Tensions and potentials of involving young people in discourse analysis: An example from a study on sexual consent

Qualitative Research in Psychology

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Abstract

Involving participants/intended audiences in discourse analysis may help to avoid overemphasising the structural effects of discourse and silencing participant voice (Saukko, 2008; Thompson, Rickett & Day, 2018). Yet, involving participants in complex analytic processes effectively can prove difficult (Franks, 2011; Nind, 2011). In this study, the authors undertook a Foucauldian discourse analysis of sexual consent material within eight (predominantly UK) wide-ranging, youth-focused campaigns to identify the discourses relevant to sexual consent and produce a collage for each discourse. Then, 43 young people from West Yorkshire, UK, helped to identify the underlying messages in the collages (i.e. the discourses), and consider who was constructed as powerful, and who benefited and 'lost out' from these messages. This paper explores the benefits and challenges of involving young people in a discourse analysis in this way, and concludes that, a "both/and" approach should be employed to acknowledge both young people's perspectives and the academic researcher's desire to retain a critical stance toward problematic discourses.

Keywords: Discourse analysis; sexual consent; young people; creative methods; qualitative research.

Introduction

Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) broadly aims to critically explore the discourses present within talk or text (Willig, 2008). A 'discourse' refers to a 'system of statements which constructs an object' (Parker, 2004, p. 252), and in FDA, critically exploring discourses involves consideration of 'what' is being constructed (i.e. what is the object or subject of the talk/text), 'how' it is being constructed and 'why' it is being constructed in this

particular way (e.g. what are the possible reasons for and implications of these constructions?; Riley & Wiggins, 2016). FDA is particularly concerned with processes of power and legitimation (Willig, 2013). Discourses reproduce power relations by constructing versions of reality that reinforce existing power structures (e.g. gendered power relations); these versions of reality may be repeated so often within talk and texts that they become 'common sense' and are therefore difficult to challenge as they are widely accepted within a given society as 'truth' (Willig, 2013; Parker, 2014). FDA can be employed to identify and critique these 'taken-for-granted' assumptions within texts that might otherwise be overlooked and to theorise the implications of these (Parker, 2004).

In the current research, the discursive object of interest was sexual consent. Sexual consent is 'the freely given verbal or non-verbal communication of a feeling of willingness' to participate in sexual acts (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999, p. 259). Sexual consent often forms part of wider Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) for young people (Department for Education, 2019; Bragg et al., 2020). Sexual (non-)consent is also commonly a topic within sexual violence prevention campaigns (Carline, Gunby & Taylor, 2018). Previous research has identified several discourses around sexual consent, particularly regarding sexual consent within mixed-gender sexual relationships and the structural, gendered power imbalances that complicate them. For example, sexual violence prevention campaigns often assume that young women are able to 'just say no' to sexual activity with young men (Carmody & Carrington, 2000; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). This reinforces traditional discursive constructions of men as the likely initiators of sex and women as responsible for giving (or withholding) sexual consent, and women as reluctant, undesiring or non-sexual (Fine, 1988; Carmody, 2006). The implication of this is that women have limited access to assertive and desiring subjectivities. In contrast to this, the male sex drive discourse positions men as having a natural, biological urge for sex that must be satisfied (Hollway, 1984) - a

discourse that is particularly noticeable within Western cultures (Hollway, 1984; Gavey, 2005).

Another common discourse in sexual violence prevention campaigns is around 'risk', where 'potential victims' (typically, women) are positioned as responsible for managing the risk of sexual violence (Carmody, 2003). Campaigns often rely on threatening narratives that focus on the victim's responsibility to prevent their own victimisation by more clearly communicating their non-consent (O'Byrne, Hansen & Rapley, 2008; Stern, 2010), in place of focusing on preventing perpetration by emphasising the need to obtain consent (Barter et al., 2015). Recently, risk and deviancy discourses dominate when discussing young people and their engagement in 'sexting', particularly by constructing sexting as always non-consensual, and as especially damaging for young women, who are constructed as responsible for avoiding the 'regrettable choice' of sharing images (Döring, 2014; Chmielewski, Tolman & Kincaid, 2017). The structural, neoliberal practice of responsibilisation constructs individual young people as responsible for managing their own risk, which leaves them liable for the negative effects of their 'choices' and ignores the contexts within which these 'choices' occur (Liebenberg, Ungar & Ikeda, 2015).

Although FDA is useful for considering the structural effects of discourses (e.g. the gendered power imbalances and responsibilisation discussed in the preceding paragraphs; Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008), exploring discourses in isolation of those whom they concern can result in a siloed interpretation, which fails to acknowledge the participants'/intended audience's reading of a text, and the ways in which people actively resist dominant discourses in their everyday lives (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). For example, when undertaking a FDA of youth-focused texts on sexual consent, researchers may focus on the structural aspects of the discourses without acknowledging young people's

interpretations, consequently privileging the researchers' account at the expense of participant voice (Saukko, 2008; Thompson, Rickett & Day, 2018). Academic research can be criticised for the role it plays in oppressing marginalised groups, including young people, and for failing to listen to their 'voice' (Chadderton, 2012). However, effectively involving participants within analytic processes may be difficult, possibly requiring formal training on the theoretical underpinnings and processes of analytic techniques (Franks, 2011; Nind, 2011).

