Postfeminist sexual agency: Young women’s negotiations of sexual consent

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Abstract
Standard models of sexual consent in sexual violence prevention campaigns suppose that women, as free and autonomous agents, are in control of their sexuality and are able to ‘just say no’ to unwanted sex. In this article, we suggest that the ‘just say no’ approach to sexual consent is deeply problematic in light of the contradictory ways in which women’s empowerment is assumed within postfeminist discourses whilst masking ongoing gender imbalances. In addition, we problematise neoliberalist notions of the inherently free and hyper-responsible citizen by highlighting the persistence of socio-structural constraints on young women’s sexual decision-making. We draw on an analysis of interviews with eight young women aged between 18 and 24 about their perceptions and experiences of everyday negotiations of consent in their casual and intimate sexual relationships with men.

Keywords
Consent, heterosexuality, postfeminism, sexual practice, young women

Introduction
Popular media images of overtly sexual young women, such as celebrities Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, represent one of the many social mediums through which young women in western societies are led to believe that they are in full control of their sexuality (Gill, 2003; Levy, 2005). The ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s and
1970s gave rise to widely held notions of female sexual empowerment, and, in turn, females today are more likely than their female counterparts of previous generations to consider themselves as sexually liberated (Jeffreys, 1990; Levy, 2005; Powell, 2010). This idea that contemporary young women are sexually liberated and free from traditional gender imbalances is encapsulated by postfeminist discourses in which popular cultural texts typically present young women as unproblematically active, desiring, independent, and empowered sexual subjects (Gill, 2007; Attwood, 2006; Baker, 2008, 2010; Evans, Riley & Shankar, 2010; McRobbie, 1996).

For some observers, postfeminism represents a celebratory period of sexual enlightenment in which men and women are exploring their sexual identities in equal and emancipatory ways (e.g. Kamen, 2000; Lumby, 1997; McNair, 1996, 2002). For other observers however, contemporary ‘raunch culture’ is merely repackaging old gender norms and sexual objectification as empowering (e.g. Gill, 2003, 2007, 2008b; Levy, 2005). Certainly, despite the prevalence of depictions of sexually free and assertive young women, Australian statistics show that women aged between 16 and 25 remain the most at risk of sexual violence (Mouzos and Makkai, 2004; Powell, 2010). Research also shows that unwanted, pressured and coerced sexual activity remains a common experience for young women in the western world, and that these experiences are often normalised in the context of heterosexual relations (see Allen, 2003; de Visser et al., 2003; Gavey, 2005; Holland et al., 1998; Kelly, 1987; Phillips, 2000; Powell, 2007; Smith et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2009; Tolman, 2002; Xenos and Smith, 2001). From the perspectives of feminist scholars, in particular, contemporary sexual relations remain defined by male-privileging ideals and are constrained by implicit pressures in ways that make the sexual freedoms which were bestowed upon young women inherently difficult to embody and enact in everyday practice (Baker, 2008, 2010; Chung, 2005; Gavey, 2005; Holland et al., 1998; Jackson, 1999; Jackson and Cram, 2003; Jackson and Scott, 2004; Jeffreys, 1990; McPhillips et al., 2001; Phillips, 2000; Powell, 2010; Tolman, 2002).

In this article, we locate our discussion within the framework of a postfeminist analysis in order to explore some of the contradictory ways in which young women assume their sexual empowerment whilst consenting to unwanted and unpleasant sex. Specifically, we examine how young women consent to sex in intimate relationships (i.e. after dating for at least three months as indicated by our research participants) and in casual sexual encounters (i.e. one-off sexual encounters or ongoing sexual interactions that lack commitment). Research concerning how heterosexuals negotiate sexual consent remains scarce despite its importance in the fields of sexual violence prevention (Beres, 2007). The negotiation of sexual consent in heterosexual relations in western societies has been explored in only a few studies and even less researched has been young women’s negotiations of consent within casual sexual encounters (e.g. Beres, 2010; Carmody, 2009b; Carmody and Willis, 2006; Gavey, 2005).
We seek to contribute to this emerging body of work and to shed light on the extent to which young heterosexual women are able to freely consent to sexual activity. Sexual violence prevention campaigns predominantly urge women to ‘just say no’ to unwanted sexual contact, which is typified by a ‘risk avoidance’ approach that upholds the neoliberal tenet of individual responsibility (Carmody, 2009a; Carmody and Carrington, 2000; Kitzinger and Frith, 1999; Neame, 2003). This approach suggests that instilling a sense of personal responsibility and encouraging sexual assertiveness in young women will prevent incidents of unwelcomed sex (Carmody, 2006; Carmody and Carrington, 2000; Neame, 2003; Phillips, 2000). By following the basic tenets of risk avoidance discourse, sexual violence prevention campaigns essentially place responsibility on young women to properly communicate their willingness, or unwillingness, to engage in sexual relations with men (Carmody, 2009a; Carmody and Carrington, 2000; Kitzinger and Frith, 1999; Neame, 2003).

