

Violence, control, romance and gender equality: Young women and heterosexual relationships

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Available online 21 November 2005

Synopsis

Feminist theories remain influential in explaining intimate violence between adults, however there has been limited feminist focus on intimate violence in young people's relationships, or 'dating violence' as it is commonly termed. Psychological explanations, particularly social learning and attachment theories, have predominated in dating violence research, which has not taken account of structural factors constraining and influencing young people's actions. This study of young people draws together feminist theories in the areas of sexuality, gender relations and gendered violence. The study is a detailed analysis of the micro-practices of heterosexuality from young people's interviews which illuminates gendered power relations and practices of inequality and violence. The findings suggest that gender inequality and intimate violence are common in young people's dating relationships. The study demonstrates that the discourses of heterosexuality, in combination with discourses of individualism and equality, are influential in how young people make meaning of their relationship experiences and understand intimate violence.

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Introduction

It is timely to examine in what ways second wave feminism has impacted on young women's intimate relationships. Examples of how feminism has impacted on the public life of some young women include greater numbers completing secondary education and consequently increased numbers attending universities. It is more difficult to gauge its influence on young women's private lives. This article discusses young people's heterosexual dating relationships and their experiences and understandings of violence and inequality in these relationships. Describing the micro-practices of dating elucidates how unequal power relations are maintained in young people's current heterosexual dating relationships, which contribute to sustaining large scale practices of gender inequality. This study indicates that essentialist ideas about gender remain dominant in

young people's understandings of sexuality and underpin their explanations of men's involvement in coercive sex and violence. Young women's experiences and definitions of violence, abuse and sexual coercion in relationships are mediated by the competing and contradictory discourses of heterosexuality, romance, gender, individualism and equality. These impact on young women's capacities to negotiate an equal relationship, and in identifying, and speaking about their experiences as violent, coercive or controlling.

Background and study design

After researching domestic violence over a number of years, I was curious about whether the power relations associated with domestic violence in adult relationships were also present in earlier intimate relationships (teenage dating). A review of the dating violence literature

revealed a surprising absence of engagement with feminist theory, with a few notable exceptions (Burton & Kitzinger, 1998; Hird, 2000; Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993). The majority of dating violence literature emanated from the discipline of psychology with a traditional positivist focus on measurement, prevalence and incidence within populations (Bethke & De Joy, 1993; Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Sebastian, 1991; LeJeune & Follette, 1994; Makepeace, 1981, 1986). Dating violence research has until recently concentrated on describing the phenomenon and attempting to look for key characteristics, risk factors and risk markers amongst those defined as perpetrators and/or victims based on self-report surveys of university and high school populations.

A consistent finding of dating violence research is that such violence is a relatively common experience. Estimates range from 12% to 87% (Archer & Ray, 1989; DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993; Levy, 1990; Stacy, Schandel, Flannery, Conlon, & Milardo, 1994). In the first national study of dating violence in Australia, there was a prevalence rate of 22% (Crime Research Centre & Donovan Research, 2001). The Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979), the controversial measurement instrument developed for domestic violence research, has been extensively used by dating violence researchers. When the Conflict Tactics Scale is used to measure intimate violence (in adult or adolescent populations) the findings consistently show patterns of gender symmetry amongst victims (Bagshaw & Chung, 2000). Consequently, there has been much critique of the Conflict Tactics Scale amongst domestic violence researchers, whereas within dating violence literature there has been very little debate. It is an interesting anomaly that dating violence researchers have extensively used the Conflict Tactics Scale without drawing on domestic violence theories in any systematic way to explain dating violence. The feminist theoretical frameworks and ideologies that shaped explanations of domestic violence were rarely evident in the dating violence literature.

