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'Everyone knows someone in an unhealthy relationship': Young people's talk about intimate heterosexual relationships in England

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Abstract

Research suggests that intimate relationship violence and coercive control is prevalent in young people's relationships. Furthermore, young people often fail to recognise such behaviour as abuse. While such findings indicate the normalisation of controlling and coercive behaviours amongst young people, there is little focus on *how* these behaviours are normalised. This paper presents findings from a study exploring young people's experiences and expectations of intimate relationships. Focus groups were conducted with young people (aged 13 to 18) in schools in the West Midlands, England. Young people talked of navigating precarious and competitive heterosexual relationships. Their expectations and negotiations of these relationships often upheld and reinforced gender double standards around dating practices. Young people's discussion also highlighted how they came to accept and rationalise controlling and coercive behaviours as 'love', 'care' and 'protection', legitimising these practices as reasonable. Heteronormativity remains a dominant discourse shaping young people's experiences and expectations of relationships with coercion and control being defining features of this discourse. Supporting young people to critically examine constructs of heterosexuality and gender norms should be a key component of England's forthcoming statutory Relationship and Sex Education.

Key words

Intimate (heterosexual) relationships, young people, gender norms, gender power relations, coercive control

Background

In 2015, coercive control became illegal in England and Wales with recognition that it constitutes a non-physical form of intimate partner violence (IPV) and abuse¹. Coercive behaviour within young people's intimate relationships, however, remains commonplace. Almost half of 16-19 year-olds in England and Wales report experiencing controlling behaviour from a partner (46.1% young women, 49.9% of young men) or threatening behaviour (31.6% young women, 27.1% young men) (Young et al. 2018). While both teenage boys and girls report experiences of emotional violence, girls report significantly more overt controlling behaviour and coercive pressure to have sex (Barter et al. 2009). Such findings indicate the normalisation of controlling practices within intimate relationships, constituting a significant public health risk to young people.

Acceptance of coercive behaviours in heterosexual relationships appear to be increasing amongst girls and young women (aged 13 to 21) in the United Kingdom (Girlguiding 2018). Between 2012 and 2018, the percentage of those who found it justifiable for their male partner to threaten them with violence for spending too much time with their friends increased from 3 to 6%, to physically harm them for talking to someone else at a party from 2 to 7%, to pressure them to have sex from 3 to 7%, to tell them who they can spend time with from 13 to 15%, and to check up on them by reading their text messages from 23 to 30% (*ibid.*). Girls and young women often believe such behaviours are rooted in a partner's feelings of jealousy and reframe these forms of control as signs of care and concern for their welfare (Girlguiding 2013).

From late 2020, Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) will be compulsory in England after the Children and Social Work Act passed into law in 2017. The Department of Education has issued new RSE guidance, stating that "Schools should be alive to issues such as everyday sexism, misogyny, homophobia and gender stereotypes and take positive action to build a culture where these are not tolerated, and any occurrences are identified and tackled" (DfE, 2019:14). The guidance stresses the importance of fostering healthy and respectful communication between boys and girls (*ibid.*). However, the guidance is vague regarding the practical delivery of such curriculum. Given the prevalence and increasing acceptability of coercive behaviour in young people's heterosexual intimate relationships, RSE that includes comprehensive discussion about (un) healthy relationships, controlling and abusive behaviour, as well as dominant ideas about gender norms and stereotypes, is key.