However, in our interviews with young women, we found, in line with much of the existing sexual consent literature, that their (hetero) sexual encounters are influenced by gendered discourses and norms, which generate implicit pressures that disrupt their negotiations of consent. In addition to confirming the persistence of gendered discourses and norms in sexual relations, in this article we seek to develop the argument that the issue of sexual consent must be addressed through engagement with what Gill (2007, 2008a) describes as a postfeminist sensibility. The postfeminist sensibility is underscored by a blend of feminist and anti-feminist elements: ‘notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the “wrong” “choices”’ (Gill, 2008a: 442). The young women we interviewed reflected the contradictory character of postfeminist sensibilities, primarily in the marked discrepancy between their perceptions of women’s natural rights to sexual agency and their vilification of their own (and other women’s) inabilities to control their everyday sexual encounters with men. We argue that this strongly correlates with Gill’s (2008a, 2008b) description of the compulsory (sexual) agency underpinning postfeminism: that is, it is a given that all sexual choices are freely made. This postfeminist notion is informed by a distinctly neoliberal sense of ‘active citizenship’ (Larner, 2000: 24) in which individuals are considered ‘autonomous, rationally calculating, and free’ (Gill and Arthurs, 2006: 445), and are expected to able to transcend any socio-structural barriers that inhibit their individual freedoms and choices (Rose, 1990, 1996). As our analysis of the interviews suggests though, the neoliberal espousal of autonomy and its concomitant framing of sexual choices as unproblematically free, masks the ongoing complexities of the process of consent. The main significance of our study is with regard to common sexual violence prevention policies that assume young women are innately free and autonomous beings who can just say no. Instead we suggest that contemporary sexual agency underscores an awkward blend of feminist and anti-feminist elements in which women view themselves as empowered yet continue to reproduce the terms of sexuality set by heteronormative discourses.
Method and analytical framework

In this research, eight young women aged between 18 and 24 took part in semi-structured in-depth interviews which ran from 30 to 90 minutes in length and were held during mid-2010. All of the young women were university students and lived in Western Australia in the Perth metropolitan area. Four of the participants were involved in intimate relationships at the time of their interviews (one of whom was recently married). The remaining four participants were either happily single, searching for a partner, or casually dating. The young women were asked questions about what they perceive to be indicative of sexual consent versus illegitimate coercion, as well as being asked to reflect on their actual experiences of negotiating consent within their intimate and casual sexual encounters with men. All the discussions were electronically recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Examination of the interview transcripts used discourse analysis: an approach grounded in a social constructionist framework that relies on studying text and talk with the understanding that language actively constructs, accepts or challenges social realities (Potter, 1996). The analysis of the interview transcripts involved multiple readings of the transcripts to locate and highlight commonalities and internal contradictions in the participants’ thoughts and experiences of negotiating sexual consent in both casual encounters and intimate relationships. This then entailed an inter-textual analysis in which previous research on gender and sex discourses were drawn upon to further interpret and contextualise the transcripts (van Dijk, 1993).

By using discourse analysis we situated our interpretations of the interviews within wider sociocultural contexts to foster an understanding of why these young women negotiated consent the way that they did and how this relates to the experiences of other contemporary young women (Fairclough, 1995). As Phillips (2000: 15) suggests, to comprehend young women’s choices ‘we must begin from an understanding of the cultural construction of subjectivity – or how cultural context, practices, and assumptions inform young women’s thoughts and decisions’. In our analysis we specifically draw from the cultural context established by postfeminism. McRobbie (2004) describes postfeminism not simply as a historical moment beyond feminism, but instead as a cultural milieu in which traditional feminist politics have been refashioned within common neoliberal texts in such a way that sanctions feminisms’ triumph whilst negating its continued relevance. Postfeminism, Gill (2007) further contends, represents the distinctly contradictory sensibilities of contemporary gendered subjectivities in which young women are at once empowered, self-actualising individuals, while at the same time they are publicly monitored and disparaged for their appearance and sexual actions as never before. It is these contradictions of postfeminism that we explore here and weave through our analysis of our participants’ talk.

Analysis and discussion

In the analysis that follows, we discuss the constraints evident in young women’s abilities to consent to sex in three sections. The first section draws attention to the
centrality of sexual miscommunication theory on young women’s perceptions of sexual consent and victimisation. Following this is a discussion of our findings regarding the implicit norms governing casual sexual encounters which restrict young women’s ability to actively negotiate consent. The third section examines the subtle pressures on young women’s negotiations of consent in the context of intimate sexual relationships.