FDA is undoubtedly underpinned by 'complex' theoretical assumptions (Giroux, 2007), which arguably makes it inaccessible to non-academic audiences and novice researchers. Kesby (2005) argues that making complex theoretical methods more accessible facilitates the engagement of participants in research, yet it is unclear how this can be achieved. Saukko (2008) began to address this difficulty in her research interviews on anorexia with adult women. For the first half of the interview, women were asked about their experiences of anorexia (eliciting their 'voice'), and during the second half of the interview, the researcher asked the participants for their thoughts on previously identified medical and popular discourses around anorexia (involving them in the discourse analysis). The current research was influenced by, and further developed, this approach by: extending it to young people, which can bring additional challenges in making analytic processes accessible (Nind, 2011); using creative methods as a vehicle to discuss discourses with young people - specifically, collages of images and text to represent each dominant discourse, and; working with young people not only to interpret the collages but also to discuss how power functions within these discourses and the subject positions being made available or unavailable within them.

This study formed part of a wider project exploring understandings of power inequalities and sexual consent among young people aged 13-18. We focused on this age group owing to previous research indicating that sexual consent is an uncertain concept for young people of this age (Beckett et al., 2013; Coy et al., 2013). The project drew upon participatory-inspired methodology, which, in keeping with Saukko's (2008) approach, strives to include participants in the various stages of the research process. This started with asking young people about the sources of information that had helped to shape their understandings of sexual consent. These discussions with young people informed our decision to focus on sexual consent material in youth-focused campaigns. We then analysed these sources of information using FDA to explore the narratives available to young people when formulating their understandings of sexual consent and the potential underlying messages (e.g. about power, rights, responsibilities). We involved young people in further interpreting these discourses by presenting each discourse as a collage of images and text from the sexual consent material and discussing each collage with them. In this paper, we briefly present the discourses we identified, alongside the young people's interpretations of them, as a vehicle to discussing the tensions, benefits, and challenges of involving young people in the discourse analytic process.

Method

Stage 1

A total of 77 young people aged 13-23 (majority 13-18) from West Yorkshire, UK, were asked during single-sex (and one mixed gender) focus groups to identify what sources of information had helped to shape their understanding of sexual consent. Campaigns that included material on sexual consent emerged as the most used source, with young people actively seeking information from these sources as well as seeing them displayed at school

and viewing them on TV/social media. Campaigns were therefore selected as the primary data source.

Eight youth-focused campaigns were directly or indirectly identified by the young people as informing their understanding of sexual consent. These included five campaigns named by the young people during the focus groups and three further campaigns that they had viewed in their school lessons or around the school premises; a member of staff at a participating school signposted the researcher to these latter campaigns. The primary goal of the campaigns varied from education on sexual consent specifically (three campaigns), to more general campaigns on healthy relationships or relationship abuse (three campaigns), sexting (one campaign) and the risks of attending parties (one campaign; see Table 1).

To obtain the data sample for analysis from these eight campaigns, the following inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied. Only information within the campaigns which related to sexual consent was sampled and we refer to this as 'sexual consent material' in this paper. A broad definition of sexual consent was used to ensure all relevant information was analysed, i.e. any information which related to defining consent, feelings of (un)willingness to engage in a sexual act, capacity to consent (e.g. after drinking alcohol or taking drugs, or based on age), freedom to give consent (e.g. being coerced or pressured), and communicating (non-)consent. Material focusing on sexting was included in the analysis when this implied a consideration of consent (e.g. pressure to engage in sexting, whether young people should consensually send images to peers and the danger that others would circulate these images without consent). Material directed at parents/carers of young people was excluded, as the aim of this study was to explore the messages conveyed to young people through these campaigns. Finally, any aspects of the campaigns that were designed to test knowledge via user input (i.e. quizzes, question and answer sections) were excluded to focus on information

that was created to enhance rather than test understandings. Table 1 presents a summary of the data sample. **[Insert Table 1 here.]**

Videos were transcribed verbatim and accompanied by a written description of the scene. The sampled material was then imported into NVivo and analysed by the researchers using FDA. There is no strict set of procedures for identifying discourses within a text. Here, we followed the approach advocated by Willott and Griffin (1997) and Willig (2013). Firstly, the data were read and re-read for meaning. The data were then coded using in-vivo themes to capture the topics represented within the text (i.e. 'what' was being talked about). Some examples of initial themes included, 'consent rules', 'negative reactions after non-consent', 'simplicity of consent'. Similar themes were merged. The data coded for each theme were then scrutinised to identify the different ways in which the discursive object was being constructed within the data (i.e. 'how' sexual consent was being talked about); for example, sexual consent as a gendered process. Similar or related constructions (from within and/or across themes) were then grouped together to form the discourses. Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine (2008) suggest that, once a discourse has been identified, there are three dimensions to explore (helping us to understand the possible reasons 'why' sexual consent is constructed in this way). These are: 'genealogy' (e.g. tracing the origins of the discourse through time and location), power (e.g. considering who is advantaged and disadvantaged through the discursive constructions and whose interests are served by them) and subjectification (e.g. analysing how a person/people are constructed within the discourse and the range of subject positions, i.e. identities, selves, ways of being, made available or unavailable to them; Stainton Rogers, 2011; Willig, 2013). We explored each discourse in relation to these three dimensions.