Many challenges remain on how best to provide RSE that addresses gender power relations (Harrison & Ollis 2015) as well as domestic violence (Bell & Stanley 2006; Fox, Hale & Gadd 2014). Schools, rather than being spaces that challenge traditional gender relations, are often sites in which rigid (binary) gender roles and sexualities are constituted, reinforced and policed by young people and teachers (Bragg et al. 2018, Davies 2003; Renold 2005; Ringrose 2012; Abbott, Ellis & Abbott 2015, 2016; Atkinson 2018). Abbott, Ellis & Abbott (2015) found teachers do not challenge but instead reinforce the gendered and heterosexist content that typifies most RSE provision. Furthermore, teachers rarely intervene in incidents of homophobic comments and bullying (Bradlow et al. 2017). Such inaction highlights how schools are not only structurally heteronormative, but also exacerbate homophobia (Mayo,

¹ See the Crown Prosecution Service's legal guidance, 'Controlling or Coercive Behaviour in an Intimate or Family Relationships': <https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/controlling-or-coercive-behaviour-intimate-or-family-relationship>

2013). Against this background, this paper reports on findings from a study exploring young people's everyday experiences and expectations of intimate relationships.

Literature and Theoretical Framework

A large body of work evidences how young people accept, rationalise and normalise IPV (see for example: Prospero, 2006; Silverman et al. 2006; Lacasse and Mendelson 2007; Barter et al. 2009; McCarry 2009). Many young people do not recognise some forms of IPV, specifically coercive and controlling behaviours, as 'abuse,' but see them as part-and-parcel of a 'normal' heterosexual relationship (Girlguiding 2013, 2018). Young people's perspectives on gender roles underpin the normalisation of coercive control (Chung 2005; Lacasse and Mendelson 2007; McCarry 2010; Sundaram 2013, 2014)). Chung (2005) found micro-practices of heterosexuality in young people's discourses signal gender power relations and practices of both inequality and violence. Teenage boys who report perpetrating sexual coercion, and teenage girls who report being victim to it, are more likely to ascribe to traditional gender stereotypes (Lacasse and Mendelson 2007). McCarry 2010 found young people's acceptance of IPV is deeply embedded within notions of masculinity and what it is to be a proper man in the context of a heterosexual relationship. And while young people fluently repeat official discourses regarding the non-acceptability of all forms of violence, many of the same young people subscribe to a narrative which says that girls, in particular, likely 'deserve' any violence they receive because they have not acted as 'a girl should' (i.e. by not demonstrated an 'appropriate femininity') (Sundaram 2013, 2014).

Societal representations of sexuality and gender shape the sexual and gender subjectivities of young people (Allan et al, 2007). These representations, along with various accompanying discourses, are based on and perpetuate traditional binary constructions of female and male (hetero) sexualities that inform understandings of gender and sexuality. While men are encouraged to experience their sexuality as active, women learn to experience their sexuality within the restrictions of passive femininity (Lees, 1993). Unequitable gender practices emerge from such dualistic constructions of male sexual agency and female sexual passivity. Conventional femininity and masculinity negatively affect young women's communication around sex and their sexual decision-making power (Allen, 2003).

This study is informed by critical and feminist approaches, which draw on poststructuralism (e.g. Burman & Parker, 1993; Willig, 1999) to adopt the position that 'reality' is constructed within specific, localised contexts in line with social constructionism, see Burr, 1995). The adoption of such a framework enables us, the researchers, to examine how understandings around intimate heterosexual relationships, including coercive behaviours, are represented in young people's talk. The language young people use shapes their understanding and reveals different forms of subjectivity. Employing Foucault's view of discourse as 'practices that systematically form the object of which they speak' (1972), young people's talk is treated as a site for both producing and enacting broader social discourses and practices (Wetherell & Edley, 1999).

In line with poststructuralism, meanings of gender, including masculinity, femininity are viewed as cultural and social manifestations that are produced and reproduced through social practice (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). We use masculinity and femininity to denote how ways of 'doing gender' are present in young people's talk. As a form of critical

feminist research, this paper provides an analysis of heterosexuality, both as a practice and discourse, in order to expose deep-seated gender inequalities.