‘You have to verbalise it and if you don’t it’s not the guy’s fault’

Our analysis revealed that the ‘just say no’ approach of risk-avoidance discourse permeated our young women’s consciousness and influenced their perceptions in line with neoliberal ideals encouraging individual responsibility in experiences of violence and inequality. All of the young women in this study had been exposed to dominant risk-avoidance discourses in their experiences of school sex education and sexual violence prevention. The key tenet underpinning these discourses, of women needing to assertively communicate their sexual choices, was also reinforced in their everyday lives through advice from family and friends to be sexually responsible.

The acceptance of dominant risk-avoidance discourses by many of the young women interviewed clearly shaped their understandings of sexual consent and sexualised violence against women. For example, Ashley, single and 18 years old, commented that men often assume consent and so a woman needs to make it clear if she wants a man to stop. Hence, only a situation involving a man’s unwillingness to stop sexual actions in the face of a woman’s direct verbal refusals constitutes sexual assault:

Most men [assume] if they can do one thing they can do everything else . . . [but] if she told him no and said stop and he continued I’d say that’s sexual assault. (Ashley)

This quotation suggests that consent has an implicit dimension to it and is often implied rather than stated (i.e. men believe that ‘if they can do one thing they can do everything else’). In turn, it is a woman’s responsibility to ensure that she says ‘no’ and ‘stop’ if she does not wish to continue, otherwise it is not a man’s fault should he proceed with his sexual advances (Frith and Kitzinger, 1997; O’Byrne et al., 2008). Similarly, Lisa, single and 24 years old, reiterated the emphasis on women verbally refusing unwanted sexual contact as a precursor to classifying an encounter as a form of sexual assault:

It’s a blurry line I think if you try to physically show you weren’t interested. There’s always the risk that they just won’t get the idea . . . physically you can say you want to but it’s pretty hard to physically say you don’t want to . . . you have to verbalise it and if you don’t it’s not the guy’s fault. (Lisa)
These responses demonstrate the influence of risk-avoidance discourses and how they frame young women’s understandings of sexual consent: emphasising that it is women’s responsibility to communicate and assert sexual boundaries.

The participants’ adherence to ‘just say no’ discourses also translated into the view that sexual assault was a purely physical act: non-physical forms of pressure and coercion did not coincide with a violation of a woman’s sexual autonomy. Indeed, dominant assumptions regarding rape suggest that it involves physical violence and forceful penetration which leaves many women without a way of articulating other coercive forms of sex (Burt, 1980; Burt and Estep, 1981; Estrich, 1987; Heath, 2005; Lievore, 2003). Sex tends to be judged according to a binary system of consensual (‘normal’) versus non-consensual (‘rape’) which results in the silencing of women’s experiences that are more complex (Gavey, 1999, 2005; Phillips, 2000; Pineau, 1989). In line with risk-avoidance discourse, the interviewees maintained that women are always responsible and perfectly capable of resisting non-physical pressures to have sex. Jessica (married, 24 years old) who acknowledged that women can be verbally pressured to have sex, still believed that if a woman submits to verbal demands for sex then she has, after all, freely consented:

I know you can be pressured into having sex: I don’t think that’s an assault. If you get talked down, you’re consenting even though you have pressure on you to consent because if you really don’t want it you go ‘fuck off I said no’. So if you get worn down you’re still consenting. (Jessica)

If a woman is being talked into unwanted sex, Jessica suggests, she should simply assert herself more in order to gain control of the situation. Like Jessica, Lisa adopted a clear-cut viewpoint regarding women who submit to unwanted sex in a context lacking in physical force. For Lisa, such women simply demonstrate ‘weakness’:

If you go home with someone you don’t know, you’re putting yourself in that position. Even though you might think differently, everyone knows that gives him the idea that you’re going to have sex, so if they threat[en] or force [you] then [that’s] sexual assault but if it’s just normal advances and you’re too gutless to say ‘I don’t want to do this’ I wouldn’t class that as sexual assault: I would class that as a weakness on your part. (Lisa)