Stage 2

For the second stage, further interpretation of the discourses identified by the researchers in Stage 1 was conducted in consultation with young people (aged 13-18) in secondary schools or sixth form colleges in West Yorkshire, UK. A total of 43 young people, 23 females and 20 males, took part in the focus groups for this stage of the research. Ethical approval was obtained from Leeds Beckett University. The education providers provided young people (and their parents if under 16) with a participant information sheet, inviting them to participate in the project. Written consents were obtained, involving either parental consent and participant assent for young people under 16, or participant consent for young people aged 16-18. Eight focus groups were conducted, each varied in size from three to seven people, and all were undertaken within the education providers' premises by the first author. To create a safer space, separate focus groups were conducted for boys and girls (Sherriff et al., 2014), and the groups were also separated by age (via school year group), with the exception of one focus group which involved both years 9 and 10 (ages 13-15). Each of the focus groups was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

A collage of quotes and image stills was created for each discourse identified by the researchers in Stage 1; however, the collages were not labelled so that the young people were free to interpret the collages themselves (see Figure 1). The concept of 'a discourse' was made more accessible by asking about the 'messages' conveyed in each of the collages. Firstly, the young people were shown a collage and asked to share their views about what they thought the messages (i.e. discourse) represented within the collage were; this was discussed as a group and the researcher shared her own interpretation of the messages. Next, the young people interpreted the messages in the collage in line with the dimensions of FDA outlined earlier, focusing on the power and subjectification of the discourse. In order to make these dimensions accessible, we asked them whether they saw these messages as 'good'

(positive) or 'bad' (negative), who they thought had the 'power' within these messages, and who might 'benefit' and who might 'lose out' from these messages. This method allowed participants to contribute to the interpretation of the discourses by engaging them partially in the discourse analysis itself.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Findings

Our analysis in Stage 1 identified three central discourses within the sexual consent material, each of which are briefly discussed in this section (for a detailed account of these discourses see [authors' reference]). The discourses included a gendered discourse of vulnerable girls and coercive boys, a discourse of risk and responsibility, and constructions of young people as immature and naive. As this paper focuses on the methodological approach of interpreting discourses in consultation with young people, and our discussions with them mainly focused on the dimensions of power and subjectification, the genealogy dimension of the discourses will not be discussed here. Below, each of the discourses is briefly discussed in turn, alongside a commentary of the young people's interpretations of these discourses in Stage 2, and any resulting tension between our and their interpretations.

'Vulnerable girls and coercive boys': A gendered discourse around consent

Within this discourse, girls were constructed as vulnerable gatekeepers, and thus, positioned as responsible for giving (non-)consent to boys. Conversely, boys were constructed as active pursuants of sex who gained girls' consent, or the aggressive or coercive initiators of sex, who would often not accept 'no' as an answer. Men or boys were positioned as going to great lengths to ensure that their efforts resulted in sex; for example, through manipulation ('What, don't you love me?' – This is abuse), by threatening the security of the relationship or

threatening to tarnish their female partner's reputation by branding them 'frigid' ('If you don't, I'll just tell everyone you're frigid' – This is abuse).

Descending from dominant discourses of 'heterosex' outlined by Hollway (1984), this discourse positions men as having a natural, biological urge for sex that needs to be satisfied (Hollway, 1984; Gavey, 2005). Furthermore, positioning women and girls as gatekeepers draws upon traditional sexual scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 2011) that construct girls as responsible for setting sexual limits (Kim et al., 2007).

In the sexual consent material, girls were mainly portrayed as withholding sexual consent from boys but vulnerable to the pressuring nature of boys' advances,

Boy: So do you want a bit of fun before your parents get back?

Girl: …No let's just watch this.

Boy: Oh come on. I'll tell everyone you're frigid.

Girl: Well why would you do that?

Boy: Well you basically are being now.

Girl: Well, no not really because we've already done it.

Boy: Yeah, but you said we would tonight, then you've dragged me over here and now you say it's not happening.

(This is abuse – Television advert, 'Abuse in relationships: Can you see it?')

The term 'frigid' illustrates the fine line that women and girls must walk between not desiring sex enough and desiring sex too much. Women's role as gatekeepers within sexual encounters puts them in the difficult position of having to refuse sexual activity (i.e. express non-consent) at the right time and with appropriate resistance or they could be considered a 'tease' and therefore at fault (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013); for example, the boy in this

extract claims he has been 'dragged over here' under what he deems false pretences. Thus, women's role within this discourse is to manage men's sexual desires by 'receiving or rejecting' men's sexual advances. Consequently, women are positioned as (un)receptive to their partner's sexual desires and not as desiring themselves (Gavey, 2005). The sexual consent material outlined a myriad of ways for girls to express their non-consent, but rarely detailed how they might give consent, which would help to acknowledge the desire that is so often silenced in women and girls (Carmody & Ovenden, 2013).

Unlike previous research into materials on sexual consent, the material in this analysis rarely attempted to present a 'gender-neutral' approach (Beres, 2018). Instead, the material often reinforced ideas about gendered power imbalances within mixed-gender relationships and the gendered nature of sexual violence. We agree that it is important to acknowledge that sexual violence is gendered (Muehlenhard et al., 2017), and that that may have been the intention with this material. However, the materials presented this narrative uncritically and essentialised gender, privileged narratives of heteronormativity and potentially had the unintended effect of 'naturalising' gendered sexual violence. Whilst it is imperative to outline the constraints faced by young people, and girls in particular, to freely give or refuse their consent, the sexual consent material and the discourses presented within it created one-dimensional and restrictive subjectivities for both men and women. Although boys/men benefit from this discourse in more ways than girls/women (as they are positioned as powerful and in control of sexual situations), men were still constituted as unable to display vulnerabilities or express reluctance to engage in sex, while women were constituted as unable to embody sexual assertiveness or display sexual desire.

In the second stage of the study, the young people also highlighted that the available subjectivities in the sexual consent material were limited to boys as coercive and 'getting'

(non-)consent and girls as vulnerable and 'giving' (non-)consent. The young people emphasised that a more equal or mutual concept of consent (e.g. where both girls and boys are seen to be getting and giving sexual consent) and greater representation of LGBT+ relationships would help to avoid this essentialisation and the constraining available subjectivities. Young people pointed out that, by focusing on boys as the initiators of sex, the materials made it 'awkward for girls' (Grace, 17-year-old girl) to talk about or initiate sex, as this was positioned as the boys' role, and consequently unfeminine for girls.

