study is primarily interested in differentials of class and gender and a detailed analysis of race, nationality, sexuality or disability would be beyond the scope of this project. There are spaces for further work examining the experiences of those who are not represented here.

In total, 18 girls aged 16 -21, and 13 boys aged 17 – 26 took part (see appendix D for a table of participants). Of the female participants, 2 were recruited by volunteering and the remainder attended Youth Service One. The male participants included 3 volunteers, 3 from Youth Service One and 7 from Youth Service Two. The demographic of service users for Youth Group One was overwhelmingly female and this is reflected in the sample. Similarly, a majority of

young people who used the youth services were characterised as working class. Of the participants, 11 girls and 11 boys were from working class backgrounds, 7 girls and 2 boys were middle class. All of the middle class girls and two working class girls were not local to the North East but lived in the area in order to attend university. Due to the nature of the services provided by Youth Service One (described in more detail in a following section), all of the female participants recruited from this service were already engaged with sexual health measures.

All young people were asked which class they thought they belonged to at the end of the interview. Subsequent categorisation was based on young people's own assessments and a combination of other disclosed characteristics which included their own level of education or occupation, parental occupation, living situation including geographical location and future aspirations. Thus, a typically working class young person would be Michaela, who was 16 and attending college, and lived with her siblings and her mother, who did not work. A typically middle class young person would be Valerie, who was studying to be a doctor at university, and whose parents were also medical practitioners.

I am aware that using broad identifiers such as working and middle class could represent an over-simplification of the class structure in contemporary Britain and I acknowledge that some of the nuances of class are lost by the use of this terminology (Elley, 2013). However, these were the terms most readily understood and used by young people themselves and while other frameworks or language may offer more detailed categorisations, they also require a greater depth of personal disclosure than it was possible to generate within a transient, 'drop in' research relationship. Similarly, while other terms may be more descriptive and inclusive of a broader spectrum of criteria (advantaged/disadvantaged, for example), they are also more subjective, more easily misunderstood and suffused with particular connotations. Thus, participants who happily situated themselves as working class, might have felt more uncomfortable describing themselves, or being described, as disadvantaged.

Sometimes young people who had been similarly classed were particularly difficult to compare. In these cases, I have used the term aspirational working

class to describe young people who were situated on the borders between classes in order to differentiate them from others in more established classed positions. Thus, a typically aspirational working class participant would be Reggie, who described himself as working class, whose upbringing was particularly impoverished and whose single mother was in and out of low paid employment. Reggie himself was studying to be a pharmacist at university and expected to have a well-paid career after graduation. As a point of contrast, Sean, who was 22 and also lived with his mother, had no qualifications or training, had never had a job and did not have much interest in finding one. It becomes clear that including both these young people in the same class category would limit the analysis.

In the majority of cases, the participants are classified here as they suggested, although this was not always a simple process. Some participants asked me to explain the class system or simply stated that they did not understand what I meant. I asked contextual questions at the end of the interviews, although I was aware that participants might be getting tired or restless which may have contributed to their lack of understanding. While this may have been somewhat counteracted by asking contextual questions at the beginning of the interview, I wanted to avoid the possible effects of framing the discussion in these terms on young people's answers. In circumstances where young people offered well-intentioned explanations that did not answer the question per se, such as, "I'm not posh. I'm not a dickhead" (Harry), I have used my own judgement based on other criteria.

Research Design

Quantitative research methods have provided numerous resources on the statistics of young sexual activity (Wellings et al., 2001; Mercer et al., 2013), levels of teenage conception (ONS, 2016) or numbers of sexually transmitted infections among young people (Public Health England, 2015). While this is invaluable in mapping health outcomes or organising effective interventions, such methods fail to take into account the characteristics and context of adolescent sexual experiences. More recently, qualitative methods have been employed to gain young people's perspectives on sexuality and sex education (Limmer, 2010;

Allen, 2008; Holland et al., 2004; Measor, 2004; Kehily, 2002a; Tolman, 2002; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000). As this project is interested in how young people gain sexual knowledge and their interpretations of the sexual world, the voices of young people are fundamental and therefore qualitative methods are most appropriate. Some researchers of youth and sexuality, notably Louisa Allen, have successfully employed visual methods of data collection in schools, such as photo-diaries to "help illuminate an esoteric object of investigation like 'sexual cultures'" (Allen, 2009:549). She argues that such methods can offer increased participant autonomy, encourage critical thinking amongst participants and can help engage young people who may be uncomfortable with interview situations or written methods of data collection (Allen, 2009). Visual methods were not deemed appropriate for this study, however, for a number of reasons. The logistical implications of retrieving data necessitating multiple meetings with participants and a greater time commitment from them would undermine the 'one off' nature of the research that I was keen to cultivate. Photo methodologies also carry specific ethical considerations particularly when the topic under consideration is sexuality. For example, ensuring that written consent is gained from everyone depicted in a photograph in order for it to be eligible for inclusion, a condition on which Allen's ethics committee approval depended, would add time-consuming administrative tasks to the data collection process and might conclude with large amounts of un-useable data. Finally, it was important to me to be able to compare the data generated in this thesis with data from similar studies to build an interpretation of sexual cultures not limited to the relatively small amount of participants in this thesis. For this reason, it was judged more useful to access how young people talk about sexuality and sexual cultures.

Bertaux (1981, cited in Seidman, 2006: 8) states, "If given a chance to talk freely, people appear to know a lot about what is going on". It is the objective of this thesis to provide young people with the opportunity to speak freely on these topics, thus data was collected via one focus group of seven participants, five joint interviews (two participants) and sixteen individual interviews (two participants from the larger focus group were also interviewed individually).

A focus group "capitalises on communication between research participants in order to generate data" (Kitzinger, 1995:299) and, therefore, produces an

opportunity to gain a sense of shared experiences and norms within the group. By paying attention to diverse communicative strategies such as joking, teasing and informal banter within the group, a greater breadth of data can be revealed as, "people's knowledge and attitudes are not entirely encapsulated in reasoned responses to direct questions" (Kitzinger, 1995:299). Similarly, focus groups can promote participants to "to explore the topics in ways that the researcher did not anticipate" (Jupp, 2006:122) which is in line with this study's aims to enter the research without preconceived ideas.

Using qualitative interviewing has a number of advantages. Mason cites reasons for choosing this method which are appropriate to this project; for example, if a researcher's "ontological position suggests that people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality which your research questions are designed to explore" (2011: 63). This is supported by Seidman who states that qualitative interviews are best suited to studies which aim to explore the participants' subjective understandings as "interviewing provides access to the context of people's behaviour and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behaviour" (2006:10).

This project was not concerned with excavating 'facts', therefore a very structured, survey-style interview would not enable the generation of in-depth qualitative data that was the aim of this thesis. Encouraging the participants to "talk about the subject within their own frames of reference" (May, 2001: 124) was of particular importance. However, a lack of structure can prove intimidating for the participants, placing a burden on them to initiate topics and decide on what is relevant (Silverman, 2011). Given that there were specific areas of information that I wished to access, a semi-structured approach was adopted for the interviews, utilising an interview guide in order to generate "reliable, comparable qualitative data" (Bernard, 2000: 191). Thus, I prepared an agenda including specific questions and topics, while maintaining a flexible approach to adapt to individual participants or in order to develop unanticipated topics (Mason, 2011; Seale, 1998). Furthermore, it was hoped that by creating an informal environment, the interviews would become "conversations with a purpose" (Burgess, 1984 cited in Mason, 2011: 62). I practised 'active listening' (Silverman,

2011: Kvale, 1996), allowing "the interviewee the freedom to talk and ascribe meanings" (Noaks & Wincup, 2004 cited in Silverman, 2011:162). I endeavoured not to interrupt nor to jump in too quickly when interviewees fell silent. This thesis sought to position young people as "simultaneously the products and the producers of discourse" (Edley & Wetherell, 1997 quoted in Wood & Kroger, 2000: 24). I sought to engage with participants as actively constructing discourses both through the content of our interactions and also the act of speaking itself (Kehily, 2002a).

The possibility that participants would give untruthful answers, or would tell their stories in particular ways in order to impress others or in anticipation of judgements or criticisms was considered. As Kitzinger highlights, "a great deal of what people say about their lives and experiences is (either deliberately or inadvertently) at variance with the facts" (2004: 128). This can be particularly pertinent when discussing potentially embarrassing or personal matters such as sexuality. It is important to acknowledge that the age of the participants in this study may have increased the propensity for dishonest responses – they may have felt pressure to answer questions in a particular way to please the interviewer, to impress others, to avoid getting into trouble or to present a particular view of themselves. However, as Deborah Tolman writes about her study of adolescent girls' sexual narratives and which can be applied here, "worrying about the extent to which these reports mirror reality misses the point; what I was trying to learn was how girls themselves make sense of their own feelings and experiences" (2002: 40). Seale continues on this theme, arguing that, "the fact that these stories are told, whether true or not, is the topic of interest" (1998: 214) and this can reveal much about the social norms and discursive practices in which the participants are invested. As Lois McNay writes:

> "The fact that certain narratives remain powerful even though they do not correspond to prevailing circumstances points not only to their historical embeddedness but to their centrality in the maintenance of coherent identity" (1999:324).

Participant Recruitment

Participants were not recruited through schools for a number of reasons. These included a requirement of parental consent and the potential for teachers and other gatekeepers to allow or deny participation to particular pupils (Gallagher et al., 2010; Skelton, 2008). Similarly, there are issues around potentially diminished anonymity and/confidentiality, particularly in focus groups, and researcher identification with the discourse of education perhaps leading to participants being unwilling to criticise school policy or official discourse. Other scholars have suggested that there are difficulties obtaining informed consent from school pupils. The participation of young people in order to avoid other lessons, (as opposed to a genuine interest in the topics) and participation in order to please teachers in an environment where "compliance with adults' requests is a norm of good behaviour" (Gallagher et al., 2010: 478) would be two examples of these difficulties.

My desire to respect and empower young people meant that I was opposed to the requirement of parental consent to participate in the research. In line with Heath and colleagues, I felt that asking young people to gain parental consent called into question the ability and competence of young people to make decisions about themselves, based only on age and neglecting the nuances of individual development (Heath et al., 2007) while simultaneously questioning the capacity of the youth services to endorse appropriate research (Skelton, 2008). As Skelton continues, when requiring parental consent, "…the power of participation has been placed in the hands of the one who already has a form of social power over the potential research participant" (2008:22; see also Gallagher et al., 2010). Alderson (2007) argues that age is no longer the defining criteria associated with the ability to give informed consent. The UN Convention for the Rights of the Child (1990) states in Article 12.1:

> "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child".

Ethics Committee approval for this study was on the condition that participants under the age of 16 had the written consent of a parent or guardian to participate. I felt strongly that requiring parental consent would both disempower young participants and alter the data I was able to collect as the sensitive theme of the research would preclude parental knowledge for a lot of young people and would fundamentally change the nature of the study. Furthermore, the requirement of *written* consent would impinge upon the 'drop-in' nature of data collection, meaning that most young people who attended the youth centre would have to come back a second time to be interviewed after a parent had signed their consent form. Thus, in order to secure ethical approval while maintaining my commitment to the empowerment of young people, participants younger than the age of 16 were not eligible to be interviewed.

Participants for this study were, therefore, recruited in two ways; my intended strategy which was accessing young people via youth services in the North East of England and, unintentionally, by word of mouth. Youth services were deemed appropriate points of contact for a number of reasons, including the voluntary nature of access and that sexual health advice, contraception and relationships counselling provide a large part of their remit. Thus, it was hoped that young people accessing a youth service would already display a level of comfort in discussing sex and relationships. Most youth services do not require parental consent for young people to use the service, thus creating an environment already predicated on trust and confidentiality. I hoped that this would help to reassure the participants that their confidential information and anonymity would be protected.

It should be noted that by recruiting young people from youth services, those who are not engaged in such services or who are particularly marginalised are not included. In particular, the female respondents in this study were all actively invested in their sexual health and had taken on board SRE messages regarding contraception, making them somewhat ideal SRE subjects. Young women who do not access contraception (for whatever reason) or those who operate outside of SRE discourse are not represented here and there is scope for future work using an alternative recruitment strategy to address this limitation.

All potential participants received a participant information sheet and the consent to interview form (included here in appendices A and B respectively). Prior to the commencement of each interview and off the record, the participant and I had an informal chat. This was an opportunity for me to gauge their understanding of the research process, what the interviews entailed, including the topics of discussion and whether they were able to consent. It also helped to engage participants who may not have been as confident with written information without drawing specific attention to this and offered space to build rapport and for participants to ask any questions. I emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers and that I was not seeking particular responses to the questions, but was interested in what participants thought about the issues. The interview schedule was semi-structured and participants were encouraged to guide the conversation towards experiences and issues that they deemed important (see appendix C). It was crucial that I maintained a flexible approach to the interview schedule in order to foreground the significant concerns of young people themselves, rather than what I imagined to be the key issues. Thus, while there was an outline of questions, the interview schedule developed throughout the fieldwork process as young people brought up topics that I had not initially considered pertinent. Further discussion of this development follows in the evaluation section of this chapter.

Participants were reimbursed for their time and while this was not initially conceived as providing an incentive, it would be naïve to imagine that it did not function as such. I wanted to convey to the young people that their time and contribution was both valued and valuable – without their participation, this thesis would not exist. Thus, a £10 shopping voucher was offered as recompense, and this was received as soon as the interview had been completed. All participants received a voucher regardless of the length of the interview.

All but one participant were allocated a pseudonym to preserve their anonymity as soon as the interview terminated. One young person asked that their real name be used and that wish has been respected. The recruitment of most participants took place in two youth services, with the remainder being volunteers outside of formal networks. These are outlined below.

Youth Service One

The majority of interview participants were recruited primarily from one youth service in the North East in November 2014. I made contact to ask if the service might be able to help recruiting volunteers for my thesis. I was invited to have an informal discussion with the service manager, who then made arrangements for me to attend the drop in service and receive support from the youth workers. In return, I produced a summary of findings for the service, highlighting areas that young people were most concerned about, and, therefore, where the youth service might employ more resources in the future, and feedback on the current youth services available.

This service operates a drop-in service for young people which was accessed for a variety of reasons including sexual health and contraception services, counselling, employment and training opportunities, and benefits advice. The service offered the opportunity to speak to a NHS nurse who could administer/dispense contraceptive pills, implants or injections, sexual health testing and medical advice on termination of pregnancy. This specialised service was extremely popular with young women, particularly those who may not have access to a GP in the local area, such as university students. Thus, there was a greater attendance of middle-class young women than may be expected of a more typical youth service target demographic and all were engaged and invested in sexual health measures.

I attended six sessions over two weeks. The drop in was often very busy with long waiting times to access the appropriate service. Youth workers were active in informing young people about my research during confidential triage sessions, giving basic information about the study and encouraging them to approach me if they wished to participate. It was hoped by promoting my work in this way, young people would not feel pressured to participate and would do so voluntarily. Interviews took place in a small counselling room for privacy. As part of usual youth service protocol, all staff who worked alone with young people wore a personal safety alarm. I had no recourse to trigger the alarm during the course of my interviews.

Youth Service Two

I attended a second youth service in the North East. This service ran a number of projects aimed at unemployed young men in particularly disadvantaged areas, dealing with a range of issues. Unlike Youth Service One, while sexual health advice was available, there were no regular clinics with medical professionals held at the service and the participants from Youth Service Two were not engaged or invested in sexual health promotion. I was invited to run a focus group with a group of young men who were current users of the service and who were interested in becoming volunteers themselves. The focus group was presented as an opportunity to begin thinking more maturely about sex and relationships and to think about some issues that might arise if the participants were mentoring other young people. It also offered the youth workers the opportunity to identify further areas of training for the volunteers. It was not a compulsory session nor was becoming a volunteer dependent on attendance at the focus group.

The group consisted of seven working class young men, aged 16 to 26, and was also attended by one male and one female youth worker from the service, to which the young men in the group agreed. The presence of the youth workers was not deemed to influence what the young men felt able to discuss as the workers and the young people had an excellent rapport, some familiarity with discussing similar issues and in most cases, a long history. The input from the youth workers was minimal, although the male worker did step in when the group became rowdy or very off topic, for which I was very grateful. As a lone female, the group would have been difficult to facilitate on my own and while the session was characterised by banter and joking, the mediating effect of the youth workers' presence helped to keep this within workable boundaries. The youth workers did not correct or challenge any ideas although afterwards they admitted that this had been hard to resist, as their role in the youth service would usually incorporate challenging attitudes, particularly those which might constitute sexism, racism or homophobia. Two members of the group were subsequently interviewed individually.

Volunteers

The second, and unexpected, way in which volunteers were recruited was by word of mouth. The subject of my thesis was often a topic of conversation that people found interesting and a number of times young people heard about my research and wanted to take part. I interviewed three male (1 m/c and 2 w/c) and two female volunteers (both m/c, both engaged with peer SRE programmes) during the fieldwork.

Analysis of the Data

Interviews and focus groups were recorded on both a digital Dictaphone and on my personal Smartphone. My Smartphone did not automatically upload data to a cloud storage device and data was not stored on the phone for periods longer than 24 hours. Data was uploaded to my personal computer for storage, which is password protected. This computer does not have internet access therefore the risk of hacking or virus contamination was minimal. No data was stored long term on either recording device. A back-up copy of the interview recordings was kept on an external hard drive which was kept locked away and for the duration of this study, was used solely for this purpose.

All recordings were transcribed verbatim and transcriptions were subjected to close reading and constant comparison in order to identify emerging themes. Groups of related themes were supplemented by additional data or discarded as the analysis progressed, based on the amount and relevance of data from subsequent transcripts.

A critical discourse analysis approach was employed as, from this perspective, "The emphasis is thus on the understanding of discourse in relation to social problems; to social structural variables such as race, gender and class; and above all, to power" (Wood & Kroger, 2000: 21). By employing discourse analysis, the intention of this project is to reflect on the discourses available to young people and their abilities to resist or challenge the imposition of adult values, whether these take the shape of a prohibitive paradigm of sex education or the pressure of sexualisation. The analysis for this project involved the comparison of transcripts with particular attention paid to the class and gender variables of

the respondents in order to assess the significance of each in relation to the types of discourse available to the participants, and the power they have to take up or resist certain discourses.

Using the theories of Michel Foucault as the basis for this analysis was deemed appropriate given Foucault's extensive body of work on sexuality, truth and power. As Janet Holland and colleagues state, "He shows that discourses of sexuality are powerful mechanisms for producing the truths of a given time, but are also unstable, contested and contradictory" (Holland et al., 2004: 76). For Foucault, sexual subjectivity is constructed discursively, emerging from institutions and it is within this construction that power is employed (Foucault, 1979) rather than through other, more obviously repressive regimes. Thus, discourses are not neutral, but make specific practices and identities 'normal', while simultaneously marginalising others. Thus, this project was concerned with how young people make sense of competing discourses and how they construct themselves as sexual subjects. As Wood and Kroger assert, "The idea that the availability or prominence of certain discourses can both enhance and constrain social practice is a major feature of some discourse-analytic work" (2000: 19). Therefore, in the analysis of this data, I have attempted to map out the prominent discourses for young people across gender and class divisions and theorise the ways in which their behaviour can be said to be limited or enriched by their participation.

As Jäger and Maier (2009: 34) state, using Foucault's discourse theory as a base for critical discourse analysis (CDA) gives rise to a number of central questions, which were incorporated into the analysis of the data for this project:

- What is valid knowledge at a certain place and a certain time?
- How does this knowledge arise and how is it passed on?
- What functions does it have for constituting subjects?
- What consequences does it have for the overall shaping and development of society?

I was interested in the opinions of young people as to what constitutes 'truths' of sexuality, in order to assess the significance of a range of sources of information on sex and the ways in which these sources impact upon practices and performances of sexuality. Holland and associates go on to discuss the significance of the language used to talk about sexuality in revealing the different discourses available to young people based on gender and class differences (2004). Likewise, Kehily argues that considering "speech as a form of action" necessitates an "analysis of the act of speaking" in conjunction with an analysis of the content of speech (Kehily, 2002a: 7). Furthermore, it is equally important to take note of the silences and omissions within the transcripts "to make conjectures about alternative accounts which are excluded by omission, as well as those which are countered by rhetoric" (Tonkiss, 1998: 258).

By using critical discourse analysis, I have aimed to understand the "discursive practices and subject positions" of the young people involved (Mason, 2011: 57). Using the transcripts and with application of some of the key concepts of Foucault's work, the analysis has emphasised the ways in which young people's sexual subjectivities are constructed through discourse. Youth sexuality is often represented as a social problem and subjected to restrictions, yet at the same time discourses of sexualisation compel young people to find value in sexual expression. This project uses the data to present understandings of how young people negotiate this dichotomy and the 'interpretative repertoires' they utilise to enable the production of subjective sexual identity.

By analysing the data from a constructionist perspective, I can highlight "how particular utterances are always positioned within an unfolding sequence" and, therefore, explore "participants' own understandings as displayed directly in their talk" (Silverman, 2011: 228). For the analysis of the focus group data specifically, it is important to highlight the context in which experiences are shared or opinions are offered and the reaction of others in the group, in order to make claims about participants' ascription of meanings. Celia Kitzinger (2004:128) challenges the idea that in interviews or focus groups, "access to experience is gained through the talk", preferring the idea that the data is evidence of how people present their experiences rather than an accurate picture of their experience. This standpoint is helpful to this project, which seeks to use the transcripts to provide an indication

of discourse production rather than as a window onto actual experiences. Furthermore, this type of analysis incorporates the possibility of untruthful answers or biased accounts given by participants, showing how people seek to conform to or oppose certain discourses in their talk. Silverman (2005) cautions against simply listing the discourses identified within a transcript. The philosophy for this project is that a discourse does not exist in a vacuum; instead discourses are viewed as overlapping and intertwined, one produced by the dis-identification with another. Thus, the intention here is not just to recognise and list different discourses but to "move beyond such a list in order to attempt to map the skilful way in which such discourses are laminated on one another" (Silverman, 2005: 47).

This research attempts to understand young people's sexual cultures, from a standpoint that views youth as much as a social category as a biological one, and one which is constructed in contemporary society as a problem and a site for regulation (Thorogood, 2000). I perceived the school as an institution charged with the official discipline of student bodies but also productive of 'informal' epistemologies and norms that offer some alternative to the formal curriculum (Kehily, 2004a). In contrast to the 'sexualised' landscape of modern Western culture that is said to impose sexuality prematurely, education's assumptions that young people are sexually innocent and unknowing seemed naïve at best. An "'explosion of discourse' around sex education indicates its centrality as a site for surveillance, monitoring and regulation" (Thorogood, 2000:427) and I was interested in investigating the impact of attempts to control access to knowledge of sex and relationships on young people's sexual self-conceptualisation.

While mindful that young people are often treated as a homogenous group, I identified differences in gender and class in order to offer a more nuanced picture of sexual cultures in contemporary Britain. Rather than making sweeping statements about the possible effects on young people of growing up in a sexualised world, this project seeks to critically examine these variables in relation to the available discourses of sexuality and a subject's autonomy to resist. As Sandra Lee Bartky argues, in her critique of Foucault's conceptualisation of the subject as gender neutral, "the abstract subject who masquerades as everyone and anyone, but is really a male subject in disguise"

(1990: 6). Using Foucault's focus on the body as the primary site of the exercise of power, Bartky explores how modern standards of femininity lead women to self-regulate their 'docile bodies' in line with cultural norms of beauty, by the 'disciplinary practices' of dieting, waxing, wearing make-up and so forth, for the benefit of men. Similarly, critics of the discourse of sexualisation argue that the narrow and increasingly explicit aesthetics of sexiness, put women (and only women) under pressure to present themselves in overtly sexual ways (Gill, 2003). For Bartky (1990), this self-objectification reinforces patriarchal power structures. While much of the feminist analysis of sexualisation has focused on the implications for young women (Papadopoulos, 2010; Gill, 2003), this thesis aims to include young men's perspectives and examine the consequences for boys of an increasingly sexualised social environment.

This thesis is concerned with a discursive analysis of the sexual cultures of *young* people. As Lois McNay (1999) argues, a multitude of discourses exist which morph over time and space, thus counteracting Foucault's conceptualisation of the subject as stagnant. McNay explores the importance of the modification of discourses over a lifetime, which exposes the system and leads the subject to a state of increased agency to choose or reject discourses. Thus, with time and age, the agency to criticise and reflect is generated. However, as this project is concerned with youth, the question, from this perspective, would be to what extent do young people have the agency to analyse discourse effectively and are they, therefore, more susceptible to conform to the social norms of a particular time and place?

Evaluating the Methods

As a number of young women attended the youth service with a friend, offering a joint interview encouraged participation which may not have occurred if a rigid one-to-one approach was taken. Joint interviews shared some of the characteristics of a larger focus group, offering an insight into shared understandings and offering an opportunity to capture discussion between both participants. Furthermore, disclosure was facilitated as often both participants already knew each other's experiences and trust and confidentiality were, to some extent, already agreed. As Hennink writes:

"A key ingredient to successful focus group discussions is the development of a permissive, non-threatening environment within the group, whereby participants feel comfortable to share their views and experiences without the fear of judgement or ridicule of others" (2007: 6).

The data collected from these two-person focus groups proved invaluable. Together, the participants spent much of the interview in conversation, told anecdotes together, agreed and disagreed on fundamental principles. There are long stretches of these transcripts where I do not say anything at all, as the participants raise and answer their own questions. It became clear that the way in which these young women discussed sex and relationships with each other did not simply supplement the story, but indeed *was* the story.

Young people were encouraged to drive the discussion and to talk about what was interesting and relevant to themselves. This was key in maintaining a youth focused study and not imposing my own (adult) assumptions as to the key issues for young people. Perhaps inevitably, unexpected subjects came up spontaneously during the course of discussion, and in cases when the topic seemed pertinent to other young people, it was added to the agenda. Thus, the interview schedule was continuously developing throughout the fieldwork. For example, Jesse's description of Snapchat as a way of flirting formed the starting point of questions about social media's role in sexual relationships and sexting as a positive practice. While much of the literature focused on the dangers and necessary prevention of sexting amongst young people, Jesse's account offered a perspective that challenged many adult assumptions and I was subsequently keen to address this topic with other young people in order to identify if this was a common way of thinking or an isolated case. In contrast, Olivia's description of Japanese comics as a good source of sexual role models was not added to the agenda as this would not be a frame of reference for the majority of young people.

Similarly, some questions on the initial schedule were removed as the fieldwork progressed. Sometimes this was in order to accommodate new items for discussion, or because a particular question proved difficult to answer or did not generate as much discussion as imagined. The order of questions remained flexible throughout, allowing topics to be discussed as they came up naturally and at times, allowing young people to follow their train of thought. The sample was

diverse in terms of age and educational attainment, therefore the wording of questions was adapted to maximise participants' understanding and allow for additional explanation where necessary.

One frequent criticism of focus groups is the pressure on participants to conform to group norms or to give dishonest responses (Kitzinger, 2004). However, while there may be differences in the ways in which young people communicate in groups and individually, this can still be helpful in highlighting prevalent cultural ideology (McQueen & Knussen, 2002). One such example might be the unwillingness of all of the female participants in joint interviews to admit to watching pornography. Whether or not they do or do not access porn cannot be determined for certain, but that they all wished to emphasise that they did not, reveals much about a dominant cultural norm which requires girls to distance themselves from porn.

Further disadvantages include the possibility of dominant group members who control the discussion either "due to an authoritarian tone or in the time spent talking" (Hennink, 2007: 9) or group members who are timid and do not contribute to the discussion. These issues were particularly apparent in the all-male focus group which was dominated by some members, leaving two to make minimal contributions. Addressing this issue at the time proved difficult as I did not want to single any group member out by putting them on the spot in an attempt to encourage further participation, particularly if those members were naturally shy and might feel uncomfortable. However, if they began to speak and were interrupted, I insisted on the group allowing them space to offer their contribution.

Feminist critiques of the qualitative interview method have highlighted the unequal balance of power between interviewer and respondent, claiming that the researcher, who classifies the topics for discussion and decides which are significant, is in a position of power over the participant (Seale, 1998). It would be naïve to suggest that the participants and I could be entirely equal, considering other contributing factors such as age, education and class. However, my research strategy focused on fostering non-hierarchical relationships with the participants as much as possible and being transparent in explaining the aims of the research, while keeping in mind that, "a good interview necessitates that

rapport has been established between the interviewer and the interviewee" (Smith, 1992: 101). Given that the majority of participants were forthcoming in their answers, many described the process afterwards as 'interesting' or 'good' and most expressed an interest in how I came to be interviewing young people about sex, I believe I was as successful at building rapport as I could have been, given the time and access constraints. Furthermore, my identity as a female researcher undoubtedly affected the data collection. That I presented as a young(ish) woman and was casually dressed was likely influential in whether or not young people decided to participate.

I offered little personal information about myself and little was sought by participants. I was prepared to share certain aspects of my personal circumstances in order to foster a friendly relationship and in the course of conversation but this rarely occurred. The majority of questions from participants centred on my relationship to the research such as what made me interested in sex education? Or what was it like to go to university? There were a few instances when participants offered standpoints which I found personally offensive. However, as my aim was to understand young people's views from a non-judgemental perspective and I was not there in any educational capacity, I did not offer any challenge on these occasions.

Similarly, when paraphrasing young people's speech, I tried to incorporate similar colloquialisms or even use the same vocabulary in order to maintain a level playing field; for example, a young person who repeatedly uses the word 'dick', can and will read much into a researcher's insistence on using the word 'penis'. It suggests more formality or a greater level of education and I was keen to avoid highlighting these differences during the interviews. This sometimes led to hilarity but also fostered a sense of camaraderie which I feel positively affected the interviews. Participants occasionally swore, this was not deemed offensive and has not been edited out. I have not attempted to transcribe the accents of the participants however, when young people used dialect, this was transcribed faithfully but translated where necessary in the analysis. My own strong local accent was most likely a contributing factor to the informal tone of the interviews and the amount of slang words that were used.

Concluding Remarks

While previous research can speak *for* young people (for example, Papadopoulos, 2010), it was central to this project to allow young people the space to narrate their own "truths". The intention, as much as possible, was to approach the data without preconceived ideas and to remain "'faithful' to a text's overall meaning" (Tonkiss, 1998: 253). Furthermore, as McQueen & Knussen acknowledge, "There are grounds for expecting the researcher to provide sufficient information about the process to permit others to assess the extent to which the interpretation might be idiosyncratic" (2002: 211). By quoting the transcripts directly in the text and rendering the process of analysis transparent, I strive to be accountable for my interpretations and allow the reader to be able to assess my explanations, or produce their own readings of the data (Tonkiss, 1998; Mason, 2011).

While I have attempted to find commonalities and distinctions between participants based on class and gender, what results is a series of generalisations based on the classed and gendered participants in this research and the academic literature. It is not my intention to 'tell the whole story', nor to apply my claims to all young people, indeed this is an important point of criticism regarding other research such as that completed by Papadopoulos (2010). Similarly, I recognise that while class and gender intersect to produce particular sexual cultures, these are further intersected by racial identity, religion, disability, geographical location, sexual orientation and so on.

 By adopting a flexible and open minded methodology, I have been able to collect data on a wide variety of subjects important to young people themselves, some intentional, some unforeseen. I feel a great responsibility to the young people to faithfully and accurately represent the views that they so generously shared with me. I believe the empirical data included in this thesis reveals much about the lived sexual subjectivities and experiences of young people in the UK today. Therefore, what follows in subsequent chapters represents an intersection between the topics routinely raised, discussed and debated by the young participants and the necessities and constraints of producing a research project

of this kind. I begin my discussion in the following chapter by offering young people the opportunity to evaluate the school-based SRE that they received.

Chapter 5: "Your Old Man Science Teacher": Young People's Accounts of SRE in School

Introduction

In this chapter, I will reflect on the evaluations of school sex and relationship education as articulated by participants. There was a lack of consistency across the experiences of SRE as participants offered diverse accounts of both the topics covered and the style of teaching. Many of the young people interviewed for this research struggled to remember details of their school's programme of SRE and the significance of this will be considered. A lack of guidance around relationships was a common theme in interviews and one which young people consistently suggested would be an important and useful area of discussion. I will argue that the narrow definition of what constitutes a relationship can limit young people's sexual expression and can, ironically, exert pressure on young people by reinforcing the centrality of penetrative sex. While the concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1993) has been extensively documented, I will argue that young people are also subjected to 'compulsory sexuality' via SRE, despite an explicit agenda to the contrary. The participants proved to be astute judges of both real and potential outcomes of school sex and relationship education in regard to young people's emotional and sexual wellbeing and were able to identify a number of areas in which a broader range of information would be advantageous. I will also contend that the refusal of information to young people constitutes age-based discrimination and a breach of their human rights – rights which are set out in broad, holistic definitions of sexual health (for example; WHO, 2006). I argue that adopting these comprehensive definitions from a sex positive perspective allows young people to access the information they need, respects their need for privacy and autonomy and upholds their rights. An in depth discussion of the significance of poor quality sex education for young people will be tackled primarily here and the other sources of sex education on which young people increasingly rely will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

The Importance of SRE

It has been widely noted that unsatisfactory sex education provision can contribute to increased levels of risk-taking, increased reports of negative sexual experiences and poor sexual health outcomes (Helmer et al., 2015; Hirst, 2008; Westwood & Mullan, 2006). The Department for Education and Skills finds education to be a key element in the drive to reduce rates of teenage conception (2007) and a survey by MacDowall and colleagues (2015) concluded that school-based sex education was influential in delaying sexual initiation (see also Bourke et al., 2014). As evidence from OFSTED (2002) highlights, sex education in schools is inconsistent, a finding which can be attributed to a lack of national curriculum and government guidance which is open to many different interpretations. It also follows, that while there is no compulsory obligation to teach SRE aside from the biological 'facts', no final exam in which knowledge and understanding can be adequately assessed and educational outcomes that have no bearing on a school's placement in league tables, SRE is not a priority for many schools in the UK. Therefore there is a strong case for offering statutory sexuality education within a "clear conceptual framework" (Hirst, 2008: 399) in order to tackle these potentially negative outcomes.

Westwood and Mullan (2006) attempted to quantify young people's knowledge and understanding of sexual health issues by producing a questionnaire focussed on sexual health issues. They concluded that large numbers of pupils were lacking in the most basic knowledge of sexually transmitted infections, emergency contraception and sexual health services. The Department for Education and Skills (2007:8) also reflects that many young people "lack adequate sexual health knowledge". For the most part, participants in this thesis demonstrated good levels of knowledge and showed at least a basic understanding of contraception and how to prevent STI transmission, even when they had received little or no sex and relationship education at school.

However, an improved level of knowledge is not always followed by an alteration of behaviour or attitude (McKee, Watson & Dore, 2014; Kendall, 2013). As posited by Allen (2001; 2011), there exists a gap between young people's knowledge and their ability or willingness to adapt their practice accordingly. She

found that the young people that she interviewed were knowledgeable about contraception, for example, but did not incorporate using protection in their sexual practice. This was supported by data collected during an all-male focus group:

> Harry – See, we know about safe sex but we don't (practice it). Like all the time I'm like, oh aye, I will (use a condom) aye, but then you just don't. I don't know why.

> Sean – The thing between your legs becomes your brain.

> Harry – Aye, it does, aye….and then it falls off.

The above exchange shows that Harry, who is 23, has knowledge about condoms, demonstrates that he knows that he *should* use a condom when having sex and has an awareness of the consequences of not using protection - "and then it falls off" - yet does not adopt safer sex practices. Sean's response suggests that young men's desire for sex stops them from thinking clearly about the consequences. Later in the same focus group, I attempted to draw the young men's attention to this paradox:

> Helen – I'm quite interested because when I asked what young people need to know about sex, you all said safety…..

> Luke – But then, we don't all use it?

The young men were keen to make a distinction between their own practice, which they accepted had potential consequences which they did not want but which they were unwilling and unlikely to change, and the ideal that should be taught to younger people via SRE. There was general consensus among the young men that using condoms did not feel as pleasurable and this was offered as a valid reason to avoid them. In this way, male sexual pleasure is presented as paramount, and as more important than the potential for negative health outcomes. The way that they corroborate the narrative and seek to justify their standpoint, demonstrates a deeply embedded group norm that is accepted as fact:

> Harry – At the time you don't think about it. You just want to get straight into it…..I have used it, but like…I really do not like it. Don't feel anything…you can't feel yourself. It's not as good.

Jesse – Even with the ultra-thin ones. They are shite.

Harry – It feels horrible. You can't feel the proper….

Luke – Sensation.

Less pleasurable sex as a result of condom use was often given as a reason why some people might not use protection and was given by male and female participants, both working and middle class. Interestingly, boys in individual interviews were less definite in their answers, offering what *other people* might think, rather than their own opinion:

Some people might feel it's interfering (Alan, 19, m/c)

Because people say that it doesn't feel as good. (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

In comparison, female interviewees were sure about the effects of using condoms on sexual pleasure:

Cos it feels better without it (laughs) especially for lads apparently. (Stacey, 20, m/c)

Well, it doesn't feel as good with condoms and that kind of thing. (Valerie, 21, m/c)

Cos it feels nicer when it comes to a condom, if you don't use one it feels nicer. (Michaela, 16, w/c)

After participating in the focus group, Jesse (18) was interviewed individually, and we returned to the subject of condoms and discussed the role of education in encouraging young people to use contraception. Jesse felt that early SRE interventions *could* have persuaded him to practise safer sex but his young sexual debut and subsequent promiscuity precluded him from changing his behaviour:

Helen - So what about the consequences of not using a condom? Cos you said before about diseases and things like that and we were talking before about having babies and things like that, but you still wouldn't use contraception?

Jesse - It was too little too late for me, I didn't get taught about all that stuff so obviously I haven't been using condoms since I started. It's definitely….I've gotten into the habit of not using them now. It's not really that I didn't want to use them, I just end up not using them.

> So I never take one out with me now, I never have one on me or nothing.
>
> Helen - So even if you'd seen the pictures of the horrible diseases?
>
> Jesse - I probably….It might have changed my mind or something back then. If they'd taught me all the things that could have happened. But obviously I didn't get taught so it doesn't bother me now.

This provides an interesting narrative. Inadequate SRE during his time at school is deemed attributable for Jesse's self-acknowledged irresponsible behaviour. A lack of sex education conveniently provides an excuse and adherence to the 'too little too late' rhetoric allows Jesse to continue this behaviour because he has "gotten into the habit". Later in the exchange, Jesse claims he "has had too much experience" to change his behaviour. Notions of personal responsibility are barely present in this discussion. Jesse says "I didn't get taught" as opposed to "I didn't learn", casting himself as a passive consumer of (insufficient) education and therefore absolved of blame. His statement that "It's not really that I didn't want to use them, I just end up not using them" makes his behaviour accidental rather than a deliberate choice, he becomes a product of his circumstances. However, in the focus group, during a discussion about sex education and what that entailed Jesse had said "I got told how to put a blob (condom) on."