Clearly, the onus is on women to regulate sexual contact through their explicit verbal communication. According to ‘sexual miscommunication theory’ (which is embedded in risk-avoidance discourses that target young women’s sexual safety), a woman’s experience of unwanted sex is attributed to her apparent inability to effectively communicate her sexual intentions (Crawford, 1995; Frith and Kitzinger, 1997). As a consequence, the theory highlights, men may misinterpret or over-perceive a woman’s willingness to engage in sexual relations (Beres, 2010;
Crawford, 1995; Frith and Kitzinger, 1997). These beliefs are promoted through a discourse of sexual difference – in particular in key postfeminist texts highlighting the inevitable differences between the sexes such as Tannen’s (1992) and Gray’s (1992, 1996) – that centres on the ‘fact’ that men and women simply do not understand each other due to their inherent ‘psychological’ differences (Gill, 2007; Jackson and Scott, 2004). Further, the widespread acceptance of sexual difference means that existing gender inequalities are rendered ‘inevitable’: indeed, our participants accepted the ‘fact’ that men cannot be held responsible for decoding women’s communicative efforts. What becomes evident, therefore, is the contradictory nature of the postfeminist sensibility in that on the one hand young women are freed from past sexual restraints and responsibilities, yet on the other they are held solely accountable for managing their sexual relations with men and are subjected to intense scrutiny regarding their sexual decision-making.

Despite the women we interviewed strongly adhering to risk-avoidance discourses and the tenets of sexual miscommunication theory, however, at the same time they also described how their sexual negotiations largely involved non-verbal communication: verbal communication during sexual relations was not considered normal. Rather, it is more common to judge a partner’s sexual intentions by their physical demeanour and what is felt ‘in the moment’ between two people. As Holly, a 22-year-old in an intimate relationship, described:

I found it sort of easier when you both just sort of don’t say anything and just go with that sort of in the moment kind of thing … I think it’s more physical and telling by their body language that they want to have sex. (Holly)

The unnaturalness of active, verbal communication during sexual encounters has also been found by other researchers (e.g. Beres, 2010; Carmody and Willis, 2006; Kitzinger and Frith, 1999; Powell, 2008). Indeed, Beres (2010: 5) highlighted how consent is typically negotiated through ‘tacit knowing’ in which recognising whether someone is interested in engaging in sexual relations is something that ‘you just know’. Hence, we found that the young women’s perceptions of sexual consent as an assertive verbal process appeared incongruous with how they typically described their largely unspoken negotiations of consent in everyday sexual encounters. We locate this incongruity in the contradictions of the postfeminist sensibility that assumes a compulsory sexual agency (i.e. women are free to control and choose their sexual relations), regardless of the persistence of gendered sexual pressures, which in turn reframes coercive sexual encounters as the result of a woman’s lack of assertiveness.

‘It’s not like I did it because I really didn’t want to’

The young women interviewed were asked to reflect on their experiences of negotiating consent in casual sexual encounters with men. Casual sexual encounters, according to our participants, were focused on sex rather than the love and
intimacy that are associated with intimate relationships. Their definition of casual encounters mirrored what Gavey (2005: 143) referred to as a ‘purely sexual currency of exchange’ in which encounters focus solely on the mutual exchange of sexual favours and on ‘taking as much as you can get’ sexually from the other person (Gavey et al., 1999: 54). The ability of women to engage in casual sex represents one of the hallmarks of the freedoms gained during the sexual revolution and finds common expression in iconic postfeminist texts such as Sex and the City (Attwood, 2006). As Candice, single 21 years old, stated, Samantha (the most sexually active Sex and the City character):

is an advocate for making sure that women in society are on the same level as men. She is able to step up to the plate and although she is feminine in a sense she is also standing up for women’s rights. I definitely look at her as a positive role because she’s sort of a leader almost – standing up for women’s progress in society. (Candice)

Overall however, we found that the young women’s descriptions of their casual sexual encounters, rather than convey a straightforward Sex and the City-like version of empowerment, illustrated certain unspoken norms governing the ‘purely sexual currency of exchange’ in casual relations which constrain their abilities to offer free and voluntary consent to sex.

We found that these young women felt that they implicitly consent to sex through particular actions, such as going home with a man or engaging in heated sexual talk. Once these actions are carried out, then they have no choice (even during non-pleasurable or coercive encounters) but to follow through with intercourse as it would be inappropriate to simply ‘say no’. These women therefore, contrary to postfeminist assumptions of uninhibited female sexuality, found it difficult to change their minds once they adopted the ‘sexy, sexually knowledgeable/practised and always up for it’ (Gill, 2008b: 35) persona inherent to a postfeminist sensibility. For example, Lisa spoke about engaging in undesired sex in order to make a man ‘happy’ in an encounter because she did not want to disappoint him:

If I have changed my mind and the person respects that, I usually do it anyway . . . otherwise I feel guilty – we’ve caught up and you haven’t gotten what you wanted . . . it’s not like I did it because I really didn’t want to it’s just that I did it because it would make the other person happy – a selfless act. They’ve never been forceful or scary or anything so I’ve never felt like there was nothing I couldn’t get out of if I actually wanted to. (Lisa)