One group of girls pointed out that persistent constructions of women as vulnerable were not representative of their relationships, where they felt they were more powerful than the campaigns depicted:

Nicole: Like 'oh come on I'll tell everyone you're frigid'.

Grace: Yeah like what the hell?

Summer: Imagine if someone said that to you, you'd go 'oh fuck off'.

Grace: I'd be like 'haha go on then'.

(aged 17, girls)

Voicing resistance to constructions of girls as vulnerable does not necessarily mean that these girls will be immune to coercive tactics. Nor does it make the use of terms such as 'frigid' or 'slut' to police girls' sexuality any less problematic. However, we argue that opportunities to challenge constraining representations of female sexuality (along with the discourses underpinning them) are an important step in attempting to change these cultural norms.

For the most part, the young people's interpretations aligned with our own initial interpretation of this discourse (e.g. we both felt that it constructed boys as more powerful); however, our perspectives on the implications of the discourse were markedly different. As

stated above, we recognise the constraints that this discourse places on both boys and girls, whilst also acknowledging that boys may benefit most from this discourse. In contrast (as illustrated in this quote from 15-year-old Lilly), the young people tended to frame boys as most disadvantaged by the discourse owing to the restricted subjectivity of boys as always coercive:

> Lilly: …it's sort of making all boys look bad and a lot of them aren't, they're just showing the bad ones and I feel like it's not fair on guys.

Furthermore, where we considered the construction of women's role as a gatekeeper to be burdensome and relatively powerless (i.e. passive/responsive rather than active/desiring), a number of young people (particularly boys) constructed this as a powerful role for women, who were seen as wielding the power to choose when and if sex takes place and the power to 'accuse' boys and 'get them into trouble' for their sexual advances:

> Dakota: We [boys] can't win, can we? But I'm not saying this is right but, he's making the first move on that campaign advert thing which the girl expects but from what he's said then she might get him done for it.

As illustrated by these quotes from Dakota (17-year-old boy) and Lilly, the young people mobilised a 'poor boys' discourse (Gough & Peace, 2000; Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016), positioning boys as the victims of misrepresentation and as being in a 'no-win' situation.

Therefore, both we and the young people interpreted the sexual consent material as essentialising gender but identified different implications for this. For example, for us, we felt that the material's uncritical focus on the gendered nature of sexual violence might potentially 'naturalise' gendered sexual violence, which restricts the subjectivities available to men and women and the opportunities for sexual violence prevention and intervention. While for the young people, the representations of boys as 'essentially' coercive appears to have provoked a 'not all men' stance (PettyJohn et al., 2018), with young people positioning

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these narratives as 'unfair' and as failing to acknowledge the plight of 'unjustly accused men' (Bragg et al., 2020), which is likely to close down their engagement with the campaign material (Beres, 2018).

The literature indicates that gender-transformative approaches are more effective than gender-neutral approaches to sexual violence prevention (Barker, Ricardo & Nascimento, 2007), but may be met with backlash if they are interpreted as 'anti-male' (Beres, 2018), in line with some young people's interpretations in this research. Rather than 'naturalise' gender, it is important that future campaigns deconstruct the gendered power imbalances and scripts that contribute to sexual violence (Gavey, 2005) and explicitly challenge gendered norms that contribute to sexual violence (e.g. traditional norms of masculinity as aggressive and virile), rather than presenting them without critique (Fleming, Lee & Dworkin, 2014). Further, we suggest that discussions need to take place with young people alongside the presentation of campaign material, to highlight the societal and systemic nature of these power imbalances. Lastly, it is important to provide young people with positive examples in campaigns to avoid resultant interpretations of campaigns as 'anti-male' (Beres, 2018). In line with the findings presented here, positive examples may include girls enthusiastically consenting to sexual activity, actively seeking consent or having their refusals accepted without repercussions, and boys respectfully seeking consent or refusing consent.

'Take control or you could be in danger': Young people as responsible for managing sexual risk

The second discursive pattern that the researchers identified in the sexual consent material was the construction of young people's sexual relationships as risky or dangerous. The sexual consent material expounded the dangers of young people's sexual relationships (e.g. non-consensual sharing of sexual images) and placed the responsibility to deal with potential risks on the shoulders of young people. Although not exclusively, much of the sexual consent

material in this discourse centred on 'sexting' behaviour (a term commonly used to refer to the "making and distributing of nude or sexual 'pics'"; Crofts et al., 2016, p. 4) – either in terms of the risk of girls being pressured into sending 'sexts' and/or these images being shared with others without their consent. Reputational damage was referenced as a potential outcome, especially for girls,

> Left boob: Ugh, another pic request.
>
> Right boob: …Remember, what's her name? That pic broke the internet…everyone saw it, her parents, her teachers.
>
> Both: Poor girl.
>
> (Disrespect NoBody - television advert, 'Nude pictures')

This extract focuses on the young woman who consented (or 'succumbed' to pressure) to send sexual images, and the risks to her, deflecting responsibility away from those who subsequently shared those sexual images with others without the young woman's consent. Further, the sexual consent material often focused on the assumed inevitable consequence that 'sexts' will be shared without consent and will incur reputational damage (Chmielewski, Tolman & Kincaid, 2017). This extract implies that reputational damage predominantly affects and is especially damaging for girls, whose sexuality is closely monitored (Hasinoff, 2015), and constructed as inherently risky (Fine, 1988).