Methodological Approach

Data presented here derive from a research project that explored young people's expectations and understandings of intimate dating relationship. Ethical approval was obtained from the Business, Law & Social Sciences faculty ethics committee at Birmingham City University. In total, 85 young people aged between 13-18 years from the West Midlands, England (57 girls, 28 boys) took part in the research. Thirteen focus groups were conducted in two co-educational secondary schools. Both schools serve a broad socio-economic population and the majority of students come from a White British background. Focus groups were utilised as a 'socially situated' method (Wilkinson, 1999) yielding interactive data that captures the way in which young people most commonly talk and construct meanings within their social groups (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1998). Within the current framework, the accounts produced through this method reflect young people 'doing' (hetero)sexuality and gender, and as such, may be viewed as a piece of social interaction as opposed to representing the description of some underlying truth (Potter & Wetherell, 1995).

Focus groups were single sex (8 all girl groups and 4 all boy groups), with the exception of one mixed sex group, and comprised friendship groups to aid comfort (Jørgensen et al. 2019). With high volunteer rates and limited control over practical arrangements such as time and place of focus groups in the school setting, group composition varied. Nearly twice as many girls as boys volunteered and we chose not to exclude anyone who volunteered from participating. The focus group guide focused on young people's expectations and understandings of intimate and sexual relationships. Discussion opened by exploring young peoples' conceptualisations and descriptions of relationships, dating norms and conventions, before moving on to relationships 'rules' and expectations. To facilitate discussion of these 'rules,' participants were asked to reflect on a range of behaviours indicating how acceptable/unacceptable they felt they were in relationships, in addition to how likely they feel these behaviours occur, under what circumstances and why². Behaviours chosen for discussion included those commonly associated with coercive control (e.g. Girlguiding, 2018). Young people's discussion focused on heterosexual relationships despite the interviewer's use of inclusive terminology (e.g. gender-neutral terms like partners). This focus does not mean all participants identify as heterosexual but may have been a response to established heteronormativity in peer groups.

Accounts produced were generated in the context of a group research interview, with one female interviewer per group. The age and gender of the interviewer and of fellow research participants influence the ways a participant 'does' and performs gender and (hetero)sexuality. Interviewers being female did not appear to hinder boys from openly discussing feelings they knew might be seen as problematic (e.g. boys were forthright about their feelings of jealousy). While we did not find any notable differences in terms of disclosures or dynamics between the single-sex and mixed-sex groups, subtle differences were noted in the use of humour between these groups. Specifically, within single-sex girl groups, humour was used to normalise and downplay a male partners' possessive

² The interview guide is available on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

behaviour. For example, in an instance discussed further below, a group of girls laughed along with a girl when she stated that her boyfriend 'thinks I'm his bitch'.

Focus groups lasted between 50-60 minutes, were audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were anonymised and extracts of the data provided below use pseudonyms. Inductive thematic analysis was conducted using the model outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). Familiarisation with the data was achieved by reading and re-reading all the transcripts, and preliminary codes were generated across the data set. Codes and data relevant to each code were then collated to identify overarching themes. Themes were reviewed by checking that the coded data within each theme cohered meaningfully. The authors jointly discussed and agreed upon these common patterns (themes) from young people's experiences and expectations of intimate relationships.

Findings

Navigating precarity, uncertainty and competition

While young people emphasised the importance of intimate relationships in their lives (and their social circles), they also spoke about the precarious nature of these relationships. Participants expressed unclear expectations about their relationships and partners and spoke sceptically about young people's relationships generally. Similar to young people in Chung's (2005) research, both girls and boys drew a distinction between more formal types of relationships (e.g. boyfriend and girlfriend) and more casual arrangements they labelled being 'on it'. Participants described the latter arrangements as a casual, non-monogamous preparatory stage of a relationship, marked with ambiguity regarding partner intentions. The precarious nature of being on it was evident from their discussions around monogamy and feelings of jealousy:

Excerpt 1 (age 17-18 , girls)

G2: Yeah so like you're not boyfriend and girlfriend yet but like you're claiming each other

G1: [You're] starting something new (*group giggle*)

G2: [Like you're not] together yeah so

G3: You spend a lot of time together

G2: But like other people can't talk to ya (*group agree*)

G2: So you're claiming each other [But they're not] like boyfriend and girlfriend

G5: You're not like a couple, but you act like one

G2: Yeah, you act like one, but you're not

G4: It's like beforehand *before it's official*

R: So you're not really meant to see somebody else or be *on it* with anybody else?