Lisa, who had assertively stated earlier that a woman must make her refusals explicit otherwise submitting under pressure is a sign of weakness, offered her body for a man’s sexual pleasure not ‘because [she] really didn’t want to’ but rather as a ‘selfless act’ which ‘would make the other person happy’. This dissonance between her perceptions of consent (staunch advocate of ‘just say no’) and her actual experiences of it (ready to please men despite changing her mind), is akin to findings obtained by Gavey (2005) who noted similar inconsistencies in her participant’s
interviews. This finding is readily contextualised by Holland et al. (1998) who argue that it is heteronormative for young women to prioritise men’s sexual pleasure. Understood through a postfeminist lens, what was traditionally critiqued as sexually objectifying (i.e. privileging men’s sexuality) now symbolises a woman’s empowerment (i.e. it was her individual choice to please her man). The traditional objectification of women has been supplanted by more insidious forms of coercion whereby women are represented ‘as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so’ (Gill, 2007: 151). Tracey, a single 20-year-old, likewise highlighted the necessity for women to follow through with intercourse once they commence with eliciting or responding to men’s sexual interest:

> if you’ve been sending certain signals all night and you go off with a guy you can’t just pull out at the last minute... you both know things will happen... with guys I’ve met, when you know they expect to get laid, you know you have to keep your word. (Tracey)

In these situations, women’s engagement in sexual intercourse is presented as a normal way of ‘paying dues’ for their flirtatious behaviour (Gavey 2005: 142). This socio-sexual norm (i.e. flirting naturally leads to sex) is assumed rather than verbalised because ‘both [people] know things will happen’. In turn, Tracey would never reconsider her initial interest or consent because it is more important ‘to keep your word’ and avoid leading a man on.

These implicit norms governing casual sexual encounters were also identifiable in the young women’s descriptions of starting sexual encounters on the internet rather than in person. As Tracey described:

> ...in the case of the internet I suppose you talk about stuff you want to do and then when you meet up it’s like you know stuff is going to happen otherwise why meet up... you can’t just change your mind when you meet them. (Tracey)

Engaging in flirtatious and heated sex talk over the internet implies that women are keen to follow through with sexual play if both persons meet face-to-face. These norms are internalised by young women and are facilitated by the convergence of the male sex drive discourse and the pleasing woman discourse (Phillips, 2000). The former promotes a relentless and naturally aggressive male sexuality that is inherently difficult for a man to control whilst the latter promotes the idealistic feminine virtues of sexual passivity and subservience to men (Gavey et al., 1999; Hollway, 1984; Phillips, 2000). The convergence of these discourses results in women learning never to ‘start what [they’re] not willing to finish’ (Phillips, 2000: 58) and that a ‘good’ woman is sexually accommodating, especially when she has been sexually suggestive (Gavey, 1992, 2005; Holland et al., 1998; Phillips, 2000). The postfeminist sensibility takes this a step further by positioning women not only as ‘good’ for submitting but as actually empowered.
Significantly, even in situations involving distinctly unpleasant sex our participants chose to follow through with sex. For example, Tracey recounted her acquiescence to sex with a much older, married man she sometimes met for casual rendezvous:

He wanted me to get him hard so I gave him [oral sex]… it’s not my favourite thing because when they get excited they can get forceful I suppose … like choking you almost … it was pretty bad [but] I didn’t want to disappoint him … I couldn’t back out – it would seem pretty stupid. (Tracey)

Tracey’s mere presence in this encounter signified her consent to the sex acts her partner initiated and left her feeling obligated to comply. Women in the role of ‘mistress’, Gavey (2005) surmised, feel obligated to engage in sexual relations every time a meeting is arranged otherwise they experience guilt much like in other casual sex encounters. Further, Tracey’s description of her partner choking her as ‘pretty bad’, rather than as coercive, reflects the eroticisation of male sexual aggression in normative heterosexual relations (Phillips, 2000; Pineau, 1989). Clearly, women’s consent to casual sex is tempered by internalised beliefs about being unable to ‘back out’ after a certain point, which demonstrates an unconscious complicity with the socio-sexual norms of such encounters and can result in a woman’s sexual (self) objectification (Gavey, 2005; Powell, 2010). Again this objectification is internally dismissed (i.e. ‘It would seem pretty stupid) through the compulsory sexual agency of postfeminism.