As well as failing to hold to account those who non-consensually share sexual images, the sexual consent material responsibilised young people and constructed them as in control of managing and alleviating the assumed inevitable risks of this victimisation. As one campaign outlines,

> You can take control of the situation yourself by doing the following;

…It may be impossible to delete everything online but you will feel more in control if you know what you will say to people about it:

"I've made a mistake"

"I've learnt from my mistake"

(Think before you send – West Yorkshire Police, webpage)

In this extract, the wrongdoing is assigned to the person whose consent has been violated, who, in order to reclaim any sense of control from the situation, must be prepared to take responsibility and show remorse for their behaviour by acknowledging their 'mistake'. Campaigns discussing sexting in this way incite shame and implicate victims (by positioning them as having made a 'mistake') and minimise opportunities for sexual agency (rendering agentic subject positions inaccessible), particularly amongst young girls (Angelides, 2013; Salter, Crofts & Lee, 2013; Dobson & Ringrose, 2016).

Young people in the second stage of this study also saw this discourse as conveying a message of 'risk' or preoccupation with 'fear factor' tactics and 'worst case' scenarios. However, whilst some endorsed this discourse and felt young people needed to be aware of the risks, others felt that this was not reflective of their experiences, and instead, constructed sexting as 'not a big deal', implying that this was mostly consensual, rather than a risky or damaging experience.

Many young people highlighted that this use of 'scare tactics' (such as the potential for non-consensual sharing or reputational damage noted above) was not useful, as Emily (17-year-old girl), points out,

Emily: …there's loads of people that send, you know, pictures and things and it's just not something that...the fear factor doesn't work because it just doesn't, it just doesn't.

Emily illustrates the unremarkable nature of consensual sexting in that 'loads of people do it' and questions the efficacy of 'fear-factor' tactics. The use of scare tactics is common in sex education materials and previous research has similarly outlined that young people do not appreciate scare-mongering when it comes to learning about sex and relationships (O'Higgins & Gabhainn, 2010).

Others advised that they should be able to make their own choices, consenting to 'sexts' if they wish to, and free from the judgement of others,

> Summer: I just think if you want to send a nude, go for it!
>
> Nicole: Do what you wanna do, you do you boo.
>
> Summer: Yeah and you're old enough to make your own choices, and we should be old enough as a society not to judge you for them.
>
> (17-year-old girls)

Nicole draws upon the popular colloquial phrase 'you do you boo' (meaning be yourself or do what you want to do no matter what anyone else might say/think) to actively reject dominant victim-blaming discourses, which we, as academics, were also critical of. In this case, the implication is that, as girls, they are aware of the judgement they inevitably face but reserve the right to make their own choices to consensually share sexual images despite this. However, many older groups distanced themselves from younger people in their justification of consensual sexting,

> Georgia (18-year-old): At 18/17 like if you want to send those pictures, that is your choice, I don't specifically think it's dangerous as such.
>
> Grace (17-year-old): At a younger age it is.

The young people generally viewed consensual sexting as particularly problematic for people younger than themselves (as they assumed they would be unaware of the dangers) or if sexts were being sent to a stranger; in these cases, it was clear how ingrained this discourse was and they upheld the discourse of risk and rejected the agentic choice of the individuals.

Other young people alerted us to the potential detriment of these messages. Tom (14-year-old boy) notes that those who have already sexted lose out from the messages,

> Tom: Because they're gonna feel even worse about it so they'll probably like... it doesn't really help them, it's just telling them; it's just making them feel more worried about what could happen.

Tom highlights that young people may be alienated and disempowered by being reminded of the (potential) consequences of their actions. Within this discourse, young people who are sexually active and engage in consensual sexting behaviour are positioned as reckless risk-takers who deviate from the authoritative advice given in these campaigns (Shoveller & Johnson, 2006). Tom's point is important as it foregrounds the problems of material that emphasises personal responsibility. Drawing upon neoliberal notions of responsibilisation, this discourse constructs the sexual agent as responsible for making 'good choices' or liable for dealing with the consequences of 'bad' ones, consequently constructing an 'accountable victim', whose actions are seen as 'inviting' (or at least failing to protect themselves from) negative consequences (Chmielewski, Tolman & Kincaid, 2017). This conceals the wider inequalities of gender, race, class and sexuality which shape our ability to make 'responsible' choices (Elliott, 2014). By positioning people who 'fail to heed this advice' as blameworthy, the sexual consent material limits people's ability to access support (rendering them less powerful) if somebody shares their pictures without their consent.

For the most part, ours and the young people's interpretations of this discourse aligned. As noted earlier, in certain instances, participants' talk did sometimes reflect the deep-rooted discourse of risk; however, the young people generally came to a resolution about the need to reconcile both the risks and potentialities of young people's consensual sexting. For example, Maddie (17-year-old girl) stated that,

Maddie: Not everybody is gonna stop you know sending pictures, I think people who advertise to campaign need to come to a sort of, an agreement … saying 'right well ok this is, I suppose the good things but then you've also got to be aware' you know, rather than just making it a really taboo thing.

Similarly, we would argue that it is important to acknowledge that young people do engage in consensual sexting behaviour, and merely focusing on the 'risks' (such as 'sexts' being shared without consent) inhibits educators' ability to have meaningful conversations with young people about both the consequences and pleasures of sexting, young people's varied motivations for engaging in this behaviour, and how they might do so 'safely' and consensually (Döring, 2014; Jørgensen et al., 2019). Messages that focus on risk and promote abstinence create unnecessary fear and shame, are likely ineffective (Albury, Hasinoff & Senft, 2017), and are not considered 'best practice' in RSE (Pound et al., 2017). Instead, acknowledging that consensual sexting is not shameful, and that it has benefits, would be advantageous; for example, it may help to relocate the 'wrongdoing' with privacy violators, and may provide a more comfortable space (for girls in particular) to communicate sexual assertiveness and desire (Hasinoff, 2015).