G2: Yeah (*group agree*)

R: What if you did see somebody else?

G3: You'd be jealous (*group agree*)

G1: Yeah it can be awkward

Although strewn with ambiguity, there was common agreement that being 'on it' was a formative stage in a relationship, when young people let others know they are taken by 'claiming each other'. This was talked about as an exploratory stage during which young people get to know one another. Comparisons between being 'on it' and being in a more formal relationship centred on expectations around fidelity. Being on it also provided a loophole through which both parties could rationalise incidents of infidelity to 'save face' in the light of any perceived wrongdoing.

While being 'on it' was discussed as a way of circumventing these issues, girls in particular talked of their confusion over the contradictory and ambiguous nature of such an arrangement:

Excerpt 2 (ages 14-15, girls)

G4: Friends with benefits. (*Group laughter*)

G2: Yeah.

G3: Like that like 'cos like if you're *on it* with someone you're like they don't get with anybody else and you don't get with anybody else

G2: So why can't you just be together in like a normal relationship not *on it*? (*group laughter*)

G3: It's weird, I don't get it why are you *on it*?

Teenage girls openly questioned being 'on it' and made fun of the situation by describing it as 'weird'. The contradictory nature of this relationship status was evident when the girls described it as an arrangement that is both casual ('friends with benefits') and one that requires exclusivity ('you don't get with anybody else'). Girls' questioning of why one cannot be in a non-ambiguous relationship ('normal relationship'), further evidences the ambiguity around being 'on it.'

Despite the implied relationship exclusivity, this particular relationship status, of being 'on it', appeared to afford boys more protection from the threat of being cheated on. This was evident in the differences in the way teenage boys' cheating was discussed across both sexes. For example, while boys' cheating was normalised under a male sex drive

discourse, narratives related to girls' (real or potential) cheating, were more critical and derogatory.

Excerpt 3 (age 15-16, girl)

Yeah 'cos me personally I know what girls are like because you see I'm a girl there are some girls who don't care if you're in a relationship if they want that person they will like they'll try their best to have him, they don't have morals

Excerpt 4 (age 17-18, boy)

'cos some (girls) actually go out of their way to cheat on us

Girls were constructed as more deliberate, deceitful and manipulative in their cheating. In contrast, participants rationalised boys' cheating as something to be expected. Evident across young people's accounts of relationships, is a discourse around dating as competitive. Girls are spoken of as direct competitors for boys' attention. Such competition positions girls in vulnerable ways.

Excerpt 5 (age 15-16, girl)

[T]here's so many pretty girls around nowadays, you've got to be in direct competition with them all. You gotta stand out. You're compared. It makes you feel sometimes in some cases it can make you feel useless, it can make you feel like someone's always better than ya..

Speaking of the competitive nature of relationships, this same teenage girl spoke of feeling 'useless' and of evaluating herself less favourably than other girls. Differentiating oneself in order to stand out was offered as a solution. However, acceptable degrees of differentiation being difficult to define, leaves girls at risk of being misunderstood and perceived negatively, particularly by other girls. This is evident in the following excerpt:

Excerpt 6: (age 14-15, girl)

A lot of girls will change themselves, completely change themselves [to] be a completely different character just so they can be with a boy. They're naïve and girls are actually desperate. They look make themselves look like a fool but a lot of girls in this school don't have high expectations at all and will settle for anything

The assertion that 'a lot' of girls 'completely' change their character, emphasised this change as common. Girls 'changing themselves' was attributed to their naivety and low expectations, highlighting how girls are positioned in vulnerable ways when attempting to navigate precarious, ambiguous relationships.