In another example in which a participant described consenting to casual sex despite entering a confronting situation, Holly described how she accompanied a man to his house after meeting him for the first time at a bar:

We went back to his place and things started happening… he walked me to a bedroom and I didn’t know at the time obviously because he never told me but his brother lived with him and he took me into the brother’s bedroom … I was thinking this isn’t good – what have I done? I didn’t know what to do … I just wanted to get through it all so I could go home. It wasn’t bad or anything: I wasn’t raped. It was a bit stupid of me to go back with him. I mean, I didn’t know him at all. (Holly)

Again, consent to sex was implied in this situation through Holly’s willing return to a man’s house. But even as she described the one-night-stand she agreed to transforming into a threesome without her knowledge, Holly still maintained that her experience was not ‘bad or anything’ because she ‘wasn’t raped’ in the true sense of the word. In Holly’s view, the unwanted threesome with two brothers was her responsibility as ‘it was a bit stupid’ of her to accompany a man to his house when she ‘didn’t know him at all’. This reflects the ‘grammar of individualism’ underpinning postfeminist sensibilities in which women perceive behaviours such as men covertly manipulating their trust to have sex as an issue related to their own individual choice-making as opposed to gendered forms of coercion.
‘It wasn’t pressure against my will but it was a pressure for me to do the right thing’

In contrast to casual sexual encounters which are focused on the mutual exchange of sexual favours, sexual encounters within intimate relationships are not always about sex per se. Rather, in an intimate relationship, women associate sex with intimacy, love and commitment (e.g. Chung (2005); Gavey, 1992, 2005; Phillips, 2000; Powell, 2007, 2008, 2010). In our analysis we found that women’s negotiations of consent in intimate relationships, like their negotiations of consent in casual relations, were clearly shaped by norms which encourage sexual compliance. It was common for the young women to explain that they relinquished their own sense of personal lust and passion in order to fulfil their expected role of sexually fulfilling a partner’s sexual desires and needs in a relationship. For example, Holly did ‘not necessarily desire’ a partner sexually yet engaged in sexual relations out of feelings of love because, she rationalised, ‘it’s just what you do’ in a relationship:

You can love the person and do something with them because you love them but in that particular moment you may not necessarily desire them ... but you can still fool around because it’s just what you do. (Holly)

Similarly, Tracey talked about giving sex out of love and in return for her partner’s happiness even if she does not desire sex herself:

In a relationship you’re not going to be like head over heels gagging for it all the time, you know? ... Sometimes you give to make them happy and because you love them not because you’re desperate to have sex. (Tracey)

Normative heterosexual relationships, Gavey (2005) suggested, involve an ‘economy of sex’ in which women exchange sex for the intimacy, love and commitment that are essential components of a successful relationship. Consequently, the issue of sex (and its frequency) is at the forefront of a woman’s concerns within an intimate relationship because a lack of sex, women learn, symbolises an unhealthy relationship that is not likely to last (Gavey, 2005; Gavey et al., 1999; Holland et al., 1998). Moreover as Powell (2010: 64) and other researchers have illustrated, female sexual compliance is normalised ‘in the name of love’ and being accommodating to unwanted sex is ‘normal’ behaviour for women who love their partners (Chung (2005); Gavey, 1992, 2005; Holland et al., 1992, 1998; Powell, 2007, 2010; Tolman, 2002). Understood through a postfeminist lens, the normalisation of sexual compliance in intimate relationships is masked by the notion of compulsory sexual agency and its related assumption that women no longer make decisions outside of free choice in (assumedly) egalitarian relations. A number of the young women interviewed described how the desire to please the men they loved was also
felt as a pressure to consent to frequent sex. For example, Jessica felt pressure to have regular sex for the good of her relationship:

In the past I felt pressured to have sex purely for the sake of the relationship… it wasn’t pressure against my will but it was a pressure for me to do the right thing … Even now I’m aware of it … that conscious sort of expectation that sex should be regular. (Jessica)

Similarly, other young women in this study described being sexually compliant in response to verbal pressure and emotional manipulation from their partners. For example Tracey explained that she regularly attended to her partner’s sexual needs in order to prevent arguments and her partner ‘freaking out’:

In my last relationship it came up a lot that we weren’t having sex enough … we argued a lot … I’d feel really bad and try not to let it go too long again … if we hung out a few times a week I’d be thinking yep we have to at least do it once otherwise he’s going to start freaking out. (Tracey)

Viewed as an ‘economy of sex’, women often exchange sexual access to their bodies to re-establish peace within their relationships (Gavey, 2005). The use of arguments, verbal pressure and emotional manipulation through the use of ‘guilt trips’ was also identified in research conducted by Basile (1999) who found that they facilitate a woman’s engagement in unwanted sex.