Too young to engage in consensual sexual behaviours? Constructions of young people as immature and naïve.

The third discursive pattern identified by the academic researchers in the sexual consent material was a construction of young people as *too* young to engage in consensual sexual behaviours. Within this discourse, young people were constructed as naïve and immature when it came to sexual relationships, which implied that they did not have the capacity to give/gain meaningful consent. This was evident in the ways that young people's sexuality was constructed as something that needed to be protected by legal and criminal frameworks and consent as simplistic yet too complex for young people.

Within the sexual consent material, young people were given constant reminders about the legal age of consent and how having sex with someone who is not of this age is 'illegal':

> Pause to check no-one involved is under 16. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland this is the age of consent. It is illegal for any kind of sexual activity to take place when one or more participants are under 16.
>
> (Pause, Play, Stop – Consent booklet)

Discussions of legal frameworks and the use of words such as 'illegal' positions anyone who defies this as criminal and 'wrong'. Yet it is recognised by young people themselves that few obey age of consent laws, partly due to the acknowledgement that the police would struggle to enforce this law (Thomson, 2004). There is also an implication that once a young person turns 16, they have the capacity to consent and perhaps should consent to sex without any further interrogation of the pressures or constraints they may still face to consenting freely. By drawing upon legal language to constantly remind young people that they are too young to engage in consensual sexual behaviours, these campaigns may disempower young people, making it more difficult for them to seek help and talk to adults about their sexual behaviours should they wish to do so.

The construction of young people as immature or naïve when it comes to sex was also reflected in the way that the material aimed to inform young people about consent. These descriptions were often reduced to over-simplified versions of consent. For example, describing consent as being 'simple as tea',

> If you can understand how completely ludicrous it is to force people to have tea when they don't want tea and you are able to understand when people don't want tea, then how hard is it to understand when it comes to sex?
>
> (Consent is everything – video transcript)

The extract above details an attempt at simplifying consent, which assumes that young people would not understand more detailed or complex notions of consent. The extract takes a condescending tone in its approach, with the potential outcome of othering people who do not currently understand the campaign's definition of consent (by positioning them as unable to follow a simple instruction) and consequently closing down opportunities for discussion (as this is so simple, it does not require elaboration or conversation; Brady & Lowe, 2019). The simplified comparison of sexual consent being akin to drinking tea also fails to recognise that our ability to refuse both tea and sex are complicated by the cultural context and social norms that remain unacknowledged (Brady & Lowe, 2019).

Other sexual consent material also drew upon this rudimentary explanation; for example, 'consent is simple. If it's not yes, it's no.' and 'sex without consent is rape #consentiseverything' (Consent is simple campaign). These extracts highlight the tendency to primarily draw upon binary options for consent as either a 'yes' or 'no', with no ambiguity (Whittington & Thomson, 2018). Without questioning the gendered expectations and heteronormative discourses which underpin sexual intimacy, young people may be disadvantaged by such oversimplified advice (Carmody, 2005), as they are not provided with a framework to label experiences that sit outside of the binaries of 'yes' or 'no', and either 'consensual' or 'rape' (Kelly, 1987). The over-simplification of consent within this material gives young people little credit to understand the varied nature of sexual assault and also fails to provide them with the knowledge and understanding that other experiences exist which lie within a much less dualistic view of consent.

In the second stage of the study, it was difficult to gain a sense of what the young people felt the underlying message was within the collage for this discourse, as they tended to focus on critiquing specific aspects of the collage (i.e. the age of consent) without considering

the overall message. Whilst, comparatively, this discourse was more difficult to discuss with young people, there were still some important points raised. For example, the young people at times felt that it was actually adults who benefited from the construction of young people as immature and naive,

> Jakob: I think some adults benefit because it reinforces a point of view that they, with them being a parent, quite often hold about their children… That it's their sweetheart, their darling or whatever they wanna call it and that they need to protect them.

As outlined by Jakob (17-year-old boy), the sexual consent material drew upon a protectionist discourse, which privileges adults by positioning them as better placed than young people themselves to know what is best for them and what they are able to consent to or not (Robinson, 2012).

Other young people noted that those who had already engaged in consensual sexual behaviour 'lost out' from certain messages. Tom (14-year-old boy, who had previously made a similar point in relation to abstinence-based sexting messages) notes that, at best, constant reminders about the age of consent and (il)legality are irrelevant to anyone who has had consensual sex:

> Tom: Because it doesn't apply to them really anymore does it, because it's not really helping them with their problems, just telling them what they've already done and why it's wrong, cause they're not gonna... can't do anything after that really.

Matt (13-year-old boy) elaborates on how the material could be improved,

> Matt: Change how it's sort of worded so it doesn't sound like you're gonna end up in prison for doing something that didn't really have an effect on you or the other person.

Matt highlights the disparity between the way in which young people are commonly experiencing sexual relationships, i.e. as consensual and not negatively impacting either of those involved, and the ways in which this is presented to them, i.e. as essentially non-

consensual and as a crime. Others noted that these reminders implied that being over 16/18 is automatic consent to sex/sexting, thus obscuring the need for discussions with young people about consent and the pressures or constraints associated with this both prior to and when reaching the legal age of consent.

It was particularly enlightening to hear young people's interpretations regarding the simplification of consent in the campaigns. We had initially interpreted this as patronising and oversimplified due to the binary assumptions outlined earlier; however, although some young people were critical of the 'jokey' tone, which may result in people not taking the campaigns seriously, others - mainly girls - noted that they could see advantages to this simplification. For example, Maddie and Lucy's exchange:

> Maddie: And being so simple…you know if people were made to think it was simple and mandatory then it's not a big thing, everybody would accept that everyone needs consent.