Therefore, it would appear that merely being shown how to put on a condom is not enough to encourage young people to adopt this as a practice. The young men in the group offered a number of suggestions as to improvements that could be made that might promote condom-use to young people. These included putting a youth service in the school (as was the case for one participant in his school), making condoms freely available and increasing awareness of the risks of unprotected sex.

A significant amount of participants cited drunkenness as a reason why young people might not use condoms:

> Some of them don't know what they are doing, and maybe like they're too drunk (Terry, 23, w/c)
>
> Probably because they are drunk (Tom, 17, w/c)

The idea that under the influence of alcohol, sex 'just happens' was often repeated by participants in relation to contraception, providing some mitigation for risky behaviour:

> It can just happen, I guess. If you're drunk or something. (Michaela, 16, w/c)

Furthermore, alcohol was mentioned by a number of participants in relation to sexual activity not only regarding impaired judgement and regrettable encounters, but also the deliberate use of alcohol to achieve sexual aims. Thus, the relationship between sex and alcohol for young people requires consideration in greater detail, and this will be taken up in Chapter Seven.

Further answers to the question, "Why do you think some people don't use contraception?" included forgetfulness, the heat of the moment, not having a condom at the time, having a long term partner and the belief that the girl won't get pregnant. However, one of the most repeated justifications offered by young women was 'knowing your partner', the idea that if a sexual partner is not a stranger, you are afforded some protection:

> With the condom thing, it is actually stupid but like you feel like if you know them then you don't need to use one if you are on the Pill or something (laughs) (Carly, 19, m/c)

> If it's with your boyfriend or someone you've been with then you are safe….. (Jade, 16, w/c)

> I think you just need to know that also a lot of people would be like 'oh he definitely has not got Chlamydia, I'm going to sleep with him'. You can't be naïve, I think you have to…sort of, making sure that you're…you know who you're sleeping with (Jenny, 19, m/c)

The evidence here demonstrates a number of misconceptions and confusion around the necessity for condoms. Jenny, for example, begins her statement by questioning the naivety of assuming a potential partner does not have any STIs, demonstrating her awareness that you cannot tell by looking if someone is infected. This is in line with the key aims of SRE, which include education about and encouragement of the practise of safer sex in order to achieve positive health outcomes (DfEE, 2000). However, she goes on to advise that to ameliorate the

risks, you should make sure "you know who you're sleeping with", colluding in the myth that it is safer to have unprotected sex with people you know rather than strangers. Similarly, Carly states that "you feel like if you know them then you don't need to use one" even though she acknowledges that this is "actually stupid".

These responses highlight an important issue with current SRE interventions – while these young women have the knowledge and understand the reasons to use condoms and the consequences of not doing so, they are also entangled in widely accepted myths that offer them exemption from incorporating condoms into their own sex lives. While it is impossible to prevent young people forgetting safer sex messages in the heat of the moment or if they have been drinking, misconceptions such as being safe with a boyfriend or that pregnancy won't happen to them are much easier to dispel.

This presents an opportunity to re-evaluate current SRE policy and its outcomes – while the government agenda explicitly aims to reduce teenage pregnancy and STI transmission by giving young people an awareness of contraception, there remains room for improvement in encouraging young people to adopt these practices.

It Says Nothing to Me about My Life

A number of researchers have argued that there is evidence that young people will disengage from sources of information that do not align with their own experiences (Helmer et al., 2015; McKee, Watson & Dore, 2014; Elley, 2013) further emphasising the need for SRE that is relevant and relatable for young people. A survey by the Sex Education Forum found that respondents named irrelevance to young people's lives as their first characteristic of poor SRE (Sex Education Forum, 2008). Participants in this research also noted that SRE in their school was irrelevant either due to not taking into account the diversity of the audience at which it was aimed, or its belated introduction to the syllabus, as shown below in young people's narratives:

> It was probably applicable for about a third of the class (Ida, 18, m/c)

> I don't know, I think we already knew everything. They didn't really start telling us stuff until year ten and we already knew stuff (Michaela, 16, w/c)

A number of respondents interviewed for this project could remember very little about their SRE classes at school, suggesting that they were so disengaged from the process, they did not retain any of the information presented:

> To be honest not really (Bart, 19, aw/c, when asked if he could remember what was covered in SRE)

> We just watched a video. Can't remember what exactly the video was about now. (Sean, 22, w/c)

Hirst (2008) also found a striking difference in the reality of teenagers' sex lives in comparison to the romantic ideals bestowed on them by their school-based SRE. For the young people interviewed by Hirst, sex was not private, intimate or necessarily comfortable but rather "encounters were furtive, often rushed and in the vicinity of others" (2008: 406). There is scant reference to relationships in the study, leading to the assumption that sex often takes place in fleeting or casual encounters rather than in the context of a 'stable' relationship. However, it is possible that information regarding relationships was merely left out of Hirst's research due to the focus being sexual activity rather than relationship culture. Furthermore, for the majority of participants, their only experience of sex had been outdoors and was, by their own admission, not what they were expecting nor what they would like sex to be. This highlights a discrepancy between how adults think sex should be and the reality for young people – a fact exacerbated by the profound distrust of teenage sexuality as emphasised by Bay Cheng (2003). Young people's sexual encounters are necessarily furtive and secretive because of a lack of acceptance of youth sexuality by adults. This is centred on the dominant idea that sex is something to be done by adults and that, therefore, SRE relates to future behaviour and not the present for adolescents.

As Kendall evaluated, all the SRE curricula in her study reflected young people as "*becoming*, rather than *being* sexual actors" (2013: 132, emphasis in original), the assumption being that those in SRE classrooms are not yet sexually active. The key problem with this approach is that for those young people who are already sexually active, this theoretical knowledge is undermined by their

practical experience – they already know a reality of sex - making the classes seem extraneous. Furthermore, if the taught ideal does not correlate with lived experience, pupils' trust in the teachers' expertise is diminished. For Harry (23, w/c), who attended a school in which the majority of pupils were from disadvantaged backgrounds, early sexual initiation was perceived to be a fact of life:

> Helen - Were there a lot of people in your secondary school who were already sexually active, do you know?
>
> Harry - Everybody.
>
> Helen - Everybody? So it was really part of the culture?
>
> Harry - Like, most of my class were all in relationships like when we were in Year 7 or something. Not relationships like, a here and there whatever. All of us were with people in our class as well. So everybody was with everybody that was in the class.
>
> Helen - And people were having sex in these relationships?
>
> Harry - Aye.

The reality of whether or not "everybody" in Harry's class was having sex at the age of 11 or 12 cannot be established here, but it is significant that Harry believed this to be true. Therefore, a lesson which focused on the value of waiting to have sex and of stable, committed relationships as the context for sexual expression, as directed by the government guidance, would potentially be lost on this group of pupils for whom casual, "here and there" sexual relationships were already part of the everyday. This is not to suggest that this is the norm for all young people, indeed previous research would contend that the majority of young people are aged 16 or over when they commence their sexual lives (Mercer et al., 2013). However, it should be emphasised that in some locations and for some young people, sexual initiation happens earlier than the age of consent (Rosenthal, Smith & De Visser, 1999).

Kendall (2013:133) compared two different methods of sex education in the USA, including comprehensive sex education as offered by more liberal states and abstinence-only education which was prevalent in very religious or conservative states. She notes that despite fundamentally different philosophies and methods, both approaches "consistently downplayed students' experiences, normed a

particular ideal of childhood and of families that does not reflect the reality of many teens' lives, and stigmatized teen sexuality and all signs of sexual activity". The consequences of such an approach are neatly summarised by a participant in Buckingham and Bragg's 2004 study as:

> You know, if you're saying 'it's bad, it's bad, it's bad'…Then when they find out that it can be quite enjoyable, it's like you're just gonna go 'Well why should I believe anything else you say?'

The importance of feeling included in the curriculum is highlighted by Westwood and Mullan (2006; see also Buston & Wight, 2006 regarding the isolation of young men from programmes interpreted to be only concerned with 'girls' issues') as crucial for young people's engagement. It has been widely noted that too few programmes of SRE are designed in consultation with young people or take their needs into consideration (McKee, Watson & Dore, 2014; Hirst, 2008; OFSTED, 2002) yet those programmes that do have been found to be more effective (Thomas & Aggleton, 2016). Similarly, work by Allen (2007) found that while young people's perspectives on SRE may have been heard by teachers and practitioners, they were seldom listened to, often being ignored and their legitimacy rejected as teachers censured them for being cheeky or disruptive (see also McKee, Watson & Dore, 2014). The assumption here is that the teacher is embarrassed by the suggestion and therefore disregards it as a deliberate effort to cause mischief as opposed to a real attempt to communicate need.

Kehily (2002b) notes that there is a clash of agenda between pupil and teacher where teachers are positioned as experts (as is customary in other subjects) and this sets them in conflict with pupils who have their own knowledge or experience which is often at odds with the message SRE is trying to promote. Thus, Thomson and Scott state that, "It is clear from our data that young people used their own culture of sexuality in order to challenge and embarrass the teacher" (1991: 12). This leads on to a fundamental issue with school-based SRE. The lack of qualified professionals specially trained to teach SRE, means that it often falls to teachers who feel awkward and embarrassed with the subject matter and this was recognised by young people:

> We were never taught by people who actually sort of cared or knew (Jenny, 19, m/c)
>
> That's what I'd say about our school, it was always just whoever was…what female teacher was lobbed off with the job (Rosie, 20, m/c)

Another participant, Stacey, found it particularly difficult to relate to SRE classes as they were taught by:

> Your old man science teacher that's just trying to say don't have sex cos you'll get Chlamydia

Discussion of pleasure rarely featured in the SRE provided for young people taking part in this study and most seemed quite shocked when the idea was suggested to them. A fuller discussion of this topic will follow, but Alan highlights a key reason why pleasure may not feature in SRE taught by those who are uncomfortable with the topic.

> I don't think pleasure was ever really discussed. Also it puts the teacher in a position of having to talk about how sex is pleasurable to them which they probably wouldn't want to talk about (Alan, 19, m/c).

Thus, the private life of the teacher would be alluded to in any discussion of pleasure or sexual enjoyment which would cause discomfort. As Kehily (2002b) has documented, all teaching styles are dependent on the tutor's personal experiences, morals and values and this is particularly apparent in sex and relationship education. This goes some way to explaining why the only consistency in young people's accounts of SRE appears to be the lack of relatable information. It would appear that teachers, understandably concerned with being seen as appropriate, rely heavily on a biological model of sex and become so removed that young people are no longer able to relate to the subject matter.

This awkwardness further alienates young people from the classes, especially if pupils are accustomed to talking openly about sex with their peers. A number of participants cited friends as their main source of information about sex, showing a level of comfort and familiarity with sharing sexual information that is not reflected in SRE:

> I think it's just when you talk to your friends, you just….you have them conversations, don't you? (Jade, 16, w/c)

> I'd probably say about 90% of my stuff came from listening to other kids and my cousins and other older lads around me. (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

> I think you just hear about it from like older friends and stuff. (Carly, 19, m/c)

> Obviously you overhear stuff from your friends and that, and they are older, I mean I'm only 18 so all my friends are like way older than me so I picked stuff up off them and the rest you just learn on your way. (Jesse, 18, w/c)

The ability to talk about sex without embarrassment is one which is often discounted or viewed with suspicion by educators. Previous research has demonstrated that "participatory teaching methods such as games, role-playing and group discussions" offer young people the opportunity to engage with the information in more personal ways (Thomas & Aggleton, 2016: 21). Yet, the lack of discussion or debate in SRE classrooms means that talking is presented as devalued, most participants reported classes consisting of passively watching videos, teachers giving information and pupils completing worksheets. Rather than presenting the diversity of sex and relationships as different for each person and supporting the idea that there is more than one way to engage in either, SRE consistently presents the topic as a set of facts to be disseminated by the teacher. That there is a right and correct way to go about sexual activity is implicit. However, participants recognised the need for continuous and wide-ranging discussion:

> The way it was done in our school, it was like, it was solely scientific, it was completely like….there wasn't any emotional or anything that you could possibly ask questions to, it would be like 'this is this'. (Kimberly, 19, w/c)

> In schools, it shouldn't be thought of as a taboo subject. It shouldn't be waited until you think, 'oh they are mature enough now'. It should be seen as a subject people can openly talk about……….it's never a sustained conversation or dialogue (Alan, 19, m/c)

> There should be a wider discussion of different ways people can gain pleasure and forms that relationships can take and yeah, I mean like…how open everything is to discussion. (Ida, 18, m/c)

These young people were aware that desire, pleasure, emotions and relationships were diverse and subjective and that broaching these topics would offer a platform for discussion and questions. While broader conversation and increased openness were valued, they also recognised that such topics represented a taboo within the regulating atmosphere of the school. The inability to talk and conversely, the proliferation of unrestrained talk, are central to the debate around single-sex or mixed SRE teaching.

Single Sex Vs Mixed

The idea that sexuality education should be taught in single-sex groups has been discussed at length in the literature (Allen, 2011; Strange et al., 2003) with little consensus achieved. While there seemed to be no consistency among participants who went to mixed-sex schools as to whether they were separated to receive SRE or not, a number of participants went to single-sex schools meaning that the debate around which method is best is redundant for these young people. Participants were asked how they felt about discussing sex and relationships in a school environment.

> I went to an all boys school, so it wasn't really that bad…. (we could) talk about it normally. Obviously if there were girls there we would have got more embarrassed…….cos lads would have not have gone into depth if lasses had been there that they'd already had sex with or something like that. So it would have been a bit embarrassing for both parties. (Jesse, 18, w/c)

It has been claimed that mixed groups for sex education classes can encourage male pupils to 'show off', be disruptive and can lead to sexualised bullying and policing of behaviour (Strange et al., 2010; Measor, 1996). This is supported by a number of responses by participants, a point which I will return to later. However, as Jesse asserts, the presence of female pupils can also act to curtail boys' bravado and make them less likely to offer personal disclosures. This could be attributed to a number of reasons.

As boys are often under pressure to 'just know' about sex (Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000) it could be deemed an attempt to create a distinction between themselves and the girls, who do not or should not know and therefore should not be party to an 'in depth' conversation. Jesse seems to express that, for him and his friends,

to 'talk about it normally' automatically precludes females from the discussion – that if they had been present, the boys would no longer have been able to 'talk normally', but would have had to modify either the content or the style of their communication. Going further, he positions himself within a masculine norm that demands explicit sex talk between boys.

As Allen (2011:74) notes "the demonstration of sexual competence and knowledge is central to esteemed masculinity" (see also Jackson & Cram, 2003). Jesse's suggestion that lads 'would not have gone into depth' about their sexual experiences if a previous partner was there, demonstrates the effect of female influence as 'civilising' (Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2001:116). What is interesting here is that Jesse particularly references girls who the boys had already had sex with and how their presence might curb the discussion and lead to embarrassment. A girl who might refute a boy's claims of sexual competence, whether explicitly stated or implied, can be perceived as a threat to a precarious masculinity. Another participant, Reggie, concurs:

> I think nobody wants like lasses saying 'oh, he was rubbish in the sack', do you know what I mean? (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

These examples suggest that while boys may be keen to display their theoretical knowledge about sex, especially to one another, in practice their reputation is dependent on their female partners. It has often been identified that young women lack agency in their heterosexual relationships (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Holland et al., 1999), and that boys are positioned as active initiators – the above can be seen as a potential example of female authority.

While this is an example of the moderating effect of mixed classes on boys, some of the younger women reported feeling uncomfortable in mixed groups and suggested that this impacted on their learning:

> No, because one girl did and all the boys were just taking the mickey out of her so no-one else wanted to. (Penny, 16, w/c, on whether you could ask questions)

> So you couldn't say some stuff and some questions that you wanted to ask, you couldn't. You didn't feel comfortable. (Jade, 16, w/c, on mixed classes)

However, it was not just boys who had the potential to disrupt classes as Kimberly, who attended a single sex faith school, explains:

> There was always this one group of kids who would just take the…like the piss basically. So they just sat at the back and asked ridiculous questions that you obviously knew that everybody knew, but they'd get the nurse to demonstrate or explain further just to make it funny. (Kimberly, 19, aw/c)

While young people were aware that single-sex teaching might help them avoid embarrassment, it also left gaps in their knowledge when it came to the opposite sex:

> The actual weird sensation of just being separated because it was a subject where either girls couldn't know about boys or whatever and boys couldn't know about girls, I just felt….I never really understood why. (Alan, 19, m/c)

In the following exchange from a joint interview, two young women who attended a single-sex faith school together, debate the implications of single or mixed sex SRE:

> Kimberly - Like I know there are schools that like don't separate the girls and the boys for their sex education which I think would be a good way to do it because at least then you know both sides.
>
> Amy – But then at the same time it makes asking questions difficult.
>
> Kimberly – Yeah, but like boys know nothing about a girl's sex education and girls know minimal about a boy's education which I think…like integrating the groups…like, not for every session, obviously there is stuff that girls need to know more than boys ……there is that overlap where I would say there needs to be that integrated group.

Both assume that the presence of boys would inhibit their ability to ask questions but recognise that it would be helpful to combine both styles in order to access a full range of knowledge. Interestingly, while single-sex teaching might promote the idea that pupils should not have or did not need information pertaining to the opposite sex, there was also evidence that girls were denied certain information about their own bodies, as the following quotes from Olivia demonstrate:

> There was very little diagrams of what your own body actually looked like and things like that, which I would have liked.

And furthermore:

> But I asked another question that was like…we did a bit on what happens when men become aroused, the penis and stuff but we didn't do anything on women so I asked 'like what happens to women? Is there a thing?' and she was like 'erm….I'm not going to answer that now" which did leave a large gap in my knowledge for quite a while (Olivia, 20, m/c)

The withholding of such information has important consequences for young women, who are often on the receiving end of sex-negative discourses that deny female sexual pleasure and maintain that the 'right' place to have sex is within a stable relationship. I will return to the impact of sex-negative teaching later in this chapter.

Teaching Relationships

The young people interviewed for the research frequently pinpointed information and discussion on relationships and emotions as something which they considered missing from their SRE classes at school. Ironically, the title of such classes – sex and *relationship* education – implies a move away from a traditional focus on reproduction and suggests that relationship education is as important as the mechanics of sex. Current government guidance specifically highlights the importance of discussing relationships in school, as Long describes:

> "Young people, when asked about their experiences of sex education at school, often complain about the focus on the physical aspects of reproduction and the lack of any meaningful discussion about feelings, relationships and values. Sex and relationship education set within the framework for PSHE across the four key stages will significantly redress that balance. It will help young people to respect themselves and others, and understand difference. Within the context of talking about relationships, children should be taught about the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and for bringing up children. The Government recognises that there are strong and mutually supportive relationships outside marriage. Therefore, children should learn the significance of marriage and stable relationships as key building blocks of community and society" (2016:5)

While this quote illustrates the government preoccupation with defining relationships in the context of marriage and family - which implicitly disregards any other kind of relationship as desirable – it does foreground relationships as a crucial area of education and a topic on which young people have consistently

requested additional guidance . The guidance utilises adjectives such as 'stable' without offering any definition and thus assuming that everyone shares an understanding of what a stable relationship is and, crucially, why this is important for family life. Equally, we are asked to collude with the idea that 'family life' is desirable, positive and universally understood. It would appear that the government is unwilling to take into consideration the fact that lone parent families account for a quarter of UK households (ONS, 2014), meaning that for many young people, this focus on marriage and/or 'stable' relationships has little or no relevance to their own experience.

When asked about their relationship education at school, some participants were able to identify the assumptions on which the lessons were based and were critical of the narrow definitions employed:

> I think when it was relationships, everyone was like…it's obvious that it's going to be about sex relationships, boys and girls and all that kind of stuff. But relationships themselves, it was more family orientated (Bradley, 17, m/c)

> And in schools as well it is that, a man and a woman married when they're in their late twenties or thirties, have a child and live in a house. It's that sort of… very normative, this is what happens, this will happen. It never breaks out of those boundaries really (Alan, 19, m/c)

> It was assumed it was boyfriend and girlfriend, a couple of months at least, and that it was just like exclusive to them, there was no like….there was no talk of other options and it seemed quite rigid in the definition (Ida, 18, m/c)

As illustrated above, relationships were described solely in terms of heterosexuality and monogamy with little exploration of alternative sexualities. It would appear that young people are taught little or nothing at all about lesbian, gay or bisexual relationships which means that those young people who do not identify as heterosexual or who are questioning their sexuality are effectively marginalised or excluded from classes. Alan, (19, m/c) who identifies as a gay male, raises heteronormativity in his interview:

> We haven't talked about it but like sexuality is a pretty important thing because as a gay male or whatever, I was never understood.

He continues:

> I might not have known my sexuality in Year 6 but looking back now, it is like, oh shit, I was never told the things I need to know, I was just told about somebody else's like…way of life.

> Yeah, it didn't relate to me so I couldn't necessarily understand it or I wasn't being told the information that I needed.

Alan's assertion that he was 'never understood' highlights an important failing of sex and relationship education in schools – namely that while it is important that young people understand the syllabus, it is equally important that they can feel *themselves to be understood* as individuals by both their peers and by the institution of the school. The idea that school sex education can offer recognition and legitimisation of young people's sexual identity should not be the privilege of only those who identify as heterosexual but should be something that is available to all. Furthermore, it seems essential that, in order to combat homophobia, young people have the opportunity to discuss sexual orientation in a way that normalises the diversity of desire, rather than focusing on heterosexuality and therefore designating any alternative sexualities as Other. Dyer highlights the "remorseless construction of heterosexuality as natural" (1993:133) and this can be said to have permeated SRE. Heterosexuality is, therefore, assumed and unquestioned (Slovin. 2016) while lesbian, gay or bisexual identities are problematized or ignored. Even when SRE programmes and educators adopt an explicitly inclusive approach, the position of LGB identities as necessitating specialised sessions can serve to highlight their status as 'problematic' (Slovin, 2016; Abbott, Ellis & Abbott, 2015). While this can alienate young people who fit into these categories, it is also an omission that affects everyone. As Ida explains:

> I think it is missing for everyone because if you start teaching sex education from a straight perspective then everything is shaped by that, so that when people say relationship most people automatically assume it's a boy and a girl (Ida, 18, m/c)

The idea that school-based sex and relationship education ushers young people into "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1993) is not new, and it has been discussed at great length in academia (some examples include Tolman, 2006; Tolman et al., 2003; Lenskyj, 1990). However, the cultural landscape has changed greatly since the term was first coined. The abolition of Section 28 should mean that there is open dialogue in schools around LGBT issues and there is greater awareness of and strategies to combat problems such as

homophobic bullying in schools. It would appear, however, that this has not 'trickled down' into practice. Moreover, as discussed above, the government is preoccupied with teaching sex in the context of marriage yet formal same-sex partnerships, which have been legal since the Civil Partnership Act of 2004, are not acknowledged (Sauntson & Sundaram, 2016). Therefore, if the promotion of marriage is acceptable in schools, it should follow that same sex marriage should be afforded the same status.

It would also appear that when relationships were discussed, the assumption was that those in question were romantic in nature. As Bradley highlights, SRE classes were '*obviously*' only concerned with sexual relationships. But this obviousness is problematic for a number of reasons. The emphasis on sexual relations consigns other kinds of relationship to a lower placing in a hierarchy – non-sexual relationships being not worthy of education or discussion and therefore, less important. The rationale behind this lack of attention to platonic relationships could be that sex is constructed as inherently dangerous for adolescents and this implied danger necessitates education in order to prevent negative consequences, such as unwanted pregnancy and STI transmission. However, taking into account that the majority of young people in Britain have sex for the first time aged 16 or over (Mercer et al., 2013), the important relationships in many young people's lives, particularly while they are at school, are not usually sexual.

Secondly, this focus takes for granted the inevitability of sex in a romantic relationship, the implication being that a relationship is somehow incomplete without sex. The current government guidance explicitly states that the "key task for schools is, through appropriate information and effective advice on contraception and on *delaying sexual activity*, to reduce the incidence of unwanted pregnancies" (Long, 2016: 7, *italics added*). Participants in this study did not mention any discussion of platonic relationships, including discussions of friendship and family relationships within a wider framework of SRE. An understanding of the components of healthy relationships, such as respect, trust, equality and mutual support was evident in the majority of participants' interviews:

> Trust. That's the main thing. (Tom, 17, w/c)

> Don't let your other half walk all over you, girls and boys. (Jesse, 18, w/c)

> Probably mutual respect and the ability to talk about things (Valerie, 21, m/c)

However, few participants acknowledged that this knowledge was acquired from SRE classes:

> We never really….we never really got told like a relationship can be good for you, and how to like maintain and things like that. We never really got those types of talks ever. (Molly, 17, aw/c)

Therefore, if SRE is to be concerned with discouraging young people from having sex, it seems a counterintuitive move to only discuss sexual relationships, effectively perpetuating an ideal of "compulsory sexuality" with little alternative. Viewed in these terms, school-based SRE can be said to contribute to and participate in the sexualisation of young people.

Sex and relationship education does not take place in a vacuum – young people are continually influenced by outside culture and media, a point which will be expanded and discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters. However, I believe that the heart of the matter is that media aimed at a teenaged audience gains popularity because it can be related to young people's current circumstances and experiences, something vitally missing from SRE. As previously noted, feeling that the subject matter is irrelevant can be a key factor in pupil disengagement. As Chloe (20, w/c) describes:

> We were still quite young and for my group of friends and me especially it was all a bit like…'oh this isn't relevant' at the time. And I guess it was kind of embarrassing. It was all….we wouldn't have anything to go off…you know, we couldn't have shared our experiences. I don't know if you would in that situation but it was all still something we hadn't done and we hadn't had the experience in.

There is a delicate balancing act to be negotiated in order to ensure SRE classes are as inclusive as possible and by extension, effective. Sexually inactive young people such as Chloe and her friends feel that by lacking personal experience they are unable to participate in discussions about sex and relationships. Being asked to imagine future scenarios rather than current circumstances can make SRE classes embarrassing. Conversely, as noted previously in this chapter,

sexually experienced teens such as Harry, feel that SRE has nothing to teach them as their experience overrides any theoretical perspectives put forward in class. Feeling that they already 'know it all' (Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000) can make classes seem irrelevant and can increase their likelihood of disrupting the lesson.

There is a fundamental problem with attempts to incorporate teenagers' lived experiences into a sex and relationship education syllabus that should not be ignored. The point is neatly summarised by participant Reggie (20, aw/c):

> I mean it is a hard one because how do you determine when a child is ready to learn about sex because every child is different? Some kids mature well before other kids do.

However, the differing development rates of young people should not automatically prevent a syllabus of inclusive relationship education in schools. Discussion of friendships, for example, would allow all young people to relate their own experiences, feel included and able to contribute to the discussion. Focusing on friendship, allows those young people to be included in discussions and teach them skills which they could transfer to their sexual relationships without discounting the experience they already have in forming relationships, however fleeting.

It has also been widely noted in the literature, and highlighted earlier in this thesis, that the sex education taught in schools focuses mostly on penetrative sex as 'real' sex, and there is little or no information about other sexual practices (Bay-Cheng, 2003). Therefore the implicit message is thus; the only relationships that matter are sexual relationships and the only sex that matters is heterosexual penetrative sex. The stated aim of schools and governments is to encourage young people to avoid "premature sexuality" (Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2000:127) and delay having penetrative sex (Long, 2016), yet the importance of sexual relationships is reinforced implicitly and without critique. Promotion of the importance of friendships, discussion of a broader spectrum of relationships and the many forms that a relationship may take, and consideration of the multitude of expressions of sexuality and sexual desire that one might experience are currently missing from SRE, and these missing elements are noticed by young people.

Let's Talk about Sex (and relationships)

As previously noted, young people observed a lack of discussion and debate within SRE. While relationship education was generally limited or entirely missing from the education young people reported receiving, the thoughtful ways in which they suggested it could be improved, usually centred around more discussion and a wider range of topics covered. Some participants felt that their relationship education lacked some fundamental practical advice which would have been beneficial:

> There needs to be more discussion of exactly what a relationship should mean. So not just that you have committed to someone on an emotional level, what you need to look for in a person and what kind of things you should be perfectly reasonable to expect from a relationship. I mean there was a discussion about abusive relationships but no discussion of what a good relationship would be. (Ida, 18, m/c)

Another participant discussed how intimacy had been ignored in her school and how the sex-negative teaching she had received led her to feel guilty about sexual experimentation:

> I don't think you can teach it but…it's good to have somebody there to talk about it cos obviously you do when you're younger you kind of have those feelings of 'I shouldn't be doing it...I should like…this is wrong' sort of thing. I think it would have been good to have somebody to be there to say 'no it's not, it's fine'. Like, I think that would have been good for some people but like….it would benefit some more than others. Like maybe not an actual class, just somebody that would be there to talk. (Amy, 20, aw/c)

This topic was returned to later in the interview, during a discussion on what young people need to know about sex and relationships:

> Helen - Do you think that is important to say to people, that it is fine if you want to have sex?
>
> Amy – It's fine, yeah. Because people grow up and they do have it and they feel really, really guilty afterwards thinking "that was wrong, that was wrong, I shouldn't have done that" and then they can't enjoy it and they regret it and I think that the worst thing that can happen is that you regret it. That is the worst outcome.

Similarly, a number of girls in this study describe a tone of sex negativity throughout the SRE provision in their schools:

> I'd say it was more negative than neutral, in that it was mainly don't do this because this will happen, don't act in this way, wait as long as you can, wait until you are in this loving relationship. (Ida, 18, m/c)

> It totally puts it down as like a bad thing and everything to do with that context is a horrible bad thing that you should never do. (Claire, 17, aw/c)

Sex negative teaching – where sex is taught in negative terms, as dangerous, harmful or implicitly wrong - particularly for girls, perpetuates a cultural system whereby appropriate behaviour is demarcated and any girl that transcends those boundaries risks being labelled. It creates a narrow set of conditions in which sexual activity is acceptable, such as within a loving relationship, and leaves no space for the pursuit or even the acknowledgment of female sexual pleasure. As discussed earlier, Olivia's question about female sexual arousal was brushed off, implying that this information is inappropriate or irrelevant to the class and that girls do not need to understand how their bodies work because sex is not something that they should be interested in. These same structures support Amy's feelings of guilt and shame about having had sex and the off-putting tone mentioned by other participants. Pleasure and specifically female sexual pleasure, did not form the basis of any SRE teaching reported by the participants:

> No. no, not about good things. It was just that sex was really just to make babies and that was it. It wasn't that people have sex for fun or because they like it so you didn't really learn any of that I don't think. (Stacey, 20, m/c)

> There was never any positive side to it. (Kimberly, 19, aw/c)

> No….. (Laughing) a lesson on an orgasm! Imagine! (Jenny, 19, m/c)

It could be argued that a lack of attention to female sexual pleasure in SRE is based on assumptions in wider society about feminine propriety and the consequences faced by women who are seen to enjoy sex. As Gong and Hoffman assert:

> "Implicit in the notion of a slut is disapproval of female sexual desire and expression, a privileging of sexual abstinence or "purity" prior

> to marriage and a judgement that women who do engage in sexual activity or are perceived to be interested in such activity are bad or dirty." (2012: 580).

These negative attitudes towards female sexuality acknowledged by Gong and Hoffman result in a process widely known as "slut-shaming" (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Armstrong et al., 2014), in which the (improperly) sexually expressive woman is denigrated in society. By extension, slut-shaming is then productive of further sex-negativity, as women seek to avoid behaviour which may result in a damaging and derogatory label. Thus, a vicious cycle is created. Slut-shaming was a major topic for the young women I spoke to, and this phenomenon will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

Two participants considered the best and most useful element of their SRE was a workshop on their 'ideal man' which encouraged them to think about the qualities they would look for in a partner and reasons why they might reject a potential partner. While this is obviously heteronormative, the exercise of discussing partner traits and considering what might be most important for each individual proved memorable and something which the girls continued to draw on as adults. Therefore, lessons which focus on expectations, aspirations and boundary maintenance in relationships can have a long lasting effect on young people. Equally, a lack of discussion around the positive or pleasurable aspects of sexual relationships can have negative consequences when young people start to engage in relationships or sexual activity, such as feelings of shame or that "I shouldn't be doing it" described by Amy above.

A further gap was recognised by two male participants. SRE can often position young women as the sexual gatekeepers (Tolman, Davis & Bowman, 2016; Schick, Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2008), and instruct them to 'just say no', the problematic assumption being that all girls are free and able to say no (Coy et al, 2016; McAvoy, 2013; Rasmussen, 2012). However, little attention or advice is given to young men who may be under pressure to behave in ways consistent with dominant masculinity (Allen, 2012). These young men acknowledged the inequality of not also educating young men on how to resist both pressure and pressurising:

> Also maybe teaching like lads to know when a girl is ready for sex because a lot of older boys probably do put pressure on their girlfriends to have sex and like saying, first of all, that's not really right and you need to know when she is ready, if you know what I mean. I think that is a big thing. I mean cos to a lot of lads it's just seen as like, oh it's a status symbol if you slept with someone, it was a big thing back then. (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

> Well, the pressure to have sex it means that we forget about other things, like respecting each gender or respecting people's….respecting each other. We are just concentrating on this thing of like having more sex and you miss out major issues that are forgotten in the process. (Alan, 19, m/c)

A more in depth discussion on the importance of sexual reputation for both boys and girls and the double standards present in young people's sexual cultures will follow in subsequent chapters.

Sex Education as a Human Right

The Department of Health in the UK use a holistic definition of sexual health to inform their strategies aimed at HIV prevention. They make explicit the link between sexual health and "fundamental human rights to privacy, a family life and living free from discrimination" (2001: 5). Furthermore, it is asserted that "essential elements of good sexual health are equitable relationships and sexual fulfilment" (*ibid).* For the purposes of analysis, I will interpret 'sexual fulfilment' as being synonymous with pleasurable sexual experiences. The relationship between sexual health, pleasure and human rights is an interesting one to explore, particularly in reference to adolescent sexuality and how these definitions might influence sexuality education in schools.

The young people who were interviewed for this thesis presented little evidence that these broad, holistic definitions were cascading into practice. Educators' consideration for pupils' emotional, mental or social well-being was unsupported by the majority of the participants, as they reported little class time spent on issues related to sex such as relationships, intimacy, the emotional impact of sexuality or consent. When asked what might have been important or useful to learn in school SRE, these elements were brought up repeatedly by participants:

> What I would have liked to….I think, more about the good things that can come from it, you know. It can make you a happier

> person…like you know…and maybe talk more about relationships and more down that route. (Bradley, 17, m/c)

> I don't think there was any discussion of like the emotional consequences say if someone was to sleep around and the effect that that might have on you. (Ida, 18, m/c)

These omissions show that young people's needs are often discounted by policy makers and educators, a conclusion reached by a number of research projects (Hirst, 2008; Fields, 2008; OFSTED, 2002). One explanation as to why young people are not consulted on what they would like to learn is the prevalent discourse of teenagers with a dangerous, all-consuming sexuality which needs to be regulated by adult supervision (Fields, 2008; Bay-Cheng, 2003). This imposition of adult values on young people echoes the sexualisation discourse as espoused by Papadopoulos (2010), yet this remains unchallenged in the literature. Sex is seen to be an adult activity which marks the border between childhood and maturity, a standpoint substantiated by reference to *premature* or early sexual activity in guidance – what is unclear is what constitutes premature and who makes this decision (DfEE, 2000). This is further evidenced by its inclusion in a syllabus which also aims to educate and regulate information about alcohol, smoking and drugs – other potentially dangerous and, from a legal standpoint, adult-only activities.

A discourse of the need for protection from sexuality and its concomitant dangers for young people appears prevalent in practice. Yet what begins as a desire to protect often ends in a denial of young people's right to information (Attwood & Smith, 2011). Fields refers to this as "adultism" - the notion that adults have superior knowledge as to the material young people need in order to maintain their sexual health (2008:19). Yet, this defies the Department of Health's assertion that "living free from discrimination" is a key element of sexual health – for what is this suppression of information rooted in if not discrimination on the basis of age? How can there be an expectation that young people will maintain their sexual health in a holistic sense if they do not have all the information necessary in order to do so? Indeed, research by Measor, Tiffin and Miller (2000) found that their young participants felt they were entitled to information and

advocated for increased openness of communication in order to achieve greater success at meeting health outcomes.

As Fields continues, "In the name of protection, adultist thinking yields rules and policies that deny young people both privacy and the right to consent to sexual activity" (2008:19). Again, privacy is a fundamental human right, as asserted by the Department of Health (2001), yet this is right is not extended to young people. This is further substantiated by the enduring clause that allows parents to withdraw their children from SRE classes which are not part of the science curriculum. Parents are seen as better able to make judgements about what information their children should have access to, without taking into account the wishes of the pupil. Again, the judgement of young people is devalued and they are subject to age discrimination. The right to privacy is particularly important for young people, many of whom expressed an inability or unwillingness to discuss sex and relationships with family members. Reasons cited for this reticence included embarrassment, fear of reprisals and not wanting to cause worry. Therefore being able to be educated and/or inform themselves about sex and relationships was indelibly tied up with access to knowledge, privacy and the ability to make decisions for themselves.

Furthermore, the protection discourse is also flawed in that it seeks to protect young people only from the tangible and quantifiable consequences of sexuality. These would include unwanted pregnancy and infection transmission but by silencing discussion around consent, equality or intimacy, the potential for emotional harm is ignored. This is not to advocate for a scaremongering approach to sexuality, merely that discussion as to what constitutes a healthy relationship, negotiation with a partner, the importance of respect, consent and equal partnerships must be included if we are to accept a holistic definition of sexual health. The participants in this research consistently recognised this need and when asked what safe sex meant they offered broad definitions:

> Contraception and stuff. And making sure that you want to do it. That you're not forced into it or pressured into it. (Jade, 16, w/c)

> I think it has a couple of meanings. Obviously like safe with contraception but then I think safe as in you are with someone you

> know you want to be with, not as if you're getting forced to do anything. (Penny, 16, w/c)

> …and there was one leader that was like "don't bother with any of this. Just teach them about STDs". And I was like "actually consent is pretty important." I'd say it was more important than STDs. Like, you are probably going to get over Chlamydia faster than you would something like that. (Olivia, 20, m/c, talking about being involved in peer SRE)

Furthermore, the World Health Organisation agrees that definitions of sexual health should be broad, not limited to medical terms and inclusive of human rights. It offers the following definition of sexual health:

> "Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free from coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled." (WHO, 2006; also cited in Hirst, 2008:401)

This holistic definition, utilising a broad understanding of 'safer sex' to include issues of consent and equality and recognising the importance of a sex positive approach to sexuality, provides the opportunity for a crucial step forward in the provision of sexual health education and services that work.

Kendall (2013), in her comparison of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and abstinence only until marriage education (AOUME), notes that these broader sexual health goals are often missing from some programmes. However AOUME is "concerned with spiritual, psychological, emotional, social and economic outcomes" of sexuality and sexual behaviour making it, ironically, more comprehensive in these areas than other, more liberal programmes (2013:130). As Fields states, abstinence education, "has as its exclusive purpose teaching the social, psychological and health gains to be realised from abstaining from sexual activity" (2008:9). The rationale behind this holistic approach may be questionable, focusing as it does on the perceived negative consequences of sex before marriage and promoting the flawed idea that marital status is indicative of sexual safety (Fields, 2008). Yet by offering discussion of outcomes unrelated to

biology, AOUME encompasses a broader definition of sexual health and highlights the importance of outcomes which are often ignored by other methods.