The regularity of women’s sexual availability within intimate relationships, other researchers have likewise noted, is a central expectation of heteronormative relations that is reinforced by the belief that the irregularity or absence of sex results in a relationship’s instability and potential demise (Gavey, 2005; Gavey et al., 1999; Holland et al., 1998; Hollway, 1984). The underlying understanding that infrequent sex threatens an intimate relationship gives rise to feelings of guilt and fear in women if they fail to embody the ideals of a ‘good feminine woman’ who is always sexually available to her partner (Basile, 1999; Gavey, 1992 and 2005; McPhillips et al., 2001; Phillips, 2000). As a result, some of the women in this research explained that they find it difficult to renegotiate their sexual consent with partners who were sexually stimulated and keen to proceed to intercourse. For example, for 22-year-old Melanie who was currently in an intimate relationship, the pressure to ‘please’ her partner remained even without him explicitly asking her to be sexually accommodating to his aroused state:

I think the pressures are there to please him … you think oh no he’s seriously aroused so I’ve got to please him in some sort of way I can’t just leave him like this … in some situations I feel bad because I might not be really into it but he might be sexually aroused. I’m just like okay I guess I can just do it. (Melanie)
Likewise Holly explained that:

I think there’s a time and a place and during sex when a guy’s inside you you’re not going to go ‘Oh excuse me, but can you take it out it’s not working for me sorry’... You’re not going to tell the poor guy when he’s inside you that he sucks. (Holly)

Feminist researchers have commonly found that females sexually acquiesce to their male partners because they see it as their responsibility to attend to his sexual needs and, conversely, ‘feel bad’ if they choose not to (Allen, 2003; Basile, 1999; Connell, 1987; Holland et al., 1998; Hollway, 1984; Gavey, 2005; McPhillips et al., 2001; Phillips, 2000; Powell, 2010; Tolman, 2002). This finding can be further developed by understanding that this line of thinking, such as ‘it wasn’t pressure against my will but it was a pressure for me to do the right thing’, illuminates the regulatory nature of postfeminism in the way that women’s subjectivities are shaped by internalised notions of being responsible for monitoring relationships whilst the gender imbalances of this responsibility remain hidden (Gill, 2008b). Further, through discourses of sexual difference, as promoted in postfeminist texts such as Gray’s (1992 and 1996) relationship self-help guides as previously mentioned, these inequalities are eroticised and repackaged as empowering and pleasurable for women. A woman’s sexual compliance is – through a postfeminist agenda – therefore representative of an active, agentic sexuality that willingly caters to a man’s sexual desires because it is perceived as also being beneficial to themselves personally and to their relationship (Gill, 2007).

Like the women’s experiences of casual sex, some of the participants described sexual experiences within their intimate relationships as distinctly unpleasant and coercive. This was the case for Holly who returned home with her partner after a social evening and passed out drunk. She later awoke to find her partner attempting to use her body for his sexual pleasure without her consent or her willing participation:

I was like what is he doing? Can’t he see I’m drunk ... that really upset me that he didn’t really give a shit about what I wanted. (Holly)

Female sexuality, positioned as always in waiting (and in receipt) of male sexual advances, often forgoes the presence of an embodied sense of desire (Gavey, 2005). Thus, it is often not women per se that men desire, but women’s bodies, which is evidenced in Holly’s experience in which her partner was willing to have sex with her despite her lack of consent (or even consciousness). Such behaviours within relationships, rather than viewed as sexually exploitative behaviour, are normalised by gendered norms which convey the idea of men’s relentless and thus not readily extinguishable sexual desires (Hollway, 1984; Phillips, 2000). In turn, Holly’s
attempts to raise her concerns with her partner about what he did were met with ridicule:

He makes jokes about it like ‘so you[re] saying I raped you?’ kind of thing and I’m like no of course not. (Holly)

Similar to the men in O’Byrne, Hansen and Rapley’s (2008) research, Holly’s partner feigned ignorance and drew attention to her lack of resistance and assertive verbal refusals. Female experiences of sexual objectification in intimate relationships are typically minimised and perceived as a normal part of heterosexual relations rendering such experiences as nothing more than the result of an insatiable male sexual appetite and a woman’s poor communication of her intentions (Anderson and Doherty, 2008; Frith and Kitzinger, 1997; Gavey, 2005; Phillips, 2000; Pineau, 1989). Ultimately, the compulsory sexual agency of postfeminist sensibilities negates the on-going negotiation of consent because women can no longer express distress if genders are now equal (Baker, 2003, 2008, 2010; Chung, 2005).