> Lucy: Yeah, it's more casual as well like, and that makes it better if it's casual because obviously people feel more comfortable if things are casual.

> (17-year-old girls)

This simplification was viewed as beneficial as it meant that the message was straight to the point and not made into a 'big thing'.

We agree that the *requirement* to gain consent is simple: it is mandatory, everyone needs it. However, our interpretations diverged from the young people's on the simplification of how consent is understood, negotiated, implemented, or communicated in practice. Our own understandings have been influenced by academic literature suggesting that consent is tangled in a complex web of gendered and moral expectations (Carmody, 2005). Therefore, we were critical of the benefit of presenting consent in such simplistic terms, which risk overlooking the nuances and complexities of consent in practice. Consent

communication is often less straightforward than sexual consent material conveys, with a clear, verbal 'yes' or 'no' not being reflective of many actual consent practices (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). However, whilst we were able to draw from our knowledge of the academic literature, we had overlooked young people's knowledges of experiencing this discourse in the here-and-now, and consequently, how a construction of consent as simple can also be productive for young women. Thus, the young people's interpretations afforded us a greater appreciation for the potential benefits of constructing consent as 'simple', namely that downplaying the barriers to giving/getting consent might make this feel more achievable to young people and also reinforce the message that there is 'no excuse' for failing to obtain consent. Reflecting on what these young women have said, we acknowledge that campaigns that construct consent as simple may have a place and serve a purpose. However, we maintain that equipping young people with an appreciation of the complexities of negotiating consent is crucial, and therefore propose that where these materials are used, this should ideally be as part of a broader programme of RSE in which they are critically analysed by the young people. For example, as part of critical sex education, whereby discussion is encouraged and the complexity and context-dependency of consent is explored, which may lead to young people seeing sexual consent as something that may not be 'simple' in practice (Bay-Cheng, 2017).

Reflections and recommendations for involving young people in discourse analysis
This study sought to include young people in the interpretation of discourses or 'messages' conveyed in sexual consent material, and to consider the benefits, challenges and tensions that arise in implementing this approach as part of a FDA. We found that the collages helped to convey the essence of a discourse to the young people in an accessible format that facilitated recognising and challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions within the discourse. However, it would be beneficial to involve young people in the earlier stages of the

analysis, i.e. in the construction of themes, underlying messages and creating the subsequent collages to represent the discourses identified. The young people recognised an overarching message in the collages for the first two discourses (gender and risk), but for the third discourse, often picked up on specific aspects of the collage, rather than an underlying message. Involving young people in the initial analytic stages may enable greater interpretation of the 'messages'. This could be achieved by presenting young people with the printed sexual consent material and working collaboratively to cut this up into 'chunks' and collate these 'chunks' into similar topics or themes (representing the 'objects' of the discourse), which could then be scrutinised for the underlying messages presented within them (the different ways in which the discursive object is constructed) and then arranged into a collage for each discourse or 'overarching message'.

By asking the young people about who was constructed as powerful and who benefited or lost out from the messages, they were able to comment on the power and subjectification dimensions of FDA successfully (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008). The young people were not involved in tracing the genealogy of a discourse as it was anticipated that this dimension may require more extensive knowledge of the academic literature, and consequently, be more challenging and time and resource intensive. However, one way of including young people in the genealogy dimension in future might be to chart a timeline (e.g. Bagnoli, 2009), and ask young people to detail events, ideas and social norms that might have contributed to the development of these messages.

In addition to the challenge of how to fully involve young people in a discourse analytic process, there are further complexities in discussing discourses with young people. Discourse analysis tends to concentrate on the negative and damaging effects of discursive constructions and assumes those who are made subjects through the discourse would

'naively' accept these taken-for-granted forms of knowledge (Moreno-Gabriel & Johnson, 2019). In the current research, the young people occasionally resisted the discourses, but also, at times, endorsed them, which resulted in a tension between our and their interpretation. However, creating binary distinctions between discourses that are 'good' or 'bad', and implying that there is a 'right' or 'wrong' way to interpret them, reinforces academics' authority within the analytic process and does little to acknowledge the multiplicity of discourse and the ways in which this may be both harmful and productive (Moreno-Gabriel & Johnson, 2019).

Involving young people in the analytic process enabled us to reflect on our own assumptions about these discourses, as well as explore what their interpretations and assumptions about the discourses were. We often came to the same conclusions about the sexual consent material, suggesting that young people are not naïve to the damaging nature of discourses. Where there were disparities in our interpretations, this encouraged us to think about the tensions between wanting to amplify young people's 'voice' (ideally without uncritically privileging or romanticising the 'insider' view; Crossley, 2000) and remaining critical of narratives that perpetuate existing inequalities (Coll, O'Sullivan & Enright, 2018). It was important for us to separate our and the young people's readings of the data, and present these as two analyses in conversation, to highlight the points of connection and departure between our interpretations. Working in this way enabled us to recognise the different knowledges that we (as academics) and young people (as the intended audience) can contribute and has helped us acquire a broader and more nuanced analysis of this data. For example, we, as academics, contribute knowledge of the research literature and analytic frameworks, whereas young people contribute knowledge of their lived experiences as the subjects of the discourse and the target audience of the campaigns.

Saukko (2008) concludes that, when using this method of involving participants in the interpretation of discourses, either/or logic should be suspended in favour of both/and logic to acknowledge the multiple dimensions of discourses (i.e. as simultaneously damaging and advantageous). As demonstrated in the Findings section of this paper, this both/and approach is useful and informative. In relation to the first discourse, where we perceived the essentialist discourse as privileging young men, whilst the young people perceived it as maligning them, we argued that it is important *both* to highlight gendered power imbalances and constraining gender norms *and* to do so in ways that are not experienced as discriminatory and alienating by young people.