While the success of AOUME methods in convincing young people to refrain from engaging in sexual activity is hotly debated in academia and the media, the approach can be used to inform techniques of SRE. If we utilised this holistic approach to teach sex and relationships from a sex positive perspective – teaching the social, psychological, health and spiritual gains to be had from having pleasurable sexual experiences between consenting partners – we could offer young people the information with which to protect themselves while simultaneously acknowledging their right to make decisions for themselves. As one participant neatly summarises:

> I have this feeling that safe sex was just literally, you know, put a condom on and that's…safe you know? Because, yeah it protects you against STDs…well, there's certain…it kind of protects you against STDs and pregnancy but it doesn't protect you against heartbreak and depression and how you might feel about yourself, how you might make that other person feel and that's a big factor as well. (Bradley, 17, m/c)

Conclusions

In summary, SRE is often thought to be an important tactic in order to achieve particular social and health outcomes. However, when sex is presented within a heteronormative and reproductive framework, a valuable opportunity is lost. The young people represented here demonstrate their ability to evaluate and criticise SRE, citing the lack of diversity, the lack of open discussion and the lack of emotional support available when sex is presented within those biological structures. A focus on romantic relationships (rather than platonic), reinforces the notion that the only relationships that matter are sexual ones, while simultaneously, SRE exhorts young people to refrain from sexual activity. An official refusal to acknowledge young people as sexual subjects offers little to those young people for whom having sex 'here and there' is already the norm. Finally, the "missing discourse of desire" (Fine, 1988) continues to promote a sex negative model for young women which fuels and is fuelled by

the practice of 'slut-shaming'. While SRE continues to treat young people as sexually ignorant, they are deemed to be sexualised by wider society. In the next chapter, I begin to unpack young people's sexual cultures in this contemporary landscape.

Chapter 6: Doing it Once a Week: The Recuperation of Working Class Masculinity

This chapter aims to examine young people's sexual cultures with particular reference to the effects of the perceived sexualisation of society discussed earlier. Here, I explore young people's shared understandings of what it means to be a young sexual subject in contemporary Britain. Starting from the assertion that not all young people are invited to equally participate in particular cultures, I will investigate the nuances in beliefs which are underwritten by class and gender and will make the case for distinct cultures of sexuality for young people of different classes. The significance of virginity to modern masculinities and the role of homophobia in young people's sexual cultures will be explored in this chapter. The different functions of relationships for young people will also be discussed using the extensive definition of culture propagated by Williams (1961: 57 cited by Attwood & Smith, 2011 and also utilised by Carmody, 2013) – "a particular way of life that expresses certain meanings and values". A sexual culture, therefore, will be defined here as 'a way of describing, representing and 'doing' sexuality to conform to particular norms and values'.

Like a Virgin?

Much has been written about the significance of virginity and loss of virginity in recent years. The steady decline in the age of first sexual initiation (Lohman & Billings, 2008; Keys, Rosenthal & Pitts, 2006; Rosenthal, Smith & De Visser, 1999), especially for women (Jackson & Cram, 2003) has garnered much attention in the West and is increasingly used as evidence for the sexualisation of society (Bailey, 2011; Papadopoulos, 2010; Walter, 2010; Levy, 2005) and a decline in sexual morality (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Chambers, Tincknell & Van Loon, 2004). Sexualisation and the increased visibility of sex in popular culture are often blamed for inciting young people to participate in premature sexual activity. Indeed, delaying first sexual intercourse is an explicit aim of the UK government's sex and relationship education guidance (DfEE, 2000; also Long, 2016; Epstein, O'Flynn & Telford, 2000) and early sexual initiation is thought to place young

people at higher risk of unplanned pregnancy and infection transmission (Lohman & Billings, 2008; O'Donnell, O'Donnell & Stueve, 2001; Wellings et al., 2001). Other outcomes associated with early first sex include non-use of contraception (Finer & Philbin, 2013; Wellings et al., 2001), increased likelihood of experiencing violence (Kaplan et al., 2013) and a higher number of sexual partners (Lohman & Billings, 2008), although the latter is only a negative outcome according to a particularly sex-negative rationale that views promiscuous sex as deviant. However, the focus on delaying first sex works in direct opposition to the culture many young participants are part of, one which maintains virginity as a potential source of mockery, exclusion and accusations of homosexuality, particularly for young men (Bay-Cheng, 2015).

Rosenthal and colleagues (1999: 319) explain that the "desire to achieve the transition to adulthood at an earlier age than their peers constitutes a powerful incentive for young people to become sexually active". As heterosexual sexual activity marks a transition to adulthood (Thomson, 2004) it becomes a way to boost social standing among boys. The shame of being a virgin was a theme that was brought up regularly in interviews, by both young men and young women. This shared understanding of the shame of virginity for boys remained unchallenged in sex and relationships education at school and while many of the participants recognised the irrational nature of this kind of thinking, they also accepted it as the status quo. None of the participants reported receiving any information about *how* to resist pressure or had any discussion on the gendered dynamics of the pressure to become sexually active. As the following quotes demonstrate, young men were acutely aware of the societal pressure to become sexually active:

> Your virginity becomes, like for a lad, you want to get rid of asap really. (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

> You know if…everyone else has done it and I haven't done it, there is no difference between us or anything like that, you know I'm going to feel isolated to them, kind of thing. (Bradley, 17, m/c)

> The most pressure (is) that people don't want to be a virgin for too long…they worry that if they are a virgin for too long people will judge them. (Bart, 19, aw/c)

Bradley's implication that having sex can stop you feeling excluded while simultaneously acknowledging that there is no real difference between someone who has had sex and someone who has not, neatly highlights the contradictory nature of the symbolism of virginity. The act of having sex is seen as symbolic, a sign of the passing from childhood into adulthood (Jackson and Cram, 2003), rather than as an embodied, physical act. Furthermore, another interviewee, Tom, concludes that bullying based on virginity caused someone to go "down a bad path" demonstrating a recognition of the difficulties in negotiating pressure and the consequences of not conforming to these norms.

The following quotes, ostensibly in response to questions on the pressure to have sex, shed light on young people's privileging of experience and the symbolic change once virginity is lost:

> Well, I didn't get pressured into it, I just did it cos I wanted to do it. People did get pressurised into it. You know like the people who were like quiet and weak, and we didn't talk to. When we heard about like, when we were talking….when we talked about it, they'd try and input into it and like, we just didn't listen to them. And next day he came in with like a proper stunning bird and all of a sudden he just, everybody started talking sweet to him just cos he had a girlfriend type of thing. (Harry, 23, w/c)

> I remember, before I'd had sex for the first time, wanting to get it out of the way. And then feeling more secure in myself afterwards, even though the experience wasn't particularly positive, I was still happy that I wasn't still technically a virgin anymore, so nobody could tease me about that. I mean I've got friends that are in their twenties that are still…who still haven't had sex and I think they are a bit ashamed of that. I don't really think that that is necessary. (Valerie, 21, m/c)

While young people may have gained theoretical sexual knowledge from a number of sources, they are not seen to be truly knowledgeable until they have lost their virginity and have gained personal experience. As Paula describes, regarding whether she could talk to her older sister about sex:

> Not really cos she's a virgin so she doesn't know. (Paula, 16, w/c)

Harry's dismissal of a peer who was inexperienced and therefore judged unable to contribute to the conversation about sex links to Jesse's feelings of inadequacy and exclusion that hastened the loss of his own virginity:

> I mean them had all done it before and I hadn't so it was a bit embarrassing at the time obviously cos I hadn't and all them had so they were all talking and I was just not involved so obviously that pushed me towards doing it quicker than I wanted to, not wanted to but quicker than I should of really. (Jesse, 18, w/c)

The privileging of experience means that as young men and women strive to present themselves as sexually knowledgeable, there is an emphasis placed on losing virginity as a demonstration of expertise. Even for Valerie, who presented as a confident, open minded young woman who was highly invested in her education, there was a desire to "get it out of the way" and a feeling of satisfaction afterwards, even though "the experience wasn't particularly positive".

Jesse and Harry highlight that young men are allowed to gain full access to heterosexual masculine cultures only once they have practical experience and have proved themselves to be appropriately masculine. Losing one's virginity is constructed in most Western cultures for boys as "key act by which they become a man" (Holland, Ramazanoglu & Thomson, 1996:145). There is no similar exhortation on girls to prove their femininity via intercourse as, in the West, transition into womanhood is marked by the onset of menstruation (*ibid*), although that is not to say that there is not pressure to become sexually active for young women.

It is interesting to highlight that Harry describes others who might have felt pressured to lose their virginity as those who were "quiet and weak" – characteristics that are in opposition to the strong and assertive "real man" ideals of working class masculinity. It is also significant that Harry's first concern is to distance himself from those "quiet and weak" young men who felt pressurised, "Well, I didn't get pressured into it, I just did it cos I wanted to do it". Harry's status as an acceptably masculine subject depends on his being unsusceptible to pressure and making his own choices.

While Bradley (17, m/c) recognised the potential feelings of exclusion or isolation caused by not having had sex, he did not subscribe to this uncritically and had some awareness that societal pressures were constructed. Similarly, a study by Holland and colleagues found that some young men were less likely to conflate loss of virginity with becoming a man although the quotes used in their study are from young men designated middle class (Holland, Ramazanoglu & Thomson, 1996). Harry and Jesse, both working class young men, appeared to believe that there was a real difference between those who had had sex and those that had not. For both, there was much invested in the loss of virginity such as acceptance into the group and the ability to participate in conversations about sex with authority, to name but two. As Tanenbaum asserts, to be or be perceived as ignorant of sexual matters represents "the kiss of social death" (2015:18).

The Importance of Not Being Gay

Young people participating in the study all seemed to share an understanding of 'losing your virginity' as penetrative penis-in-vagina sex between a man and a woman. Comparatively, for Holland, Ramazanoglu and Thomson (1996:46), this is what their participants constituted as "proper sex" (see also Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005). In my own interviews, other sexual practices were rarely mentioned, nor the ways in which knowledge might be gained or demonstrated in ways other than by participating in penetrative heterosexual sex. Those participants who exhibited a broader understanding of sex tended to be those who claimed queer identities for themselves, either explicitly or implicitly including one out gay male and two women who disclosed sexual experiences with both male and female partners. When homosexuality was mentioned in the context of the loss of virginity, it was to point out that having heterosexual intercourse offered incontrovertible 'proof' that a man was not gay. Conversely, girls were rarely mentioned in the context of being gay or having to reject lesbianism or bisexuality as part of a 'properly' feminine identity. This male desire to refute homosexuality could also explain Harry and Jesse's investment in the loss of their virginity. As Jesse states:

> If you're a lad and you're 14 and you haven't shagged someone, you're gay. That's what people think. (18, w/c)

The use of loss of virginity as a way to counter accusations of homosexuality for boys was apparent across gender and class boundaries, suggesting a somewhat universalised cultural understanding. As Valerie describes:

> Helen - So being a virgin was that something that might have caused people to tease you when you were younger?
>
> Valerie - Yeah.
>
> Helen - And is that the same for boys?
>
> Valerie - I think it is probably worse for guys than it is for girls.
>
> Helen - And where do you think that pressure comes from, the pressure of sex and relationships?
>
> Valerie - Erm…I think like with guys, it is the masculinity of…yeah, I've had sex, I'm not gay you know, kind of thing. Or just, the case of, yeah, I am capable of seducing someone. So I guess there is a feeling of your own personal validation as well as social validation but I think that pressure is more social than personal. (Valerie, 21, m/c)

In both these excerpts, being gay is presented as something which can destabilise masculine identity and is to be refuted by young men, as though the default identity for boys was gay until proven otherwise. Having penetrative sex with women is, therefore, seen as an intrinsic part of being a man, as Ida explains:

> Well, for boys it's this whole, are you going to be a man? Are you going to do this? Are you going to live up to this expectation of what it is like to be a male? (Ida, 18, m/c)

Martino (1999:240) notes that "homophobia plays a pivotal role in the formation of heterosexual masculinity" and little seems to have changed in subsequent years (see more recent findings from Pascoe, 2007; Melendez & Tolman, 2006; Chambers, Tincknell & Van Loon, 2004; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman, 2001). For Pascoe (2007:60), what she describes as "fag discourse" represents "a failure of masculinity" much more than as an indication of sexual orientation. She sees 'fag' as a fluid identity that young men can move in and out of depending on the level of their participation in heteronormative masculine behaviours. Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman (2001) also note that boundaries of acceptable manifestations of masculinity are regulated by the positioning of those who stray into 'feminine' behaviour as 'gay'. That is, "Boys must maintain their differences from girls (and

so avoid doing anything that is seen as the kind of thing girls do)" (2001:10). It is important to observe that 'the kinds of things that girls do' is not stable nor absolute, but changeable across time, place, race and class.

Similarly, Nayak and Kehily note that gay labelling was often attached to young men who worked hard at school or, as one teacher describes, "…if they're just a very nice person, if they're gentle and not seen as macho" (1997: 141) echoing the proscription of particular 'feminised' character traits amongst young men. Furthermore, in Redman's study, boys who were not interested in football, who lacked confidence or social skills or who occupied a "subordinate position within a specific friendship group or within the class as a whole" (1996:179) attracted homophobic abuse. I would argue that this point is much more salient for working class boys than for those from the middle classes, where academic achievement and being a 'nice guy' are not judged with such suspicion or contempt.

Equally, boys that may be described as aspirational working class were also able to acknowledge the importance of being 'nice' and did not associate this with homosexuality. Bart (aged 19) and Reggie (aged 20) were both from disadvantaged, single-parent households. Both excelled academically and were attending university, studying STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths). In the following quote, Bart illustrates the difference between his friendship group and 'lads':

> From my friendship group, we were not judgemental but I can imagine from like…what you would call lads, they'd be like "oh go on do that" type thing, so that would be pressure from them. People would like laugh at you if you didn't do it or whatever. (Bart, 19, aw/c)

For Bart, it is important to stipulate that his friendship group were not judgemental nor did they exert pressure on each other, they were, by implication *nice* – not just towards girls but towards each other. He notes that the 'lads' were different, they would laugh at others who were seen to be less experienced, particularly in (hetero)sexual matters. Thus, Bart distinguishes himself from a 'laddish' working class masculinity, which targeted those who were 'quiet and weak' or more interested in schoolwork than the pursuit of sex. He and his friendship group operate somewhat outside conventional masculinity, due to their academic

abilities and having 'other options'. For the young men in the focus group, for whom life presents few alternatives or opportunities for advancement, this 'hard' masculinity proved much more difficult to challenge.

Practising Heterosexuality

For Mac an Ghaill (1994), working class masculinity is characterised by the three Fs – fighting, fucking and football. As the intended nature of this research was a focus on sexuality, no questions were asked directly about other proposed sites of masculine identity production such as violence or football. Interestingly, given that the research was conducted in the North East of England, where football is widely constructed as a way of life, no participants made reference to football or sport in general. Indeed, an aesthetic that presupposed athleticism, such as defined muscles, was denigrated by a number of the male participants. There were also no references to fighting or crime in the narratives of young working class men, although this should not be interpreted as signifying that the participants did not participate in either.

The characteristics valued by the young working-class men in this study could be more accurately conceptualised as the three Bs – booze, birds and banter. Drinking alcohol excessively and 'going down the town' were key socialising activities for the boys, and often facilitated their interactions with girls. A fuller description of this relationship with alcohol is offered in the following chapter. Similarly, the young men valued banter and the ability to be quick witted was a respected trait. This was particularly evident during one focus group, when banter amongst the young men occasionally threatened to overwhelm the conversation. The personalities that dominated the group were those who were the most confident and could make the whole group laugh by poking fun at another member. There was no evidence of any member being offended by becoming the object of fun. It seemed that being able to take banter as well as give it was also important for being one of the lads.

As with alcohol, banter also had its place in attracting potential partners. The following quotes from Harry illustrate the value of banter when talking to girls:

> I walked over and just started talking to them, started laughing and carrying on and they ended up coming back with us like.
>
> I don't need the appearance. I'm not being big headed, like I'm more banter me. More of a banter type. Like I would rather have a frisk with them, me.

There is much potential for future work in developing this line of thought, including young people's perspectives on the importance of banter in flirtatious interactions, however it is beyond the scope of this thesis to do justice to this aspect of young masculinity. For the remainder of this section, I will focus on 'birds' (Harry) and the place of young women as integral in the production of heterosexual masculinity.

From a Foucauldian perspective, sexuality is an important site for identity production, and considered a manifestation of the truth or core self of a person. Sexuality proved to be a significant part of young men's own identity construction in this research, more specifically, heterosexuality and the rejection of homosexuality as an identity. Eric Anderson (2009) notes that societies exhibit varying levels of 'homohysteria', a concept described by McCormack as "the cultural fear of being homosexualised" (2012:44). Thus men must "publicly align their social identities with heterosexuality in order to avoid homosexual suspicion" (Anderson, 2009:8 cited in McCormack, 2012:44).

 In the following section, I argue that the young men I spoke to aligned themselves with heterosexuality primarily by having sex with women, thus they practise their heterosexuality repeatedly to remain inside a 'safe zone' of masculinity. A lack of interest in girls and having sex with girls is presumed to be suggestive of homosexuality, which is further supported by an exchange in a focus group of working class young men:

> Matt (26, father of two, w/c) – I don't worry about it (sex) these days. I don't think about it…not these days, nah. I think as you get older you start not wanting it as much.
>
> (Laughing)
>
> Matt – Honest, I don't know what it is, but I just….I think I've been through that much like…in relationships and that

Sean – Are you gay?

Even though Matt is in a heterosexual relationship and has two children, his lack of interest in sex provokes laughter and questions about his sexuality. While the tone of 'are you gay?' was light-hearted, it did not constitute a serious inquiry and was not intended nor perceived to be bullying, Matt had offered a number of reasons why he was not as interested in sex as he had been in the past, that is getting older, being in a relationship, having young children (the youngest being 12 weeks) and 'going through a lot' such as emotional upheaval and relationship breakdown.

To contextualise, it should be noted that Matt was the oldest member of the focus group and had established his position of authority by asking other members their age and whether or not they had children (Matt was the only father in the group, but there were two other members with children on the way). He took the research seriously and did not engage in the 'banter' amongst the other participants. This gave Matt a position of privilege that made it acceptable to admit he was not as interested in sex as he used to be, despite the joking challenges that this provoked. It could be said that his masculinity had already been established by his status as a father and by being in a relationship. Matt did not appear to feel offended and did not become defensive at the suggestion of homosexuality thus, it could be taken as a joke as his masculinity had been consolidated in other ways. For most of the other, younger members of the group, whose masculinity might be described as more precarious, the notion of not being interested in sex with women was, literally, laughable.

Therefore, the use of humour in this instance serves to reinforce "dominant heterosexual codes of masculinity" (Kehily & Nayak, 1997:70), for the rest of the group, specifically an interest in sex with women and "plays a significant part in consolidating male peer group cultures" (Kehily & Nayak, 1997:69). Much has been written about the use of homophobia to police heterosexual identity expression in peer groups of young men (Pascoe, 2007; Chambers, Tincknell & Van Loon, 2004; Martino, 1999). While the term homophobia seems overly powerful to describe the above exchange, it is significant that the question focuses on sexual orientation when it could have been phrased more benignly –

"are you feeling ok?" or "are you mad?" would have had similar connotations in this instance. This supports the idea that rejection of homosexuality plays a key part in hegemonic masculine identity production. I will return to the idea of homophobia and possible alternative terms later in the chapter.

The following discussion continues on the topic of Matt's lack of interest in sex, between Luke who is in a long-term relationship and Harry who is determinedly single and promiscuous:

> Luke – Might be cos he's busy too much, not thinking about it that much maybe.
>
> Harry – I'd make time. I reckon, you have to. Just to give you peace of mind.
>
> Luke – But you don't need to have it all the time.
>
> Harry – If you'd like to….
>
> Luke – You could do it once a week, you know what I mean?
>
> Harry – Shut up.

For Harry, his masculinity hinges on heterosexual performance (Jackson & Cram, 2003), his identity means sex occupies a central space in his life, regardless of whether he is in a relationship or not. His contention that "I reckon, you have to" (make time for sex) shows an adoption of the male sex drive discourse, which argues that men have a biological need for sex which must be satisfied (Tolman, Anderson & Belmonte, 2015; Gavey, 2005; Hollway, 1984).

Furthermore, his assertion that he would 'make time' for sex, just to give himself "peace of mind" points to the precarious nature of his masculinity, even to himself. It suggests that while it is important to appear sufficiently masculine and heterosexual to outsiders, there are some internalised anxieties which he must allay by frequently having sex with women. Thus, even if he was very busy, this activity would take precedence over other activities that might similarly consolidate masculinity. In this sense, he must continually 'practise' heterosexuality to be sufficiently masculine, constantly and repetitively recuperating his sexual identity (McCormack, 2012; Butler, 1999; Lees, 1993). This is what Pascoe (2007) refers to as 'compulsive heterosexuality', building on the more recognised term 'compulsory heterosexuality' coined by Rich in 1993.

Pascoe claims that "Compulsive heterosexuality is not about desire for sexual pleasure per se, or just about desire to be "one of the guys"" (2007: 86). She goes on to explain that the root of compulsive heterosexuality is to exert power over women, in a culture where male supremacy is eroticized (Weeks, 1998 cited in Pascoe, 2007), yet I see little evidence of gendered power games in this exchange or in other interviews. Harry does not seem motivated by a desire to subordinate women. As Lees writes, "achieving manhood involves a permanent process of struggle and confirmation" (1993:33). It seems that Harry's compulsive heterosexuality speaks more of the habitual and ritual consolidation of masculinity for an individual man whose interchangeable female partners play merely a supporting role.

Comparatively, Luke, from his relatively safe position as a man with a long-term female partner, can assert that "you don't need to have it all the time" and suggests that "once a week" could be enough to maintain acceptable levels of masculinity. Here, Luke is protected from accusations of homosexuality by virtue of having a girlfriend or children, regardless of whether or not he is particularly sexually active. Pascoe (2007) similarly finds that being in a relationship can offer proof of heterosexuality for a young man, thus obviating the need to demonstrate masculinity by having sex – presumably sexual activity is implied if a boy has a girlfriend and this is enough. Harry's dismissal of this suggestion demonstrates the centrality of sex to his own precarious masculine identity, when outside of the 'safe zone' of a relationship.

Sex is for Babies

A similar discussion ensued during a one-to-one interview with Tom when asked if he thought that girls and boys thought differently about sex. Tom described himself as in a serious, long-term relationship and trying to start a family with his partner. He disclosed that the reason they had accessed the service on the day of the interview was so that his girlfriend could have her contraceptive implant removed. He describes the importance of sex in the lives of young men as a symbol of their immaturity:

> Tom - Lads are just…they think with their cocks, don't they, really. It's like….it's all they ever want to do. They don't care about who it

> is or what it is, it's just sex, do you know what I mean? And some people need to realise it's not like….I'll admit when I was younger, I had the same sort of attitude but as I've got older, I've realised, do you know what I mean?…I don't even care about it, me. Sex, do you know what I mean? If I didn't get it, I wouldn't even be arsed. It's not a main priority with me, it doesn't make me that bothered so [.....]
>
> Helen - So do you think it is an immaturity thing?
>
> Tom - Yeah, it is. I think as you get older you start to realise it's not as….well, I think that is important when you are young in school, that's all everyone is talking about, it's like "oh, if you smoke, you're cool". If you have sex with loads of people, obviously, there you go. You get loads of rep (reputation), don't you? It's silly, I think, personally. (17, w/c)

For Tom, feeling less bothered about sex was a result of his maturity, a factor which he thought separated him from other young men. He admits to only being interested in sex as a younger man, "I'll admit when I was younger, I had the same sort of attitude" but is keen to communicate that he no longer feels that way. As with Luke, Tom operates from a 'safe' position, his masculinity is protected by his relationship status. Furthermore, by participating in a one-to-one interview, there is no pressure to present a particular identity in front of other young men or women. It is possible that Tom would have not felt as comfortable disclosing that "If I didn't get it, I wouldn't even be arsed. It's not a main priority with me, it doesn't make me that bothered" in a group situation.

Tom also represents the only participant who was intent on starting a family imminently. While other male participants adopted a blasé approach to prevention and possible unplanned pregnancy, there was consensus that it was not something that they wanted at this time in their lives. For Matt, who was a father of two, and Rob (16) and Olly (18), who were both fathers-to-be, all conceptions had been unplanned accidents.

Tom took pride in telling me about his stable job as a labourer, his intention to get a council flat with his girlfriend, his savings that were originally for a holiday but that he was going to keep to put towards his flat, and the close relationship he had built with his nephew. He also emphasised the talking and "working out" he had done with his girlfriend on the subject of having a baby and he was keen to demonstrate that this had not been a rash decision and had been properly

thought out and planned. Given the opposition that young people often face when making the decision to have a child as teenagers, Tom has much invested in presenting himself as mature, stable and responsible. My status as both an adult and as part of the youth service, may have made him eager to convince me of his maturity, despite my claims to be neutral and independent. By declaring that he had changed and that sex is no longer a major concern for him, he marks himself as having made the transition from 'young and immature' to adult. Thus, he can consolidate his cultivated and coveted identity as a mature adult and can convince others of his readiness to become a father. Young fatherhood remains an underexplored area of research and there is scope to broaden understandings of intentional parenthood amongst young men.

The young men in the focus group also framed relationships in terms of reproduction:

> Helen - Do you guys think being in a relationship is important?
>
> Harry – If you want bairns (children) and that, it is.
>
> Sean – Not at the minute for me.
>
> Rob – It is when you've got a bairn on the way because then the bairn is just not going to get to know their dad.
>
> Sean – Aye, if that's the case.

Here, Sean can be said to support Tom's assertion that promiscuity and a preoccupation with sex are signs of immaturity. He claims that being in a relationship is unimportant currently, yet the implication is that, at some point in the future, he will be ready to settle down, "not at the minute for me". While Tom is keen to describe the ways in which he is grown up, Sean is equally invested in presenting himself as without the trappings of maturity, being unemployed, living in the family home and disinterested in pursuing anything other than casual sex. While his contributions to the discussion were often thoughtful and intelligent, his participation in banter and boasting work to deflect any accusations of maturity. Later in the discussion, Sean (22, w/c) states with conviction, "You've got no chance of me going in a relationship". His choice of words here is particularly noteworthy as his use of 'you' implies that his statement is addressed to me personally, both as the adult researcher who is asking the questions and

presumably as a female[3]. The idea that girls want relationships is so pervasive, that it appears that even I, as an independent and neutral group member, might advocate for stable relationships and want the boys to settle down. The fact that I have asked them specifically to talk about relationships, much to their disappointment, instead of focusing only on sex, would support the idea that as a female, I am concerned with relationships. That I would be invested in, rather than merely interested in, the boys' sexual activities might relate to my position as aligned with the youth service as the boys may be so used to receiving this kind of direction from the youth service that Sean offers a rebuttal of the principle in advance of any persuasion.

The young men reach consensus that it is important to be in a relationship if there are children involved, otherwise the child "is just not going to get to know their dad". This is a particularly significant point for Rob (aged 16), as he had earlier disclosed that he had a baby on the way, the child's mother being a girl that he had a one night stand with at a house party. He had been receiving a lot of support from the youth service around taking responsibility, practical advice and telling his mother, something he intended to do later that day and that was a source of acute anxiety.

The other boys in the group offered little emotional support to Rob throughout the focus group, despite his age and obvious fear, his predicament was a source of humour to the young men in the group who did not have children:

> Rob – How do you think I feel? I'm telling my ma tonight (that he has a baby on the way).
>
> Harry – Well, that's the last time we'll see him.
>
> Sean - You'll be sleeping in the shed tonight.

Later, the conversation moves on to Rob's realisation that his lifestyle will change once his baby is born:

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[3] It should be acknowledged that the established way of communicating plural you in local dialect is 'yous' therefore we can assume that he refers to singular you, given his previous use of colloquial language.

> Rob – It wrecks your life cos you can't go out.
>
> Luke – Once you have a kid, you've got loads of responsibility.
>
> Harry – No X-box or Fifa or nowt.
>
> Sean – Should've stayed on the X-box or Fifa.

Again, the consensus is that once you have a child, your freedom is curtailed and you should take responsibility. However, the example that Harry and Sean focus on, rather than economic, social or practical struggles, is that Rob will not be able to play video games once his baby is born. Thus, they consolidate their own immaturity by distilling the enormity of becoming a parent into jokes about the inconvenience of being unable to play video games.

It is interesting to note that the majority of young men in the group came from single parent households yet they considered relationships important in the context of having children. That is not to say that they would adhere to these principles should a casual partner become pregnant, nor that they actively take responsibility for preventing an unwanted pregnancy by using condoms, but the accepted propriety of being a present father was clear. Similarly, Tom came from a single-parent home, having been raised by his father. He also lived with his sister and her child, whose father 'didn't stick around', a fact that he cited as a reason why being a good father himself was so important. It would be interesting to explore in further research where these entrenched ideas of responsibility and parenthood are formed, in the absence of local norms and in contrast to lived experience.

The Nice Things of a Relationship

The participants offered varying accounts of relationships, and often a profound distrust of the opposite sex was evident, a point that will be taken up later. Most participants were able to acknowledge that it was impossible to generalise 'what boys want' or 'what girls want' and when asked, most answered a variant of 'it depends on the individual'. Despite these assertions, most then did go on to generalise and spoke of fundamental differences between male and female young people. There were a number of similarities in these generalisations that could benefit from closer examination.

The idea that girls were interested in relationships and boys only interested in sex was often repeated. Even in the context of a relationship, it was considered that girls' interest in sex was minimal in comparison to the male partner. Reggie offers this analysis on what can make a relationship negative:

> Erm…to be honest one of the things that used to ruin relationships a lot was constantly having sex. Literally, if you were in a relationship where all you did was like go over to see each other and then have sex, maybe watch something on television and then have sex, like a lot of lasses, as far as what I heard through friends and whatnot, thought well, all there is to this relationship is sex. And that doesn't make them feel particularly good to be honest. Like lasses want all the nice things of a relationship not just like to have sex all the time. (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

This account demonstrates Reggie's understanding that a relationship is about more than just having sex and acknowledges that a one-dimensional relationship can cause problems. His statement, however, that "lasses want all the nice things of a relationship" implies that having sex is less of a priority for girls and the feeling that a relationship is established around sex "doesn't make them feel particularly good". The idea that a girl might enjoy having a lot of sex without the concomitant relationship activities such as romance, going out on dates or emotional intimacy, does not seem to occur to Reggie. Furthermore, he doesn't consider that other relationship activities might be desirable and enjoyable for the male partner, rather those things are something that the boy should do in order to ensure that the girl feels good about herself and about the relationship. He does not say, for example, that having shared interests other than sex might make a stronger partnership or that a relationship might be boring if the partners do not talk to each other, statements which have similar connotations, but crucial differences. What Reggie does is make relationships explicitly gendered. For him, there are things that boys want (sex) and things that girls want (everything else) and the two need to be compromised to keep everyone happy.

Similarly, Reggie's comments on consent (discussed in more detail in the previous chapter) confirm his assumptions about the passive nature of female sexuality:

> Consent is, without a shadow of a doubt, is when they want to have sex with you as much as you want to have sex with them. Not as much, but they want to have sex with you.

Here, he begins from an egalitarian perspective, describing an imaginary encounter in which both parties are equally desirous of sex, desire being both mutual and reciprocal. He then quickly corrects himself, clarifying that the girl wants to have sex, but not as much as the boy. Reggie's correction is crucial to understanding his position within a sexual culture. He is able to acknowledge the presence of female desire, yet is unable to disentangle this from embedded notions of the primacy of the male sex drive. A girl might want to have sex, but her desire could not exceed that of a boy, the implication being that the male sex drive is urgent, constant and ever-present.

Louisa Allen (2007) writes about young men's investment in romance within their heterosexual relationships. She finds that, among her participants in New Zealand, to be romantic was to be perceived as subordinate, due to "its association with the feminine and the constitution of romance as something women have greater investment in" (2007:137). Allen argues that young men are under pressure to conform to "contemporary expectations that they be more caring, thoughtful, and emotionally responsive" (2007:139) than would previously be allowed under hegemonic masculinity and thus employ a romantic discourse to demonstrate this. There are a number of points to be examined further here. Allen makes reference to contemporary expectations but does not state who might have these expectations. Whether it is female partners, other men or society is relevant in dissection of the subject to establish the hierarchy of influences in young men's lives. There is also a classed dimension which is underexplored in her article.

For the young working class men in my focus group, there was little pressure to display sensitivity, thoughtfulness or investment in romantic discourses. Indeed, any hint of these feminine traits was subject to ridicule and emphasis was placed on being deliberately thought*less* in relationships, a topic that shall be explored in more detail later in this chapter. What girls wanted from a relationship was to be avoided at all cost, while the pursuit of boys' interest (sex) was paramount.

The middle class boys who were interviewed did indeed demonstrate a different masculinity, making frequent reference to talking to a partner, the importance of feeling comfortable and being open about their emotions. They placed emphasis on the value of equitable and respectful relationships, even while acknowledging that those relationships might be fleeting:

> You don't always agree on things, but if…especially when it comes to relationships and sex and stuff like that, it's a very emotional thing and how an individual feels so if someone's not feeling that and you maybe are or vice versa you know you've got to have that respect. You've got to respect each other and that's literally the main thing….it's just respect and being understanding. (Bradley, 17, m/c on what makes a relationship 'good')

> Yeah definitely consent and respect are two of the most important things, but also…like, yeah pleasure…….Do they have to be in a long term relationship? I wouldn't say that they have to be. (Alan, 19, m/c on factors that make a sexual experience positive)

However, it is possible that both participants were simply unusually sensitive and that other middle class boys may not share these enlightened ways of thinking nor be as comfortable sharing this aspect of their personality. The rise of problematic lad culture in universities (Jackson, Dempster & Pollard, 2015; Jackson & Sundaram, 2015; Phipps & Young, 2015) offers support for the notion that a number of middle class boys are invested in particularly sexist forms of masculinity. Furthermore, it is possible that both young men recognised the importance of *appearing* to be sensitive, they could acknowledge the expectation of a less 'hard' masculinity and were able to tailor their answers in accordance. While both presented as authentic and genuine, it is worth acknowledging that my identity as an educated female researcher may have coloured their responses.

Interestingly, there were participants who seemed to inhabit a borderland between 'hard' working class masculinity and a more sensitive middle class identity. These could be described as the aspirational working class, as referenced earlier, and their placement in this study goes some way to support the class differentials when discussing romance and masculinity. For an example, we can return to Reggie and his conviction that girls want all the nice things in a relationship.

Reggie's recognition of his female partners' feelings, and implied desire to make the girl feel good by compromising, point to a sensitivity in line with the middle class boys in the study. Reggie is able to articulate the importance of equality and communicates an understanding that both partners should have their needs satisfied in a relationship. Yet he is unable to claim 'romance' or "the nice things of a relationship" as part of his own desire or note that he might feel more fulfilled if other elements were present, for him they are constructed as an entirely female or feminine need. Thus, Reggie displays 'hard' masculinity by implying that his own interest is predominantly sex yet he tempers this with enough 'softer' masculinity to be able to show sensitivity to girls' needs and a desire to fulfil them.

Irreconcilable Differences

Both young women and young men appeared to give credence to essentialist arguments that dictate that men and women are fundamentally different, particularly in reference to sex and relationships. The concept that sex was not something that girls necessarily wanted or enjoyed, but something that they were willing to trade off in exchange for a relationship was frequently alluded to in interviews. The idea that boys did not think that relationships were very important was also paramount among the younger female interviewees who also expressed considerable anxiety that boys might get into a relationship with them in order to use them for sex:

> Boys don't take it as serious as girls. (Penny, 16, w/c)

> If I thought that someone was just going to use me for sex then I wouldn't. I wouldn't go out with him. Just someone who like actually likes me and didn't just use me or anything. (Jade, 16, w/c)

While a number of girls agreed that boys were less serious than girls about relationships and sex, Paula also highlighted that boys were sometimes dishonest about their intentions in order to sleep with girls:

> Paula - Like girls are quite serious about it. And boys are just messing around. Like trying to use girls.

> Helen - To use girls?

> Paula - Yeah, for sex or something. Like they are saying 'oh I love you' and that but they just want to have sex with that person. (16, w/c)

Paula's description emphasises that boys recognise the importance of love and relationships for girls, to the extent that they will declare their love for a girl as a gateway to having sex. As previously discussed, SRE guidance implies that the natural and correct place for sexual activity is within the confines of a "stable" relationship. As will be explored in more detail in the following chapter, relationships are crucial for some young women in the maintenance of sexual reputation, particularly those who are working class. Thus, we might conclude that this element of SRE discourse is pervasive for working class girls and while boys recognise its salience for young women, they reject it for themselves, necessitating dishonesty. It would appear that for young, working class men, the recuperation of a masculinity predicated on sexual activity has greater significance than the discourses of SRE.

Similarly, the idea that having sex produced feelings or 'attachment' for girls was prevalent and young women identified tension between their own sensitivity and boys' apparent indifference:

> …from like personal experience, like, I've slept with a guy and then got feelings for him whereas a guy can just move on to the next one if that's what he feels like. (Stacey, 20, m/c)

> I think that girls can get attached quite quickly from having sex whereas guys generally…I'm not speaking for everyone, I don't know…I'm just…I get the impression that they don't feel bad having sex with lots of partners, for example. (Chloe, 20, w/c)

While Michaela describes how some people do have 'no-strings-attached' sexual relationships she also highlights that this can *obviously* be problematic for young women:

> ….if you're going to have sex with someone, cos obviously there are people who just meet up and have sex all the time, but we think…obviously for girls cos we are more sensitive, it creates feelings. Whereas lads just go and have sex with them and then see you later, never speak to you again. (Michaela, 16, w/c)

The agreement that girls are more sensitive and more easily attached than boys also alludes to SRE discourses that position sex as risky for young women. While SRE may focus on pregnancy and STI transmission, the girls highlight the risks of being used, being lied to, being discarded and feeling bad about themselves. This is in opposition to young men for whom sex did not present such risks. Boys

themselves recognised that the feelings generated by having sex were different between the sexes:

> The lads just think it's just sex sometimes, sometimes girls think it's just sex, but some girls get like attached after one night and that's it. They get attached for life. It's silly. Even if they are drunk they get attached dead quick. Just cos yous have had sex (Jesse, 18, w/c)

> Lads just want to have it and leave. Lasses definitely want…like to be in a relationship for longer. But lads don't. (Tom, 17, w/c)

While having sex was presented as 'risk-free' for young men, it was getting into a relationship with a girl that imparted risk. A pervasive idea amongst the participants was that once in a relationship, boys were perceived differently by their peers. Their status as a 'lad' became doubtful and there was the assumption that they could no longer be counted on as a friend:

> Well, I mean…I've seen it happen before when guys have started going out with girls and then all their friends are like "oh no, he's now gone, he's been stolen by this girl. He's not a mate anymore, he's not a lad anymore" it's just like, it's not changing anything. He hasn't really changed….for a lot of people their girlfriend is a totally separate entity to the rest of their life. (Ida, 18, m/c)

The single young men in the focus group expressed their disdain for being in a relationship:

> Sean - The death of people them. I hate relationships, me.