Two theoretical explanations for dating violence predominate in the literature: Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Gray & Foshee, 1997; O'Keefe, 1997; Pipes & LeBov-Keeler, 1997; Riggs & Cauield, 1997), and John Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory (Maysless, 1991; O'Hearn & Davis, 1997). Social Learning Theory¹ represents the most popularly endorsed explanation for dating violence in the published literature. Within this approach, dating violence is described as having been learned from an early environment (family background) and/or current environment (school and/or the dating relationship itself). The major

limitations of Social Learning Theory as an explanation for dating violence are that it lacks any analysis of power at the individual or structural level and presumes people have little agency in the choices they make about their behaviour in intimate relationships. The use of Attachment Theory to explain dating violence assumes there is a strong similarity between early relationship with a caregiver and those with a girlfriend or boyfriend. The emphasis on early childhood experiences as irreversibly pivotal to adult personalities and relationship patterns also assumes little agency for the subject. Both explanations pay little attention to power differences that result from inequalities related to age, gender, sexuality, abilities, culture or class.

It therefore appeared that there would be little value in using a similar methodology within the Australian context. The research design employed was a qualitative study of young people's understandings and experiences of dating, intimacy, relationship equality and intimate violence. Unlike feminist domestic violence research, there were very few dating violence studies (Burton & Kitzinger, 1998; Hird, 2000) which used young people's experiences as the basis for explaining dating violence. In pursuing this methodological approach it raised Education Department Research Ethics Committee concerns about parents' knowledge and consent to their children participating in a study which was primarily interested in their children's experiences and use of violence. Consequently, I re-focussed the interview schedule to include young people's expectations and experiences of dating relationships generally to identify how they define what is acceptable and unacceptable in a dating relationship. This broadening of the interview schedule enabled me to examine the links between gender relations, equality–inequality and intimate violence, rather than my initial focus on the dynamics of intimate violence.

Forty young people were interviewed for the study, 25 females and 15 males. The young people were recruited from 2 public co-educational secondary schools (18), 1 public girls secondary school (12)², 1 suburban youth health service (5) and 1 youth accommodation service (5). Participants ranged in age from 15 to 19 years, with a mean age of 17 years. Participants were asked about their cultural background and parents' occupations as a means of identifying class.³ Seven young people had 2 parents from non-English speaking backgrounds, 5 young people had 1 parent from a non-English speaking background and 28 had parents from English speaking backgrounds. Twenty of the participants were from a middle class background and 20 were from a working class background. The variables are included in brackets at the end of quotations from young people's interviews.⁴

Study findings

In analysing the data it became evident that the institutions and practices of heterosexuality were a focal point for identifying how gender inequality, violence and abuse were reproduced, ignored, marginalised or given meaning. The findings demonstrate the influence of heterosexual dominance in supporting patriarchy, reproducing gender inequality and hegemonic masculinity and individualising and minimising relationship violence and abuse.

The data analysis is organised into three sections: the first considers how dating as an institution of heterosexuality inducts young people into heterosexual dominance privileging masculinity and particular gendered and sexual identities whilst disguising power relations; the second examines the influence of equality and individualistic discourses which impact on how young people present their identities and the inherent tensions between the institutions and practices of heterosexuality and gender equality; and the final section discusses young people's understandings and experiences of dating violence and sexual coercion and how this is influenced by heterosexual dominance.

Young people and dating relationships: active engagement with the institutionalization and practices of heterosexuality

This study confirmed that dating relationships play a major part in young people's lives. The defining feature of a dating relationship for young people was some form of heterosexual intimacy. A consistent typology emerged across the young people's descriptions of dating and the rules governing these various 'relationships' which is testimony to the strength of heterosexual dominance (Table 1).

Transgressing the types of dating relationships or their gendered expectations has differential gender impacts. For young women the threat continues to lie with the possibility of gaining a bad sexual reputation, for young men it may mean that potential girlfriends do not trust them or they gain a reputation for violence towards girlfriends (Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Smith, 1998).

In western society, the commencement of sexual activity represents one of the transitions to adulthood (Fraser, 1999; Heath, 1997). Young people's sexual identities are formed within the institutions of heterosexuality, regardless of sexual orientation. During this period many young people take on gendered heterosexual identities as girlfriend or boyfriend in a dating relationship. This signifies to peers progress towards adulthood which is associated with the successful performance of masculinity and femininity. The prerequisites for the performance of successful masculine and feminine heterosexuality: sexual experience for men and dating for women, can result in young people encountering pressure to gain such experience. Twenty-two of the twenty-five young women and eight of the fifteen young men stated there was pressure to be in a relationship. Dating experience was required to avoid exclusion from same sex conversations, about sex and relationships. Whilst such knowledge could be acquired through other means such as print media, film, television or the experiences of others, it is not considered as legitimate as experience. Without having dating experience, Emma describes the inability to successfully perform feminine heterosexuality.