A both/and approach was also informative in the third discourse. Whilst we were critical of constructions of consent as 'simple' and focused on the 'negative' aspects of this discourse, the young people instead, at times, focused on the 'positive' or productive aspects. In drawing together these seemingly opposing views, we were able to *both* recognise that young women (who draw upon their experience as a subject of this discourse) understandably find this to be a productive message, i.e. the goal should be that consent is seen as possible and 'mandatory', *and* draw upon our knowledge of the research literature to argue that consent can be difficult for young people to communicate freely in practice owing to gendered and moral assumptions about appropriate sexual behaviour (Carmody, 2005; Brady & Lowe, 2019).

By taking young people's interpretations seriously, we recognise what is important to them and are simultaneously encouraged to reflect on our own readings of the data. This discussion and collaboration in the analytic process helped us to reach a more nuanced analysis of the data and acknowledge both our interpretations and knowledge contributions as academics and the young people's interpretations and knowledge as the intended audience of

the campaign material. This process also enabled us to think about the knowledge that we each find difficult to contribute, that is, as academic researchers, we may overlook the utility of certain discourses for the subjects of that discourse, whilst because young people are usually unaware of the research literature, they are less able to bring this to bear on the findings.

Conclusions

This paper identified three central discourses in sexual consent material from youth-focused campaigns and highlighted aspects of these discourses that are potentially problematic: a gendered discourse, which restricts the subjectivities of both boys (as coercive initiators) and girls (as vulnerable gatekeepers); an overemphasis on the risks or dangers of young people's sexual relationships (such as their photos being shared without their consent), at the expense of positive aspects; and, constructions of young people as immature or naïve, suggesting that they do not have the capacity to consent or require oversimplified notions of consent. We endeavoured to include young people in the discourse analytic process and found that displaying discourses as collages and framing questions in accessible ways meant that young people were able to meaningfully engage in this process.

By presenting our and the young people's analyses in tandem, we have demonstrated what we, as academics, and young people, as the intended audience, can contribute to FDA. We can contribute knowledge of the academic literature and analytic frameworks, while young people contribute knowledge that draws on their lived realities in the here-and-now. Young people can contribute to co-creating new knowledge by identifying messages in texts and thinking about power and subject positions from their standpoint, while we do the same from ours. Although we were cautious about involving young people in all aspects of the FDA (i.e. the initial stages of generating the discourses and the genealogy dimension of the

analysis), our experiences have led us to re-think this, and in our next project, we plan to work with young people as co-researchers across all stages and dimensions of a FDA. This study has highlighted the importance of a collaborative analytic process that brings together academic's and young people's respective knowledges, skills and experiences to produce a more nuanced analysis that recognises the multiplicity of discourse, and although there were tensions at times, a "both/and" approach offers a productive way forward.

Acknowledgements

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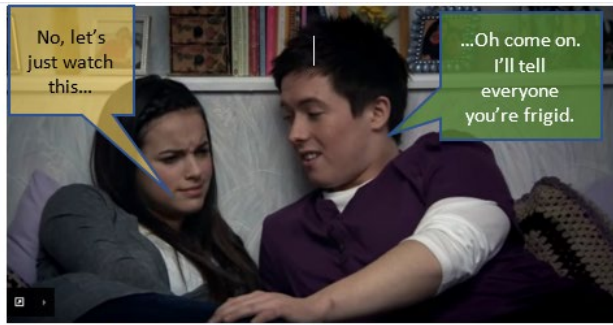
Tables and figures

Table 1: Campaigns included in the discourse analysis

Campaign name	Years active	Focus of overall campaign	Type and number of data units sampled (through application of inclusion and exclusion criteria)
Consent is everything (Thames Valley Police, UK)	2015 –Present	Sexual consent	4 posters, 1 webpage, 1 video
Consent is simple (Project Consent, USA)	2016 – Present	Sexual consent	3 posters, 3 videos
Disrespect NoBody (Home Office, UK)	2017 - Present	Healthy relationships, controlling behaviour, violence, abuse, sexual abuse and consent within relationships	3 posters, 3 videos, 6 webpages
ListenToYourSelfie (Childline, UK)	2016 - Present	Online sexual exploitation, grooming, and peer-to-peer relationship abuse	2 videos, 2 webpages
Party Animals (West Yorkshire Police, UK)	2015 - Present	'Dangers' of attending parties organised by strangers or involving	1 leaflet

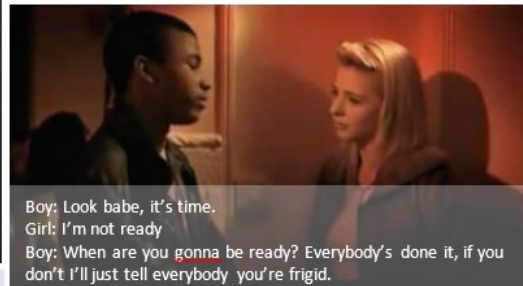|		free drinks, drugs or transport	
Pause, Play, Stop (SARSAS, UK)	2014 - Present	Sexual consent	1 booklet, 3 webpages
Think before you send (West Yorkshire Police, UK)	2015 - Present	Consequences of sexting	2 posters, 1 webpage
This is abuse (Home Office, UK)	2010-2014	Violence, abuse, controlling behaviour and consent within relationships	2 webpages, 8 videos

Figure 1 - Gendered discourse of consent collage