> Harry – Right on that. Why do you think so many people drink?

> Olly – They stop you from seeing your mates and you start fighting. And it goes pear shaped.

When Sean states that relationships are "the death of people", he refers to an end to laddish behaviour, male friendships and socialising. It was generally assumed that relationships were a cause of conflict due to the irreconcilable differences between males and females. A number of young men mentioned having to choose between their friends and a girlfriend, demonstrating their conviction that male friendships and heterosexual relationships could not co-exist harmoniously. In the case of Luke, who was in a long-term relationship and also a well-integrated member of the friendship group, the others saw him as an exception:

> Sean - Your relationship is alright, your relationship though. You still have a life, well I don't know about Janine though.
>
> Harry – You can still go out.
>
> Sean – He doesn't care. He just tells Janine to piss off.
>
> Luke – I just let her get on with it, me. "See you later, I'm going to town. Ta-ra."

This presents an example of the *thoughtlessness* of boys in relationships alluded to earlier in the chapter. The implication here is that Janine would rather he did not go to town, but Luke can casually brush this aside, showing himself to be independent and uncontrolled/uncontrollable. Luke displays nonchalance regarding his girlfriend's feelings, "I just let her get on with it". There is ambiguity in this statement – he might be referring to letting his girlfriend get on with her own social life, or letting her get on with her lack of control over his actions. However, Sean's explanation that Luke tells Janine to "piss off" suggests it is more likely to be the latter. Furthermore, his behaviour, or at the least, his description of his behaviour, provides a way to establish himself as the active partner, by going out, and his girlfriend as the passive, by staying at home and getting on with it. This is supported by Sean's assertion that Luke can "still have a life" despite being in a relationship, although he does not know whether the same could be said of Janine. The idea that 'having a life' usually ends once a boy is in a relationship, "they are the death of people" is dominant for Sean. This implicit demonstration of power, by constructing himself as active, insensitive to Janine's feelings and unwilling to negotiate, marks Luke and his relationship as unusual and certainly not the norm within his group of friends. He does not offer resistance to the norms of patriarchal masculinity, instead he conforms by constructing his girlfriend as subordinate. It stands in marked contrast to the presentations of relationships by aspirational working class and middle class participants as caring, equal and compromising. By embodying the opposite values, "he doesn't care", Luke is able to maintain his position as a respected member of the group.

Power in Young Relationships

What is interesting about the exchanges on the topic of relationships is notions of power. The lack of power young women have in their relationships and sexual

liaisons with young men has been the subject of research for a number of years (Holland et al., 2004; Hollway, 1984). There were a number of instances in the interviews when young female participants disclosed instances that potentially pointed to an inequitable power balance between men and women in relationships, particularly in terms of sexual practice. Penny and Michaela, in separate interviews, describe the pressure on young women to have sex:

> I think some girls, like the younger ones, do it to keep their boyfriend. (Penny, 16, w/c)

> Apparently that's why a lot of lads cheat on you, because other girls are willing to do what you won't do. Which obviously, is not good for us. (Michaela, 16, w/c)

Here, young women describe limited choice when it comes to having sex. Having sex or participating in particular sexual acts in order to keep a boyfriend from cheating or ending the relationship is a common theme both in my interviews and other studies with young people (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Impett & Peplau, 2003). This is particularly pertinent for younger teenagers, who may lack the confidence or experience to negotiate more equitable terms for themselves, and for whom having a boyfriend is synonymous with elevated status and social capital (Tanenbaum, 2000).

Furthermore, cheating is often constructed as natural and to be expected from boys (Tanenbaum, 2000) which means that the other women are necessarily held responsible for boys' infidelities. Michaela's assertion that lads cheat because other girls are more prepared to sexually experiment supports this – she seems to be more uncomfortable with other girls' sexual willingness rather than boys' disrespect for monogamous principles. However, for young working class men, girls were deemed to hold all the power in relationships.

From stopping a boy from socialising to regulating his use of social media, young men's reluctance to get into a relationship was underscored by their desire to remain independent and uncontrolled. As quoted previously, Olly maintains that girls "stop you from seeing your mates" and Harry marks Luke as different from other boys in relationships as he "can still go out", the implication being that other boys with girlfriends cannot. What is interesting, is that none of the young men in the focus group, with the exception of Luke, could envisage an alternative

relationship scenario. Rather than offer a narrative of potential proactive negotiation and shared power, they assumed a subjugated position that was absolute, leaving them little room to resist or negotiate new terms. This perceived lack of diversity in relationships – that *all* women and *all* relationships played out in similar ways – made it easier for them to simply avoid the situation.

However, when Jesse was interviewed alone he was able to recognise the importance of equality in relationships, although he framed this as a personal responsibility, "don't be a doormat" rather than "don't try to control your partner":

> Jesse - And don't be a doormat, don't let your other half walk all over you, girls and boys. Don't let the boys walk all over you, don't let the girls walk all over you. Because it's not nice that.
>
> Helen - So if things were more equal?
>
> Jesse - Aye. So there is not a balance of power to one person. The boys not in charge, the girl is not in charge.

We can conclude from these examples that girls are perceived to pose a threat to working class young men's masculinity in a number of ways. As seen in the previous chapter, a boy's reputation can be endangered by a girl suggesting he is an inadequate sexual partner. Furthermore, girls can threaten a young man's 'laddish' persona by drawing him into a relationship and denying contact with his peers. As we have noted previously, a boy's masculinity is practised by having sex with a number of women, this is then validated by sharing details of his exploits with his peer group. If a young man is in a relationship, the implication is that he is no longer promiscuous. While this can offer 'safety', it can also mean it is no longer acceptable to divulge intimate details, thus, a boy is not able to participate in 'sex talk'. Moreover, if a young woman is viewed as seeking to remove her boyfriend from a friendship group entirely, he would no longer have access to this route to consolidate his masculinity. Thus, relationships are seen to be 'girly' and therefore, the ultimate insult to working class masculinity and to be avoided. Whether young women really seek to separate their boyfriend from his friends or not, and whether a young man bears any responsibility for allowing this to happen or not, is almost irrelevant as the threat is enough to make young men distrustful of girls and want to maintain distance, at least emotionally.

This could be attributable to the particular kind of working class femininity which proliferates in the social circles of these young men. This 'chav' femininity has been previously described as powerful, in control and no nonsense – in contrast to the passive, demure femininity of middle class women (Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007). A femininity which encompasses loudness, vulgarity and open discussion of sexual exploits may, indeed, prove unsettling for young men, whose status and masculinity rest on their sexual reputations.

Homophobia?

As stated previously, the interactions between boys in the focus group seem too benign to designate as indicative of homophobia. None of the young men in the group expressed sentiments that might pass for actual disgust or hatred of homosexual men, although admittedly there were no research questions on that subject directly. While 'gay' was used as a term to define a boy not adhering to the masculine conventions of the group, such as not being interested in sex or taking too much care over their appearance, it was usually employed flippantly and without marginalising intent. Pascoe (2007) finds similar usage of 'fag' in her study of high school students in the USA. For her, the term is employed regularly yet with little relation to actual sexual orientation or even loyalty to particular codes of masculine behaviour. She agrees that homophobia represents a label that is too superficial to represent the nuances of 'fag discourse'. Mark McCormack (2012) reaches similar conclusions, stating that in a number of situations that he observed, 'gay' is employed in many cases to denote something stupid, ridiculous, or unfair without real homophobic intent. Both Pascoe and McCormack document that the majority, but certainly not all, of their participants believed in gay rights and recognised the unacceptability of using such language as a term of abuse towards a boy who was actually gay. However, McCormack acknowledges that homophobia is currently unfashionable, meaning that his participants may understand that it is no longer acceptable to be explicitly homophobic, particularly to an out gay researcher, while still engaging in practices that may be deemed as such.

Yet, as previously noted, it is significant that questions around sexual orientation and the use of the pejorative 'gay' abound. While there are a number of terms

similar in meaning, it is noteworthy that it is words which reference homosexuality that are frequently utilised. Homophobia, with its connotations of violence and hate crime, seems overly strong and ascribes negative meaning where perhaps none is intended. Equally important is that gay or 'fag' discourse is explicitly gendered, regulating men in the same way as 'slut' disciplines women, speaking for transgressions in conventional masculinity just as 'slut' is a comment on femininity (a fuller discussion of which follows in the next chapter). Young women also use the descriptor 'gay' outside of conventional meanings:

> Last year when I was a fresher, I kind of, you know like, slept around a bit and they took the mick. And I said….sounds really gay but like the only way…you know like, to have someone in your bed and have a bit of a cuddle. (Stacey, 20, m/c)

When Stacey describes her desire to 'have a bit of a cuddle' as 'really gay', she does not mean homosexual, but, rather, is worried that she sounds excessively girly. The following exchange between young men in the focus group, initially on the subject of girls' investment in their appearance, is similar in its connotations:

> Sean - it takes them (girls) about three hours to go out for half an hour….to get ready.
>
> Harry - Like him (gestures at Jesse)
>
> Sean - Well, he's a big poof anyways.
>
> (All laugh)

Despite his use of the term 'poof', Sean is not really accusing Jesse of being homosexual because he takes a long time to get ready, the real charge is that his behaviour is comparable to that of a girl. Therefore, it would appear that there is space for a new term to be employed to capture the nuances of this practice.

Pascoe (2007) argues that male homosexuality per se, is not unacceptable to the young men in her study. Rather male *effeminacy* is the real cause of heterosexual boys' discomfort, and it is this association with the feminine that they are keen to avoid. Thus, homosexual terms such as 'gay', 'poof' and 'fag' serve to police young men's gender expression much more than their sexual activity. That being said, a key component of acceptable masculinity, particularly working class masculinity, is pursuit of and interest in heterosexual sex. In this way, young men can consolidate their claims to masculinity and avoid associations with the

feminine. In the absence of alternative ways to construct masculine identity, such as muscular body image, employment, fatherhood, physical violence, or sporting achievement, sexual exploits become key. This may account for a diminished interest in having sex perceived as suspicious. This would also go some way to explaining why these young men actively avoided participating in romantic relationships, as these were constructed as feminine pursuits. As illustrated by Luke's example above, the only way to be in a relationship with a woman and still exhibit acceptable levels of masculinity, was to 'not care' and present yourself as independent, active and in control.

I would argue that a more appropriate term for such behaviour would be effemiphobia, which I would define as "the fear of being perceived to be effeminate or feminine, principally relating to practices of heterosexual masculinity". I do not claim to have invented this term nor am I attributing a new meaning to an existing term. What I propose is a change in the context in which this term would be applied. Currently, effemiphobia (sometimes spelled effemophobia) is principally used within the male gay community to describe men who avoid partnerships or associations with camp or effeminate men (Taywaditep, 2002). A focus on "butch" homosexuality and a distaste for "sissies" (sissyphobia is also sometimes used as a synonym for effemiphobia) has led some commentators to allege that there is now a fetish for the "straight-acting" homosexual and a "defeminisation" movement within gay culture (Hartinger, 2009) with anti-effeminacy discrimination present in the gay male community (Taywaditep, 2002).

Similarly, Sedgwick (1991) utilises the term *effeminophobia* to describe movements within psychoanalysis to place less focus on an individual's sexual orientation while emphasising and problematising non-normative gender expression. Therefore, according to Sedgwick, gay men who present as traditionally masculine are deemed acceptable to revisionist analysts such as Richard C. Friedman, a rhetoric presented along the lines of "they are just like you and me". This standpoint asks the reader to collude in a process of naturalisation of gender norms that sees sporting achievement, physical strength and stable employment as signposts of masculinity. Sedgwick highlights the significance of the American Psychological Association's removal of

homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III) published in 1980, while simultaneously adding a new ailment, "Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood". The process of diagnosis of this new disorder is, itself, gendered. As Sedgwick notes:

> "…a girl gets this pathologizing label only in the rare case of asserting that she actually is anatomically male (e.g. "that she has, or will grow, a penis"); while a boy can be treated for Gender Identity Disorder of Childhood if he merely asserts "that it would be better not to have a penis" – *or* alternatively, if he displays a "preoccupation with female stereotypical activities as manifested by a preference for either cross-dressing or simulating female attire, or by a compelling desire to participate in the games and pastimes of girls"" (1991:20, emphasis in original; quotations from DSM-III, 1980).

Thus, homosexual orientation, in itself, becomes depathologised (under the condition that it is accompanied by adulthood and normative masculine gender expression), while effeminacy, in young men, becomes a pathological disorder. Pascoe (2007) uses Sedgwick's standpoint to highlight her own participants' issues with effeminacy (as a set of perceived behaviours or mannerisms) rather than homosexuality. She describes her participants as productive of 'fag discourse', in which the 'fag' takes up an abject position and can be used to regulate young men's conformity to hegemonic masculine practices. Pascoe lays a lot of the groundwork in unpicking heterosexual males' use of terms such as 'queer', 'fag' and 'poof' in the consolidation of their masculinity, yet I feel that the term 'fag discourse' does not sufficiently convey the division between gender and sexuality that is apparent in young male's interactions with each other.

By adapting the meaning slightly, effemiphobia becomes more inclusive, and can be used not just to reference gay men, but within heterosexuality to denote practices by which men disavow the feminine in order to consolidate their status as masculine. I am unaware of any instances in academic literature where the term has been applied to heterosexual men regarding their own identities and as an alternative to the more established term 'homophobia'. It should be emphasised that I did not ask my participants directly about their views of homosexuality, nor did the conversation include any meaningful discussion of that topic by chance. It is entirely plausible that, had they been asked explicitly,

they might have revealed themselves to be homophobic, however, this is almost incidental. By moving away from the use of homophobia in this instance, we can avoid attributing labels, thoughts and behaviours to the young men for which there is little tangible evidence.

Similarly, we can highlight the aversion to femininity or what are perceived to be 'girly behaviours' that seems a key factor in the production of a mainstream masculine identity for working class men. It seems important to note that while appropriate gender expression (femininity) is policed for young women (a point which will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter), it is also the perceived practice of femininity which is policed for young men. Thus, while inadequate femininity can ruin a young woman's reputation, excessive femininity can affect a young, working class man's status. It would appear that for young, working-class people in the North East, femininity is vital force in the creation and maintenance of sexual identity, for both men and women.

Chapter 7: "You Can Spot Them A Mile Off" – Sluts and the Sexual Culture of Shame

This chapter aims to unpick the complexities of the gendered double standard and its place in a sexualised society. While much has been written previously on the slut/virgin dichotomy, the fact that this continues to pervade young people's sexual cultures means that it remains a compelling subject (Tolman, Anderson & Belmonte, 2015; Tolman, Bowman & Chmielewski, 2015; Bay-Cheng, 2015; Attwood, 2007; Keys, Rosenthal & Pitts, 2006; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Tiefer, 2004; Chambers, Tincknell & Van Loon, 2004). Given that the presumed consequences of sexualisation include greater promiscuity, worth attributed to a girl or woman based on her sexiness and pressure to comply with and satisfy male sexual demands, I am interested to understand how sexualisation coexists with this double bind for young women. Specifically, how do young women negotiate sexualisation and its concomitant demands while also being subjected to the practice of slut-shaming? What role does class play in a young woman's investment in both a sexualised society and slut-shaming?

Old Habits Die Hard

The gendered double standard of sexual activity is not a new area of inquiry but rather one that is sadly familiar. Participants in this study acknowledged the injustice of this practice, while simultaneously reinforcing its centrality to contemporary youth cultures. The social status to be gained from having sex was widely recognised as true for young men:

> Especially if they are in mainly male only groups, it's a way of showing who is the kingpin, who is cooler than everyone else. (Ida, 18, m/c)

For boys, it was not just important to have many female sexual partners, but equally important that their peer group knew about their sexual activity, disclosures of which served as verification of their claims to particular forms of heterosexual masculinity (Jackson & Cram, 2003). As Holland and colleagues,

writing on loss of virginity, emphasise, "'First sex' experiences are not only happening in private, they are also performances in a peer group – events that are made meaningful by talking about them" (Holland, Ramazanoglu & Thomson, 1996:148). This quote can be applied more broadly than first sex experiences, accounting for the discussion of and bragging about all sexual activity by boys that has been identified by girls. Thus, a boy's promiscuity is rendered meaningless, unless his peer group are party to all the details. It is the talk, arguably more than the act itself, which constructs heterosexuality, heterosexual masculinity and its symbolic meanings in a culture.

However, young women were subject to much more nuanced rules regarding sexual expression – sexual activity for young women was widely recognised as being potentially damaging and a source of shame. Practices that might confer 'hero' status on a young man may be viewed as "deeply morally questionable" when enacted by a young woman (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005:143; see also Carmody & Ovenden, 2013). Holland and associates (2004) document the privileging of male sexual desire and the regulatory effect of 'sexual reputation' on the sexual expression of young women (see also Jackson & Cram; Tolman, 1994). The following quotes demonstrate young women's understanding of this sexual double standard:

> I think with girls you've just got to be careful with what you say in front of people. But boys always like go on about how they've done this and done that (Jade, 16, w/c).

> Boys can sleep with like numerous girls and be like…respected for it….but then if the girl does the same thing, within a friendship group, she gets like named…to be a slut (Charlotte, 16, w/c)

> Like you don't want to be stereotyped as like a slut. So I would say it's bad. Like for a lad to be…to have many sexual partners and stuff, it's like seen as…almost like…I don't know, like victory or something. You've got so many. But for a girl, it's like "oh, don't touch her". For a girl's own wellbeing, I would say don't be promiscuous. (Kimberly, 19, aw/c)

The participants perceived a considerable risk for young women in talking about their sexual experiences that is not present for young men. The following exchange highlights these perceived differences:

> Helen - So for boys it is important to sleep with a lot of girls?
>
> Stacey - I think so, yeah, personally. And especially being friends with a lot of….with a lot of boys, it's like I think that they all find it important to discuss and divulge into every part of a girl. Like tell them everything that has happened and it's just a bit embarrassing for a girl really, isn't it?
>
> Helen - What about if a girl did that?
>
> Stacey - She would get called a slut or a whore. She'd get a bad reputation, wouldn't she? Even girls look down on girls that do things like that. So for girls I think it is a bit more secretive, you don't want everyone to know if you've slept with people. But then, it's just sex really isn't it? I don't see why everyone can't do it. But girls get a bad name, don't they? (20, m/c)

Stacey discloses how the boys she knows enjoy discussing every aspect of their sexual experiences, making those experiences meaningful, according to Holland and colleagues (1996). While acknowledging that this is embarrassing for their female partners, she offers no real challenge or condemnation, accepting this behaviour as indicative of being a 'lad'. It is important to note that she is talking specifically about discussing sexual activity, and not necessarily the activity itself. She identifies that girls need to be "a bit more secretive" and that "you don't want everyone to know". She recognises that girls play a part in their oppression of each other as "*even* girls look down on girls" who dare to discuss their sex lives, yet doesn't offer any real objection. Furthermore, while she questions the legitimacy of girls being subjected to restraints on their sexuality in a way that boys are not, ("it's just sex really, isn't it?") she accepts that this is the reality. Similarly, Reggie also recognises the unfairness in disclosing sexual activity for boys and girls:

> Reggie - People would brag about it and be like 'oh I had sex with so and so' and you'd get a pat on the back when you lost your virginity, things like that. I remember when I lost my virginity, like I told my mates and they were all like 'wahey!' Proper like celebrating about it.
>
> Helen - Do you think that's the same for girls?
>
> Reggie - To be honest, no. It's very sexist, sex in a sense, if you get what I mean. You glorify the boys and the girls get, sort of like…scolded for it in a sense….Yeah it's like almost a man who

has sex, he's like…he's like the king whereas when a woman does it she becomes a slut or a whore. It's not very fair to be honest.

Helen - So a girl might get a bad reputation?

Reggie - Yeah, it's like a stigma…that would be a word for it. (20, aw/c)

The above quotes demonstrate how young women continue to face the slag/drag dichotomy even in the wake of the sexualisation of society and an apparently increased openness regarding sexual matters. As discussed in previous chapters, commentators such as Bailey (2011), Papadopoulos (2010), and Levin and Kilbourne (2009) argue that young women are pressured to participate in sexual activity due to the sexualisation of the media and contemporary culture, however there still remains a taboo on young women being open about those experiences. The suppression of women's talk around sexuality is not a new phenomenon (Skeggs, 1997; also Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005) yet in an environment which some say constitutes an incitement to sexuality, the stigma attached to the discussion of personal experiences seems illogical. While talking for young men boosts status and adds to their reputation, girls can quickly become labelled and often face the greatest condemnation from other young women, even when those girls, such as Stacey, recognise the inequality of the status quo.

Sluts and Shame

The slut-virgin dichotomy appeared to be thriving among the young women interviewed, reinforcing previous research that found this continuum to be the "the primary hegemony that is imposed on girls" (Tolman, Anderson & Belmonte, 2015: 301; see also Tolman, Bowman & Chmielewski, 2015; Attwood, 2007; Tiefer, 2004), although the imposition is done chiefly by girls themselves (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Chambers, Tincknell & Van Loon, 2004). Indeed, it would appear that a girl's social value is still determined in part by her sexual behaviour (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Keys, Rosenthal & Pitts, 2006; Lees, 1993).

There are a number of derogatory terms in use to describe female sexual behaviour that contravenes a particular 'code of conduct' which is variable across time, place and social standing. Terms include 'slut', 'whore', 'slag', 'tramp' and

'slapper' and are subject to regional variations, such as the Americanised term, 'ho'. That the subject of such slurs is predominantly female is taken for granted, there exist few terms to describe similar behaviour in men (Tanenbaum, 2000), most likely because such behaviour is not deemed socially deviant or problematic for men. 'Slut-shaming' or sometimes 'slut-bashing' refers to the practice of labelling women based on their sexual expression, identity or practice. Crucially, for slut-shaming to occur there does not need to have been any actual sexual activity – revealing clothing (Bay-Cheng, 2015), 'sexy' dance moves, having male friends, and an openness to discussing sexual matters can all be used as characteristics of a 'slut' regardless of whether the young woman in question is sexually active or not (Tanenbaum, 2000). For continuity, I will use the terms 'slut' and 'slut-shaming' predominantly in this chapter.

Similarly, behaviour that may result in slut-shaming can be either actual or alleged (Bay-Cheng, 2015), meaning that there does not have to be any actual evidence of transgression, or even agreement that transgression has taken place, the allegation alone can be enough. As Tanenbaum asserts, "the ostracized school "slut" is a case study for all the other girls considering hooking up with a guy" (2000: 87) in that she becomes the cautionary tale by which other girls measure their own sexual morality. Slut-shaming can be viewed as a disciplinary mechanism that works to police the sexuality and the gender expression of women, although women may acquire the label 'slut' for reasons other than their sexual behaviour (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Lees, 1993). Jackson and Cram note that labels such as 'slag', 'slut' and 'whore' are often used by girls against each other, "regarding not only sexual behaviour but also behaviour that contravened traditional femininity" (2003: 115; also Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Historically, the word 'slut' was used to describe a dirty woman who did not keep her house clean (Tanenbaum, 2015). At a time when housework was a uniquely female activity, a dirty home represented a woman who did not maintain acceptable standards of womanhood, she was not, therefore, acceptably feminine. This is a standpoint that is reflected in the assertion by Armstrong and colleagues that "slut stigma is more about regulating public gender performance than regulating private sexual practice" (2014:102; see also Chambers, Tincknell & Van Loon, 2004).

During these interviews the word 'slut' and related terms such as 'whore', 'slag' and 'tramp' were used to describe sexually deviant women by a number of female participants and were generally accepted as a label that women would want to avoid, that is, one which is entirely negative (Victor, 2004; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001; Lees, 1993). A number of girls made reference to the danger of being called a slut based on a female's sexual experience or expression, as discussed earlier. Young female interviewees were often keen to distance themselves from 'sluts', either real girls who had been labelled or just the idea of a slut, and actively participated in 'slut-shaming' their contemporaries. This was particularly evident in interviews with working class young women, possibly highlighting internalised constraints on sexuality in a society where working-class sexuality is disproportionately problematized (Tyler, 2011; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). The following extract reveals the shared understandings that young women have about what constitutes 'slutty' behaviour:

> Helen - So if a girl has sex with a boy and then people know about it, is that a bad thing for her?
>
> Michaela – It depends on the situation. Like, if she's been seeing him or if it's a one night thing.
>
> Charlotte – Like if she was drunk or something.
>
> Michaela – Or if she didn't know him or whatever.
>
> Charlotte – Or like if it was outside, inside. It depends.
>
> Helen - So if she's drunk and they have a one night thing outside, is that bad?
>
> Both – Yeah.
>
> Charlotte – Everybody like laughs at you…like "Oh my god, you shagged him outside".
>
> Michaela – It's a bit of a trampy thing to do.

Charlotte and Michaela demonstrate clear ideas on the right circumstances for having sex and circumstances which will result in being labelled a slut. For these girls, being drunk, having sex with someone who is not a long term partner and having sex outdoors were all signifiers of misplaced sexuality for girls that could

lead to ridicule. Similar findings by Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) cited multiple partners, concurrence of sex and inebriation and sexual activity outside of a relationship as what Bay-Cheng terms "red flags for sexual risk and social sanction as a slut" (2015:284) suggesting a somewhat universal norm of what constitutes sluttiness. Later in the conversation, the girls are asked if boys are susceptible to the same constraints as girls regarding their sexual behaviour:

> Charlotte – Not really. I think it's the opposite for boys. Like boys are always like…like in our group of friends…talk about what's the most stupid, stupid place you've had sex with a girl. And it's like…they just give you ridiculous answers like "Oh, behind Tesco or in a park or in a bush"
>
> Michaela – It's quite like a challenge, just so they can be like….
>
> Charlotte – The best. Like who can have the best random place. But if a girl does that it's the complete opposite.

Here, the girls describe how boys have the freedom to compete with each other over behaviour which for girls would constitute sluttiness. While this can be constructed as a lack of restriction, it can also highlight the pressure on boys to conform to particular masculine ideals, as described in the previous chapter, that demand both sexual activity and the discussion of experiences within the peer group. Similarly, whether or not these sexual stories are true is apparently unimportant, as Charlotte acknowledges that the boys just offer "ridiculous answers". However, there is still prestige to be won simply by telling the story itself (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). It is also worth underlining that while these stories are productive of masculine status, they are simultaneously destructive of female reputation as a young woman is denigrated for the same behaviour. Thus, we might conclude that, to some extent, the recuperation of this particular masculinity is dependent on slut-shaming.

In a separate interview with two working class young women, comparable views of what constituted slutty behaviour and the consequences of engaging in such activities were shared. Again, the focus was on the circumstances of sexual activity rather than having sex per se – being intoxicated, outside or with someone who is not a boyfriend were all agreed to be indicative of immoral behaviour. However this pair of young women took this further, and lengthily described girls

who *were* sluts. The shift in vocabulary is subtle but an important distinction. For other female participants the existence of a real, tangible group of women who were sluts was negligible – the important factor was the use of the label as a regulatory means, whether or not it alluded to real people or urban legends and a distancing of oneself from that label. For Kimberly and Amy, sluts were a particular group of girls with a number of distinguishing features:

> Helen - When you say you could pick out the sluts a mile away, in what sense? From the way that they looked or the way they behaved?
>
> Both – Both.
>
> Kimberly – The makeup they wore. The…even their hairstyles were different.
>
> Amy – Yeah, the hair, yeah.

The conflation of appearance with sexual reputation is one which has been reflected upon by a number of researchers (see Bay-Cheng, 2015; Tolman, Anderson & Belmonte, 2015; Armstrong et al., 2014; Tanenbaum, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Lees, 1993). For Kimberly, "even their hairstyles were different" demarcating a clear borderline between her own friendship group and 'the sluts'. Neither girl was able to offer any detail on *how* the hair and makeup was particular, they were satisfied that it was simply different from their own. It is also significant to note that while Amy and Kimberly agreed that both appearance and behaviour were indicators of sluttiness, they chose to first elaborate on the aesthetic differences between themselves and the other girls. This suggests an eagerness to ensure that they were not mistaken for being part of this group, before we began discussing the more intricate topic of behaviour. As Kimberly shows, there are other ways to identify this particular group at her school:

> Kimberly - So…and I mean…like when you say "oh there was this group of sluts" it was basically like all the Charver lasses. Like it would be that group.

Bay-Cheng (2015) observes that for young women, choice of clothing can lead to them being labelled a slut, although she is specifically referencing a celebrity culture of sexiness that requires revealing outfits. Charver culture would usually represent a less overtly sexy look, typified by sportswear, but this is not enough

to preclude Kimberly's assertion that the Charver group were sluts. Armstrong and colleagues (2014) note that slut as a derogatory term often articulates more regarding class position than as a judgement on sexual morality (see also Tanenbaum, 2000), and this is evidenced in Kimberly's disdainful description of the "Charver group" at her school - "Charver" being the local term for the group known nationally as 'Chavs'.

Chav Life

Charver status is based upon aesthetic, a uniform of tracksuits and trainers (Nayak, 2006; Tyler, 2008) being the most obvious signs. The Charver or Chav sub-culture has strong associations with joblessness, young parenthood, lack of education and the suspicion of participation in crime (Nayak, 2006; Tyler, 2008; Edensor & Millington, 2009). As Davidson suggests, "They are the dole-scroungers, petty criminals, football hooligans and teenage pram-pushers" (2004, quoted in Tyler, 2008:21) and the Charver figure has long been derided in popular culture, one example being the Vicki Pollard character on BBC sketch show Little Britain. What Skeggs describes as "signifiers of sexuality" such as "loudness, vulgarity, bluntness and openness" (1997:124/5) are other connotations of Charver culture (Nayak & Kehily, 2014). The perceived offensiveness of Charver culture in general, and particularly for the female, is summarised neatly by Tyler with her description of young Charver mothers:

> "The chav mum or pramface, with her hoop earrings, sports clothes, pony tail ("Croydon facelift") and gaggle of mixed race children, is the quintessential sexually excessive, single mother: an immoral, filthy, ignorant, vulgar, tasteless, working-class whore" (2008: 26)

Kimberly's repeated reference to "Charver lasses" as sluts conflates sexual activity and class. Thus, being one or the other, for her, automatically makes a girl both. Kimberly goes on to discuss behaviour:

> Helen - What kind of things did they do that made them slutty?

> Kimberly – Well, for instance, I'll tell you about this one girl, right. I mean she wasn't the like…how do I put it? She wasn't the most attractive, right? […]And this girl came in one day and started bragging about how she'd literally met this lad for ten minutes and

> then they had sex on the field. And she was throwing it about like it was something to be proud of and I'm like "what?" and I mean I'm not ashamed to say I was like one of these innocent ones who was like "Oh my God, what are they on about?" but like, I'd sit there and like listen and I'm like "you're going to regret that when you are older". Like that is not something to like be bragging about and…oh, it was just ridiculous.

This excerpt demonstrates Kimberly's desire to communicate the difference between herself and the girl in the story. For Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody, class "is lived as an identity designation and not simply as an economic relation to the means of production" (2001:13). Further to this, we can say that, for Kimberly, the 'Charver' is, regardless of economic resources, of lower status than other working class women (such as Kimberly herself) due to her identity categorisation within a particular subculture. Moreover, Armstrong and colleagues (2014), who compare higher and lower status young women in their study, find that social status is not dependent on material resources, although this can play a part in maintaining a particular lifestyle and can make it easier for a woman to achieve and maintain higher status. Status, for their college-attending participants, was based on looks, confidence, social skills and attractiveness to boys. Therefore, Kimberly's mention of her subject's looks, "not the most attractive", could be described as a way to establish the lower status of this young woman.

Kimberly herself presented as an ambitious and aspirational working class young woman, currently studying at university and dressed smartly and demurely. She was also one of the most conservative participants, with strong views on appropriate behaviour for young people and a defined sense of right and wrong, which she was unwilling to debate. I have previously noted Kimberly's desire to highlight the difference between herself and other young women who she considered 'sluts'. She can be described as highly invested in slut shaming as a way to reinforce her own, precarious status as a respectable working class young woman. As Skeggs (1997:124) writes, "The actual practice of sex occurs within a framework of recognitions of how women have already been socially positioned". Therefore, the young Charver woman in the story, who has already been positioned as socially inferior based on class, subculture and looks, would always be susceptible to being labelled a slut, whatever the circumstances of her sexual experiences. Her possible participation in "signifiers of sexuality", such as

loudness, for example, means that whether or not she participated in actual sexual activity, she was already assumed to be sexual. Therefore, Kimberly can use this woman, or even just the idea of this woman, to illustrate difference and to bolster her own claims to respectability. By deflecting this stigma onto others, in a process called "defensive othering" (Armstrong et al., 2014), she can consolidate her position as superior. Thus, the figure of the Charver performs an important function for Kimberly. As Nayak and Kehily argue:

> "The 'chav' as a recent and distinctive class-cultural phenomenon can be seen as both a media construction and a reconfiguration of enduring class-based social divisions fuelled by conceptualisations of an 'undeserving poor' and a social 'underclass' whose life-choices place them beyond the pale of working-class respectability" (2014:1130)

Her disapproval of this young woman having sex with a partner with whom she had just become acquainted, supports the notion that some working class women view sexual activity outside the confines of a formal relationship as "morally suspect" (Armstrong et al., 2014:112; see also Skeggs, 1997; Lees, 1993). She echoes Charlotte's assertion that "If she's been seeing him or if it's a one night thing" is crucial as to whether or not a girl's behaviour deserves condemnation or not. As Aapola, Gonick and Harris state, "Girls are supposed to only become sexually active within the romantic discourse" (2005: 152), which emphasises the confines of a stable relationship as the acceptable environment for sexual expression. I would argue that this is particularly salient for working-class women, for whom sexuality is already problematised (Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody, 2001). For many, a relationship would be the only environment in which they could safely explore their sexuality. In the same way that being in a relationship can protect young men from accusations of homosexuality, relationship status can ameliorate the possibility of slut-shaming.

To illustrate, having sex outdoors was derided as indicative of sluttiness, the location of the sexual acts in question was specifically included in the narration of the story to support the claims. This was made a more compelling argument if the encounters involved fleeting partnerships outside of a stable relationship. Yet when asked if sex outside constitutes sluttiness, Kimberly highlights the

difference in how this behaviour would be perceived when acted in the context of a relationship, "I don't think being older and with a partner and saying "Do you want to try something different?" and maybe a change of scenery (laughing)". The behaviour takes on an entirely different meaning, one of sexual experimentation and daring, when it takes place within the safety of a relationship. Similarly, Kimberly's emphasis on being older underlines her views about the propriety of sex for young people, while side-lining the issues that contribute to young people having sex outside, namely that for many young people, there are few spaces where their sexual activity is sanctioned.

Furthermore, "that is not something to like be bragging about" reinforces the previous idea that it is the discussion of sex that is especially troublesome for girls. Boasting about having sex, while entirely acceptable for young men (Tanenbaum, 2015), is what the participants take issue with and leads to this young women being 'labelled from then on'. Similarly, Armstrong and colleagues (2014) found that boasting about sexual activity was not acceptable for the young women in their study. Therefore, if talking about sexual activity makes it meaningful (Holland, Ramazanoglu & Thomson, 1996), the young woman in the story has made her own experience negatively perceived by boasting, in the same way that a young man might make the same experience more positively perceived. Unfortunately, when it comes to sexual reputations for women, how you are perceived by others is often more important that your actual behaviour. As Bartky asserts, "shame requires the recognition that I *am*, in some important sense, as I am seen to be" (1990:86).

The Agency Line

In recent years, a number of scholars have begun to unpick the notion of a "double bind" for young women. Livingston and colleagues (2013) state that:

> "…the conventional notion of a "double bind" might be too simplistic a description of young women's entanglement within a complex knot of multiple, seemingly opposed normative injunctions: to abstain, to resist, to comply, to seduce, to express, to arouse and to perform" (39).

For Laina Bay-Cheng constructions of female sexuality are being influenced by neo-liberalism. In her theory of the Agency Line, she offers "an updated characterisation of the contemporary normative field in which girls' sexuality is constructed and enacted in the US" (2015: 279). Neo-liberalist discourse, according to Bay-Cheng, requires the exercise of free will, control and "personal responsibility for all consequences" (2015: 280). Instead of a relatively simple double bind of slut/virgin for young women, she argues that the matter has been complicated by neo-liberalist demands for agency contesting that "girls are now also evaluated according to the degree of control they proclaim, or are perceived, to exert over their sexual behaviour". To illustrate this interplay, she goes on to contend that the virgin/slut continuum is bisected by the Agency Line, forming quadrants associated with different combinations of activity and agency levels. Therefore, according to this model, a young woman exhibiting high agency but low levels of activity may be described as 'consciously celibate'. In comparison, a low agency but high activity subject would be labelled a 'slut', in other words, a girl who is having sex for the wrong reasons. This is illustrated by the following quote from Amy:

> I remember there was one girl as well who like ….I remember it was on that day, the sex ed day. And she came in and she was like "I think I've had sex. I don't remember really. I was like really drunk. I just remember coming round and my buttons were undone on my pants". And we were like "Oh my God. What's happening? How can you not know?" (Laughs). I think she was labelled from then on. (Amy, 20, aw/c)

As a researcher, I was disturbed by this story as, for me, it offers a narrative of vulnerability and possibly, rape. Moreover, I was uncomfortable with the complete lack of sympathy that this story engendered in the participants. However, application of Bay-Cheng's theory to Amy's narrative offers the possibility of a broader analysis and some explanation of her reaction to the story. Neo-liberalist injunctions to agency preclude this young woman's story from eliciting empathy as the issue in question is not the sexual activity itself, but the fact that its occurrence has happened outside of her control. It is this failure to exercise free will and choice that leads to this young woman's label as a slut. Thus, where we might once have anticipated "Oh my God, you might have had sex!" the response is instead "Oh my God. What's happening? How can you not know?"

Furthermore, the insistence on personal responsibility means that the young woman in question must absorb culpability for this incident as her excessive drinking has diminished her ability to act with agency. Bay-Cheng argues, "Neoliberal ideology insists on unconditional personal responsibility while it simultaneously exempts us from any obligation to one another" (2015:287). This could explain Amy's lack of outrage at this potentially non-consensual situation, the girl must be held responsible for being unable to consent. There is no reference in the story to the girl's possible sexual partner, the actual existence of this unidentified male is insignificant as is whether or not any actual sexual activity took place. It is sufficient that the subject of the story is not sure because the absence of agency is enough to ensure she is "labelled from then on." Later in the joint interview, the topic of agency is again highlighted as we returned to the topic of what constitutes slutty behaviour:

> Helen - So from what I am understanding, tell me if I'm getting it wrong, slutty behaviour is like getting drunk and having sex?
>
> Amy – I wouldn't say getting drunk and having sex, I would just say having sex for all the wrong reasons. It wasn't anything to do with that they wanted to. It was the status of it, like "I've had sex, I'm amazing. You haven't. You're all virgins, you are all losers".
>
> Kimberly – But basically, all of them who were like sluts or whatever, were in that charver group that would go out drinking on a Friday night in a field with a bunch of lads. So in a way you could bring drunkenness into it.
>
> Amy – It was the way they were acting, it wasn't specifically the drunkenness. Like it was the actions that came afterwards.