Upholding and reinforcing gender double standards

Young people's discussion of relationship expectations reinforced double standards around dating practices. Across all groups, the focus of such discussion centred on explaining gender differences in behaviour (e.g. girls as more possessive, controlling, demanding and jealous) and in vulnerability ('we are more vulnerable', 'more sensitive'). In contrast, boys drew on discourses of heteronormativity and male dominance; they talked of themselves as being more 'sexually dominant' and of girls as being 'too shy' and 'under confident'. This was most evident in discussions about boys being the ones who should initiate a relationship:

Excerpt 7: (age 17-18 , girl)

I would never ask a boy out, EVER. It would always be them, it's their job but I would never ask a boy out. I don't think the girl would want to seem kinda needy and pestering. They try and be quiet, laid back about it, even if secretly like you want him to [ask her out]

Excerpt 8: (age 14-15, girl)

I think there's big pressure on boys cause they've always got to be like the one to ask [girls] out blah blah blah, they always have to do the things first, the first text, the first date or whatever

The expectation that boys must 'always' initiate a relationship was articulated as 'pressure' on them. Excerpt 7 highlights the way girls strongly rejected the notion that initiating a relationship is something girls could do. Girls who initiate relationships may appear to be 'needy' and 'pestering,' reflecting a sexual double standard (Holland et al, 1996). Instead, to 'do' femininity properly, girls should be passive ('be quiet, laid back') about their own interest in a boy.

Boys' justifications and concerns for initiating relationships differed to those of girls. Specifically, they reflected concerns around rivalry and ownership, ensuring certain girls were seen as 'off limits' to other boys. Such concerns reflect a hegemonic male sexuality enacted through heterosexual masculine performance (see Connell, 1995).

Excerpt 9: (age 14-15, boy)

So, I'd rather make it official than no one knowing and because I know what people are like nowadays. Especially like some lads, like they'll talk to her, [because] you can't see she is in a relationship. So, I'd rather it be official so everyone knows the second you go into a relationship. Then like then they're not accessible

Excerpt 10: (age 17, boy)

I can say that is mine, my missis and no-one [else] can have her

These excerpts indicate a discourse of ownership and objectification ('that is mine'). This talk reflects ways of 'doing gender', in which boys are expected to 'do dominance' in their constructions of masculinity (Kimmel, 2012). Such narratives position girls

problematically as objects that boys possess and claim, reflecting a hegemonic discourse around dating that reflects the role of heterosexuality in maintaining a gender hierarchy that subordinates women to men (Cameron & Kulick, 2003).

'Appropriate' masculinity was also displayed through boys' talk of heterosexual prowess and sexual conquest ('gotta show'em who is the man, it's in our nature, they like it' group, Group 8, B). Boys discussed sex as a given aspect of relationships and while they emphasised this being dependent on girls' willingness and readiness, in line with normative expectations of masculinity, this talk also demonstrated their expectation that sex should happen at some point.

Excerpt 11: (age 13-14, boy)

I can wait, they [girls] decide [whether to have sex] but it depends if everything's gone to plan 'cos not everything does

Excerpt 12: (age 14-15, boy)

What I don't like is when they girls don't want to meet alone, and they bring friends. It's like it's never gunna happen then. I didn't invite the mates, you know what I mean?

While the boy in excerpt 11 states that he 'can wait,' sex is still an expectation in the relationship when 'everything's gone to plan'. Girls are constructed as the gatekeepers to boys' desire for sex as 'they decide' whether sex will occur. The boy in excerpt 12 talks of perceived barriers to sex, stating that when girls invite friends to join them, sex is something that is 'never gunna happen then'. Implicit within this talk is a discourse of the desiring male in pursuit of the reluctant female who acts as a gatekeeper to sex.

A sexual double standard around desire for sex was evident in girls' focus group discussions where they spoke about having to sublimate their own sexual, social and personal feelings and desires to steer a successful course in their relationships with boys. Even in longer-term relationships, girls discussed sex primarily as it related to boys' needs only.