You're sitting there going 'Well I haven't done this or I don't have a boyfriend or a girlfriend, so what am I going to do?' So, I think it's you sitting there and you don't know. But if you don't know, if you haven't had a relationship then it's, 'Oh, god, what do I do' and 'I can't say anything' you get really quiet. If you say something, you could put your foot in it because you know that you haven't had a relationship. Anyone who has had a relationship can tell. It's so obvious. Then if you have had a relationship but you've broken up or something, then it's really hard because you have to sit and listen to their happiness. (Emma, 17 yo, esb, chs, mc).

Amongst the young men, there was less pressure to have dating experience, which is attributable to a number of related aspects. Firstly, the performance of heterosexual masculinity relies on sexual experience not dating experience. Secondly, being independent and in

Table 1
Typology of dating relationships

Going out with someone	Seeing someone	Getting with someone
Emotional commitment	Casual	Focus is on sexual relations
Monogamy	Cannot expect monogamy	No expectation of monogamy
Publicly known as a couple	Irregular or intermittent contact	No expectation of ongoing contact or commitment
Been together for a longer period of time	Not been together for a long period of time	Recently met

control is consistent with the performance of hegemonic masculinity and so the 'relationships tie you down' narrative is an acceptable resistance to the relationship pressure, as shown by Liam.

Oh, some people can get lonely. Um, but I don't really mind being single. Like if you go out to parties, do anything, you don't have to tell anyone...except for your parents, you don't have to tell anyone where you're going, what you're doing and stuff, report to them. (Liam 16 yo, chs, mc).

The performance of heterosexual masculinity requiring the perception of heterosexual experience and not a dating relationship is shown by Mark.

Interviewer:

But like if you didn't have a girlfriend for a long period of time, do you think people would say anything like you haven't got a girlfriend or you know just kind of imply that maybe you should have one, whether you should be having sex, or?

Mark: Oh yeah...They don't to me, but like I say Nathan have you done it yet? I always give him shit, cause he hasn't Am I allowed to talk like that? Cause he hasn't done nothing with another girl. Yeah, and so I give him shit. Did he tell you he's done nothing?

Interviewer:

Each interview is private

Mark: Yeah but I give him shit all the time about it. You know you're eighteen mate, do something. Don't be shy.

Interviewer:

Why do you do that?

Mark: 'Cause he's a soft cock. He's got the chance to do it. Girls want to, but he's just like, I don't know, gets all shy or something.

Interviewer:

Seems like a real tough guy actually.

Mark: Me and him are good friends. Did he talk about me did he? (Mark 17 yo, nesb, chs, wc).

A dating relationship confirms to both young women and men that they are attractive to the other gender, a signifier of successful heterosexual performance. This is indicated in the description of girlfriends as 'prizes' and status symbols. One young woman described herself as a 'prize' to her boyfriend. The woman as a status symbol was a means of performing heterosexual masculinity and hegemonic masculinity more generally when the female is attractive to the

male peer group. The dating relationship is an institution that enables young people to be schooled in the practices of heterosexuality and its performance. Young women who have not had the experience/identity of 'girlfriend', like young men who have not had sexual experience, are not considered as adult as their peers who have had such experiences.

The 'coupling' practice of dating begins a process whereby young women learn the primary importance of a heterosexual relationship with a male over same sex friendships and they begin to place the needs of the male boyfriend above both their own needs and those of their friends. Young women reported their friends spending less time with them and being relegated to second priority when their friends had boyfriends. This is one of the ways in which the privileging of masculinity and men is produced in dating relationships. Importantly, none of the young men reported changes to their same sex friendships as a result of their friends having girlfriends.