Amy's reference to one woman's assertion that "I've had sex, I'm amazing" again aptly demonstrates the condemnation that a girl can face on discussing her sexual exploits. The interviewees do not seek to denounce female sexuality or experience per se, but rather find shame in having sex "for all the wrong reasons." The failure of young women's agency is apparent in that, "it wasn't anything to do with that they wanted to", having sex in order to bolster social standing was frowned upon, even for women who may have had little social capital outside of their sexuality. Ringrose and Renold (2012) state that working class women are more invested in their desirability as this can be productive of "erotic capital" or

higher status (Armstrong et al., 2014). I would argue that while this might be the case for some working class women, for those in this thesis who occupy the borderlands between working and middle class (those I have designated aspirational), there seems to be more capital in academic achievement, education and intelligence. Thus, Amy and Kimberly are disdainful of girls they think have sex to prove their worth, as they themselves have no need to resort to this tactic. It is worth noting, however, that the social capital of these aspirational working class women is precarious, possibly explaining their investment in slut-shaming as a means to consolidate their superiority.

While Amy argues that "it wasn't specifically the drunkenness" that she objects to, the implication is that excessive alcohol has led to the inability to act in an acceptable way, "it was the actions that came afterwards". Willett contends that while agency plays a role, it is a perceived lack of discipline that provokes criticism. Thus, Amy sanctions those who "lack the discipline to make good choices" (Willett, 2008:429), in this instance the undisciplined body being the inebriated body. Furthermore, the issue with sex outdoors can be attributed also to lack of discipline as the circumstances for sex are not deemed socially acceptable and the girl involved has lacked the discipline to wait for the correct circumstances before having sex. For Fjær and colleagues, who studied young Norwegians' judgements of others' sexual behaviour, "the implicit prescription seems to be that women should always exert self-control by controlling their own sexual desires (which is not the same as denying them)" (2015:11). Thus, for their participants, having sex and getting drunk were not especially problematic, indeed in some circumstances both behaviours were expected and encouraged, as long as a girl was understood as being in control.

Jackson and Cram (2003) denote a difference between women who are proactive in their desire to have sex and can go out looking for it and those who merely react to the desire of men, girls who "just say yeah to everything". Here the undisciplined body can be applied to those who are reactive, they lack the discipline to seek out potential partners or experiences themselves. Interestingly, for the group of working class boys, it was the presence of female sexual agency, rather than the lack of it, that led to accusations of sluttiness.

Boys' Understandings of 'Slut'

The discourse of sexualisation argues that young women are increasingly under pressure to dress in sexually provocative ways, taking their inspiration from the aesthetic of pornography that is now ever-present in mainstream culture (Papadopoulos, 2010; Levy, 2005). For the young men in the focus group, revealing clothing automatically generated judgements on a girl's sexual morality:

> Helen - So when you see a girl and she is in a short skirt and stuff, so you think that's….
>
> Luke – Slutty.
>
> Harry – Like we automatically think, oh hello.
>
> Helen - Like she's up for it?
>
> (All disagree)
>
> Harry – Oh no, nothing like that. We just think, oh hello. Not like off us, but she is going out to get it. That's what we think….like a little slutty thing.

The assertion that "she is going out to get it...like a little slutty thing", reveals both the conflation of clothing and sexual availability and the connection between a perceived, proactive sexual agency and slut status. While some of these young men had, during the course of the focus group, openly discussed their avoidance of relationships, commitment to the pursuit of casual sex and the techniques they used to facilitate this, they were still suspicious of a female who might be interested in the same. While the synthesis of physical appearance and sexual reputation is certainly not a new phenomenon, (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Tolman, Anderson & Belmonte, 2015; Armstrong et al., 2014; Skeggs, 1997) this extract offers an interesting comparison to Kimberly's establishment of the Charver female as slut, especially when we consider her own position within the aspirational working class.

The boys in the focus group were all from a particularly economically deprived area and all were currently unemployed and with little prospect of future employment. None of the group were in education, and all had left school at 16 or younger. All were training to be youth work volunteers at a young men's project

which they themselves had used while growing up, although their commitment to this opportunity was questionable (all but one arrived for the training session which incorporated my focus group hungover and up to two hours late after a number of phone calls, and attendance at the session was eventually negotiated with the youth worker to include a lift to the centre and lunch at the local café). While they were friendly, cooperative and engaged during the discussion, there was a distinct feeling that they would not have bothered to attend had they had to make any effort. Their involvement was in marked contrast to the other participants, who offered to take part in the study, presumably because they were interested in the subject matter. The boys' uniform of sportswear and general disenfranchisement would mark them as members of the Charver subculture (Tyler, 2008; Nayak, 2006) and their communication was often loud, intentionally shocking or humorous and filled with banter. There was little evidence that the young men in the focus group aspired to upward mobility or further education, and while there was some discussion of finding employment, this was not generally regarded as a priority.

While there are a number of factors at play, making a direct comparison complicated, I believe that the slut discourse performs different functions when applied in these contexts. As previously stated, for Kimberly, high investment in slut-shaming works to differentiate herself from lower status women (but not *lower class*) and confirms her belief that she is superior as her social capital is less dependent on her sexuality. For the young men, the Charver circle, which provides the majority of their social and sexual lives, is normalised, therefore to differentiate from 'normal life', they designate the scantily clad woman as a slut, someone who is not conforming to the normal dress code. Furthermore, for Kimberly, and other young women in the study, 'slut' was an entirely negative label that should be avoided. The boys' understandings do not seem as clear cut as while young women might not want to socialise with 'sluts' lest they be subjected to the same label by association, the boys would see a 'slut' and "automatically think, oh hello". My original understanding of this was that the young men would be interested in 'the slut' as she might represent an easy target for their advances, although when asked specifically if her clothes meant she was up for it, they were all at pains to disagree. It would appear, then, that the young

men had some understanding of the nuances of slut discourse and that while they may think that a scantily clad woman was "going out to get it", it was not acceptable for them to take this, or more importantly, to say that they took this, as an invitation.

Furthermore, the boys' understanding of slut-labelling based on appearance points to an understanding of the term as something that can be put on or taken off at will. That is, that the label goes only as deep as the clothing choices of the girl in question. However, for Kimberly, slut is lived as an identity that is synonymous with social standing, and is impervious to alteration. For Victor (2004) the slut label, once attached, can and does follow a young woman throughout her youth. As in Amy's story, when the subject is "labelled from then on", once the slut label is in place, it cannot be shaken off. In contrast, girls from middle class backgrounds presented a more sexually liberal and liberated viewpoint.

Middle Class Sex

In line with Maxwell and Aggleton's findings (2013), middle class girls in this thesis were less sexually limited by ideals of propriety and respectability than working class young women. Discourses of romance and love were less obvious in the girls' interviews, with casual sex outside of relationships normalised and less shame attached to promiscuity:

> I kind of have a similar view to sex as I do to catering. So, you know, it is a physiological need and as long as you go somewhere safe then it's not really a problem. (Valerie, 21, m/c)

> …in my experience, I think there are a lot less negative connotations with girls having sex with a lot of guys or girls than there used to be. And everyone seems a bit more open to the idea that if guys can play that way, then why can't we? (Ida, 18, m/c)

In contrast to the working class girls who discussed promiscuity only in terms of *other* girls and were at pains to separate themselves from such activity, young middle class girls were able to disclose their own behaviour:

> Last year when I was a fresher, I kind of, you know like, slept around a bit. (Stacey, 20, m/c)

Similarly, while working class girls spoke of the status of having sex for boys, middle class girls recognised that sometimes, in certain circumstances, this could also be the case for girls. While an absence of agency was conducive to being a slut, being perceived as agentic in sexual matters offered middle class girls the opportunity to gain the respect of their peers, as Ida describes:

> I mean some girls respect that, as in you've done what you want, good on you. (Ida, 18, m/c)

Being seen to be doing "what you want" meant that middle class girls had more opportunity to sexually experiment than was afforded the working class girls. Aside from being perceived in a positive light by others, increased sexual experience was personally valued by some of the participants. In a discussion in a joint interview about starting university and disclosing numbers of previous sexual partners, Jenny (19, m/c) and Rosie (20, m/c) position themselves as unapologetic sexual subjects:

> Jenny – it is a numbers game with boys, I think. Whereas with girls, it's not at all.
>
> Rosie – so if you're like...if you say like a certain number, girls can be like 'oh, that's quite a lot' and you're like 'can't really take that back though'….. Like a lot of our friends, girlfriends at uni, are…like their numbers are relatively low, they range between 1 to about 5.

Both young women have a positive view of themselves regarding their sexual expression, even when this is in conflict with group norms. This may be partly attributable to their confidence that they were not having sex for the 'wrong reasons', to increase their numbers of sexual partners or in order to boast as boys did, but because it was what they wanted. Therefore, while a friend may comment that Rosie had slept with 'quite a lot' of partners, there is no lasting stigma for Rosie herself. Maxwell and Aggleton (2012) found that, for their participants, with increased sexual experience came increased sexual confidence, which in turn led to an improved capacity to exert control over other aspects of their relationships. This may explain Rosie's ability to shrug off a friend's judgement. While Kimberly (aw/c) constructs herself as superior due to her fewer sexual partners, Rosie (m/c) sees herself as superior due to her greater experience and confidence.

Similarly, Hamilton and Armstrong (2009) note that middle-class girls in US viewed college as a time for sexual experimentation, hook-ups and promiscuity and that these behaviours were not only acceptable but encouraged as part of the college experience. Relationships were constructed as problematic for middle class college students as they presented a distraction from school work and career progression. Thus, the hook-up culture of college provided them with a way to engage in sex without the demands of a relationship. It is important to note that all of the middle class girls who participated in this study were university students, living away from parents and outside of the place in which they grew up. This anonymity and freedom from parental control might explain their more relaxed attitudes to sex. In Hamilton and Armstrong's study working class women were less invested in career and education, and were looking forward to marriage and children in the near future. In my study, working class women presented themselves as highly invested in relationship maintenance as this represents the only acceptable context for sexual activity. Comparatively, none of my middle-class participants disclosed ongoing, formal or exclusive relationships with boys.

For one of Hamilton and Armstrong's participants, casual sex represented a form of social education that involved learning "what it's supposed to feel like when I'm with someone that I want to be with" (2009: 605). She interpreted women who did not have this experience as worthy of pity, "I feel bad for some of my friends….They're still virgins" (*ibid*). Likewise, when Jenny, in my research, later asserts that their friends will change in terms of sexual experience over the three years of university, she reveals her shared understanding that greater experience offers increased status. When Rosie "hopes so", she and Jenny seem to be offering pity to the inexperienced friends and willing them to become as sexually liberated as themselves. Here, Rosie and Jenny construct themselves as knowledgeable through experience and as active sexual agents. Indeed, Rosie offers excuses not for her own proclivity, but for the lack of experience her friends have gained:

> ….lots of them have had like long term relationships but…like since they were about 14…or didn't have sex, didn't lose their virginity until they were about 17.

As Armstrong and colleagues (2014) argue, young women of higher status are not included in slut-shaming discourse – their higher status affords them the privilege of sexual expression without the constraints of public censure. Regarding Rosie and Jenny, both described themselves as middle-class and presented as confident, educated and popular and thus, could be described as higher status. According to Armstrong and colleagues (2014) this would protect them from slut-shaming discourse and this seems to be borne out by their confident disclosures of multiple sexual partners, sex outside of relationships and drunken one night stands (see also Bay-Cheng, 2015)

Similarly, Carly recognises that there is a double standard for boys and girls most of the time, but also argues that plenty of young women are promiscuous with few negative consequences:

> It really depends on the person. I think boys as a general rule are a bit more…like they don't mind about sleeping around with lots of people cos they don't get called names obviously. Whereas girls have got to be a bit more careful cos you get called like a slut and stuff if you do that. But at the same time like loads of girls sleep around loads and it doesn't (affect) them at all so I don't know. It's kind of…it depends on the person really (Carly, 19, m/c)

Her statement that the way people think about and perform sex and relationships depends on the individual, points to an acknowledgment that not all girls and young women are equally treated by society. It could be that some young women can "sleep around loads" while displaying appropriate levels of agency and are therefore considered acceptable. It could also point to a recognition that certain conditions offer exemption from slut-shaming – class or race privilege, or increased status, for example (Bay-Cheng, 2015).

This can be viewed in terms of being positioned and positioning (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Wetherell & Edley, 1998). Thus, working class women positioned other women as 'sluts' and were aware that their own behaviour could allow other women to position them as 'sluts' if caution was not exercised. Rosie and Jenny positioned themselves as sexually experienced and simultaneously recognised that this position was unshakeable, "can't really take that back though". They positioned others as 'drags' but acknowledged that this could (and implicitly, should) change over time.

On the topic of neoliberal sexual agency in modern culture, Bay-Cheng (2015: 281-2) asserts that a key element is to "showcase female sexual power and appetite: women commanding sexual attention, demanding sexual pleasure, and pursuing sexual fun, all without apology". Using this definition and the previous extracts, Jenny and Rosie set themselves up as ideal neoliberal sexual agents. However, we should be wary of accepting this assertion without reflection. While the pursuit of sex and sexual attention was entirely acceptable for Jenny and Rosie, they were certainly not able to demand sexual pleasure as the following extracts reveal:

> Helen - Do girls expect to have a good time when they're having sex, do you think, or is it just for the boy?
>
> Rosie – Erm…it depends.
>
> Jenny – I mean, it's nice to have a good time but I suppose, I wouldn't like go into sex knowing, yeah…it's not like with a boy they go into sex, they're like 'I know I'm going to enjoy this'. With girls, it's a bit more….it's going to go one way or the other.

Jenny's understanding that sex for women is "going to go one way or another" (it might be pleasurable but equally it might not) challenges Bay-Cheng's ideas of young women's agency. Jenny presents herself as lacking control over sexual outcomes and as a passive recipient of boys' actions. While Jenny may be free to choose when, where and with whom to have sex, seemingly without fear of social sanction, she reveals her lack of freedom to ensure her own sexual pleasure. It would appear that Jenny, otherwise a social and sexual agent, takes little responsibility for having a good time. Furthermore, the ability to communicate with a partner was also lacking for the girls:

> Helen - Is it important to be able to talk to your partner about what you like, and what they like, or is that not something you would do?
>
> Jenny – I don't know, not really.
>
> Rosie – I think it's quite…it's like unspoken about…I wouldn't be like "oh, I really like it when you do this".
>
> Jenny – It's a taboo subject.

It is interesting to note that a number of participants highlighted the importance of communication between partners, but this was usually framed in terms of feeling uncomfortable or not being happy:

> I think that is important as well, because if there is something you are not comfortable with then they should completely understand that. (Molly, 17, aw/c)

> It just ruins it for both of you really if you're not happy with something that they want or they are not happy with something you want, it's kind of like, you're not in sync at all and it's pointless really. (Claire, 17, aw/c)

The girls understood that sex could be ruined if one partner felt uncomfortable and recognised that it was important to be able to communicate with a partner about being "not happy with something". However, there was a lack of acknowledgement that sex might not be as pleasurable due to the absence of something that a girl particularly enjoyed, and the importance of communicating what you *did* want as well as what you did not. Thus, for Olivia:

> I don't think I feel uncomfortable saying "not that", you know if they suggest something or try something…like, I find that easy to do. But I'd find it harder to suggest like "could you try this?" or "would you like this?" I find that a bit more embarrassing. I tend to play it safe (20, m/c)

Olivia, while otherwise very confident and open-minded when discussing sexual matters, demonstrates the difference for her in being reactive, "not that", and proactive in assuring her own pleasure, "I'd find it harder to suggest like 'could you try this?'" These problems with disclosing desire echo previous points on the danger of talking about sex for women, suggesting that the taboo on female sex talk is deeply embedded in youth culture. Ida highlights another factor in the ability to communicate with a partner:

> In like, if it is the second or third time I'm sleeping with them then I'm perfectly comfortable in communication in saying this is what I like, this is what I don't like. Like asking them, gauging what they also enjoy but in a one night stand situation it is more a bit like keep it traditional. (18, m/c)

For Ida, the ability to be active in pursuit of sexual pleasure was dependant on the context of the experience. In a one night stand situation, she prefers to "keep it traditional" by which she means playing a passive role – when asked about the term 'traditional', she qualified this by saying, "Like, lie back and think of England". Taking responsibility for her own sexual pleasure was something that was only acceptable in the context of an ongoing sexual association. Similarly, while Jenny

and Rosie were confident to have sex with multiple partners, they were not immune from feeling self-conscious or worrying about their appearance:

> Jenny – Selfridges and seeing Dolce and Gabbana adverts. Victoria's Secret, that's the one. That's the one that makes girls feel bad about themselves.
>
> Rosie – Yeah, and you're like, 'I can't buy this underwear because I don't look like Karli Kloss'.

The image painted by Bay-Cheng of a sexually liberated, confident young woman exerting her right to sexuality is complicated by these factors. I will return to the subject of body image for young people in more detail in following chapters. However it is worth noting here that while Bay-Cheng (2015) seems to argue that neoliberalism has offered young women unfettered sexual agency – indeed, it demands sexual agency – there are more complex factors involved in showcasing female sexual power than simply the amount of sexual partners or the acceptability of sex outside of a relationship.

The Role of Alcohol

The use of alcohol and other substances is often described as playing a facilitating role in sexual encounters (Griffin et al., 2009; Bellis et al., 2008; Bullock & Room, 2006; Rhodes & Cusick, 2002), mainly due to its side effects of decreased inhibitions and altered ways of thinking (Bellis et al., 2008; Bullock & Room, 2006; Tolman, 2002). Bellis and colleagues describe "an epidemic…of binge drinking" (2008) in European cultures and there is a "particular concern with 'binge drinking' amongst 18 to 25 year olds" (Griffin et al., 2009: 2) in the UK, where excessive drinking is considered customary among young people (*ibid*). Anoop Nayak (2003) highlights the centrality of drinking in North East culture, particularly as a bonding activity for working class men. Equally, university students have long had a reputation for drinking to excess (Griffin et al., 2009), to the extent that many universities now feature information about local nightlife in their publicity. Furthermore, alcohol consumption is not limited to those over the legal age limit , Griffin and colleagues cite the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD; Hibell et al., 2003) which found that 15 and 16 year olds in Britain recounted "the highest levels of drunkenness and positive attitudes to alcohol consumption in Europe" (2009:3). It was, therefore,

expected that the young participants interviewed for this study would reference alcohol when discussing their social activities. A number of young people described the links between alcohol and sex, particularly in terms of impaired judgement and regrettable encounters:

> Like I would never go out sober and go home with a random boy but sometimes when I've had a drink it seems like a good idea. And then it's really not. (Stacey, 20, m/c)

> Most definitely because you think that most things are a good idea when you are mortal, when you are drunk. And when you wake up the next morning you are like…oh what did I do that for? There's just regrets after regrets. (Jesse, 18, w/c)

> If you are in a relationship, you have to enjoy it (having sex). But it doesn't really matter, cos it's normally when everybody's drunk, isn't it? You don't know what's going on. You wake up and you don't even know. Can't remember. (Harry, 23, w/c)

These participants accepted the potential that alcohol-induced sexual activity might lead to negative consequences and guilt or remorse, yet this did not dissuade them from participating nor from recounting their stories. However, this was not the case for all participants. As previously noted, drunken sex was seen to be indicative of sluttiness and women who engaged in such behaviour were the subject of ridicule by other women. There did not seem to be equal condemnation of drunken young men, implying that men are not subject to the same neoliberalist ideals of constant control over one's actions.

Yet, incidental sex as a result of inebriation was not the only narrative that twinned excessive drinking and casual sex. It appeared that young people intentionally used alcohol in certain circumstances in order to facilitate the accomplishment of sexual goals. Thus, it was not simply that young people wanted to have sex as a result of drinking, but also that they drank deliberately because they wanted to have sex:

> I think that is why a lot of people lose their big V (virginity) when they are drunk cos there's less pressure. Especially when it's with someone who's new (Michaela, 16, w/c)

> That's half my pals. They need to get drunk to talk to a lass (Harry, 23, w/c)

These examples illustrate the ways in which young people might use alcohol because they appreciate results such as increased confidence to approach members of the opposite sex, diminished inhibition and feeling less pressure on performance. Intoxication also gives subjects free reign to behave out of character and offers justification for actions that might otherwise be viewed as irresponsible, such as having unprotected sex or Stacey's admission that she would have sex with a stranger while drunk, but never while sober. In similar findings, Bellis and colleagues noted that young alcohol consumers placed value on the results of drinking, particularly the sexual effects (2008) even though excessive alcohol consumption is associated with a number of negative health outcomes, such as decreased condom use and increased levels of STI transmission. It was not solely a young person's own drunkenness that was considered advantageous to sexual activity. As Tom states:

> Boys think with their cocks and it's just 'Oh, she's drunk, I'll take advantage' stuff like that.

That sex and alcohol are intertwined in the minds of young people is perhaps unsurprising, given that most participants recalled their school-based SRE taking place within curriculum of Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE or another similarly titled umbrella subject) that also included teaching on alcohol awareness and substance misuse. The legal age limit on consumption of alcohol reinforces its status as a boundary marker between childhood and adulthood, just as sexual activity is thought to confer grown-up status on those who participate. Similarly, drunken exploits can offer opportunities for boasting and banter as can sexual conquests.

Conclusions

There are marked contrasts between middle class and working class participants, represented by their relationship to, and investment in, slut-shaming. Working class participants, particularly those belonging to the aspirational working class, were keen to distance themselves from more sexually experienced contemporaries and highlight their own limited experience. Participants constructed themselves as knowledgeable, not through experience, but through reiteration of group understandings of 'the right kind of sex under the right kind of

circumstances', a standpoint reinforced by SRE discourse. Having sex for the wrong reasons, such as in order to boast, could be said to breach appropriate codes of working-class femininity as discussion of sexual exploits and boasting about one's sexual partners were usually viewed as uniquely male privileges.

Slut-shaming was also linked to class, signifying not just a slur on sexual reputation but also a communication of class inferiority. Aspirational working class women in my study were particularly judgemental of other girls' sexual exploits, whether real or imagined, and were particularly invested in slut-shaming as a way to reinforce their own perceived social superiority. In contrast, middle class young women presented as less invested in slut-shaming. In some cases they worked from the opposing view, that those with less experience than themselves were to be pitied. They demonstrated a 'class privilege' that appeared to exempt them from labelling, or at least, from the ill effects that a ruined reputation might offer.

A key issue in the maintenance of sexual reputation was agency, and being in control, disciplined and exerting free will regarding sexual activity were deemed to be ideal circumstances. Agentic performance of sexuality, whether actual or perceived, could protect a young woman from slut-shaming. Bay-Cheng's agency matrix (2015) is somewhat supported by the findings here, although there are more complex, complicating factors at play. While some young women demonstrated agency in choosing when and with whom to have sex, there was little evidence of young women feeling empowered to be proactive in their own sexual pleasure. While girls seemed to take responsibility for speaking up about feeling uncomfortable, in accordance with SRE discourse that places women as 'sexual gatekeepers' and focuses on 'saying no', there was no available discourse for young women to advocate for their own sexual pleasure. I will explore this topic in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 8: They don't teach you that in school! : Porn as Sex(y) Education

> "In the absence of acceptable forms of sex education in the schools, the conventional media, now supplemented by the Internet, are de facto providing sex education for our children and adolescents" (Zillman, 2000:43)

> "A lack of available or high quality school-based sex education may open the door for emerging technologies to serve as resources for sexual script building" (Simon & Daneback, 2013:305)

The above quotes illustrate the potential consequences of poor quality SRE in schools – when information from school is not relevant or adequate, the gap in knowledge is filled by the media, the internet and new technologies. Moreover, the quotes also serve to highlight the enduring nature of this issue, despite the interval of thirteen years and enormous changes in the capability and ubiquity of new technologies, the quotes articulate the same anxiety.

This chapter aims to examine the relationship between young people, sex(uality) and uses of new media technology. In a climate where the dangers of the online world and specifically, internet pornography are emphasised, particularly with respect to 'vulnerable' young people, I am interested to discover how young people themselves negotiate their emerging sexual identities through technology. The ubiquity of mobile phones, particularly smart phones with incorporated digital photography and internet access, mean that young people now have unprecedented levels of privacy. The majority are no longer limited to using the internet on the family computer, but can access the internet 24/7 and without parental surveillance or control. This will be taken up in more detail in the next chapter. In this chapter, I want to focus on the role of the internet as a source of sex education.

The Internet can be an invaluable source for teens who are otherwise marginalised in some way; for example LGBT-identifying young people, those in a rural setting or those who are part of a racial or religious minority in their locality (Pascoe, 2011). The internet provides a service predicated on "availability,

acceptability, affordability, anonymity and aloneness" – key characteristics for young people seeking to answer questions and queries about sex (Barak & Fisher, 2002 cited in Simon & Daneback, 2013: 315). I wanted to understand how this impacts upon young people's use of the internet to communicate about sex, both in terms of actively seeking factual information and also in the perpetuation of cultural norms. As noted in previous chapters, young people view SRE at school as woefully lacking in useful and relevant information, so how does the internet help to plug that knowledge void?

"Pregnant, must be!" – Dr Google and Health Information Online

When asked if young people had ever used the internet to find out information about sex and relationships, a number of participants disclosed searching for specific information. Thus, Alan describes his understandings of the internet as a resource:

> Yeah, so like something had let's say happened or let's say you had a very specific question but in your year 6 class you might have had a specific question but you wouldn't have wanted to ask it in front of 30 people. Whereas the internet can be used to answer specific questions, I wouldn't say it's general, the internet isn't just one general…you find out everything about sex there. It might be more, "oh, I need to know this little bit of information" either you haven't been able to ask anybody about it and you're just wondering. You're looking for an answer. Or you're using it to…something has happened and you need help. (Alan, 19, m/c)

The above highlights how the internet fills an information void when SRE elsewhere has been inadequate. Feeling unable to ask a question in front of classmates – something which was a concern of a number of participants and has been noted earlier in this thesis - can lead young people to seek answers online. Similarly, when parents are unapproachable regarding such topics, the internet can provide a less personal and less risky option as described by Kimberly, "Put it this way, I wouldn't ask my mam. I would ask the internet." (19, aw/c).

Olivia describes her quest to discover quite fundamental biological knowledge, which you might expect to have been covered during statutory science lessons:

> I do remember like Googling diagrams of what female downstairs looked like cos I didn't know where I wee'd from and I was like, why don't I know this? (Olivia, 20, m/c)

The feminist implications of this omission have been analysed in greater detail earlier in this thesis, but I include it here as an example of simple factual information that young people are forced to seek online as a result of poor SRE in school. Similarly, Penny's use of the internet to research sexually transmitted diseases mentioned by boys at school would be avoidable, if such topics were covered thoroughly during sex education:

> Yeah…like if someone….if a boy come out with something daft like a sex disease or something and all of us were like 'eh, what's that?' they'd be like 'Google it' so we would and it would just tell you then. (Penny, 16, w/c)

The anonymity of the internet, so frequently assumed to be a danger for young people, was something they valued, particularly when it came to questions about sex that might be a source of embarrassment. Thus Kimberly (19, aw/c) asserts, "I think, it's that like anonymity kind of thing. Like you can wipe it afterwards and it never happened." Similarly Amy (20, aw/c) describes the speed with which the internet can answer queries, "If you're curious one minute, you get the answer and it's gone. That's it. Nobody has to know."

Use of the internet in place of seeking medical advice was also frequently disclosed, particularly by young women. However, whether or not the girls thought the internet provided accurate and reliable information was variable, as these excerpts from interviews demonstrate:

> I've probably done it in the past but I wouldn't rely on it as a source of information. I can probably admit to using it, you know, if something is worrying you after an experience, I can probably admit to using it once just to see what…you know, symptoms were, kind of thing. But I wouldn't rely…that wouldn't be my first go-to thing. (Chloe, 20, w/c)
>
> Yeah, Google. It's quite bad though cos I do always end up thinking I'm like pregnant or worse……. yeah I always seem pregnant. I'm like, spotting? Pregnant, must be. Bloated? Pregnant, must be. (Jenny, 19, m/c)

> Well, for me, usually if it's like, if I am ever worried about anything. I think we do that a lot……like say if like, I know a lot of people like symptom check and stuff like that……you just want to know as much as possible. So you just turn to the internet cos it's the most reliable thing. (Claire, 17, aw/c)

While regulation of the internet is often thought to present a key strategy in counteracting the effects of sexualisation (for example, Papadopoulos, 2010), the young participants in this research relied on the web as a vital source of information that was missing from their sex education or that they felt too embarrassed to ask someone in person. In the main, they were able to distinguish reliable sources from others and a number of participants mentioned using NHS information online as a trusted source, despite its apparent propensity for diagnosing pregnancy!

We can compare this 'savviness' of the internet to young people's experiences of peer group information. Participants cited learning about sex from older friends as a valuable and valued experience, while simultaneously taking into account that information from friends is not always reliable. In the same way, young people can and do seek advice from the internet, while understanding that not everything online is true or trustworthy. Much of the sexualisation discourse assumes young people are passive consumers of the internet and easily influenced by negative messages – indeed reports such as those by Papadopoulos (2010) and Bailey (2011) depend on such assumptions in order to support their advocacy for censorship and child protection interventions. However the young people I spoke to had a critical and analytical approach to the online world, and media in general, that offered them the ability to 'pick and choose' which information to trust.

Edwards (2016: 269) notes that her participants, looking back on their SRE in school, can identify feelings that "there were things 'they weren't telling us'". As I have argued in earlier chapters, SRE is controlled by adults who determine which knowledge is appropriate, acceptable, useful or relevant, and this is a source of frustration for young people. This control might be communicated explicitly via the curriculum – the information that is formally passed on during lessons, what topics are covered and how. Equally, it is communicated by the silencing of certain topics, as Edwards' participants felt. This can happen at a structural level;

a school policy to ignore homosexuality on the syllabus, for example, limits young people's knowledge of the spectrum of sexuality and reinforces ideas that heterosexuality is normal and natural. Homosexuality becomes an unsuitable topic for young people to discuss. It can also happen on an individual level. Thus, when a teacher refuses to answer Olivia's question about female arousal, the teacher is determining that that information is inappropriate or irrelevant and is actively denying Olivia's right to that knowledge. The reasons for evading particular issues or questions are somewhat irrelevant here; teacher embarrassment, parental pressure, government guidance all contribute to the same outcome - a delimitation by adults of what they think constitutes acceptable knowledge for young people. Ironically, it is this very imposition that discourses of sexualisation seek to problematise. When that 'off-limits' knowledge is then actively sought out from other sources, we can see this as young people "attempting to take control over the kind of information they had access to" (Edwards, 2016:274). Similarly, we might observe my participants' use of the internet in terms of an expression of agency. By using the internet to satisfy her curiosity and answer her questions, Olivia is able to influence her own education, using the internet as a place for unrestricted learning.

While commentators on the problem of sexualisation often focus on the internet as productive of oppression and pressure on young people, using the evidence above, we can also view the internet as an emancipatory, educational space. The anonymity of the internet offers young people the opportunity to ask questions free from the constraints of respectability, reputation or ridicule. It also removes them from adult-controlled ideas of what information they should be allowed access to, giving young people the autonomy to actively guide their own sex education (Edwards, 2016). As Parker notes:

> "The internet, while bringing challenges, has also brought the ability for young people to educate themselves about intimate or embarrassing issues, meet like-minded people, explore their sexuality and identity, and conduct virtual and long-distance relationships" (2014:13).

The Problem of Porn

A particular area of concern around young people and the internet, as outlined previously, is the accessibility of pornographic images online (for example, Ollis, 2016a; Tanton et al., 2015; Parker, 2014; Papadopoulos, 2010, Ollis, 2016a). Watching sexually explicit material is often deemed dangerous for young people and to have negative consequences for their sexual maturation (Albury, 2014; Sun et al., 2014; Horvath et al., 2013; McKee, 2010; Flood, 2009). Commentators cite the ubiquity of internet porn as a major contributor to the sexualisation of society (Papadopoulos, 2010) as young women, particularly, are said to feel increased pressure to present themselves as 'sexy' and as ready for sex at all times (Coy et al., 2010; Levy, 2005; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Holland et al., 2004). Furthermore, mainstream pornography is argued to have become more hardcore, the media more sexually explicit and imagery that would once have been considered obscene, now part of the everyday 'wallpaper' of young people's lives (Bailey, 2011; Attwood & Smith, 2011; Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa, 2007; McNair, 2002).

For social commentator Ariel Levy (2005), there is evidence to suggest that using pornography as a source of sex education reproduces a very narrow ideal of sexuality and reinforces ideas that a woman's value lies in her sexuality. This puts enormous pressure on girls to "perform" their sexuality, even when they do not have the desire and makes the acts depicted in porn seem "'normal' and even routine in heterosexual relationships" (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005:142). Sun and colleagues find that pornography provides, "a powerful heuristic model which is implicated in men's expectations and behaviours during sexual encounters" (2014: 1).

Pornography has long been blamed by the second wave feminist movement for women's continued oppression and for sexual violence (some examples include Coward, 1987; Dworkin, 1981; Brownmiller, 1975). A popular slogan of activist group Women Against Pornography neatly summarizes their stance, "Pornography is the theory, Rape is the practice" (quoted in Levy, 2005:61). This standpoint is enduring and accepted as a 'truth' in much anti-violence against women campaigning (a contemporary example would be the EVAW coalition).

Thus, pornography is thought to be productive of "beliefs that women are sex objects" and adherence to gender roles that encourage male dominance and power (Horvath et al., 2013:7). However, there has been no "clear cut scientific quantification of the harmful (or beneficial) effects of pornography" (Hardy, 2004:3; also Baker, 2016; McNair, 2014). Similarly, while the discourse of sexualisation argues that pornography is becoming increasingly violent and thus, normalizes male violence against women (a statement contended by a number of commentators such as McNair, 2014; McKee, Albury & Lumby, 2008), there is little to support "linear, causal effects on male behaviour towards women" (McNair, 2014:4). Indeed, empirical research into the impact of pornography on young people's sexual development is limited (Spišák, 2016). In the following quote, Kateřina Lišková discusses pornography as "social reality" which is particularly illustrative when discussing young people:

> "It follows that pornography does not simply express or interpret experience, it substitutes for it. It does not only bring a message from reality, it stands for reality. And because representation is reality, pornography is no less an act than the rape and torture it represents." (2007, 43/44)

Therefore, to apply Lišková's logic to young people, it can be said that pornography acts as a substitute in the absence of any practical experience, and as representations of sexual violence and female subordination become normalized, they become the reality of sexual experience.

These arguments, however, can be criticised as treating pornography as one homogenous genre without taking into consideration the many different kinds of porn available. There are certainly pornographic films which depict rape and sexualized torture but it seems short-sighted to suggest that any explicit representation of sex promotes violence towards women. Indeed Döring (2009) explains that violent pornography is usually accessible only on pay-per-view sites, which would limit its availability for most teenagers. Furthermore, these viewpoints leave little room for women who consume and enjoy pornography. If we assume that all pornography is oppressive to women and therefore any woman who enjoys pornography must be a victim of sexualisation, we deny such women both agency and authenticity. As we have seen in previous chapters, to

be perceived as acting without agency had serious consequences for young women's sexual reputations. More than this, we confer shame and embarrassment on those "cultural dupes" (Jackson & Vares, 2015a: 349) who perpetuate their own subordination, feelings which are then internalised. Thus, simplistic connections of misogynistic porn to self-deception work to silence women's desire, what Michelle Fine (1988) positions as the "missing discourse of desire" in school-based sex education.

I would argue that there is no space within discourses of sexualisation and anti-pornography for the support of young women's sexual curiosity, desire or satisfaction. If it is widely accepted that boys will seek out pornography in the absence of explicit information at school (Limmer, 2010; Allen, 2004), in order to widen their knowledge of positions and sexual practices (Mowlabocus, Harbottle & Witzel, 2013), to satisfy their curiosity (Baker, 2016), or to consolidate their gender identity – why is it so unbelievable or unacceptable that young women may want to do the same?

Porn as SRE

Young men, in particular, have expressed a desire for access to more explicit information (Limmer, 2010; Allen, 2006; Allen, 2004) and they describe porn as helpful because it offers a specifically practical knowledge of sex (Albury, 2014; Hilton, 2007; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000). One problem with using pornography as a source of sexual information, however, is that what is depicted can present a limited view of sex and of gender roles. As Allen so succinctly expresses, "mainstream pornography is a key way by which hegemonic male sexual subjectivities are constituted and this construction is deleterious for sexual equality" (2004:157).

Concerns around using porn as a source of sexual information have led to calls for this to be addressed within SRE (Baker, 2016; Ollis, 2016a; Brook, the PSHE Association & the Sex Education Forum, 2014; Haste, 2013). Baker's (2016) survey of young people found that the majority of participants supported the inclusion in SRE of the risks of viewing online pornography. Ollis describes the need to offset boys' reliance on porn for sexual information and highlights "the importance of SRE as a reality check against which they can explore what they

see and understand from pornography" (2016a: 55). Ida describes in her interview how the reality of sex can come as a shock to young men who have educated themselves using porn:

> Yeah, I mean I know, a lot of my male friends have been like have said that the majority of their sex education has come from porn. And then when it comes to real life it is a bit of a culture shock in that you have certain expectations and obviously a normal person is not going to fulfil that erm….so to them it is quite difficult to calibrate with what they've seen and what's actually going to happen. (Ida, 18, m/c)

If pornography is said to be productive of distorted ideas about gender, sex and relationships, for which there is no antidote in school-based sex education, there are fears that young men then uncritically appropriate these ideas into their own sexual scripts and activities. A girl's sexual performance becomes a key attribute above all else. In addition, fetishization of a particular body type, characterised by shaved pubic hair (Albury, 2014) and a normalisation of acts such as anal sex and 'facials' (ejaculating into a woman's face) are thought to lead young men to pressurise girls into conforming to what they have understood as 'normal sex' through pornography (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005). I want to make clear that my use of the term 'normalisation' is not intended to portray these acts as abnormal, rather my point is that these practices, ubiquitous in much pornography, are ones which require further consent. Agreement to sexual intercourse does not automatically include consent to receiving a facial, however as this represents a 'normal' ending in much pornography (Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa, 2007), an inexperienced individual could be forgiven for assuming that this is the way all sexual encounters end.