Excerpt 13: (age 15-16, girl)

Personally, I think there is a lot of pressure to actually do things that you don't want to do because I've always been quite, I dunno, like I'm happy to have sex and stuff but like things like giving head an stuff, that's not, I dunno, I just don't really like to do it and his mates making comments an stuff cause he'd tell his friends that I wouldn't do stuff like that but like in a sense I suppose like I'm glad in a way that he did sort of push me to do it cause I think I was just sort of like nervous about it and I was really closed sexually but I just needed to become more comfortable in doing it [...]. He would guilt trip me to give him a blow job, but I never expected anything in return. I was never like 'oh lick me' or anything. I didn't expect him to do that so I'd do it because it'd be good for him an he felt like he was missing out. So I'd want to do it for that sake. I'd want to do it to make him happy, but I just didn't like doing it myself

In the excerpt above, the young woman describes the pressure to perform sexual acts she 'didn't like to do' within her relationship. In framing nervousness as something attributable to her lack of comfort with sex, she presents it as something she needs to overcome. Pressure is articulated (and rationalised) as positive rather than negative ('I am glad in a way that he did sort of push me to do it'). While she recognised her boyfriends' 'guilt trip' as a form of pressure, she states that giving into this pressure is 'good' for her boyfriend, thus, prioritising his sexual needs. Such justifications highlight a missing discourse of desire around female sexuality (Fine, 1988), most explicit when young women dismiss expectations of sexual reciprocity.

Justifying coercive and controlling behaviour

Both girls and boys in relationships spoke of feeling anxious, jealous and possessive of partners. Many openly talked about their own controlling behaviours as well as those of their partners. When describing these behaviours, young people often drew on a discourse of 'care' to explain and rationalise these practices. Jealousy was often discussed as something that indicated the strength of a (primarily male) partner's feelings.

Excerpt 14: (age 15-16, boy)

I think if you like the girl that much, I think you are a bit (jealous) to start off with because you actually care and actually wanna stay with her

Excerpt 15: (age 14-15, girl)

I don't know how you can have a boyfriend that doesn't care, you want them to bother {become jealous}, so they care

In both of these excerpts, there is a strong association between jealousy and possessiveness and the perceived depth of a partner's feelings. Jealousy was talked about as not only symbolic of 'love,' but as necessary for such feelings to be demonstrated and recognised. In excerpt 14, the boy frames jealousy as indicative of the level of his feelings ('actually care') and investment ('actually wanna stay with her') in a relationship. In excerpt 15, a girl equates an absence of jealousy with lack of care.

Where young people discussed jealous and possessive behaviours more negatively, such talk centred predominantly on girls' rather than boys' actions. Where girls did appear to problematise more possessive behaviours in male partners, this was not straightforward condemnation but was often done using humour ('[I]t's annoying he thinks I'm his bitch, it's like he is branding me' age 14-15) and/or normalised ('Everyone knows someone in an unhealthy relationship, 'everyone's been there', age 17-18). Girls' use of humour in this way served to normalise and/or downplay the severity of it. In contrast, when boys complained about girls'/girlfriends' controlling behaviour, they framed it as something that could end a relationship.

While both girls and boys employed a discourse of care to normalise possessive behaviours, boys also drew on a protectionist discourse where they referred to themselves (rather uncritically) as 'overprotective.' This appeared most prominently when boys made

admissions regarding more possessive behaviours (e.g. wanting to know where and who partners are with). Framing behaviours such as jealousy and possessiveness (indicative of control and coercion) as 'overprotective' served to justify and soften such behaviour.