The young people's descriptions of dating relationships have a theme of intimacy involving the sharing of secrets and confidences which potentially makes individuals vulnerable to their partner. However, it is often read as a sign of increased intimacy and depth of feeling. As the length of the relationship increases and they are publicly known as a couple there can be considerable investment in the relationship as it represents one aspect of the successful performance of masculine and feminine heterosexuality. Young women reported that it was more difficult to end longer relationships due to the history of 'commitment'.

The public perception of being a couple introduces the idea that your boyfriend/girlfriend's behaviour reflects on your sexual and social identities. This commitment to the relationship both public and private creates a level of interdependence in their identities. There is now her/his identity as a young woman/man, her/his identity as a girlfriend/boyfriend and their identity as a couple. The interdependence of identities that results from being in a heterosexual dating relationship can ambush young women into speaking about and presenting their boyfriends' behaviours and identities in ways that do not tarnish their own identities or describe his behaviour in ways that do not reflect poorly on the young women. For young men should their girlfriend have a bad sexual reputation then they must be able to distance themselves from her identity. This can be achieved through drawing on the male sexual drive discourse whereby they explain to peers that they are just seeing the young woman in order to have sex, acting as an opportunity to reaffirm their

heterosexual masculinity. In these instances the young woman's sexuality and identity remain under the surveillance of her boyfriend, peers and often parents, which sustains gendered power imbalances both within the relationship and more generally in society. His personal surveillance of her sexuality is then condoned at a social level.

Romantic love as an institution of heterosexuality has a powerful influence on how young women attribute meaning to their experiences in dating relationships. The dominance of romantic love within western society makes it inescapable for young women. Romantic love typifies gender differences in many respects, it is heterosexual, it emphasises desire for the 'other' and positions the woman as emotional and the man as rational (Jackson, 1999; Seuffert, 1999). Romantic love assumes heterosexuality with its end point of reproduction (Kirkman et al., 1998; Langford, 1996; Rose, 2000; Segal, 1997).

The idea that romantic love is characterised by individualism and freedom (Burns, 2000; Giddens, 1992) to choose a partner ignores the compulsoriness of heterosexuality (Rich, 1996) in which women's social identity is constructed through being in a heterosexual relationship. It also ignores the gendered scripts within romantic love, which privilege male power. Langford (1996) argues that a reason why power is not considered in romantic love is that power and love are understood as opposites. Romantic love invokes ideas of freedom which are in contrast to power.

The young people's interviews show how various aspects of romantic love are used to divert attention away from behaviours being interpreted as male control of women and instead being interpreted as signs of love and commitment. For example there was a focus on sacrifice for one's partner, for young men this meant waiting to have sex and being monogamous. For young women it often meant agreeing to sex or at least finding polite ways to decline the 'offer'. Some young women described their boyfriend's policing of their behaviour or clothes as a sign of his love with jealousy as the signifier. This was not considered male behaviour which was aimed at controlling young women. In some young men's and women's interviews men were considered 'protectors' of women against predatory men. This knight in shining armour role included boyfriends accompanying young women to all social events to protect her from other men's unwanted attentions. Young men's use of the term 'ownership' in relation to their girlfriends was presented as a sign of their true love and not that she was considered property of the male.

In these examples, romantic love enables young women to interpret young men's behaviours in ways that are not signs of power and control, instead representing intimacy and love. Some young men spoke of how they used romantic love to coerce young women into sex, suggesting that if she genuinely loved him she would agree to sex as it would signify her love.

The influence of heterosexual dominance is evident through the importance many young people place on gaining heterosexual experience so that one can take up an identity as girlfriend/boyfriend and couple. Amongst the young women interviewed, the sexual scripts they had available offered limited opportunities outside of traditional feminine heterosexuality, precipitating young women's collusion with hegemonic masculinity and gender inequality in both their dating relationship and the relegation of their same sex friendships. The publicly known couple that they become creates an interdependence of identities in which his behaviour must be seen as being a boyfriend who cares and respects her wishes. If his behaviour is inconsistent with this script, she must explain it to justify to peers her continuation with the relationship. Examples of justifications for boyfriends' sexist behaviour included that it was only an act for his friends and that he has learned sexist behaviour from his father so he does not know any better. Similarly his identity status is linked to her appearance and behaviour which requires monogamy and the performance of heterosexual femininity. Consequently, the dating relationship is often a site where gender inequality is supported, at times masquerading as intimacy. The next section discusses other discourses which impact on young people's dating relationships and consequently gender equality and violence in such relationships.