Boys' incorporation of pornography into their own sex lives was something commented on by a number of female participants, such as Jade in this example:

> Jade - I think boys have got high expectations.
>
> Helen - What kind of expectations?
>
> Jade - Like that every girl's got to be like a porn star.
>
> Helen - And what would a porn star be like?
>
> Jade - I don't know just ….don't know. Dead good. (16, w/c)

From this extract we can see that while Jade states that boys place expectations on girls to be "like a pornstar", she cannot give any details about what that means, falling back on the explanation, "dead good". This inarticulacy could be accounted for not necessarily by a lack of knowledge or understanding but simply by Jade feeling too embarrassed to go into more explicit detail. However, I am interested in young people's conceptualisations of pornstars as sexual models to compare themselves to, therefore the inability to pin down the qualities that make a pornstar an aspirational figure seems significant. I will return to this point for a fuller examination of the description "like a pornstar" later in this chapter. Similarly, Charlotte and Michaela stumble over what porn teaches boys about sex:

> Helen - Do you think they (boys) learn anything from porn?
>
> Michaela – I think they do try and…..
>
> Both – Re-enact it.
>
> Charlotte – I can imagine.
>
> Helen - And is that a bad thing?
>
> Charlotte – It puts girls…
>
> Both – …under pressure.
>
> Charlotte – …to be like something that's…like a career really. Pornstars…it is a career really, isn't it? And obviously they know what they are doing and have done it for however long and girls…whatever age…are like 'oh, I've got to be like her, and what if he thinks I'm not good? What if it doesn't look right?'

This exchange shows the girls sharing ideas, as evidenced by finishing each other's sentences and simultaneous answers. Charlotte and Michaela do not cite any specific evidence that boys learn from porn, what troubles them is the potential for re-enactment and this "puts girls under pressure", although we might assume that Charlotte has no actual experience of this by her statement, "I can imagine". Like Jade, comparison to female pornstars centres on performance, "what if he thinks I'm not good?" Similarly, the pressure of "oh, I've got to be like her" is stated without description of what 'she' is like, other than 'good'. Thus, it might be concluded that the idea that pornography negatively affects young women because of the pressure to conform to boys' expectations is prevalent

among girls, that it represents a truth, even when the girls have no personal experience and cannot describe boys' expectations or actions.

Rosie, a university student and from a middle class background, demonstrates that this issue does not just affect younger, working class or less experienced people. Here she describes boys' recreation of porn as symptomatic of poor education:

> They don't know any different from it, because they've just watched porn and they obviously just go with what they've been watching…which is very bold.

Importantly, she also states, "they don't know any different from it". The idea that boys get *all* of their sexual information from pornography, and that this trumps anything that they might find out from school, parents or from less explicit media, was common among the young women and there was consensus that this information did not reflect the reality of sexual experience. The young women presented themselves as savvier than the boys they knew, often emphasising their own knowledge that pornography does not reflect real life, "it's a career really, isn't it?" as opposed to boys' perceived repetition of what they have seen, "they obviously just go with what they have been watching". Yet, despite this critical analysis of pornography, knowledge that it is done by professionals and that it does not reflect real sex, young women still described feeling pressure to live up to boys' perceived expectations and revealed body consciousness and performance anxiety. This was particularly pertinent for younger girls and those identified as working class.

What is most interesting about the answers given by young women on the subject of pornography, is that not a single female participant stated that they, personally, watched porn or had intentionally watched porn in the past. They all presented porn as a definitively male pastime, something that boys did and that they, themselves, had little desire to know about. The following, more detailed exchange from a joint interview (edited for brevity) is typical of young women's thoughts about boys' consumption of pornography and their own 'knowledge' of how this affects male sexual activity:

Claire – I think, yeah, it just depends on what they have been taught. And I think for boys…I think porn is a big thing too, isn't it? Cos that does affect expectations, doesn't it, really?

Molly – Yeah, I think that can definitely affect a relationship.

Helen - So boys watching porn and then….

Claire – …and then just expecting the same things from…

Molly – …a girlfriend and stuff, not that it has happened to me! But I think that can… in some situations that could happen. Definitely.

Claire – And the boys (inaudible) obviously I don't know what goes on and what they watch and stuff, but it must be really unrealistic. But do you know what I mean, when boys…? Expecting girls to be like they see in porn.

The above shows Molly and Claire's positioning of pornography as both important and influential on boys' sexual behaviour. When asked if girls watch porn too, they begin to discuss the gendered nature of sexuality in terms of shame and embarrassment:

Molly – No, I don't think so. But what I think it is, if…I think it is something that if it's a big thing like, it's not shameful. Boys talk about it within their friendship groups, it's a big thing to be talked about. And if girls did, you wouldn't know about it. That's exactly what it is. It is something that boys big up as well, within their group. Like even when they are with us and stuff, you still hear about it. It's not something that they are like, ashamed about. We hear about it from them all the time.

Claire – I don't know why that is though. I don't know why they feel like it is ok but we feel really ashamed. Like we feel embarrassed. I mean, I don't know.

Helen - Do you know what kind of porn the boys are watching?

Molly – No, I've got no idea at all.

Claire – No idea and really don't want to ask. I don't want to know either.

Both girls are keen to exhibit their knowledge of pornography's ill effects, describing how they "hear about it from them all the time" and it can "definitely affect a relationship". However, Molly is keen to point out that "not that it has happened to me!" Therefore, in the absence of actual experience, Molly and Claire construct a hypothetical reality, pornography becomes something that affects boys and *other* girls' relationships, but not their own. This serves an important purpose, to present themselves as untainted by pornography, which

they themselves describe as shameful and embarrassing for girls. Similarly, they repeatedly claim total ignorance of the details of boys' pornography consumption, "no, I've got no idea at all"; "no idea and really don't want to ask. I don't want to know either"; "obviously I don't know what goes on and what they watch and stuff, but it must be really unrealistic." Yet by reasserting their ignorance, they reveal their previous assertions to be assumptions.

One female participant in McKee's study of porn consumers neatly sums up the issue, "Women don't often look at pornography because we're all told that's not what nice women do" (2006: 532). Similarly, Clarissa Smith (2007:172), in her book on reading women's porn, discusses the taboo on discussion between women of sexuality and desire, "until women realize or are prepared to discuss their sexuality openly in order to make a statement of their pleasure in sex then equality between the sexes is as far off as ever". This disavowal of pornography was widespread across female participants:

> It's like their… it's like boys generally watch porn, girls generally read. (Rosie, 20, m/c)

> Very few of my female friends watch porn. Very few. (Ida, 18, m/c)

For Charlotte and Michaela in their joint interview, the question of whether girls watch porn required a personal rebuttal:

> Helen - So do you think girls watch porn?

> Charlotte – Well, I haven't

> Michaela – I wouldn't….nah, I just couldn't.

Michaela's response that she *would* not watch porn, suggests a personal distaste and acknowledges that she chooses not to participate in its consumption. She then qualifies her response with *could* not, indicating that watching porn is not actually an option, it represents something that she is unable to do. The implication in these responses is that, in fact, watching pornography is something that girls *should* not do. Thus, a culture of using pornography as an educational tool colludes with the silencing of women on the topic of desire, to produce a generation of young people with a very singular conception of sex. If pornography operates to silence women (Liškova, 2007) and women's silence gives pornography the power to dictate sexuality, we should be asking how this vicious

circle can be broken. If women's silence on the topic of sexuality contributes to their lack of sexual agency, it might be concluded that the censorship of any representations of female desire only extends this silence.

The Boys' Point of View

As noted earlier, the young women interviewed for this thesis were convinced that boys watched pornography and this then affected the way they thought about women and the way they approached their real life sexual relationships. However, in interviews, the young men were often as critical of the messages that porn might give to young people and presented themselves as equally savvy about the lack of reality in pornography:

> Like, people can watch porn on the internet as well. And that's probably as well not younger kids but obviously teenagers and stuff, that can influence them as well. If they've found these sources online it can give them maybe a particular message about sex… either rose-tinted, as like this is how your sex life will be or quite bad messages that… of like how women are subjected and males will dominate or something like that. People can watch anything and that can spread messages as well, that can pass on messages. (Alan, 19, m/c)

> They see these things on the internet and they get a false image of what sexual relationships like are and so either they get like a really over-hyped image of what it is or it is completely different so it can often lead to confusion and stuff like that. (Bradley, 17, m/c)

> I think it, like…..pornography in general is like…not the same as real…like sexual relationships. It is similar obviously by the actions, but it isn't the same as if you were in a relationship with someone so people can get an image of how they think a relationship could be when that's probably not the case. (Bart, 19, aw/c)

The boys in these excerpts all disclose their knowledge of porn as a "false image of what sexual relationships are like" and "not the same as real….sexual relationships" and recognise that this might be a particular problem for inexperienced young people. In the same way that Molly and Claire emphasised that their relationships had not been affected by pornography, but other people's relationships definitely were, the boys reference other young people being confused or getting a "false image", but not themselves. Thus, "it can give *them*…a particular message" "*people* can get an image…" "…*they* get like a really over-hyped image". Indeed, the young men who disclosed that they, themselves,

had or did consume pornography were keen to emphasise their awareness of the differences between porn scripts and real life sex. Here, Jesse is keen to promote himself as both knowledgeable and experienced:

> Aye, so it's not even realistic. It doesn't even happen like they produce it anyway…. I can tell you that …..It's not the way it is online, most definitely not. (18, w/c)

Similarly, Reggie and Tom, speaking in separate interviews, each stressed the difference between porn and real life sex:

> It's like an act isn't it, basically porn, it's acting so really they've got to do what they've got to do in front of the camera. It's meant to be a calm, relaxing time when you're with someone that you love, but I would say that porn just isn't like that, I don't think. (Tom, 17, w/c)

> I mean, in porn it is not intimate. Like the way that you actually are with a woman, you are supposed to be intimate and it's supposed to be like…it's supposed to be like….you are supposed to like caress them and touch them…where there is no real touching involved in porn. It's just pure sex. (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

In these extracts, both Reggie and Tom offer more explicitly romantic discourses of real life sex as opposed to what they both admitted to viewing in pornography. Tom asserts that sex should be "a calm, relaxing time when you're with someone that you love" while acknowledging that "porn just isn't like that". Reggie, equally, addresses the lack of intimacy in porn when compared to his own sexual relationships, "Like the way that you actually are with a woman, you are supposed to be intimate".

Both Reggie and Tom, young, working class men frame their real life sexual relations in terms of a particular conscientiousness regarding their sexual responsibilities. Use of phrases such as "it's meant to be" and "It's supposed to be" offer evidence that these young men understand a hierarchy of sexual activity, one which places intimate, loving relationships at the peak and these represent something that a young man should strive to attain. By extension, porn-style "pure sex", presumably sex without intimacy and "no real touching", becomes something that a young man might enjoy looking at, but should not do when "you actually are with a women". This offers an interesting rejoinder to the young women who described boys as keen to re-enact porn and expecting girls to perform like porn stars. I will return to the subject of conceptualisations of how

sex *should* be at the end of this chapter. Young men in individual interviews offered similar rationale for accessing pornography:

> Erm….I suppose yes in a sense of you start to understand where you are supposed to put it and like how you have sex (Reggie, on whether pornography was useful)

> I don't think they go on for information to be honest with you. I think they go on, just cos they want to watch it. (Jesse, 18, w/c)

> I remember at like 14 being like "oh what's that?" cos you just think "Why? What?" you know, you are curious, you are generally curious (Bradley, 17, m/c)

Tom makes explicit that his consumption of pornography was motivated by the desire for education:

> Tom - Aye yeah, curiosity. Educate myself a bit more. See what it was like for myself, do you know what I mean?

> Helen - Do you think you learnt anything?

> Tom - Not really. Apart from how to do it, do you know what I mean? That's the main thing not anything really special apart from like what you would do and stuff like that.

Satisfying curiosity and learning the mechanics of sex seem powerful incitements to viewing pornography, particularly in the absence of the explicit information that young men report lacking in SRE (Limmer, 2010; Allen, 2004). Similarly, porn as a subject for humour and as a mechanism for group bonding and implication of knowledge was also demonstrated in the following focus group extract:

> Helen - But you did mention watching videos?

> All – Aye.

> Sean – I used to have a load on my phone.

> Harry – It's dirty. It's dirty but like…it's alright, like.

> (All laughing)

> Helen - Do you think it taught you anything?

> Harry – Not really like. Just a load of noise, if you ask me.

> (All laughing)

All the young men here readily admit to watching videos and Sean particularly, boasts about his 'stash'. What is interesting is his use of the past tense – "I used to have a load on my phone", rather than "I have…" This could be explained by the setting of the interview within a youth service and with youth workers present, Sean could be trying to present himself as responsible by not having pornographic videos on his phone now. I think this is unlikely, however, given the group's previous disclosures around safe sex and sexting (explored in more detail in the following chapter), presenting themselves as responsible did not seem high on the agenda for these young men.

Another explanation might be that having a supply of pornographic videos, implying their use as masturbatory material, is considered a substitute for real sexual experience. Sean's status as sexually active means that he no longer needs a 'stash' of porn – while the lads might still watch pornography, either for humour or as a bonding activity, it serves no real sexual purpose for him. Similarly, Tom describes watching pornography as being indicative of a lack of practical experience, "Like it's like "oh, why do you watch porn? Is it cos you're still a virgin?"" (17, w/c). Both Tom and Reggie, in their interviews, associate this behaviour with immaturity and inexperience:

> Yeah. Like porn and stuff like that. I have done…I have been through all of that, do you know what I mean. I don't even see the use of it now, do you know what I mean? I actually don't even watch it anymore. I think ….I don't need it, do you know what I mean? It's not something that I do anymore. I done it as I was a kid, a young kid, but not anymore. (Tom, 17, w/c)

> Especially people who are virgins and who have never had sex before, they've got this fake expectation of what it's supposed to be like and they are used to having a different variety because obviously there are different varieties of porn that when it gets to it, you've sort of dulled your pleasure senses anyway. (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

Tom's stance, in particular, is likely to have been informed by his relationship status and his desire to become a father at the age of seventeen (as discussed in more detail in Chapter 6). Yet, this can also illustrate young men's complex relationship with pornography. Watching pornography can offer young men the opportunity to engage in banter and can consolidate their masculinity within a group. Yet, without having actual sexual experience, this becomes more

troublesome, to learn how to have sex from pornography is considered immature. This could explain why young men are keen to express that real sex is different from sex on camera, to confirm that they have had a real sexual experience. Therefore, while discourses of sexualisation assume that young men cannot distinguish between pornography and real life, leading them to potentially mistreat their sexual partners, the reality here is that young men can and do understand the differences and that acknowledging these differences serves an important purpose in the recuperation of masculinity. This is not to say that some boys do not try to recreate porn scenes or even that this in itself is always inherently bad, but young men are underestimated when it is assumed that they cannot differentiate. While this standpoint for young men may not come from a particularly egalitarian or feminist perspective, it seems decidedly anti-feminist to treat young men as ignorant and therefore by extension somehow not responsible for their behaviour.

Addressing the Effects

Pornography is often charged with depicting acts of violence against women which is said to contribute to a normalisation of male dominance and aggression towards women (Papadopoulos, 2010; Levy, 2005; Coward, 1987; Dworkin, 1981). Penny, aged 16, discusses specifically violent pornography as resulting in boys' desensitisation to violence and as productive of the acceptability of violence against women.

> Penny - Not that I've ever watched it but I've heard that it's like loads of abusive porn and stuff and I don't think that should be allowed cos I think if a young boy's watching that, he'll thing 'eee, it's ok to do it'.
>
> Helen - What do you mean by abusive porn?
>
> Penny - Like where the boy's like slapping her like really hard in the face and like stuff like that.
>
> Helen - So a man hitting a woman while they are having sex?
>
> Penny - Yeah. Like really punching.
>
> Helen - Is that the kind of thing that people watch do you think?
>
> Penny - Like, I think boys do it, laughing about it.

Like Molly and Claire, Penny states that she has never watched porn, but she has specific ideas about what is involved and the consequences of watching such material. Her assertion that the boys who watch abusive porn, laugh about it and think "it's ok" to hit women during sex, corroborates her narrative of the cause and effect model of porn consumption.

Using this concept that pornography has a causal effect on violence against women is one of the foundations of debate around sexualisation (Papadopoulos, 2010). However, the subjectivity of interpretation must not be lost in the debate around pornography. Personal interpretation is at the heart of any 'reading' of any media which should make us wary of generalisations (McNair, 1996). As Hardy expresses*:*

> "Should any individual opt to take on board from a pornographic text unquestioningly the idea that 'all women are whores' or that they mean 'yes' when they say 'no', we must recognize this as a wilful act of interpretation by the reader for which he alone is ultimately responsible." (2004:17).

Young men in interviews for this thesis did not communicate these interpretations of sexually explicit material. While Tom acknowledges that some porn is "horribly aggressive", he also recognises that real sex is not. Similarly, attitudes to violence in relationships were very clear:

> It's not alright for them, but obviously if they do hit you, you don't hit them back. It's not right for her to hit you but it's better her hitting you then you hitting them (Harry, 23, w/c)

The website Make Love Not Porn (makelovenotporn.com) attempts to address some of the myths perpetuated by pornography by juxtaposing the porn world and reality. Developer Cindy Gallup draws on her own experiences of sex with men in their twenties, who she claims attempt to recreate sex as seen in porn films without taking into account the diversity of sexual desire. Yet, her "entirely up to personal choice" approach seems like basic commonsense without offering any strategies for discussing choice or negotiating boundaries. This didacticism is reminiscent of school-based sex education (although the website purports to come from a sex-positive stance) where instruction is given into *what* should be done without acknowledging the *how* and *why.*

Although the principle behind the site is could be seen as admirable, there are a number of glaring omissions that simply reinforce Gallup's original premise, namely that there are assumptions we make about gender and sexuality based upon our exposure to pornography. In his study of the ways in which young men 'read' pornography, Hardy suggests that in terms of sexual desire, masculinity becomes vulnerable and respondents wary of being labeled "perverts" or "dirty old men" (2004:6). The young men he encountered were keen to distance themselves from the idea that pornography is arousing, most frequently listing "curiosity" or "a laugh" as reasons for accessing sexual material. Similarly, young men interviewed in this thesis describe accessing porn out of curiosity, to see explicit examples of sex and to learn what goes where – pornography as arousing, stimulating or for the purposes of masturbation was not mentioned. It has been suggested that pornography is a tool in a "collective construction of masculine identity" (Holland et al., 2004:70) which is a much more complex interpretation than simply using it for ideas of sexual practice. Such perspectives are not taken into account by Gallup, as she presumes firstly that all men enjoy pornography, and secondly that they enjoy it primarily as a sexual stimulant.

Moreover, the site takes steps to re-educate young men about the ways in which women might want to have sex (or not), it fails to offer any reassurance to those same men about the negative impact that pornography might have had on their sexual confidence. For example, there is nothing on the site which addresses penis size, and the unrealistic representations of male bodies in porn. The depiction of female orgasm and the almost effortless gratification of female desire could lead to feelings of incompetence when it comes to satisfying a real-life partner (Hardy, 2004). Furthermore, the website entirely fails to tackle issues of safe sex and the total lack of condoms in pornography, a point which require more careful analysis.

Enthusiastic Consent

McKee's study of adult porn consumers (2006), both male and female, provides some interesting data on what makes good pornography. His participants respond in multiple ways, some discussing production values, debating the usefulness of a storyline or citing the kinds of aesthetic that they appreciated.

However, overwhelmingly, the key ingredient was a sense of the actors' enthusiasm. Various responses include "genuine interest", "enjoying themselves", "being into it" or "wanting to be there". One of McKee's participants states conclusively, "It doesn't matter how attractive they are, if they look bored, it ruins it" (2006: 527). Similarly, Allen describes part of the fantasy of porn is performers who are "corporeally confident" (2006:79). Yet, as discussed in Chapter 7 briefly, young women described almost ambivalent attitudes to sexual pleasure. Motivations for having sex (or not) ranged widely but enjoyment and desire were rarely mentioned. Here, Chloe and Stacey in separate interviews, describe what affects their sexual decision-making:

> Whether you go home with somebody, for me anyway it would be what my mum would think, my family would say. Obviously just thinking about your health…not only health but emotional, how you're going to feel in the morning. (Chloe, 20, w/c)

> I've liked someone and thought if I sleep with him then maybe he might want to be my boyfriend and it didn't work out too well (laughs) (Stacey, 20, m/c)

Chloe describes her thought process if she met someone on a night out that she might be interested in. Her initial desire and the potential pleasure of an encounter is enmeshed with thoughts of health outcomes and familial disappointment, thus she is unable to separate sex from negative consequences and disapproval.

Similarly, Stacey's narrative sees sex as a gateway to a relationship and a way to win affection, even though her attempt was unsuccessful. Having sex here represents the means to an end, divorced of any notion of pleasure or gratification. It is Stacey who, in Chapter 6, is quoted as giving the motivation for indulging in one night stands as a way to "have a bit of a cuddle". Again, Stacey uses sex as a way to achieve intimacy rather than as a pleasurable activity in itself.

For Jade, boys who use girls for sex were to be avoided, and indeed, among the younger female participants the fear that boys might use them was paramount. There is no recognition of her own sexual desire or acknowledgement that girls might enjoy having sex for its own sake, as she fears boys do. Only one female

participant expressly cited sexual pleasure as a motivation for having sex, "Like if you're having sex you want to enjoy it." (Paula, 16, w/c).

Of course, it is possible that these young women were simply uncomfortable with discussing their own pleasure in sex with a researcher – discussed in more detail in the previous chapter, there is much at stake in young women's sexuality and sexual activity. Equally, there were no questions specifically on participants' own experiences, these statements arose naturally in conversation on various topics. It is possible that a more direct line of questioning, such as, "What motivates you to have sex?" would have yielded different data.

However, what we can ascertain is that particular discourses are extremely powerful when it comes to negotiating heterosexuality for young women. Thus, it is almost irrelevant if Chloe really worries about what her mum thinks about her sex life, or whether her mum has a particularly celebratory attitude to one night stands, what *is* important is that Chloe uses this measure of propriety when disclosing details about her life in the interview. That she would state that her mum's opinion is important regarding decisions she makes about sex, speaks volumes about her understanding of casual sex as somewhat deviant. Likewise, the discourse of boys using girls for sex was often repeated and a girl being used for sex was presented as a terrible situation and to be avoided. That girls might just be interested in sex or might use boys for sex was not mentioned at any point, thus reinforcing the discourse of the male sex drive (Hollway, 1984).

Thus, young women are offered few opportunities to express their desire or pleasure in sex. A focus on the negative outcomes in SRE and cultural slut-shaming which treats sexually adventurous women with suspicion, collude to produce a generation of women with no discourse of pleasure or expectation of enjoying themselves during sex.

Safer Sex Scripts in Porn

One particular sexual health issue associated with using pornography in the development of sexual scripts is condom use. There is a lack of condoms in the majority of heterosexual porn scenes despite porn performers' increased risk of STI transmission (Gold, 2015). As previously explored, the young men in the

focus group had the knowledge of condoms, knew how to use them and the consequences of not using them, yet did not incorporate their use into their sexual practice. I contend that this could be attributable to pornography in two ways.

The first is that young people simply have no sexual script featuring an eroticised use of condoms. Tanner and Pollack (1988) found that couples who received "erotic instructions" including techniques to integrate condoms into foreplay had significantly more positive attitudes to condoms than the control groups. Similarly, Kyes, Brown and Pollack (1991) established that men who read erotic, explicit material that included condom use had enhanced positive feelings about condoms. Whether this would then translate into behaviour change is unclear, but changing attitudes must represent the first stage. Results from these studies suggest that a syllabus of SRE that precludes any discussion of pleasure and eroticism is therefore at a disadvantage when it comes to promoting positive attitudes to condoms. The mandatory use of condoms in pornography has been widely debated and is considered unlikely to be successfully implemented. As Gold states, "Producers have stated that visible use of condoms reduces the marketability of the product" (2015:186).

To illustrate the second way in which porn may inhibit the use of condoms I will use Mowlabocus, Harbottle and Witzel's study of bareback porn (2013), which describes the relationship between the real-life sexual practices of adult gay men and what is represented in pornography. Despite using participants from a different demographic, their findings can be compared to the results of this thesis in a number of ways. Mowlabocus and colleagues note that respondents often highlight the educational nature of porn, citing it as a valuable source of information about homosexuality that is lacking in SRE and in mainstream media. They might access pornography to normalise their desire or gain validation that gay sex is acceptable. Similarly, young people might access pornography as a way to validate their emerging sexual desire in a social climate that explicitly states that youthful sexuality is wrong or deviant (Bay-Cheng, 2003).

Furthermore, participants in Mowlabocus and colleagues' study discussed porn as a "research tool" to find out "the right positions to do, the right methods" (2013: 527). This can be compared to Tom and Reggie's previously mentioned

assertions that one use of pornography was to learn the mechanics of how to have sex, thus explicit information that is not available as part of a curriculum of SRE (Albury, 2014). However, when Mowlabocus and colleagues began to ask their participants about representations of barebacking, the practice of unprotected anal sex between men, many participants changed their narrative, emphasising that a key characteristic of porn is fantasy, and that it does not show real life. The participants acknowledged that it might negatively affect *some* men's sexual practice, but not themselves, in the same way that boys in this thesis recognised that pornography might give *some* young men the 'wrong idea' about sex, but that it had not affected them personally.

Yet, the participants in Mowlabocus and colleagues' study offer powerful insights into why the practice of barebacking is a key element of much current gay pornography and its appeal in real life, despite strong safe sex messages that denote it as a dangerous practice. It is this very danger, its taboo and barebacking's status as risky that gives it erotic appeal. One participant in their study states, "I would think it's because barebacking is really risky, but it's quite erotic as well, they are being naughty and doing that" (2013: 534; see also Ávila, 2015 for similar discussion).

This testimony may help to shed light on some young people's unwillingness to use condoms, despite knowledge of the consequences. SRE's focus on promoting condom use among young people serves to reinforce unprotected sex as something 'you're not supposed to do'. If the pleasure of such acts is rooted in its 'naughtiness', it is the act of transgression that is eroticised, rather than the pleasure of the act itself. Thus, Mowlabocus and colleagues write:

> "Bareback pornography speaks to desires that some gay men may otherwise spend a lifetime policing and sublimating. Bareback pornography not only acknowledges this sublimation, it responds to the reasons behind in (HIV prevention work, sexual safety) at the same time that it depicts the 'conquering' or refusal of such sublimation" (2013: 536).

Likewise, unprotected sex can be said to speak to the desire of young people to be rebellious, to engage in behaviour that is proscribed. Thus, a specifically didactic approach to SRE that denotes 'good' and 'bad' practice can serve to further promote condom-less sex as "taboo, forbidden or exciting" in the same

way that attempts to prohibit bareback pornography work to reinforce its erotic appeal as 'naughty' (Mowlabocus, Harbottle & Witzel, 2013). In this study, this was especially true of young men who were particularly disenfranchised. It is perhaps unsurprising that young people for whom being 'naughty' was a source of pride and social status, would not comply with safe sex prescriptions either.

The Best Sex

As described in Chapter 5, the belief that unprotected sex is much more pleasurable (Schick, Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2008; Chapman et al., 1990), particularly for a boy, than sex using a condom was much referenced by my participants and used as a justification for non-use. I contend that this is also attributable to pornography – but not necessarily because porn is a poor educator or a bad influence.

  If we make the assumption that, for anyone who accesses porn, the imagery represents the best sex that that person may hope to have, the pinnacle of sexual experience. This is, after all, the point of pornography. This fantasy might include the idealised bodies featured in porn, the performance (the longevity, the positions, or the amount of orgasms, for example) and/or the ease with which sex is initiated and completed (Allen, 2006). As I have shown previously, young people have shown themselves to be savvy enough to realise that porn is not reflective of real life. A more detailed analysis, breaking down each part of the fantasy, offers further corroboration. Thus, young people can recognise that porn features specific kinds of bodies that do not reflect the majority. They can appreciate that this part of the fantasy is unachievable:

> It's like unrealistic sex in a sense because not very many men are that big and they don't go for that long (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

> Imagine if you had a really small willy and you saw all these massive willies on porn sites? (Jenny, 19, m/c)

Charlotte and Michaela also discussed celebrity culture more widely, acknowledging that while celebrities were sexually attractive, they were not representative of the real life partners that they might have:

> Charlotte - Cos some girls look at the likes of Channing Tatum who have an unbelievable body….

> Michaela – you're not going to find a Channing Tatum in (name of town) though. I wish.

> Charlotte – that's what I'm saying. You're not going to find a Kim Kardashian in (name of town), either.

In the same way that bodies on screen could be appreciated but seldom replicated in real life, the acts that are featured in pornography are identified as not easily or always achievable:

> I mean because obviously the things that women, like female porn star actors do in porn, lasses are never eager to do that in real life. And I mean, why should they? It's not exactly the nicest thing in the world. (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

Mowlabocus, Harbottle and Witzel argue that this is a similar consideration for men who engage in barebacking – the scenarios that are depicted in pornography may be unattainable, but the transgressive act of barebacking is much more easily achieved. Thus, "I want to watch porn where there's group sex like it's a harder thing to achieve and bareback is just not wearing a condom, so it's, you can achieve that fantasy really easily" (2013:538). We might surmise, then, that the part of the fantasy that is most easily accessible and achievable for young people is the having sex without a condom. Similarly, porn does not show any of the fumblings, the furtiveness, the negotiations, the time constraints that characterise so much of real teenage sexual experiences (Hirst, 2004), and this is precisely its appeal (Allen, 2006). It is unencumbered by consequences, relationships, love or intimacy just, as Reggie described, "pure sex" or as we might put it, 'pure pleasure'.

This notion of pure sexual pleasure is not featured elsewhere – as described by the participants in Chapter 5, SRE talks little of sexual satisfaction or pleasure and keeps sex within the boundaries of risk and responsibility. Mainstream media may show explicit sex, but usually the relationship between the subjects is the main focus, with sex being employed as a narrative device to further the story. In contrast, in pornography, sexual pleasure *is* the story, it is both visible and audible.

Good porn, as described by McKee's participants, features enthusiastic performers, enjoying themselves (2006). It provides a fantasy realm where

everyone has multiple orgasms with ease and men continue to have sex for hours. Thus, porn represents one of the only channels by which pleasure for pleasure's sake is actively and explicitly promoted. One particular message of porn is that an interest in and desire to have sex is acceptable and normal (McKee, 2007) and it could therefore be described as the only teacher of pleasure for young people for whom the desire for pleasure is actively denied in most spheres. If young women are not participating in watching porn, they are possibly missing out on this potentially valuable validation of sexual desire.

Depictions of female sexual pleasure, specifically – that is, pure pleasure for pleasure's sake, not bound by relationships, power or reputation – are, I believe, rare, even in this culture of so-called sexualisation. Indeed, pornography, might be the only forum where women are shown enthusiastically engaging in sexual acts without consequences, explicit teaching moments or in order to accomplish something other than pleasure. The female participants in this thesis report learning much about prevention and protection, but little that offered a positive view of pleasure and the pursuit of pleasure. This left some young women battling with post-sex feelings of guilt and led them to engage in sexual acts with no real expectation of having a good time, thus motivated to have sex for reasons other than desire and pleasure. While none of my female participants disclosed watching pornography, and were often keen to communicate their distaste, I suggest that the notions of sex negative SRE are more deeply embedded in young people's lives than they might credit. Young men, however, the majority of whom were unashamed about discussing their access to pornography, are apparently well educated to expect pleasure and view sex purely in terms of the gratification of desire (Thomson, 1999).

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, young women expressed concern that boys expected them to be 'like a porn star' when having sex, however they were unable to state explicitly what that meant. Reliance on nebulous descriptors such as 'dead good' meant that being 'like a porn star' took on an accepted status, and implies that everyone knows what that term signifies and they understand it in the same way. Given that none of the young women interviewed admitted watching pornography, this collusion takes on grander proportions – they are apparently all expected to mimic something that they have never been exposed to, yet they

all share the perception of what that performance would entail. Such is the legacy of the sexualisation rhetoric.

Levy (2005) is critical of the use of porn stars as sexual role models. She states:

> "For the rest of us who are lucky or industrious enough to make a living doing other things, sex is supposed to be something we do for pleasure or as an expression of love. The best erotic role models, then, would seem to be the women who get the most pleasure out of sex, not the women who get the most money for it" (179).

There is much to take issue with here, including her sneering tone and her ignorance of the fact that some women might get pleasure specifically from selling their sexual lives – again, the particular pleasure of the transgression. Yet, I contend, that in many ways, the women who are represented in porn *are* or at least *appear* to be those who are getting the most pleasure.

Conclusion

Pornography is most often associated with negative consequences and harmful effects on young people's sexual development (Flood, 2009). This chapter has attempted to understand the place of pornography in young people's emerging sexual identities and the possible implications its use (or non-use) as a source of sex education may have for youthful sexual relationships. It is not my intention to argue that young people should watch more pornography, nor to disregard the issues with mainstream porn highlighted by other scholars (Horvath et al., 2013; Allen, 2006). Furthermore, I do not wish to present pornography as a solution to poor quality sex and relationships education. However, I have attempted to show that there is a real, long standing gap in school-based SRE which refuses to acknowledge young people as sexual beings entitled to pursue sexual pleasure and to expect sexual gratification. While other writers seem preoccupied with the potential ill effects pornography has on young men, I have attempted to illuminate the ways in which young women's rejection of porn might have negative effects on their sexual subjectivity. The solution to this can only be a more inclusive, positive attitude to sex fostered by SRE that recognises and promotes pleasure as the core motivation for engaging in sexual activity. An official discourse that advocated for pleasure could work to decrease the appeal of pornography which

would no longer be deemed deviant or dangerous, rather than censorship which would cement porn's status as transgressive. In contemporary society, however, it must be recognised that young people have the potential to be not just consumers of explicit material, but also producers. The rise of social media, 'sexting' and their meaning in young people's lives will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 9: OMG! The Moral Panic of New Media and Youth Sexuality

The range of contemporary sexual experiences has been expanded by technological advances - cybersex, online dating, social networking and sexting are all exclusive to the modern era (Attwood, 2006). Ken Plummer continues the point, "People increasingly have come to live their sexualities though, and with the aid of, television, press, film, and most recently, cyberspace" (2003: 275). It is in this sense that Attwood (2010: xiv) discusses humans as "sexual cyborgs", users increasingly mobilise their physicality in the form of photographs to illustrate their presence online and, thus, extend physical bodies into the virtual reality of cyberspace (Weber & Mitchell, 2008). This mediated sexuality is what sets contemporary Western society apart from all other previous generations, and has implications for sexuality and gender in the new technological age - the subject of much investigation, in academia, in the press and in parliament (some examples include Tanenbaum, 2015; Parker, 2014; Nayak & Kehily, 2008; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008; McNair, 1996).

Thus far, young people as consumers of new technologies, in particular the internet and pornography, as part of their sexual education, have been discussed. However, the sexualisation debates are not only interested in young people as passive consumers of inappropriate materials in the pursuit of knowledge. Young people as *producers* of explicit imagery is deemed to be a further cause for concern.

Pressure on young people, particularly girls, to adopt an overtly sexual aesthetic on social media is thought to be an important consequence of the sexualisation of society (for example, see Papadopoulos, 2010). A rise in the practice of 'sexting' – a portmanteau of sex and texting, describing a text message featuring nude, semi-nude or sexually evocative pictures and/or suggestive language – has led to much outcry in the mainstream media, especially when those taking part are young people (for some examples see Marshall, 2009; Reed, 2009; Shiels,

2009; Battersby, 2008). 46% of young people surveyed by Parker (2014:6) described sexting as "part of everyday life for teenagers nowadays". Much of the literature which focuses on social media, sexting and young people identifies new technology as problematic, and an example of how youth sexuality is deemed deviant and dangerous.

Previous research, such as the Sex and Tech survey (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008) has most often approached the study of sexting quantitatively – exploring questions as to the prevalence of sexting. In addition, much research has not emerged from a value neutral agenda, and assumes that sexting is a dangerous activity, often using extreme examples to illustrate the point and offering advice on how to avoid the risks. New media technology conceptualised as an emancipatory space for young people is often overlooked. This chapter seeks to examine young people's opinions of sexting, their own experiences and how this practice plays a part in the production of sexual discourse.

Do You Think I'm Sexy?

Communication in contemporary culture is often focused on visual methods, video calls and picture messaging are now the norm (Poltash, 2013). The World Wide Web, particularly through social media such as Facebook and Twitter, has revolutionized how individuals stay in touch, make friends and feel a sense of community and has far-reaching implications for the production and circulation of information (Döring, 2009). Indeed, Khomami (2016) asserts that young people spend the majority of their leisure time using media technology. In a single day, around 300 million pictures are uploaded to Facebook alone (Poltash, 2013). Furthermore, the teenage pregnancy rate in England and Wales now stands at its lowest since records began (ONS, 2016), something that Khomami (2016) speculates could be attributed to the rise in social media and new media technology. If young people spend the majority of their time communicating via apps such as Facebook and Twitter, she states, that leaves less time for meeting up in real life – and therefore less opportunity to engage in drunken, unprotected sex. This was an issue raised by one of my research participants, Reggie, "I mean, first of all, it stops them going out and socialising normally" (20, aw/c).

While this might be the case, it could also be that discussions around sexual activity and contraception use are more easily negotiated outside the 'heat of the moment' or via typed message rather than in person. In this sense, social media offers a measure of distance. A similar point is made by Finkelhor (2011:10), despite popular opinion to the contrary, dangers in the online world are "less immediate and serious" than those which occur when young people meet up and social media interactions lack the impulsiveness of real life situations. More considered judgements may have time to overcome risky temptations before the situation has escalated.

Internet use by young people in relation to their sexuality is, therefore, an area worthy of further investigation. While these viewpoints seem difficult to corroborate – and in fact, a number of the young people in this study described themselves as regularly engaging in drunken, unprotected sex – which could be attributed to a number of factors, it seems unlikely, given the feedback on school-based sex education, that the change is due to better, more comprehensive SRE (Khomami, 2016). There is space here for further investigation into the possible links between declining teenage pregnancy and social media use.

The majority of participants in this study used some form of social media, and often used multiple platforms simultaneously. Facebook and Snapchat were the most often referenced, although others mentioned Twitter, Instagram, Bebo, and BBM. Some participants also referred to 'hook-up apps' such as Tindr and Grindr when talking about social media although these seemed to less typically feature in young people's lives. Boyd (2007) distinguishes between two groups of non-participators in social media. Those who are "disenfranchised" and who would like to participate but cannot due to a lack of economic resources or parental restrictions, and those who are "conscientious objectors" who choose not to participate because they ideologically oppose social media. One participant in this study, Alan, did not use any social media and would fall in to the "conscientious objector" category.