Conclusions

The sexual pressures and expectations experienced by the young women we interviewed corroborate existing feminist studies regarding heteronormative sexual relations. However, whilst the coercive dimensions of heteronormative sex have been well documented, less explored has been why and how it is that despite the continuance of findings showing stark imbalances in power between genders, women’s sexual agency remains largely taken for granted. In pursuit of extending understandings of sexual consent as a gendered and unequal process, we brought focus to one of the most notable features of our participants’ talk, namely the contradictory ways in which their perceptions of their personal sexual agency (i.e. it is easy to ‘just say no’) contrasted to their constrained experiences of having sex in both casual and intimate relations. On the one hand, our interviewees accepted the ‘just say no’ approach to sexual violence prevention and its characterisation of sexual consent through the basic duality of just say ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Simultaneously though, the young women described personal experiences of sex which demonstrated their distinct failure to express ‘no’ in the face of feeling uninterested, pressured and/or in some cases outright distressed. This discrepancy, rather than inviting self-reflection on the part of the participants about the complexity of consent and agency for themselves and women more generally, was instead reiterated in the intolerance many of them expressed for other women who engage in unwanted sex by failing to act more assertively (i.e. if you’re too gutless to say no then that’s weakness on your part).

These contradictions, we suggest, parallel the postfeminist sensibility: an awkward blend of feminist and anti-feminist elements in which women view themselves as empowered yet continue to accept terms of sexuality set by heteronormative discourses. Against this postfeminist cultural backdrop, the ease with which our
participants blamed themselves and other women for unwanted sexual engagements becomes understandable. As fellow researchers (e.g. Baker, 2003, 2008, 2010; Chung, 2005; Rich, 2005) have also highlighted, the notion that women are subject to numerous external pressures has lost currency amidst the popular acceptance of individualism and ‘girl power’ as social facts. In turn, women now not only adopt practices that questionably satisfy interests external, and possibly in opposition, to their own, but they must still always present it as of their own free will. This compulsory sexual agency represents the crux of why our participants readily blamed themselves and other women for engaging in unwanted sexual acts because they perceived sexual choices within the prism of a postfeminist sensibility which renders forces outside individual responsibility obsolete. The young women’s accounts presented in this article are eerily similar to those obtained in other studies by Baker (2003, 2008), Chung (2005) and Rich (2005) who also noted a tendency for young women to dissociate themselves from narratives of victimhood and to over-emphasise choice and self-determination in recounting experiences of violence and inequality. It is these young women’s re-interpretations of their experiences that highlight the implicit forces underpinning postfeminist and neoliberalist ideologies.

By invoking the concept of a postfeminist sensibility we are not suggesting that our participants are slavishly beholden to male sexual needs. As Allen (2003) illustrated, heteronormative sexual relations may privilege male desires but young women still maintain a degree of agency within this dynamic in the way that they actively choose to favour male needs. In this understanding, Lisa’s narration, given earlier, of selflessly having sex for men’s pleasure reads as a form of postfeminist agency. Lisa, like our other participants, has actively decided to recompose her own sexuality in terms of the primacy of her partner’s needs and in so doing has exerted agency by selecting to do so. However, whilst we accept that our participants are not trapped in a unidirectional system of power, we cannot ignore two conspicuous gaps: (1) the gap between our participants’ claims of sexual agency (i.e. ‘I’ve never felt like there was nothing I couldn’t get out of’) and their descriptions of feeling pressured, unable to change their minds or to verbalise their sexual wishes, and (2) the gap in our participants’ awareness of these contradictions. These gaps reflect one of the great ironies of postfeminist sensibilities: specifically, that although the blatant denigration of women is no longer acceptable, somehow it is women themselves who are freely choosing to partake in practices that conform to traditional gender stereotypes.

Overall, these findings cast doubt on the utility of traditional risk-avoidance approaches to sexual violence prevention, which portray women as ‘autonomous agents’ capable of transcending gendered power relations and exerting complete control over their surroundings and other people (Phillips, 2000: 51). Most of the young women interviewed in this study encountered difficulties in negotiating their sexual consent. In this article we have taken some tentative steps toward suggesting that these difficulties correspond to the same forces underpinning contemporary media discourses, suffused as they are with postfeminist and neoliberal ideals valorising heteronormative sexuality and individualism. Our findings further highlight
how these forces have reprivatised and decontextualised women’s experiences of (sexual) violence by disengaging women from understanding their lives and sexual choices beyond their own individuality (Baker, 2003, 2008, 2010; Chung, 2002, 2005). These forces have reprivatised and decontextualised women’s experiences of (sexual) violence by disengaging women from understanding their lives and sexual choices beyond their own individuality. It follows that the prevention of sexual violence against women relates less to encouraging young women to ‘just say no’ and instead concerns reconnecting popular understandings of sex with issues of power, gender and sociocultural norms.

References


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