Discourses of equality and individualism

The interview data revealed two other influential discourses in young people's understandings of dating relationships, gender relations and violence in intimate relationships. These two related discourses were an 'individualistic discourse' and a 'discourse of equality'.

The young people's accounts of dating relationships were underpinned by the assumptions that all people are freely able to make choices and that gender equality existed in society. In the young people's interviews, the individualistic discourse served varying purposes with regard to explaining gender relations. It could enable gendered power relations to be made invisible by assuming individuals make decisions and choices

outside of any social structures and pressures. These choices subconsciously retain the status quo and marginalise ideas related to gender and other forms of inequality. Alternatively, young people can use the individualistic discourse to challenge existing gendered expectations, as we are free to make our own choices and not be bound by dominant social values, attitudes and beliefs.

The equal rights discourse described was based on notions of citizenship and human rights. For example, it was not acceptable to force a woman to have sex as this violated her rights. However, it was not assumed that the violation of a woman's rights had its basis in gender inequality. The equality discourse which young people used was a means of opposing inequality between the genders. This discourse is closely aligned to liberal feminism as the young women positioned themselves as having equal rights to men in all aspects of their lives and the individual was the unit of analysis.

The equality discourse has been identified in various studies of young people (Lamanna, 1999; Sharpe, 2001; Thompson, 1995). In a study of North American young women Lamanna (1999: 198) found young women assumed equal rights to men and "were virtually unanimous in refusing the helpmate role". Sharpe (2001) in her study of young people found that young women had expectations of domestic equality, however their male counterparts still expected their future partners would be responsible for the lion's share of domestic responsibilities.

The equality discourse young people drew on took account of gender as being about the masculine and feminine differences that are brought into the relationship—different reasons for wanting a relationship, different attitudes/needs about sex, different emotional needs and maturity. Whilst these differences were discussed by the young people they were not viewed as representing power differences or inequalities, rather they were seen as gender differences that were brought to the relationship and had to be negotiated. The equality that most of the young women described in this study was individualistic and market oriented. It was similar to what Kelly, Burton, and Regan (1996) refer to as commercialised feminism marked by its focus on individualism.

The individualistic discourse diminishes the possibility of material and structural explanations for explaining power differences in heterosexual relationships as everybody is an individual with rights and able to make their own choices. As a result of this discourse young people must present themselves as powerful individuals with agency under all circumstances.

Equalising strategies

Young women did not want to be viewed as doormats who tolerated inequality in post second wave feminist times. The young women in the study believed equal relationships were important. Young women used two particular strategies to equalise their relationships. One strategy was based on being knowledgeable about men and relationships. Young women saw this strategy as giving them equality with young men as understanding men's behaviour provided immunity from its sexist and unequal impacts. The second related strategy was the use of emotion work as a strength which young women could use to manage the relationship, an attribute their boyfriends did not have (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998).

These equalising strategies assume young men are emotionally incompetent. This was used to explain why young men behaved in ways that were unacceptable in relationships. The oppressive and abusive aspects of heterosexual relationships could be minimised by the young women as they had a 'theoretical' understanding of male behaviour and an emotional maturity offering immunity from its oppressive impacts. The description of emotion work as a feminine strength also meant that as women were the 'managers' of the relationship, they were also solely responsible for its 'failure'. These two strategies presume young men are emotionally immature and less competent communicators when compared with their girlfriends. These strategies could also be viewed as a means of being complicit in minimising men's unacceptable behaviour or reducing men's responsibility for such behaviour and supporting essentialist understandings of gender.