For most young people, however, social media occupied a central position in their lives. Kimberly, aged 19, highlights the importance of being connected at all times:

> Like everybody is so focused on social media, like I wake up in the morning, the first thing that I do is Facebook…Twitter, Instagram…Snapchat…..and then I'll get out of bed. Like, it's my newspaper to me. Like my dad will read the newspaper, I'll read my phone. (19, aw/c)

Mobile phones now have a multitude of functions and are used to take photographs and videos, access the Internet and send multimedia messages (Lenhart, 2009). Kimberly notes that her phone works as a provider of news, a key way to stay connected to the outside world in the same way that a newspaper or maybe television news may function for the older generation. Thus, "The cell phone is such a vital part of these teens' lives that it isn't surprising that it's a major source of content for them" (interview with Lenhart, 2009 quoted by Shiels, 2009). To be more specific, "New media technologies are central parts of young people's social, romantic and sexual lives" (Pascoe, 2011:5). The role of mobile technology in young people's sexual lives will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Despite this, young people were able to critique social media and often espoused strongly negative views of its role in adolescent lives, particularly as a source of arguments in romantic relationships. The following quotes taken from a number of exchanges, show focus group participants describing Facebook:

> Facebook is the worst. It's stupid. There's loads of things happen because of Facebook. (Luke, 22, w/c)

> That is the worst possible thing invented, ever. (Harry, 23, w/c)

> It should be banned. It should be blown up or something. It should just go up (Matt, 26, w/c)

Snapchat was also described as a source of conflict:

> I think it's broken a lot of relationships (Michaela, 16, w/c)

> It's just asking for trouble really (Charlotte, 16, w/c)

One participant, Jesse, offered a more specific story. He described an ex-girlfriend who threatened to upload naked pictures of him onto Facebook to get back at him for ending their relationship, a practice often described as 'revenge porn'. Jesse was the only participant who had deleted a social media account in order to avoid this kind of bullying, saying, "I haven't got Facebook for that exact

reason, it causes too much bother so I just left it" (18, w/c). The more established view was that while social media might be "stupid", "asking for trouble" or "the worst thing ever invented", it was difficult to imagine life disconnected:

> I don't think I could live without Facebook now. I tried to deactivate it but I couldn't, I was straight back on it. (Harry, 23, w/c)
>
> That's the way you communicate with people (Sean, 22, w/c)
>
> I do want to remove it but then it is the fact of removing it isn't it, and you can't speak to no-one and stuff like that (Tom, 17, w/c)

The impact of access to social media on young people's self-esteem and sexual development has been the focus of a number of studies. Stronge and colleagues (2015: 200) note that, "Growing media consumption and emerging forms of social media such as Facebook allow for unprecedented appearance-based social comparison with peers, family and the wider media". Their study into body satisfaction found that both male and female adult participants who used Facebook regularly were significantly more dissatisfied with their appearance that those who were not users of Facebook, suggesting that increased capacity for comparison can lead to feelings of inadequacy. Stronge and colleagues do not include data on the effects of particular imagery on self-dissatisfaction and their sample of participants span a wide age spectrum, but they do note that gender did not differentiate participants' self-perception. Thus, while much of the sexualisation literature describes young women as being disproportionately affected and at risk of negative consequences, it would appear that the men studied by Stronge and colleagues also felt appearance-based pressure while navigating social media, although this has garnered less attention in other literature.

More positively, Weber and Mitchell (2008: 31) describe their young participants as "performing their bodies" when they present themselves online. Choosing photographs, altering their look and personalising their online space constitute an act of "who they think they are or who they want you to think they are or who they would like to become" (Weber & Mitchell, 2008: 30-31), they are "identities in action" (Weber & Mitchell. 2008: 26). As Ringrose states, "Young people must continuously negotiate and make choices around which images and words to use to construct and perform their sexual identities in semi-public spaces" (2011:101

quoted in Charteris, Gregory & Masters, 2014:391). Similarly, one interviewee in my study, describes her own online presence as bearing, by her own account, little resemblance to her real life appearance, it is a presentation of herself as she wants others to see her:

> My profile pictures look nothing like me (laughs). You spend ages editing them and putting filters on them. And it's mainly to impress people, isn't it? (Stacey, 20, m/c)

For some young women, social media also involved the presentation of a particular image but appearance was less important than portraying that you had a good social life. In this way, social media might be said to work as a form of storytelling, the presentation of an idealised narrative of oneself:

> Just that they're a happy person, they've got a good group of friends maybe, they're going out a lot. (Chloe, 20, w/c)

> I think everyone like portrays a more kind of exciting version of themselves but it's not…I wouldn't say it is necessary. Just kind of…you only put the good things on, I guess (laughs). (Carly, 19, m/c)

> If you look at someone's Facebook their life would look amazing cos it's all pictures of them going out and doing stuff whereas it might not be like that in reality. (Stacey, 20, m/c)

In this way social media offers young women an element of control over their own image in the eyes of others. As Hogan describes, "People take their choice of what to display personally and consider it a form of impression management" (2010:1). Co-Founder of application Snapchat, Evan Spiegel, claims "People are living with this massive burden of managing the digital version of themselves" (quoted in Poltash, 2013:11). Thus, not only do young people need to manage their image in real life, they also have to keep up a particular persona online. I will return to Snapchat's particular place in young people's lives later in this chapter.

Thus, a carefully crafted social media presence can give the impression of an exciting, desirable, sociable life and positive reinforcement can boost self-esteem. Young women, in particular, were highly invested in their social media profiles. Equally, this status is precarious, with one wrong move, either virtually

or in real life, leading to denigration online, as Charlotte, in her interview with Michaela, captures:

> It's just like the random person like taking the mick out of someone like 'Oh, my god, I can't believe such and such did this with you. (Charlotte, 16, w/c)

Michaela agrees:

> …or just like calling someone a slag on Facebook. 'You've shagged this many lads, you're a slag, ha ha ha' stuff like that. (16, w/c)

Both Charlotte and Michaela were blasé about this type of behaviour and seemed uncomfortable when I asked if they considered it a form of bullying. As with slut-shaming in real life, young women appeared to understand these risks as a 'normal' consequence of sexuality or femininity performed incorrectly. Social media as a technique of governance will also be explored later in this chapter.

Sexualisation is said to deal with a specific type of appearance – one which is overtly sexy, sexual and suggestive. As noted previously, Gill (2003) suggests that sexualisation is merely a new form of objectification – it is a false empowerment that works with neoliberal injunctions to agency, meaning that women are under pressure to be seen to be in control of their own sexuality but to present it in particular, explicit ways. This pseudo-subjectivity, she argues, then disguises how female self-policing, and the primacy of the male gaze continue to dominate popular culture (*ibid*). Similarly, Levy (2005) observes that real sexual oppression is masked by this rhetoric of female sexual agency, meaning that anyone who does not take part in sexualised scripts is deemed to have lesser value (a stance taken up by a number of sexualisation critics). As such, young people "are facing pressures that children in the past simply did not have to face" (Papadopoulos, 2010:6).

Interviewees discussed the propensity for young people to look a certain way, "sexy" or "revealing", and the purposes this might serve, particularly on social media:

> A lot of people would post photos of them in like in poses or wearing certain clothes which are obviously implying that they are sexy, like…that they are out there. And it is a bit, I don't know….like personally I don't, I find it a bit strange erm…..but then some people

> like to show off in that kind of way and gain attention in that kind of way so…..(Ida, 18, m/c)

> I think girls are just trying to look too revealing on Facebook. To get attention or whatever. (Jade, 16, w/c)

Reggie elaborates by describing the system of 'Likes' on social media:

> I mean the problem now as well is the whole liking system on Facebook. I mean if a lass gets a lot of likes and then she realises that if she does it when she's scantily clad and gets even more likes, she is more inclined to not wear much and obviously use that as sort of like a way….cos in a way I suppose it feels good when you see that loads of people like your picture. You think, 'oh people like my picture, it must be good'. (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

Reggie highlights the positive reinforcement that a woman might gain from posting 'sexy' images and that this might provide an incentive to post further pictures. Getting this kind of attention is deemed an important motivation for particular performances on social media, as Bart articulates:

> To look good so that you get, almost like a good impression, sort of thing. (Bart, 19, aw/c)

Popularity on Facebook or Twitter is denoted by getting 'likes' – other users who publicly like your photo or comment. Other users are able to see how many likes a post has received thus popularity can be quantified, adding an element of competition. Participants, like Reggie earlier, recognise the importance of being popular and cite this as an important motive for posting online:

> It's all about the likes really. How many likes you have (Michaela, 16, w/c)

> Like, if you write something on Facebook, people want to get likes for it, otherwise they delete it and stuff like that. (Stacey, 20, m/c)

Amy specifically describes this is gendered, heterosexual terms, implying that Facebook plays an important function in attracting admiration from the opposite sex:

> You want the attention of the lads. You want the lads to like your photos and stuff. (Amy, 20, aw/c)

However, seeking popularity online was seen to be indicative of immaturity, with some young women relegating its significance to the past, now seeing

themselves as having grown out of such practices. Amy and Kimberly reminisce about their former behaviour:

> I used to go around, I am ashamed to say it now, I used to like… "Oh like my photo" and I'd keep on at people to like my photo and then be like "I got so many likes". But now it is just like, why did you even bother? When it doesn't matter. (Kimberly, 19, aw/c)

> I've had an epiphany recently. So I don't feel it anymore but I definitely did, I definitely did before. I remember I had…it would always be about the pictures and, I'd have to put my make up on, I'd have to have my hair done perfect in anticipation that there would be pictures on the night out and I'd get really disappointed if there wasn't cos I've got myself dolled up for nothing. And then we'd go out on like a day out or something and I'd have no makeup on and my hair would be an absolute mess and she would take manky photos of me. (Amy, 20, aw/c)

Another participant had similar views:

> I think, not as much our age now, because everyone has matured and has realised that you don't need to post everything that you do on Facebook. It's more the younger generation that don't really understand. (Claire, 17, aw/c)

Amy and Kimberly admit to being preoccupied with 'likes' and presenting themselves in particular ways online, but only in the past, "I don't feel it anymore", "Why did you even bother?". While both girls still use social media and post photographs online, it would appear that this "epiphany" comes as a result of maturity. Similarly, Claire makes this explicit, claiming maturity has taught her and her friends that "you don't need to post everything that you do", while the younger generation are still to learn this lesson. As noted in detail in a previous chapter, Amy, Kimberly and Claire were categorised as aspirational working class, girls from working class backgrounds who were now studying at university or intended to in the future. This status gave them a unique perspective on the importance of reputation and respectability when it came to sexual experience. It is possible that these girls can afford to be less invested in their appearance and online personae, as they have other social capital, educational achievement and subsequent status, for example. It could also be attributed to the fact that Amy and Claire are now in relationships, therefore their attractiveness is validated by their boyfriends. Furthermore, this could mean it is no longer imperative that they post everything to Facebook as a form of advertising or that "the lads" like their

photos. The positive reinforcement of 'likes' available online and the importance of popularity offers social media a unique position from which to regulate young people.

A Form of Surveillance

It has been argued that new technological advances have blurred the boundaries between private and public, meaning that not only can we now publish our most intimate experiences in the public sphere of the internet (McNair, 2002) but we can use the web to consume the world in our own personal spaces (Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010). The internet provides an environment which is participatory (Mowlabocus, 2010), facilitating a sense of community and a motivation to share and contribute.

In this way, social media can be said to perform a regulatory function for young people. Charteris and colleagues use Foucault's panopticon as a reference point, whereby social media can be said to entail constant visibility to others, a presence that can be monitored remotely and without knowledge of that surveillance. Thus:

> "The visibility, of seeing and being seen, demonstrates a Foucauldian 'gaze' where power plays out through the capacity to be visible and recognisable to others and specific practices (e.g. selfies) become normalised" (Charteris, Gregory & Masters, 2014; this comparison is also made by Tanenbaum, 2015).

Stacey and Tom, in the following extracts from separate interviews, discuss Facebook and Twitter as:

> Social media. Yes definitely, because everyone knows everyone's business now. A lot of the time even if people were to drunkenly do something on a night out, Facebook finds out about it, Twitter finds out about it. So, definitely. And people are always talking about, just everything on Facebook and stuff like that. You can find out more information by looking on someone's Facebook than having a conversation with them, I think (Stacey, 20, m/c)

> I would say all your friends can see, they get involved (Tom, 17, w/c)

Here, the regulating potential of social media is recognised by Stacey, there is no privacy as "everyone knows everyone's business now". Even minor indiscretions on drunken nights out are subject to the "Facebook gaze", described by her as a

third party who, once in the know, might shame, embarrass or entertain. Tanenbaum claims, "One gaze, like a Facebook news feed, saw everything" (2015: 114). Thus, Facebook (or any other similar social media site) becomes the watchman, observing everything and ready to discipline any transgressions. Participation in social media sites, like imprisonment in the panopticon, means upholding a constant performance and continual self-surveillance (Tanenbaum, 2015).

Similarly, Jade describes how her social media use is modified due to the potential surveillance of her family members:

> Jade - Yeah. I've got all my family on Facebook so like I don't…I don't know. I don't know how to explain it.
>
> Helen - So you might not say things because you don't want your parents to see it?
>
> Jade - Aye. Well, not like I say bad stuff but you know what I mean.

While some young people felt that the "Facebook gaze" could inhibit them and regulate their behaviour in real life, Bradley recognised the potential of social media to be liberating, particularly in terms of communication:

> I've done it before when you feel a layer of protection behind a computer screen (Bradley, 17, m/c)

Similarly, Reggie remembered:

> I think the term is keyboard warrior - that got used a lot when we were younger. People would like hurl abuse at people and like see the thing is on a computer you feel safe behind a screen because you are not talking to the person in real life so there is no fear of getting attacked for it, or punched for it. (Reggie, 20, aw/c)

The ability to scrutinise and discipline others via social media offers a degree of protection, you are not going to get "punched for it" and can therefore be more outspoken.

The American Academy of Pediatrics label the media as a "superpeer" for young people in the context of the normalization of sexual situations for young people, recording that "more than 75% of prime-time programs contain sexual content" (2010: 576). While recognising that the term 'sexual content' is not nearly as nuanced or detailed as it needs to be in order to offer meaningful analysis of this

social trend, the underlying conclusion remains valid – that the media can and does normalise certain kinds of behaviour for young people simply by increased coverage, in the same way that the peer group influences a young person's social activity by the perpetuation of group norms. This can also be applied to social media.

Social media might take on the role of a "superpeer" in the regulation of behaviour and the production and perpetuation of norms. While the peer group is often cited as an important location for the construction of youth identities (Pascoe, 2007; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Lees, 1993), the "Facebook gaze" can create a visibility to one's social circle that is inescapable. While this presents opportunities for image management and storytelling, there are consequences to non-conformity that translate from real life to social media and vice versa. Disconnecting is difficult (though not impossible as Jesse shows), in the same way that rejecting the views of one's peer group is complicated, social media is often deemed inextricable.

Staying Safe Online

There has long been concern about young people's sexuality and the Internet, both being categorized as social problems which must be regulated and legislated (Pascoe, 2011). Safety online was recognised as important by a number of participants and particularly issues such as grooming and catfishing (the practice of creating fake online profiles or pretending to be someone else in online communications) were also raised in interviews:

> All these young girls going on Facebook, chatting to random people. (Terry, 23, w/c)

> It is very easy to upload a photo of someone your age when you're different, catfishing is quite easy to do. (Valerie, 21, m/c)

> Well, people could lie about their identity. (Bart, 19, aw/c)

Similar viewpoints were also expressed in the focus group:

> Paedophiles looking through people's profiles and that…..that's what Facebook causes with young lasses. (Rob, 16, w/c)

> You don't know how old they are, man. On Facebook. Anybody can make a fucking Facebook. (Luke, 22, w/c)

It is interesting to note that the majority of the young people quoted here are working class men. This was a specific issue on which they often became animated and recounted long stories about people they knew who had been 'catfished' or those who had captured the attention of predatory men online. There was frequently a tone of outrage and a vocal condemnation of anyone who participated in online trickery. Some young men also described themselves as stepping in to confront those who were deceptive:

> And in the end I just told him to "piss off, you nonce" cos he was trying to chat her up and stuff like that. And she's like 16 and he's like 40. (Sean, 22, w/c)

When young women talked about internet safety, they often presented themselves as savvy about the dangers and talked about techniques to offset any risks such as not going alone, meeting in public places, texting to check in with someone, video calling first to ensure the person was who they said they were. There were also stories, including one participant who disclosed the rape of a friend by a man she met online, but, in contrast to the young men, these were presented with minimal emotion and functioned seemingly as cautionary tales for other girls.

One issue that was pertinent for young women was the unsolicited 'dick pic', something which was described as a common occurrence. Here, Valerie relates her experiences online:

> Valerie - I think with certain kind of texting and online platforms it's quite anonymous and so sometimes you'll get….like you'll be happily going along and you'll get like a dick pic…like, completely unsolicited. And that's quite annoying cos…you know. And then they're just like 'what do you think of that?'

> Helen - Ok, I am interested to hear more about that. So somebody would just send you a picture of their dick, unsolicited?

> Valerie - Yeah, so you'll be like chatting on like Tindr or something…or what's the other one? Chat Roulette was quite a big one when I was a kid. And then you would just be talking and then you'd get sent a picture of a penis and then just be 'well, thank you for that but I was just talking to you' kind of…

> Helen - And is that something that happens quite regularly?

> Valerie - Erm, yeah. I mean you kind of learn to notice the sort of…like you think you can judge the kind of guy that will do it but it seems like it is something that is quite socially kind of….not acceptable but not condoned enough that they feel they can get away with it quite a lot. And I imagine that occasionally it is successful. So maybe that's why they've been doing it.

In the following exchange between Carly and Abigail, the difficulty of internet safety is addressed:

> Carly – I think in some cases it is. But that's in the case of like if you don't know what you are doing. Like if you are like a child who's going on and like….and meeting up with people and stuff. Or like a teenager or whatever. Like people who don't know anything about them, like if you're safe about it….obviously that is dangerous. But I think most people kind of have…
>
> Abigail – you need experiences to know.
>
> Carly – it's kind of a common sense thing really.

The universal potential vulnerability of young people in online settings has been noted extensively, particularly in the mainstream media, yet there seems to be little discussion of what makes a particular child particularly vulnerable. There is evidence to suggest that the children most susceptible to harm on the Internet are those who are also the most vulnerable in real life – factors including low self-esteem, marginalization or lack of social ties and low perception of risk. As Wells and Mitchell (2008) found, young people who reported being subjected to abuse at home or feeling isolated from parents were more likely to receive unwanted sexual approaches online (see also Pascoe, 2011). To represent the internet as risky for all young people is to ignore the everyday social circumstances which contribute to exposing a person as a potential target. Similarly, young people presented themselves as well aware of the potential dangers of the internet and knowledgeable about protecting themselves.

The Problem of Sexting

Chalfen (2009) asserts, digital photography facilitates a marked decrease in self-censorship when compared to film photography, as the images do not need to be sent to a professional to be developed. In their analysis of DIY porn website YouPorn, Waskul and Radeloff acknowledge the "democratization of technology" which digital photography and the internet have enabled, signifying a blurring of

the boundaries between "ordinary" consumer and producer (2010:202; see also McNair, 1996).

One manifestation of the connection between sexuality and new technology, and consumer and producer would be 'sexting', a combination of the words 'sex' and 'texting'. This is a practice which involves "flirting" via text in a sexually explicit way or photographing oneself in sexually suggestive, or sometimes sexually explicit poses and then disseminating such images via mobile phones or uploading them onto the internet. Sexts would usually be understood as including nude or nearly nude images and would be self-produced (Döring, 2014). The idea that sexting might 'help' a long term relationship or that it represented "great foreplay" is circulated in the mainstream media, for example Cosmopolitan magazine, which includes a how-to guide for its adult female target audience (see www.cosmopolitan.com/sexting/). Indeed, much of the literature on sexting aimed at an adult audience frames the practice in terms of pleasure and the benefits to sexual communication (Hasinoff, 2013).

However, when the sexters involved are young people sexting becomes a problematic practice. This constitutes what Angelides (2013:682) refers to as "the shaming of teenagers", by which young people are stigmatised for participating in activities which are encouraged among adults, even though they may be similarly motivated. As Feona Attwood concludes, there exists a "profound distrust of young people, popular culture, 'feminine' practices, 'the media' and new technologies, laid on top of a familiar view of sex as inherently dangerous." (2010a: 743). Thus, there has been considerable disquiet around the practice of youth sexting (Campbell & Park, 2014; Angelides, 2013; Gordon-Messer et al., 2013; Lenhart, 2009) and that of young women in particular.

Mainstream media has contributed to this unease, with the majority of articles seeking to highlight the risks of sexting and its inappropriateness amongst young people. Variously described in a number of media articles as "alarming" (Battersby, 2008), "worrying" (Reed, 2009) and a practice that "will horrify parents everywhere" (Marshall, 2009), the "devastating consequences" (Weale, 2016) of sexting are emphasised. This type of rhetoric is not, however, limited to newspaper journalism. Using a few high profile case studies (the same story is

cited in a number of articles), some examples of the reported potential effects of youth sexting include bullying, humiliation, criminal prosecution and sex offender registration, sexual risk taking, decreased employment prospects or university placements, depression and suicide (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016; Angelides, 2013). In her journal article entitled 'Is your student flirting with a felony?' Goldstein devotes pages to recommendations to help prevent "this *evidently* irresponsible behaviour" (2010:1, emphasis added). Angelides (2013) argues that a key aim of such writing is to urge parents or teachers to keep young people's online activities under close surveillance.

There is little substantiation to these claims. For example, in a study of teen online safety, Cox (2009) established that 90% of sexters report no negative consequences from their participation (quoted in Lee & Crofts, 2015). Gordon-Messer and colleagues (2013) failed to find a relationship between sexting and risky sexual behaviours (such as unprotected sex) nor did they find associations with depression or anxiety. Angelides (2013: 671) asserts that:

> "…in the course of researching the media and social science material published on sexting, I have not found any evidence of actual cases in which a teenage sexter has been refused employment or entrance to university [on those grounds]".

Wolak, Finkelhor and Mitchell (2012) found that registration on the sex offenders register in the USA was rare, particularly among young people. Similarly, police involvement and criminal prosecution was unusual in cases of consensual sexting – law authorities were usually only involved if the case involved an adult and a minor, or there were aggravating circumstances such as blackmail, unauthorised dissemination, payment for images or candid pictures that had been taken without the subject's knowledge. Wolak and colleagues (2012) were specifically interested in sexting that was the subject of police inquiry, it should be noted that the vast majority of sexting instances do not come to the attention of the authorities. Sexting between young people is not currently against the law in the UK (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016).

There is evidence that, despite this media outcry, sexting as a practice is on the rise among young adults. Lenhart (2009) states that 13% of her participants had sent a sext and 31% had received one. In 2013, a similar study found that 30%

were senders and 41% receivers of explicit sexts (Gordon-Messer et al., 2013). The popularity of sexting has resulted in what Ringrose and colleagues deem the "total normalisation of sexualised communications and imagery that young people are receiving and negotiating in their day to day lives at school and beyond" (2012:39, quoted also in Coy, 2013). In the same vein, Weale (2016) quotes a spokesman from the NSPCC on the pervasiveness of sexting, "Many young people see this activity as part of everyday life". This view of sexting as a normal part of communication (Döring, 2014) might explain the differences in the reported prevalence of sexting, it could be that young people now feel more able to declare their participation in such behaviour.

 It could also be explained by developments in technology. Snapchat is an application for smart phones which allows senders to send pictures to a recipient which last for a few seconds before being deleted automatically, what is known as a disappearing data application. Snapchat is so popular that Dredge (2013; see also Charteris, Gregory & Masters, 2014) estimates daily figures of 350 million shared photos in September 2013 – up from 20 million a year earlier – and it is most widely used among those under 25 (Poltash, 2013). The self-destructing nature of photos has facilitated the rise of sexting while attempting to overcome some of the risks of regretted actions and revenge porn, although these are not failsafe and there are a number of ways to circumvent the apparent self-destruction (Dredge, 2013; Poltash, 2013). For Jesse, one of the participants, his phone and Snapchat are integral parts of his sexual life:

> Jesse - Well that's all I have, casual sex relationships. That's what I mostly have. And that's all through my phone, texting….have you ever heard of Snapchat? Snapchat, and stuff like that. That's all.
>
> Helen - And would that be meeting people online or people that you know in real life and then….
>
> Jesse - Both really. Well mostly it's meeting people in town and getting their number, getting their Snapchat, texting. And you end up meeting up. And obviously you end up….that one time. And then you carry on until you don't want to take it any further.

Much research has been embarked upon with the aim of ascertaining the motivations for youth sexting. Some researchers suggest that young women seek the admiration and positive feedback of recipients that such images elicit, similar

to the culture or 'likes' described by Facebook users (Chalfen, 2009). One teacher describes young women as participating in sexting because they "craved peer approval" (Battersby, 2008). In the same article, Battersby describes young women themselves as citing the motivation for sexting as, "Girls feel like they can't get attention without putting themselves out there like that". It is important to note here, that the referenced studies are all focused on young women and I will return to questions of gender later in this chapter.

In a 2009 study designed to promote the inclusion of sexting awareness in education, Phippen discovered that 40% of teen participants questioned did not consider a topless image as "inappropriate". Although, crucially, he does not note whether he refers to topless images of males or females, he concludes that this illustrates a discrepancy between teen and adult norms and highlights a desensitization towards sexualized imagery in the adolescent population. Yet this question is almost meaningless without some information on the context of an image, and the context in which it might be viewed. Furthermore, Phippen fails to take in to account the religion, race or class of his participants – variables which could affect perceptions of what is "appropriate" – and does not categorise them by gender, thereby missing an opportunity to analyse the results in terms of the differences between masculine and feminine norms. While this may be intentional on the part of the researcher, I suggest that it is a mistake to treat teenagers as a homogenous group.

Mitchell and colleagues (2012) found that the primary reason that young people, both male and female, cited for participation in sexting was "romance", in that sexting was part of a pre-existing relationship, a way to share intimacy and as foreplay. Similarly Meyer (2016) found that sexting was most common among couples, especially those in long-distance relationships and that "millennials consider it a normal and even healthy part of a relationship". The concept that sexting constituted the subject as flirtatious and exciting and could be offered as a "sexy present" added to the attraction of sexting (Lee et al., 2015; also Meyer, 2016; Van Ouytsel, Walrave & Van Gool, 2014; Hasinoff, 2013).

Some teenagers justify their participation in sexting as practicing a "new model of 'safe sex'" (Chalfen, 2009:263), or a method of experimenting with sexuality

without actually becoming sexually active (Lenhart, 2009). Meyer (2016) notes that the next largest demographic of sexters after couples in her study were virgin teens and Van Ouytsel and colleagues comment that sexting can be a way to create a sexual identity while preserving virginity and without the associated risks of pregnancy or STI transmission (2014).

However, one survey found that 29% of boys believed that a girl who sends a sext to a boy does so with the intention to "hook up" in real life (National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008:2) therefore sexting as a disembodied form of sexual experimentation is not necessarily understood by everyone involved in the same way. While it might seem easier to be sexually confident in cyberspace, there may be implications and expectations for the real world which should be considered (Goldstein, 2011). That sexting functioned as an initial invitation to actual sexual activity was cited by Jesse:

> Jesse - Any pictures. It's just pictures of being out on the drink, probably pictures of lasses naked, it could be anything.
>
> Helen - And do you get those kind of messages sometimes?
>
> Jesse - I could check my phone and there'd be a few on there now. Just cos they are bored and they want to do something.
>
> Helen - So that's girls sending pictures as a way of flirting?
>
> Jesse - Most definitely. They think that's the way to start a convo with you, to start meeting them and stuff like that. That's the way they start.

For Jesse, sexting plays a vital role in the early stages of his sexual relationships, it functions as a way for girls to "start a convo with you, to start meeting them". Commentators such as Levy (2005) might remark that this is an example of sexualisation – that instead of being able to talk and get to know one another, the girl's key offering is her sexuality. Another participant, Harry, defines this as a primary motive for sexting:

> Helen - Why do you think people do send pictures of themselves?
>
> Harry - Cos they want to sleep with them

Yet this could also be an example of young women's sexual agency – to want to have sex, "they want to do something" and to actively seek it out. Furthermore,

being able to have a conversation with someone does not necessarily make them a preferred sexual partner. While opponents of sexualisation may consider this behaviour as 'sexualised', it is also possible to read this as simply 'sexual'. To continually deny the legitimacy of girl's acting 'sexually' is to conform to sexist beliefs that young women are inherently non-sexual.

Sexting and the Discourse of Gendered Pressure

A significant number of adolescent females cite pressure from boys as the main motivation for sexting (Ringrose et al., 2012; Englander, 2012; Powell, 2010; Chalfen, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008; Battersby, 2008; this is also noted by Lee & Crofts, 2015). Thus, a young woman's desire to portray herself as sexy can be easily exploited (Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005).

This gendered dynamic to sexting warrants a more detailed examination. As with sexualisation, the discourse of pressure is highly effective when talking about young people's sexting activities. Young women are constituted as in need of protection from these pressurising influences which facilitates a standpoint in which girls are entreated to avoid these dangerous behaviours. A focus on the risks for young women further supports notion that girls should take responsibility for their own behaviour and position themselves as gatekeepers. 'Resisting pressure' becomes an important pedagogical tool, where saying no is prized and saying yes leads to negative consequences. I have found no similar discourse for young men with regards to sexuality or to sexting, they are constructed as able to pressurise (and indeed there is little effort put into educating young men on how to avoid pressurising others) but not susceptible to pressure. Similarly, this reinforces the expectation that young men will be interested in sex and experimenting with sexuality (Gong & Hoffman, 2012).

The assumption of such a focus is that young women can never, willingly and free from coercion or pressure, indulge in sexting for their own pleasure or to communicate their own desire for sexual attention. As Dobson and Ringrose argue (2016: 18) "What seems more difficult for youth, as for adults, is to imagine the possibility that girls are legitimately entitled to digitally mediate sexuality or express sexual desire". I would add that aside from feeling entitled to own their

sexuality, that women would *want* to digitally mediate their sexuality, free from pressure and for their own pleasure, is alien to many. Thus, young women who practise sexting are constructed as victims of pressure and any attempts at agentic sexuality are deemed inauthentic and contrived. Lee and Crofts unpack the many layers of potential pressure on young people, citing individual, peer group and socio-cultural levels, leading them to conclude:

> "As a result of pressure and coercion at this range of levels it is legitimate to question whether young women in some instances are able to fully and freely '*consent*' to the activity even where they produce and send the image '*consensually*'." (Lee & Crofts, 2015:5, emphasis in original).

Thus, in the many studies in which pressure was cited as a significant motivation for sexting for young women, we must consider the advantages to girls available by colluding in this discourse. "I felt pressured" offers a much easier justification than "because I wanted to", in a culture in which female sexual expression is often deemed deviant and female sexual pleasure is frequently ignored. This is not to say that all sexting occurs in environments free from coercion, that all girls who sext feel liberated and empowered by their actions or that they do so solely in the pursuit of pleasure. My point is that to continually reduce sexting to a discussion of pressure supports the notion that young women have no entitlement or desire to display their sexuality, in the same way that the sexualisation discourse denies young women the agency to participate on their own terms.

It is noteworthy that similar tactics are employed in the media in order to conceptualise sexualisation as a pressurising force, inherently bad and productive of only negative consequences for young women. Bullying, depression and low self-esteem, as examples, are said to be caused by both sexualisation and sexting. The media collude in the idea that both sexualisation and sexting are harmful, dangerous and in need of regulation without considered analysis of the mechanisms in contemporary society that allow such disproportionate responses to occur. Thus, there is a "reductionist push in sext education to persuade young people to simply stop producing images rather than schools seeking to challenge the sexist culture that makes sexting 'risky' for girls in particular" (Dobson & Ringrose, 2016:9). We are invited to accept that sexting leads to bullying, for example, without being asked to consider why this is

presented as an acceptable or logical chain of events, nor what purpose this may serve in perpetuating societal inequalities. In the same way, sexualisation is depicted as responsible for violence against women, which works to present gender inequalities in terms of cause and effect as opposed to complex societal structures.

There have been some particularly high profile instances of suicide among young people which have been linked to sexting and it is not my intention to minimise these cases nor attempt to rationalise the many potential contributing factors. However, I would argue that sexting in and of itself is not productive of any of these negative effects. The effects come from the practice of 'leaking', disseminating explicit sexts to a wider audience than that which they were intended for, without the consent of the subject. Young people who have committed suicide, have done so not because they took and sent a nude photograph, but because that picture was disseminated without their consent and they were subsequently publicly shamed. Current attempts to dissuade young people from sexting in the first place, do little to deter or punish those who wilfully circulate images as an act of aggression, with the explicit intention to cause hurt and embarrassment.

Yet, while these studies acknowledge boys as consumers of sexts, they fail to discuss boys as producers. Previous research has indicated that teenage boys do send pictures of themselves (Sherman, 2011; Barkacs & Barkacs, 2010; Chalfen, 2009; Lenhart, 2009; National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2008) and this was corroborated in this study. Harry, Jesse and Tom disclosed that they had sent explicit sexts of themselves and they did not view this behaviour as problematic in itself:

> I've used…like I've used…like sent pictures to my girlfriend. It's nothing bad to me, do you know what I mean? It's just openness, you know what I mean? (Tom, 17, w/c)

> I've done it a couple of times but I wouldn't do it again. (Harry, 23, w/c)

> I have a couple of times but that's….it's daft cos I'd rather meet them in person. (Jesse, 18, w/c)

As with much of the discourse around sexualisation, young men are effectively ignored when it comes to discussion of the consequences of sexting. While young women are often presented as 'victims', there is little space for young men outside the role of recipient, a role which carries with it connotations of power, manipulation and abuse of trust. However, there is also a degree of condemnation from other girls who identify the behaviour as "slutty" (Van Ouytsel, Walrave & Van Gool, 2014; Lenhart, 2009).

Othering Others: Risky Practices

Dobson and Ringrose note that "young people discussed with astonishment and aversion girls who 'expose themselves' by intentionally posting, sending or taking sexualised digital images of themselves" (2016:15-16). When female participants in this study shared sexting stories they were never based on personal experience and the subjects were usually a source of ridicule and contempt, as Jenny describes:

> We had a girl who was three years above me who wanted to be a full on porn star, she like uploaded pictures of herself (laughing) to this website called Bangers and Gash (laughing). And then we had a girl in the year above me who sent a picture and a girl in the year below and theirs was like a joint thing (Jenny, 19, m/c)

Here, Jenny describes a schoolmate who uploads explicit pictures to a pornographic website – she goes on to give more detail in the transcription, which is not included here for brevity. While the idea of a young woman still in school wanting to be a "full on porn star" is literally laughable to Jenny, these are photographs posed for and uploaded to an external site willingly by the young woman. In the same breath she recounts another tale of two school friends whose private pictures were distributed around the school without their permission. While both stories involve explicit pictures, and are thus conflated for Jenny, they are distinct in terms of consent and potential consequences. Yet, Jenny does not seem to note this fundamental difference in the stories, both are treated as salacious gossip and a source of hilarity. All three subjects of the pictures are deemed 'other' by Jenny, different from herself and therefore legitimate targets for ridicule. Rosie continues with a tale from her own school:

> Rosie – There was actually one guy who was in my year, his sister sent a picture, who's three years above, and they cut out her head….

> Jenny – (laughing) That's awful. That's awful.

When Rosie discusses the sister of one of her classmates whose picture is doctored presumably by others in the school (we never got to the end of the story), Jenny responds with laughter, while acknowledging "that's awful". While Jenny seems to understand the upset that might be caused from this intentional 'leaking', or at least can pay lip service to it, she is still able to appreciate the humour as the scenario has happened to *other* girls. She cannot relate to the subjects, therefore she is unable to be empathetic.

This othering performs an important function. It allows victim blaming attitudes to prosper while exempting some young women from acknowledging their own precarious superiority. Thus Stacey asserts, "I've seen a lot of my friends, when they have sent a guy a picture and it's ended up on the internet. Obviously that's not very nice (laughs)" (20, m/c). Stacey describes intentionally abusive behaviour from male recipients of sexts in distinctly minimised terms, "not very nice". She also recognises the prevalence of these acts, it has happened to a lot of her friends, yet she does not question the unfairness or the impropriety of this behaviour by boys, or express any sympathy for the victims. She goes on to emphasise the difference between herself and other girls by stating, "Personally I've never done it myself because of that, it scares me the idea of it going on the internet".

This sense of victim-blaming is widespread in the literature– that is, the judgement falls on the action of the person who sent the original image rather than the person who forwarded it without consent. Barkacs and Barkacs (2010) detail a number of cases where the subject of the photograph, most frequently but not exclusively a teenage girl, is pursued and punished by the law while the person who has disseminated the image is not held accountable (see also Sherman, 2011). Gong and Hoffman (2012) assert that to prosecute self-sexters in this way constitutes legally mandated slut-shaming (a practice discussed in more detail in a previous chapter) and that when images are self-taken, free from coercion and not intended for publication then their harm is negligible.

Barkacs and Barkacs (2010) detail the legality of teen sexting by analysing attempts to legislate this practice and what emerges is a knee-jerk reaction to "protect" children while simultaneously side-lining their human right to privacy and to self-expression. As society changes and young people lead the way in assimilating new technologies into their everyday lives, care should be taken not to criminalize behaviour just because it is new or personally distasteful. Sherman (2011) documents cases of the prosecution of teenagers who have taken and exchanged explicit images of themselves consensually. Similarly, Marshall notes the case of a thirteen year old girl who sent a sexually explicit photograph to her boyfriend who then forwarded it to his friends without her permission. She claims that even though the potential consequences were serious, the police acted leniently and decided not to prosecute the young woman (2009). As there is no condemnation of the breach of trust or criticism of the young man who passed on the message, we are asked to collude in the idea that this is behaviour is not unusual for a teenage boy. The implication is that the young woman bears a moral obligation to protect herself (Angelides, 2013) and therefore was lucky not to be punished. The notion that women cause such problems (by taking pictures and sending them) and should, therefore, bear any negative consequences was prevalent among young women. In the following extract, Charlotte and Michaela discuss a young woman at their school whose sexts had been widely circulated:

> Charlotte – She was like a gymnast and stuff and obviously if you're a gymnast….and there were just so many pictures that she'd sent.

> Michaela – yeah, people had done edits and stuff, taking the absolute mick out of her.

> Charlotte – and it ended up getting to the stage where she wouldn't go to school and it was on the news and everything. And even like her mam and dad had seen all these photos and her family and other people's family and her friend's family.

> Helen - That sounds horrible.

> Michaela – But then again, you shouldn't do it. I would have been killed. I would have had my phone took off me forever.

While the girls imply some sympathy for the young woman involved, there is also a sense of disapproval, "you shouldn't do it". Michaela offers support for her standpoint by describing the consequences she herself would have faced,

presumably from family members, had she been in the same position. She does not mention how degraded, humiliated or ashamed she might feel as a victim of over-sharing, her reasons for not participating revolve solely around familial punishment. It is also interesting that she describes such punishment as being killed or not having a phone, seemingly equating the two. The 'social death' that she alludes to as a result of not having a mobile phone, echoes the young men cited earlier in this chapter who disliked Facebook but just could not give it up because they would not then be able to communicate with their peers.