Excerpt 16: (age 15-16, boy)

I'm overprotective, but not too protective

Excerpt 17: (age 13-14, boy)

It's just that I'm overly protective, but you can have a bit of overprotective I think

Excerpt 18: (age 17-18, boy)

"You get a general anxiety, yeah, I'm terrible for that. It's like over thinking as well, like you see something pop on their phone if you're with them and? then like 'Who's that?' and then they like tell you that like the correct answer, but you've still got like something else ticking in your brain saying like 'Is she really doing what she's saying she is doing?' I'm just overprotective obviously at the time I won't speak or I'll put myself in a confined space and then that's when I over think things and then I get even more worried and jealous cause things in my mind have gone way out of proportion and it's just like driving yourself crazy"

In each of the examples above, being overprotective is spoken about as something positive and reasonable. Whilst protectiveness has positive connotations within relationships, overprotectiveness was often associated with possessiveness and mistrust. In attempting to draw a distinction between the two, the boys distinguished between appropriate and problematic levels of protectiveness (excerpt 16 & 17). Similarly, in excerpt 18, being overprotective is also associated with anxiety about the relationship. Boys' admissions of feelings of jealousy and associated possessive behaviours were justified as evidence of 'care':

Excerpt 19: (age 15-16, boy)

If you really like a girl, you care and obviously you're like kinda overprotective but you don't want her to talk to anybody else

Excerpt 20: (age 17-18, boy)

What I try to do, and I've actually done 80% of what I have said I would do is, I've actually met all of Sarah's friends so when she is talking about someone I know exactly who she is talking about. Not in like a creepy overprotective way, I just like to know who her friends are. I like to know if I can trust them because some of my girlfriends in the past, they've had friends and they've been like 'Ah no, he's just a friend' and [then] they've gone out with them [after]

Here, claims to being overprotective are used to explain controlling behaviour such as curtailing who partners can and cannot talk to (excerpt 19) and to justify surveillance strategies, including checking a partner's phone and asking friends to 'keep an eye' on partners. In excerpt 20, the boy initially attributes his 'overprotectiveness' to a lack of trust in those male friends, however this is undermined when he goes on to locate the suspicion more firmly with his partner, framing his behaviour as both reasonable and justified, based on past experience. Much of young men's talk about jealousy and trust, 'overprotective' is discussed as reasonable and indicative of care in a relationship (Chung, 2005), rather than something problematic.

While girls made similar admissions regarding jealousy, they did not explicitly refer to themselves as being (over)protective. Instead, they, along with boys, referred to certain behaviours associated with control in terms of 'best interests'. Where this occurred in girls' talk, it appeared only where they discussed boys' controlling behaviours rather than their own. This difference is highlighted in the quotes below, where both male and female participants justify boyfriends being able to have a say in what their girlfriends wear:

Excerpt 21: (age 15-16, boy)

I'd just be like 'Don't you think that's a bit too revealing? Cause you don't want every boy to look at ya.' Like and 'I don't want people to think the wrong thing of ya.' I wouldn't say go and change, but I'd be like 'Don't you think it's a bit too?' If she starts having one of those hissy fits I'd be like 'See ya later. Don't come with me'

Excerpt 22: (age 17-18, girl)

I think if it is like your arse is hanging out then being like it's ridiculous. If it is something like that they [boys/partner] do think it's inappropriate then I do think it's [to tell her to change her clothes] ok.... If it's in your best interests, then yeah. If it's for their interest, then no

In the above excerpts, both girls and boys justify a male partner asking his girlfriend to change her clothing as being in her 'best interest' so that she avoids being sexualised and judged. T. In excerpt 21, the boy's statement, 'I don't want people to think the wrong thing of ya,' rests on girls recognising the consequences of violating expectations of appearance and sexuality. The examples provided by participants ('arse hanging out'/'that's a bit too revealing') are indicative of how female sexuality is policed via a slut shaming discourse.

Discussion

Findings from this study highlight the ways in which some young people's accounts of intimate relationships draw strongly on heteronormative assumptions to rationalise coercive behaviours. Young people's talk largely constructed boys as decision-makers under a discourse of male ownership; conversely, accounts positioned girls as vulnerable under a discourse of passivity. This gendered notion of vulnerability supports previous findings examining young people's heterosexual dating relationships (see Chung, 2005).