The key concern with these equalising strategies is that they do not disrupt hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. They only require young women to continue doing the 'relationship work', whilst masculinity is left intact and unchallenged. Without such disruptions and challenges heterosexual dating relationships can be spoken about in ways that support equality but do not necessarily differ significantly in practice from those where equality is not consciously pursued.

One of the difficulties posed for post second wave young women is that they presume equality as individuals however there is no cultural script as to what it constitutes in a relationship. There is far more knowledge available to young women about traditional heterosexual gender relations (romantic love) than there ever is about whether and how equal relationships can be negotiated. The continuing dilemma is that working

towards gender equality in heterosexual relationships depends on disrupting hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, consequently women are still reliant on a man who has a commitment to anti-sexism in order to even begin such a process (Van Every, 1996). The final section outlines how heterosexual dominance and the discourses of individualism and equality impact on young women understanding and dealing with coercion, violence and abuse.

Young women's experiences and understandings of violence and sexual coercion in dating relationships

Fifteen of the twenty-five young women interviewed had experienced harassment or unwanted attention from men on at least one occasion. The behaviours that young women defined as being hassled or harassed by men included regular or constant phone calls to their homes, writing letters, driving past their homes or school, visiting their workplace, following them from the bus stop or school and telling people that they were going out together.

An important distinction one young woman used in defining her experience as not being harassment was that his behaviour did not offend her. Thus whilst his behaviour was the same as other men who young women defined as harassing, such as ringing at home, it was her assessment of him and her reaction to his behaviour that defined the experience, not the behaviour per se. The centrality of context is highlighted by Fiona's description.

Fiona: Not really hassling. It's sort of like people used to phone me up all the time and sort of like make up excuses to talk. This one guy, he's in my English class and we both really like Star Wars and so we had the same sticker collections and we used to swap stickers every day and stuff like that and he always used to ring me up oh, Fiona, um can you please um bring your sticker book tomorrow and I went oh, yeah, my sticker book and I've got something to ask you and I went oh, my dad needs to use the phone, oh bye and I'd just hang up. He really wasn't hassling cause I was never offended by anything he did.

Interviewer:

It was never go out with me, go out with me!

Fiona: No, he was too shy to say stuff like that. Constant phoning and try to make up conversation, small talk and stuff but nothing like harassing. (Fiona, 17 yo, father nesb, chs, wc)

Not surprisingly, young women generally did not wish to offend men in dealing with their 'unwanted attentions'. This is reflected in their strategies of response with initial reactions of not wanting to offend or hurt the feelings of the young man and then growing less tolerant of his behaviour. In the first instance the young women generally tried to ignore the situation. When these polite/passive strategies did not work some young women told the young men directly to stop the behaviour and in one case the police intervened and organised a restraining order. The findings are consistent with previous research that found unwanted sexual attention and varying levels of violence are common for young women (Davis & Lee, 1996; Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987).

Six of the 25 young women said they had experienced violence and abuse in a dating relationship. An additional 4 young women in the course of the interview defined their current relationship or past relationships as abusive in some way. Those who reported experiences of violence and abuse were between 15 and 17 years old. These young women were a cross-section of the sample and were not unique according to any demographic variables. The violence and abuse that young women reported in the interviews included physical violence, verbal abuse, sexual violence, pressure and coercion, stalking and driving dangerously when the young woman was the passenger.

One young woman had been in a violent and abusive relationship involving physical assault, verbal abuse, rape, and following the ending of the relationship, stalking that required police intervention. This young woman's experience stood out from all the other interviews in its severity and similarity with domestic violence survivors' narratives (Chung, 2002).

Jane: We were at a mate's house and it was his 21st and my boyfriend had heaps to drink and decided to like another girl and I said, That's it and I went to walk away. He grabbed my arm and twisted it all the way and broke my bone up here so I walked. I got home and my arm was all black and I had a big lump and my mum took me to the hospital and then the police went there. He got arrested. Got charged with assault. I had to get a restraining order on him 'cause he got people to follow me. Kept on ringing me up and saying that he was going to kill me so he got done for it Lots of things happened. Wasn't good. I very much regret it [the relationship]. (Jane, 16 yo, ys, wc).