Jenny describes a comparable event at her school, in which explicit pictures of one girl were forwarded by others:

> Jenny – people got suspended at mine, the girls who sent the one round of the girl in the year below me. And the girl who sent…who took the picture…She didn't get in trouble at all. Obviously there should be a consequence for her.
>
> Helen - For taking the picture?
>
> Jenny – yeah for allowing that to…obviously it is bad for people to send it round but it's bad to take it.

There is the sense of victim-blaming apparent in Jenny's narrative. That the 'victim' should have received a punishment from the school is 'obvious' for Jenny because "it's bad to take" such pictures. For her, this kind of representation of female sexuality is obviously 'bad'. Like Michaela, there is little acknowledgement of the suffering that may be caused by over-sharing, although Jenny can recognise that "obviously it is bad for people to send it round".

This seems to support the idea that young women are somewhat uncomfortable with explicit representations of female sexuality. As discussed in detail in the previous chapter, young women were keen to express their ignorance of pornography. I argued that they then have few representations of 'pure' pleasure to draw upon, meaning that sex and sexual expression are always embedded in notions of passivity and propriety, respectability, responsibility and relationships as often taught in SRE. In contrast, young men are socialised to expect sexual pleasure and to be the actors and instigators of their sexual experiences. Thus, for the young women cited here, girls who produce such pictorial evidence of their sexuality are no longer passive or proper and therefore, should expect to be

disciplined. Documenting female sexuality is deemed a risky practice for young women, in the same way as talking about sexual activity also presents risks to reputation (as I have shown in previous chapters). Thus, it is difficult to square a discourse of sexualisation that views young women as induced to have sex, to replicate pornography, to send sexts and so on by cultural norms, with the dangers to reputation and negative consequences still attached to sexual expression for girls.

Equally, a discourse that understands sexting simply as a product of the sexualisation of culture (such as that advanced by Papadopoulos, 2010, for example) and views sexts as reproductions of sexualised imagery in the mainstream media, denies authenticity to the young women who express themselves in this way and works to keep representations of female desire within narrowly defined parameters. That a forwarded image should bring shame and punishment on the victim, unquestioned by the participants, reinforces not only a slut-shaming perspective that says it is acceptable to denigrate a sexually transgressive woman, but serves as a cautionary tale for other young women.

Furthermore, in Jenny's story, those who forwarded the picture were other female pupils, discrediting the notion that boys are always the perpetrators in such instances. Similarly, the notion that girls send explicit pictures because of pressure from boys is somewhat redundant here as this whole tale takes place in an all-female school. In fact, Jenny actually tells a number of sexting stories from her school, and describes a talk that was given on the topic from local police, suggesting that the practice was rife amongst the female pupils there, although she offers little insight into their motivations for doing so. A 'pressure from boys' discourse does not stand up here, but the ability and willingness of girls to 'slut-shame' their contemporaries are again highlighted. Lees (1993) describes the correlation between a girl's appearance and her vulnerability to the slut label, noting that an attractive girl might be labelled a slut more readily by girls eager to get ahead of her in the competition for boys. It is possible that in Jenny's story, sexual confidence as evidenced by sexts substitutes for physical attractiveness, creating a girl who appeals to boys and whom girls seek to discredit. There is scope here for further investigation into the reasons why girls participate in the circulation of sexually explicit images of other girls.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have mapped young people's relationship with new media technologies and the role it plays in the production of sexual identity discourse. I argue that social media can be said to represent a 'superpeer' and is a primary mode of regulation of young people's sexual expression. I have likened the 'Facebook gaze' to Foucault's conception of the panopticon, whereby constant potential surveillance mediates the ways in which young people can and do communicate online.

Similarly, sexting can represent a display of female sexual agency, a way of flirting and soliciting sexual activity. However contemporary discourse of female sexuality and sexualisation mean that this is often disguised by reducing female consensual sexting to a product of pressure. This serves to reinforce ideas that young men are sexually active and dangerous, while strengthening claims that the exhibition of young female sexuality is unacceptable. Prosecutions for consensual sexting and the lack of punishment for the non-consensual circulation of explicit photographs further muddy the waters around issues of consent and responsibility, leading to victim blaming attitudes and slut-shaming, which are evident in young people's narratives. I argue that any form of 'sext education' must begin from a standpoint that foregrounds consent as the primary concern rather than proscribing mediated sexual expression for young women.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

This research has been concerned with investigating young people's sexual cultures in contemporary Britain. Taking into account current arguments on the sexualisation of society, this project has aimed to understand how young people make sense of their emergent sexual identities and practices within a 'sexualised' context. While much previous research examines sexualisation *or* SRE in schools, I have considered both elements together, offering a unique insight into the interplay of these discourses for young people.

Using sex and relationship education in school as a starting point, I have analysed how classed and gendered sexual cultures develop and how 'truths' of sexuality are produced by young people themselves. By including little information on platonic relationships or alternative sexual practices, it is my contention that SRE offers little alternative to 'compulsory sexuality' (Radner, 2008), and which I have argued is inherent in much sexualisation discourse. Similarly, while sexualisation discourse is often concerned with the problem of imposing adult sexual values on young people, SRE does exactly this by proscribing sexual expression, focusing on the dangers of sexuality and denying young people the right to certain sexual information – a practice which I contend breaches young people's human rights.

Differences in male and female sexual cultures have been highlighted throughout this thesis. While much has been written previously about the sexual 'double bind' (Tolman, Anderson & Belmonte, 2015; Tolman, Bowman & Chmielewski, 2015; Bay-Cheng, 2015; Attwood, 2007; Keys, Rosenthal & Pitts, 2006; Aapola, Gonick & Harris, 2005; Tiefer, 2004; Chambers, Tincknell & Van Loon, 2004), it would appear that the cultural landscape has remained remarkably stagnant in this respect. Young women are still subject to conditions shaping their sexual expression – that is, only having the right kind of sex in the right kind of circumstances – while there is much status and enhanced reputation available for sexually active young men. Male working class interviewees in this thesis used heterosexual experience to ward off accusations of homosexuality and to consolidate particular kinds of masculinity. I have argued that status for these

young men was attained by participation in the three Bs – booze, birds and banter. Furthermore, while these young men disavowed homosexuality, I have contended that rather than being evidence of homophobia as previously described in the literature (Pascoe, 2007; Melendez & Tolman 2006; Chambers, Tincknell & Van Loon, 2004; Frosh, Phoenix & Pattman., 2001; Martino, 1999), this is more aptly described as 'effemiphobia', a word I am using to describe a fear of being viewed as feminine. This term more accurately notes the division of gender identity and sexual orientation apparent in young men's interactions. I have highlighted the aversion to femininity or what are perceived to be 'girly behaviours' (such as being in a relationship) that seem to be key factors in the production of a mainstream masculine identity for working class men. I have concluded that femininity is vital force in the creation and maintenance of sexual identity, for both men and women.

I have also made explicit the links between SRE and the purported sexualisation of young people, noting the ways in which a prohibitive SRE discourse can promote the very actions which are assumed to be the cause of sexualisation, such as accessing pornography. While sexualisation discourse views the consumption of pornography by young people as unconditionally problematic, I contend that porn can perform an important role in educating young people about pleasure. The entitlement felt by boys to pursue sexual pleasure for its own sake, and their expectation of sexual gratification has been previously noted in the literature (Levy, 2005; Tolman, 2002), as has the ways in which SRE educates boys to expect pleasure (Fine, 1988) and how boys value the contribution made to their sex education by watching pornography (Albury, 2014; Hilton, 2007; Measor, Tiffin & Miller, 2000). These findings are borne out in this thesis in the ways boys readily admit to watching pornography and to engaging in sex primarily for fun and pleasure. Similarly, it has been noted that girls foreground male pleasure at the expense of their own and have little expectation of sexual satisfaction (Levy, 2005; Holland et al., 2004). The interviews for this thesis with young women yielded little acknowledgement of entitlement to sexual pleasure and no female respondents admitted to using pornography either as a sex education tool or for entertainment purposes. Thus, like other authors, I have argued that in the absence of pleasure-based teaching in SRE, pornography fills

this gap for boys (Albury, 2014; Limmer, 2010; Allen, 2004). However, I have also made the case that young women's rejection of porn can be said to negatively affect their sexual subjectivity. I contend that the scarcity of depictions of pleasure as the sole motivation for sexual encounters, unencumbered by relationships, reproduction, or risk, has a detrimental effect on young women's self-conceptualisation as active sexual beings.

This thesis found that some young women were proactive in their pursuit of male attention, for example, using sexts to signal sexual availability. This was mentioned casually by young men, however other young women often treated stories of this behaviour with suspicion or ridicule. It is interesting to note that no young women interviewed for this thesis spoke of incorporating sexting into their own sexual practice and their stories were always in relation to 'other girls'. Sexualisation critics have previously used sexting as an example of male entitlement to female bodies and the resultant pressure on young women to perform their sexuality in these mediated ways (Ringrose et al., 2013; Ringrose et al., 2012; Papadopoulos, 2010). Furthermore, sexualisation discourse demands that sexting can never be seen as an authentic expression of female sexuality, but must always be viewed as a misguided attempt to conform to sexualised norms. Thus, what might be viewed as female sexual agency is reduced to a by-product of a male demand for explicit material. That boys may send solicitous sexts has been often overlooked in the literature but some boys interviewed for this thesis willingly admitted to participating in the practice. However, when sexting went wrong, for example when private pictures were shared with others outside the relationship, disproportionate blame was attributed to female sexters (the victim) and little to those who had broken confidentiality without consent. While the over-sharing of compromising images could be devastating to a young woman's reputation, when young men described sending private and explicit pictures to young women who then disseminated the image to others or publically posted it on social media, this was laughed off. Indeed, Jesse's solution was to stop using Facebook so he was not aware if and when his sexts were posted, rather than to stop sending explicit pictures to women or to challenge those who breached his confidentiality.

This victim-blaming is linked to the practice of 'slut-shaming'. Sexualisation discourse concludes that young women are incited into promiscuity yet 'slut-shaming' and the fear of being labelled offer powerful disincentives to become sexually active, particularly for aspirational working class young women. Bay-Cheng's agency matrix (2015) conceptualises young women as not only evaluated on their (real or perceived) sexual activity but also on the degree of control they exhibit over those interactions. For Bay-Cheng, the slut-virgin continuum of old is intersected by an 'Agency Line' to form four quadrants, each associated with different combinations of agency and activity levels. According to the matrix, high levels of sexual activity are most problematic when coupled with low agency, in other words, girls who have sex for the wrong reasons. This is somewhat supported in my findings as participants such as Amy labelled contemporaries who had unrespectable sex in the wrong circumstances – outside a relationship, while drunk, outdoors, promiscuously - as 'sluts'.

Others have pointed out that the insult 'slut' is more often used as a designator of class and status, than a statement on sexual behaviour (Armstrong et al., 2014; Tanenbaum, 2000) and this was apparent in my interviews, with middle-class girls being somewhat exempt from 'slut-shaming' and working class girls keen to deflect this label by shaming other 'lower status' women. I conclude that while SRE, sexualisation discourse and the practice of 'slut-shaming' work together to empower (or compel) young women to say no to sexual activity, there are few available avenues for young women to advocate for their own sexual pleasure in ways which are not assumed to be problematic.

How Far Have We Come?

By 2010, there was already a wealth of publications dealing with the topic of sexualisation. Influential research projects had published findings examining the effects of sexualisation (APA, 2007) and exploring the links between sexualisation and violence (Papadopoulos, 2010) or paedophilia (Rush & La Nauze, 2006a; 2006b). There were academic commentaries on these research projects (e.g. Lerum & Dworkin, 2009) and commentaries on the commentaries (Vanwesenbeeck, 2009). Books had been written urging parents to protect their children from a tide of sexualisation (e.g. Levin & Kilbourne, 2009) and lamenting

the oppression and sexism of sexualisation (Walter, 2010; Levy, 2005). Theories of sexualisation abounded in the academy (some examples include Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010; Attwood, 2010; 2003; Gill, 2009a; 2009b; 2003). In the intervening years, debate about sexualisation has not died away, but rather has extended, morphed and altered – definitions proliferated, theories tweaked, links between sexualisation and other social phenomena explored. Yet, outside of the academy, the notion of sexualisation and its concomitant negative consequences has remained remarkably entrenched.

Similarly, perhaps unsurprisingly, discussions about what, how and when young people should be educated about sexual matters have also remained current. It has been posited that increased SRE provision can help to stem the tide of the sexualisation of culture as linked to young people, and campaigns to change legislation to make SRE in UK schools mandatory have ensured that sex education has lingered in the public consciousness. Boys' access to hardcore pornography and girls' sexting habits, to name two particular issues linked to sexualisation, are thought to require attention. It has been suggested that schools could play a valuable part in educating young people about the risks and potential consequences associated with these practices and help them to avoid the pressure to participate in the sexualisation of culture (Ollis, 2016a; Horvath et al., 2013; Ringrose et al., 2012). Yet in spite of these recommendations, very few things have changed in practice. Government guidance on SRE in schools in the UK, first published in 2000, has been reviewed in 2014 but remains the same (Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016).

While official legislation on SRE may not have changed, the statistics do show some sign of progress. The conception rate in England and Wales for young women under the age of 18 is currently at its lowest level since 1969 (ONS, 2016). Similarly, conceptions to under 16s fell by 10% nationally from 2013 (ONS, 2016). The North East, despite continuing to have the highest number of conceptions in England for women between the ages of 15 and 17 years, has experienced a reduction in rates of 46.5% from 1998 figures. In the absence of developments in school-based sex education provision, there remains space for future research to ascertain the cause of this downward trend.

Conversely, levels of STD transmission among the 16-24 age group remain persistently high despite increased screening practices which saw over a third of young women tested for Chlamydia in 2014 (Public Health England, 2015). While young people appear to be better protected against unplanned pregnancy, such numbers suggest that condom use is still patchy. This is supported by my data, in how young people are knowledgeable about condoms and the rationale for using them, yet rates of condom use remained low. There is, clearly, still work to be done to promote the use of condoms amongst young people.

New Responses to Old Questions

Much of the literature tasked with describing young people and heterosexuality begins with a view of power in relationships as asymmetrical and patriarchal (for example; Holland et al., 2004). The data collected for this thesis offers a somewhat different view. This is not to offer a utopian view in which young people engage in relationships entirely predicated on equality, nor in which the gendered nature of power is no longer an issue. Indeed, as I have argued, the discourse of SRE which denies female sexual pleasure, and the rhetoric of sexualisation which denies the authenticity of young women's sexual expression, intermingle to produce a generation of young women for whom desire and sexual gratification are rarely claimed. Feeling that "sex is more for the boy" (Stacey) and that sexual encounters "could go either way" (Jennie) with regards to pleasure supports the notion of the "male sex drive imperative" (Hollway, 1984) and as described by Holland and colleagues' "the male in the head" (2004). While young women lack the feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure that boys are said to have in abundance (Horvath et al., 2013), this is not to suggest that they are always disadvantaged when it comes to heterosexual relationships. I have described how young women are often underestimated in their creative production of power and that young women's ability to express power in a variety of ways using sexuality and relationships is under-represented in the literature.

 Female power is particularly present in accounts of working class sexuality and relationships, in varied manifestations. For example, participants described young women actively instigating casual sex via sexting. While most female participants scorned the girls who took explicit pictures of themselves, working

class young men regarded this as a normal part of everyday flirtatious behaviour, a contradiction that perhaps acknowledges the pressure on some young women to outwardly belittle manifestations of female sexual agency and the requirements of masculinity that necessitate sexual conquest. That some young women pursue sex with boys in this explicit way suggests that they are able to confidently display active desire and can demonstrate sexual agency, rather than the feminine passivity demanded by discourses of respectability.

A discourse of sexualisation, however, automatically assigns these women as 'sexualised', as conforming to the demands for more sexually explicit materials from young men and detrimental to their own wellbeing. I argue that this view is both patronising and suppressive of female sexual power. These assumptions are the product of a sexist society that far precedes the current sexualisation of culture, and that I would argue has had far greater detrimental effects on gender equality. If we challenge the assumption that sexting is always and can only be negative, damaging and harmful for young people, and instead conceptualise it as a means to communicate sexual desire and agency, a different picture emerges. Sexting becomes a device by which young women counteract a dominant culture that presumes that girls are inherently passive, non-sexual and easily influenced – it becomes a form of power. That is not to say that respectability is no longer paramount – girls may be able to initiate casual sex via sexting but remaining respectable means disavowing this practice, and crucially, not being caught. In this example, young women may have sexual power in heterosexuality, but they cannot disclose that they have that power, especially to other young women.

Similarly, young working class men and women both described heterosexual relationships as *transformative* for boys. Participating in a relationship was presented as a loss of autonomy for young men; in a relationship, girlfriends held the power to deny a boy access to his friendship network and inhibit young men's promiscuity, both key sites for the production of masculinity. Yet, even this model of promiscuity as a way to consolidate heterosexual masculinity offers young women a measure of power unavailable to them within sexualisation rhetoric. By definition, sexualisation discourse views young women as instruments upon which young men exercise their masculinity. It is this view that removes young

women's autonomy, reducing them to mere tools used by men in their production of sexual identities.

By turning this model on its head, we get a landscape in which young women are not passive instruments, but are instead, *instrumental* in the production of modern masculinity. A boy cannot recuperate heterosexual masculinity without young women, girls are essential. Thus, if masculinity is dependent, in some measure, on sexual performance, young women can, by criticising sexual ability, constrain that identity production. If masculinity is concerned with making sexual exploits meaningful by talking about them, the presence of young women can limit the ways in which young men can articulate sex, as Jesse described, boys can "talk about it normally" only when girls are not around. If being a 'lad' is a major source of masculine identity, relationships with girls have the ability to regulate a boy's capacity for 'laddishness' by limiting his access to the peer group – "they stop you from seeing your mates" (Olly, 18, w/c) - and by the implication that the boy is changed – "he's been stolen by this girl. He's not a mate anymore, he's not a lad anymore" (Ida, 18, m/c). Thus, while the discourse of sexualisation laments the contamination of implicitly virtuous middle-class girls and bemoans their diminished ability to negotiate equal power within sexual relationships, working class women are endowed with the potential to shape and control, if not their partners, then at least the manner in which their partners are viewed in their social circle.

I believe that the effemiphobia displayed by young men is fuelled by the recognition that young women have the ability to somewhat dismantle a young man's masculine identity and therefore, represents an attempt to recuperate precarious male power. Dominant discourses of SRE and sexualisation offer little challenge to the notion that men and women are fundamentally different when it comes to sex, indeed, both are predicated on this very idea. Young people are invited to collude in the belief that men are naturally sexual and active and that young women are (or should be) passive, non-sexual, and more invested in emotional ties. Yet, young female sexual cultures require a young woman to be in control of her sexuality, a perceived lack of agency resulting in slut labelling. Similarly, SRE discourses encourage young women to be the gatekeepers of sexuality (Tolman, Davis & Bowman, 2016; Schick, Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2008),

thus preserving their acceptable femininity. Girls' power to control access to and the context of sex can impact on the consolidation of masculinity required by young male sexual cultures. This is recognised by young men, who are told they *should* be in control but do not feel themselves to be. What results, then, is a wrestling for power in relationships by young men and women and a space in which coercion, betrayal and potentially, violence become enabled.

What is missing from young people's narratives is a notion that things could be different. While some young people could identify the importance of equal power in relationships, such as Jesse's instruction, "don't be a doormat", this was often presented as an exception to the rule. In order for young people to feel that equal relationships are possible, normal and can be commonplace, these deeply embedded assumptions around gender differences need to be dismantled.

Strategising Future Interventions

I have argued that SRE produces a state of compulsory sexuality for young people while simultaneously denying their place as sexual actors. An education system which ignores all non-sexual relationships and endows all interactions with sexual potential, produces a condition in which sex is the norm and is taken for granted. A steadfast refusal to discuss any sexual practice other than heterosexual vaginal penetration centralises this act as 'real' sex and a focus on marriage, love and stable relationships offers young people a discourse of sexuality at odds with their actual lived experience. In this way, SRE is often disregarded as irrelevant from the outset, by young people who value their own acquired practical knowledge and experience over theoretical perspectives that bear little resemblance to real life.

In line with discourses of SRE, girls seemed able and comfortable to take responsibility for speaking up to refuse sexual activity, yet there appeared to be no available discourse for young women to advocate for their own sexual pleasure. This was the case even for girls such as Olivia and Ida who demonstrated a more political understanding of sexuality and gender relations. Thus, SRE offers power to young women only if they align themselves with SRE discourse but it does not empower to say yes, on terms that foreground their pleasure. The lack of pleasure-based education in schools can educate young

women not to expect or feel entitled to sexual pleasure, and this has been well stated in the literature (Allen, 2004; Tolman, 2002; Fine, 1988). While the silencing of female sexuality is by no means new (Skeggs, 1997; Fine, 1988), what is significant about contemporary SRE is that it maintains this silence within a purportedly sexualised culture, reinforcing the idea that sex does not belong to women but rather is (and always will be) appropriated for them. That SRE can go some way to counteracting the negative effects of a culture pervaded by sex and sexuality has been noted elsewhere (such as Papadopoulos, 2010) yet by ignoring issues of female desire and pleasure, SRE maintains the notion that 'nice girls' do not desire sex, in turn reinforcing the designation of girls that do want sex as sluts. Thus, SRE becomes a context conducive to the disempowerment of women and reinforcement of dominant gender structures.

A mainstream view of sexualisation, as espoused by writers such as Papadopoulos (2010), Bailey (2011), or Rush and LaNauze (2006a; 2006b), recognises young people, and especially young women, as educated by sexualised cultural norms into behaving in explicit, vulgar and promiscuous ways. That the process of sexualisation leads to undesirable sexual(ised) behaviour in young people is taken for granted. I have argued that there is little support for such claims; a flawed logic based on tenuous links, pre-existing assumptions, a lack of empirical evidence and a reliance on emotive publicity and public outcry render the phenomenon of 'sexualisation' somewhat specious. Yet while the abstract concept of sexualisation renders its existence difficult to confirm, there is certainly a discourse of sexualisation apparent in academia and the media, which seems to be influencing the understandings of the young people interviewed here.

Thus, when Papadopoulos cites padded bras as a social problem, it is the discourse of sexualisation that endows such clothing with the power to signal sexual activity or availability. This thinking was apparent in the ways female interviewees such as Amy and Kimberly discussed the aesthetic of 'sluts' at their school – "even their hairstyles were different" – while the actual sexual behaviour of a young woman was afforded much less importance. It is sexualisation discourse that compels women into one of two categories and creates a space in which unequal class and gender structures are emphasised. Girls are either

sexually pure and clean (that is not to say virginal but rather sexual only in the right circumstances) or victims of sexualised culture, deviant and out of control.

Similarly, sexualisation discourse is encumbered by concerns around class and implicitly, the perceived sexual impropriety of the working classes versus conceptualisations of the white, middle classes as clean and sexually pure (Egan, 2013b). Therefore, someone must be judged to be 'unclean' for others to demonstrate their own cleanliness by comparison (Egan & Hawkes, 2012). Slut shaming represents a mechanism to regulate the sexual behaviour of the aspirational working class and lower middle class young women, in the same way that sexualisation discourse denotes the contamination of middle class girls by working class aesthetics as being particularly problematic (Egan, 2013b). In this way, sexualisation discourse, and SRE itself, reveal themselves to be contexts conducive to the sophisticated class-shaming of young women on a national scale. At the same time, this discourse works locally to bolster the social capital of some girls at the expense of others. Therefore, sexualisation discourse promotes middle class respectability as the norm by castigating the characteristics which are categorised as unrespectable and therefore, working class such as brashness, perceived sexual excess and 'vulgar' femininity (Skeggs, 1997).

Sexualisation discourse in SRE, as I have noted, is primarily concerned with censorship, denying access to information and imagery in order to discourage sexual activity and proscribing any mediated form of sexual expression by young people. Similarly, the stated aim of government SRE guidance is to delay sexual activity and offer information on only carefully selected, approved topics in order to avoid accusations of inciting premature sexual activity or expression. The discourse of sexualisation views young sexual expression as inauthentic and somewhat pantomimed, young people are seen as compelled to participate in such behaviour in order to fit in. In the same way, desire and pleasure are comprehensively ignored on most SRE programmes, particularly for young women. Therefore, both SRE and the discourse of sexualisation can be said to deny young people's sexual desire, their agency, their bodily autonomy and the pleasure that can be derived from sexual activity. SRE and sexualisation discourse both insist on treating young people as a homogenous group, with little

attention paid to the diversities of lived experience that create such distinct sexual cultures amongst this age group. Yet, both have resoundingly different effects depending on gender and class.

For example, the securely middle class girls in this study were able to talk about their own drunken sexual experiences, having multiple sexual partners and enjoying casual sex in ways that were entirely absent from aspirational working class women's narratives. Indeed, when working class young women described such acts they were usually in relation to other girls' experiences – the girls that they went on to describe as 'sluts'. For many of the participants, such a standpoint conforms to the ideals of the SRE that they received in school, lessons which located sex solely within the confines of loving and stable relationships. I have claimed that, for these girls, having sex for the wrong reasons (whether real or simply perceived), such as for status or boasting, breached appropriate codes of working-class femininity. As such, slut-shaming is often more a statement on class positioning and the desire to separate oneself from 'lower class' or 'lower status' girls. Maintaining an acceptable sexual reputation is also dependent on the manifestation of agency – being in control of oneself, exercising discipline and exerting free will were key factors in deciding whether sexual behaviour might be deemed slutty or not. A performance of sexuality that met these criteria offered some protection from the slut label for some young women (Bay-Cheng, 2015). Yet, as I have shown, the picture of agency is somewhat more complicated than simple questions of whether a girl has sex because she feels like it. As mentioned above, while some young women adopted an agentic approach to choosing sexual partners and deciding when and where to have sex, more or less encumbered by notions of proper feminine behaviour, the ability to actively seek sexual pleasure was missing from young women's narratives.

Although SRE and the sexualisation of society are often presented as oppositional forces (SRE utilised to oppose the negative implications of sexualisation), there are striking similarities between the discourses that warrant further examination. Both are thought to incite sexual activity in young people, either by providing too much information or too much 'sexualised' imagery. Furthermore, as I have argued, both require the imposition of adult values onto young people; SRE by restricting access to knowledge deemed inappropriate,

which moral framework should provide the backbone of teaching and so forth, sexualisation by compelling young people to behave in a sexual manner prematurely. While the values imparted by each discourse may be distinct, the fact that both view young people as impressionable, unable to think for themselves, and (under *normal* conditions) asexual is important. By adopting a protectionist approach, both SRE and anti-sexualisation campaigners are able to dictate a value-set to young people that is assumed to be universal. However, when the subject in need of protection is always assumed to be white, middle-class and heterosexual, the inequalities that allow (or indeed, require) some young people to be constructed as sexually deviant, such as race, gender and class, are ignored. Therefore, if anti-sexualisation rhetoric seeks to protect young people (and especially young women) from the contaminating influence of sexuality, it can only fail in this endeavour, as its very nature is predicated on the sacrifice of some young women (sluts) in order to regulate the sexual activity of the majority. Similarly, SRE prescribes acceptable conditions for sexual activity, which, by extension, excludes those who operate outside of these criteria and subjects them to social opprobrium. When the target audience for SRE discourse is always assumed to be white, heterosexual and middle class, those falling outside of the limits of protection are most often those who are already subject to institutionalised inequalities of race, class and sexuality. While neither SRE nor sexualisation challenge the existence of a category of young women undeserving of protection (because its existence is essential for the greater regulatory regime espoused by both), both provide contexts which facilitate the disparagement of the sexually desiring woman . After all, if this was not the case then (anti) sexualisation discourse and SRE would be redundant.

In the same way, sexualisation discourse relies upon the idea of pornography as influential, corrupting, sexist and shameful, and promoting a narrow range of sexual practices and body images. Within sexualisation, pornography can only have negative effects because to accept that there may be a possible positive outcome to accessing porn is to imply that the very concept of sexualisation is a façade. There is little space for young women to admit to enjoying pornography in a culture which denotes this as 'unladylike' and 'sexist'. Similarly, any girl who participates in acts considered 'pornographic', such as anal sex or 'facials', is

deemed to be under the influence of sexualisation, pressure from her male partner, or, most likely, both. That some young women may watch porn and may enjoy recreating it, is entirely absent from the discourse of sexualisation. Porn depicts 'pure pleasure', sex without the context of relationships, driven solely by the pursuit of sexual gratification. The poverty of resources available to girls that depict pure, joyous sexual pleasure for its own sake unencumbered by romantic ideals, I contend, fuels an inherent sex negative outlook which relegates female sexual pleasure to the side-lines.

Final Thoughts

This thesis contributes to a greater understanding of young people's classed and gendered sexual cultures in Britain today. While SRE and sexualisation discourse are often examined as separate entities, this research brings together SRE and the sexualisation of culture to offer an original analysis of the interplay of both in the production of youth sexual cultures. This thesis concludes that the SRE provision in schools continues to be inadequate, irrelevant to the lived experiences of British youth and perpetuates many of the themes that concern sexualisation discourse. The analysis provides an understanding of how SRE and sexualisation collaborate to reproduce classed and gendered inequalities and to recuperate the white, middle class ideal, a first step in addressing the disparities entrenched in contemporary youth cultures. The recognition that young people produce and maintain cultures that are distinct, often complex and in opposition to much 'official' adult discourse paves the way for a more youth-centred and positive approach to sex and relationships education.

Appendices

Appendix A: Participant Information

You are being invited to participate in a research project. This information sheet has been produced to help you understand the reasons for the research and what it will involve before you decide if you would like to take part. Please read the following information carefully and feel free to discuss it with others. If you would like any further explanation, or you have any questions or queries about the research, please come and ask me in person or by email (contact details provided below). Take your time to decide if you would like to take part. Participation is voluntary and there are no consequences to not taking part.

Title

The title of the research is Young People's Sexual Cultures in Contemporary Britain. This means that I am interested in how young people learn about sex and relationships, either in school or other ways. I am also interested in how social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter and the internet fit into the lives of young people. I am especially interested in how these sites might help young people access information about sex, and how the information that is available through the internet or social networking sites might be different from the information that schools provide. Some people think that British society is becoming more 'sexualised' – they think that there is pressure on young people to behave in sexual ways before they are ready because of the amount of sex shown on TV and in magazines. I would like to find out what young people think about this.

What is involved?

The research will be done in two parts, focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The focus groups will involve small groups of young people who will be asked to discuss the sex education they received in school, how they use the internet / mobile phones / social networking to access sexual information, and what they think about sexualisation. As much as possible, I will try to form groups with people who already know each other. You can decide if you prefer to be in a single-sex or a mixed-sex group. Groups will last for about an hour.

The one-to-one interviews will cover the same topics more in-depth. These will typically last for about an hour and will involve talking to me alone. The questions will be open and there are no right or wrong answers. You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to and you can stop the interview at any time.

You can decide to participate in either a focus group or an interview or both. You do not have to decide this now.

Recording

The interviews and the focus groups will be recorded so that I can listen to what you say without having to take notes. These recordings will only be used for analysis. No one outside the project will be able to access the recordings, which will be kept securely for three years after the publication of the project and will then be destroyed.

Confidentiality

It is very important to me that the people who take part in this project feel able to speak freely. For this reason, all names of people and places will be changed and nobody will be able to be identified from the reports or publications associated with the project. I will not pass on what I find out to anyone associated with you – parents, schools, friends etc. You do not have to answer any questions which make you feel uncomfortable and you will not be required to share very personal information if you don't want to.

However, it is important to remember that I do have responsibilities to keep the people taking part in this research safe. If someone is in danger or is suffering from abuse, I have a legal obligation to pass this information on to others.

You do not have to take part in this project – participation is voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form which states that you have read and understood what is involved in the research. If you change your mind about taking part, you can withdraw at any time without consequences. You do not have to give a reason if you wish to withdraw.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Taking Part

There are no immediate benefits from taking part in the research. However, it is an opportunity to discuss the topics freely and in a safe environment. It is hoped that the results of this study may help to make changes in the way sex education is taught in schools by adding young people's voices to the debate.

Given the nature of the topics to be covered, it is possible that some people may feel uncomfortable or anxious during or after the research. You can stop at any time if this happens. It is possible that participants might share some very personal information which they then regret. It is important to think carefully about the information which you are comfortable sharing, and this is particularly important if you decide to take part in a focus group. My contact details will always be available if you have any queries or questions after the discussion.

What Happens Next?

If you decide to take part in this project you will be given a copy of this information to keep and a signed consent form. If you require any further information or you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. You can email me at he.williams@hotmail.com or telephone me on 07853 911 063. This

project is supervised by Ruth Holliday at University of Leeds who you can contact via email at R.Holliday@leeds.ac.uk

This project is self-funded by the researcher.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix B: Consent Form

My name is Helen Williams and I am a research student at the University of Leeds, Centre for Interdisciplinary Gender Studies.

I am currently completing a research project and would like to know your views on sexuality, find out where you get your information about sex and relationships and how young people use the internet and mobile phones in their relationships. I would very much appreciate your participation in the research. Before you decide to take part, I would like to tell you your rights regarding the research and what you can expect from me.

- You are free to withdraw at any time from the research and you do not have to give a reason and there are no consequences.
- You do not have to answer any question if you prefer not to.
- The information you give me will be kept confidential and all names, places and other identifying characteristics will be changed to protect your anonymity.
- No information will be passed on to your parents, school or other people / organisations connected with you.
- In the event that in the course of our discussion you disclose to me on-going physical or sexual abuse, I would have to break confidentiality and pass this information on to the appropriate people.
- Any information that is kept about you – including taped interviews, transcripts, notes etc – will be kept in a safe and secure place.
- You can access the data which relates to you at any point.
- You are free to ask any questions or raise any concerns with the interviewer, both during the interview and afterwards.
- There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. All opinions are valuable.

I have read this consent form and accompanying information sheet. I understand the nature of the research and what to expect during the interview. I have had the chance to ask questions and raise any concerns with the interviewer. I consent to participate in the research.

Signature of Participant……………………………….

Name of Participant………………………………..

Signature of Interviewer………………………………

Date…………………………..

Appendix C: Interview Schedule

<u>Section One: Sex and Relationship Education</u>

1. Did you have sex and relationship education classes at school?
2. What did you think about SRE? What areas of SRE were covered? Did you enjoy it?
3. How were you taught it? By whom?
4. Did you learn anything that you thought was useful?
5. Was there anything missing from the classes? Would you have liked more information on any particular areas?
6. Did you talk about pleasure?
7. What would you have liked to be taught? Any ideas on how to improve SRE?
8. How did you feel about discussing sex and relationships in school?

<u>Section Two: Other Sources of Sexual Information</u>

1. Do you get sex and relationships knowledge from any other sources?
2. Do you think any of these other sources were useful? Which of those sources do you think are the most reliable and why?
3. Do you talk about sex and relationships with anyone else? What do you think about this?
4. Do you use the internet as a resource for sexual information? What are the good things about using the internet to find out things about sex and relationships? Are there any problems with using the internet to find information about sex?
5. Do you use the internet to talk to your friends? What about? How often? Do you have friends online who you do not know in 'real life'?
6. Is it important to look a certain way on social networking sites?
7. Are there any bad things about social networking? What about bullying? Stalking? Have you or any of your friends had negative experiences on social networking sites?
8. Do you think people use the internet/mobile phones to communicate ideas about sex? In what ways? Have you or any of your friends ever done this?

9. What is good about using technology to communicate about sex? Have you or any of your friends had positive experiences using technology in this way?

10. What are the dangers of using technology to communicate about sex? Have you or any of your friends had a negative experience? What made you feel so bad about it?

11. When you watch TV or read magazines aimed at a teen audience, what kind of messages do you think they send about sex and relationships?

Section Three: Sex Education Messages

1. What messages do you get from all these sources of sex education?

2. Are these messages always the same as each other or do they get mixed up sometimes?

3. Why do you think people might have different ideas about sex and relationships? What do you think might affect what a person thinks about sex?

4. Do you think girls and boys think differently about sex and relationships? Why do you think that might be?

5. What would you advise that other young(er) people need to know about sex and relationships?

Section Four: SRE in Real Life

1. What are the most important things to have in a relationship? (What makes a relationship 'good'? What sorts of things would make a relationship 'bad'?)

2. Is appearance important to you when choosing a boyfriend or girlfriend? Is your appearance important to your partner(s)?

3. When you think about your own sexual (future) sexual experiences, what is the most important factor for you? Is sexual enjoyment important? For whom? Should sex be with someone you love and are in a steady relationship with or does that not matter?

4. How comfortable do you feel talking to your partner about what you like or don't like doing?

5. How comfortable are you asking your partner what they like or don't like doing?

6. What does the term 'safe sex' mean to you? How important are 'safe sex' practices to you? Why do you think people sometimes do not use protection?

7. What sources of information are valuable to help you have positive sexual experiences? Are there any sources of information that make you feel more confident when it comes to sex and relationships? Or do you think that people just get better with practice?

8. What sort of things are important to have good sexual experiences? (For example; is it important to be in a relationship? To be in love? That you have privacy and are not going to get caught?)

9. What influences the decisions you make about sex and relationships?

10. Has what you learnt in SRE been relevant to your own experiences of sex and relationships?

Section Five: Contextual Questions

1. Where do you live and who do you live with?

2. Who are the important people in your life?

3. Do you go to college or university? Do you have a job?

4. Do you think you are working class or middle class? What are you basing your answer on?

5. What do your parents do for a living?

6. What do you think you might be doing in five years' time?

Appendix D: Participant Demographic

NAME	GENDER	AGE	CLASS	SITE OF RECRUITMENT	WHERE THEY GREW UP
ABIGAIL	F	21	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	OTHER
AMY	F	20	ASPIRATIONAL W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
CARLY	F	19	M/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	OTHER
CHARLOTTE	F	16	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
CHLOE	F	20	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	OTHER
CLAIRE	F	17	ASPIRATIONAL W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
IDA	F	18	M/C	VOLUNTEER	OTHER
JADE	F	16	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
JENNY	F	19	M/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	OTHER
KIMBERLY	F	19	ASPIRATIONAL W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
MICHAELA	F	16	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
MOLLY	F	17	ASPIRATIONAL W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
OLIVIA	F	20	M/C	VOLUNTEER	OTHER
PAULA	F	16	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
PENNY	F	16	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
ROSIE	F	20	M/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	OTHER
STACEY	F	20	M/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	OTHER
VALERIE	F	21	M/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	OTHER
ALAN	M	19	M/C	VOLUNTEER	N.EAST
BART	M	19	ASPIRATIONAL W/C	VOLUNTEER	N.EAST
BRADLEY	M	17	M/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
HARRY	M	23	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 2	N.EAST
JESSE	M	18	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 2	N.EAST
LUKE	M	22	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 2	N.EAST
MATT	M	26	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 2	N.EAST
OLLY	M	18	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 2	N.EAST
REGGIE	M	20	ASPIRATIONAL W/C	VOLUNTEER	N.EAST
ROB	M	16	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 2	N.EAST
SEAN	M	22	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 2	N.EAST
TERRY	M	23	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST
TOM	M	17	W/C	YOUTH SERVICE 1	N.EAST

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