Dominant essentialist discourses around heterosexuality were also evident in discussions around sexual behaviour, particularly when sexual acts (and the pressure to have sex) prioritised male desires and downplayed the needs or desires of girls. Under such narratives, sexual pressure was normalised and female agency compromised. Girls' accounts demonstrated how they must navigate a tightrope of morality, where they must strike a balance between being seen as 'too available' or as 'too frigid'/'left on the shelf' when seeking boys' attention, because actively and directly initiating a relationship was not seen as appropriately feminine. Girls' reframing of sexual pressure from their boyfriends as necessary and positive for the relationship evidenced how female desire is absent from discussions and how female sexuality comes to be subjugated to hegemonic male sexuality (Holland et al, 1996).

Strongly gendered discourses also justified boys' controlling behaviours, with male partners' surveillance reframed as forms of 'protection', 'love' and 'care'. Such gendered discourses disempower girls in particular. This is evident where girls co-constructed their own gendered constraints; (*'you want them to bother...so they care'*) further justifying coercive behaviour. It is also important to acknowledge the regulatory effects compulsory heterosexuality has on young men. Indeed, as masculinity is consolidated through displays of heterosexual prowess and conquest (Holland et al, 2004) young men risk serious marginalisation when violating these norms. Accordingly, the present findings also highlight the constraining effects of normative discourses of male heterosexuality as expressed by boys.

By highlighting how dominant notions of heterosexuality (and gender structures of power) underscore much of young people's talk around relationships, these findings echo existing work that demonstrates how young people's conceptualisations of gender impact their understandings of intimate relationship dynamics (Lacasse and Mendelson 2007; McCarry 2010; Sundaram 2013, 2014). More specifically, in common with Sunadram (2013) these findings highlight how gender based narratives portray girls who do not act 'appropriately feminine' as more 'deserving' of (coercive) violence.

Conclusion and Implications

The aim of the study was to explore young people's everyday experiences and expectations of intimate relationships. We found that young people spoke about their relationships in ways that emphasised their experiences as precarious and competitive. Their talk also revealed gendered expectations around dating practices. Furthermore, young people's accounts drew on a discourse of heteronormativity to justify coercive and controlling behaviours. These findings demonstrate how heteronormativity remains a dominant discourse shaping young people's relationships and how coercion and control are defining features of this discourse.

Our study findings have implications for sex and relationship education generally, but are particularly timely and relevant for England's forthcoming compulsory RSE programmes. Given the normalisation of coercive control, there is a need for RSE educators to support young people to better identify and recognise such practices as forms of abuse. Further, as coercive and controlling behaviour is justified via heteronormative discourses, there is also a need to support young people to critically examine constructs of heterosexuality and accompanying gender norms. This recommendation echoes that of

Pound et al. (2017), whose synthesis of evidence of sex and relationship education best practice identifies the need for a curriculum that challenges, rather than reinforces, gender stereotypes and heterosexist attitudes.

To create opportunities for young people to deconstruct heteronormativity and its role in normalising coercive control, we recommend educators provide examples or cases of both controlling and equitable behaviour as a means of facilitating discussion. Educators should ideally adjust such examples to the local context or the personal experiences of the young people they work with. In such discussions, educators may help young people to not only identify coercive controlling behaviours, but also how such behaviours are justified through heteronormative gender binaries of 'appropriate' femininity and masculinity. Doing so may assist young people to better recognise and challenge coercive control, as well as the justifications for such behaviours, in their own relationships and/or allow them to seek therapeutic and legal support should they require it.

Framing critiques of heteronormative gender binaries as part of a wider school ethos that values equality may help provide young people with alternative discourses from which to frame more equitable relationship experiences. For example, schools could promote the message that *all* young people, regardless of gender identification, are entitled to enjoyable and a diverse range of sexual experiences and practices. While it is important for educators to provide discussions on what constitutes both controlling and equitable behaviour, our findings highlight the way such discussions need to be part of a broader critique on heteronormative practices. This will enable young people to combat coercive and controlling practices in their intimate and sexual relationships.

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