Whilst Jane was being stalked she found out she was pregnant as a result of rape by this man on a previous occasion. Jane explained that her current boyfriend always accompanied her when she went out at night. She interprets his protectiveness as a sign of affection, due to her prior experience of rape. Jane sees this as a very practical measure for feeling safe. As a result of one man's violence against her, Jane now depends on another man (her boyfriend) to ensure her sense of safety.

One of the notable findings has been how the interdependence of identities and the equality and individualistic discourses encourage young women not to identify their relationships as violent, abusive or coercive as it is inconsistent with how a young woman should describe her identity. This is demonstrated most sharply in Kate's interview, which indicated she had begun to define the situation as violent. However, such a defining moment has a number of implications for her identity and relationship.

Kate: Now I'm in a relationship not so much violence but just sternness. He feels that he has to get his own way and if he doesn't then that's not right and I think it's mainly the way he was brought up. Because his dad comes from his dad's Polish, so he comes from a Polish background and they're really strict on their kids so he sort of learnt from his dad that he has to get his own way and that sort of thing. I think mainly it depends on how they were brought up and what sort of backgrounds they come from.

No violence. A bit of sternness that borderlines on something that's a bit uncomfortable. Yes, it probably is violence but I don't like to call it violence because when I think of that I think why would I personally want to be in a relationship where there is violence. It probably is violence now that I think about it but I don't want to think about it because it will make me see what's happening and it might change my thoughts a bit.

Interviewer:

Your past relationships, were they any different from this one in terms of the abuse or the sexual pressure or any of that?

Kate: My boyfriend before, because I was so young and he was already 18, he really respected me. Because he was 18 I thought he's going to be sex crazy like all they want to do, but he really respected me. He waited until I was ready and

sort of helped me, talked to me about it and we discussed it for ages. I think we went for a year and it wasn't until six months that we actually did anything. He was kind enough to wait and respect my wishes. But my boyfriend now when I started going out with him, he expected it straight away, thinking, Well, you've been out with an 18 year old, so surely you have done something like that. My relationship before was just a bit better than that about sex. (Kate, 16 yrs, wc).

Kate acknowledges that there is violence in the relationship and this concerns her, for it positions her as a victim. There are competing pressures to be in a relationship and not be single, but it is also unacceptable to be known to be in a violent relationship, as this makes her look weak to others. The interdependence of Kate's identity makes her resistant to speaking of her boyfriend as violent or abusive. Thus these contradictory pressures have inhibited Kate from defining his behaviour as violent. The primacy of Kate's boyfriend's feelings underlies much of what she describes. Kate's response demonstrates the two equalising strategies of emotion work, where she has learnt to manage his demands and her knowledge of men, and where his behaviour is determined to be the result of his Polish upbringing and therefore not completely his responsibility, minimising the impact of his behaviour on her.

Young women were resistant to defining boyfriends as violent or abusive for a range of reasons. Women commonly feel shame associated with having a partner who uses violence against them, this was also the case in this study of young women. When a young woman was still with her boyfriend the inter-dependency of the couple's identities meant she would not want her partner to be known as violent as that positions her as unequal and a 'victim' and therefore under pressure to terminate the relationship, which she may not wish to do. Finally, the individualistic discourse encourages young women to understand violence and abuse as a problem of the individuals involved. Acknowledging a boyfriend was violent would represent her personal failing and inability to choose a suitable partner.

The young woman must position herself as an equal partner and not identify as a victim as this assumes she has little agency and is not an equal. For a number of young women in the study they were therefore only able to define a relationship as violent or abusive after it had ended. Once it ended the young woman's identity was no longer inter-dependent, as indicated by Emma.

At the time, looking at one relationship, I would say there was some sexual pressure. There was definitely sexual pressure but at the same time it was something that. At the time I accepted it. At the time it was not an issue for me. . . . Seeing that contraception was never discussed, and I was not getting pregnant at that point of my life. I was strong enough—I just left it. It was not an issue for me in relation that I knew what I was going to stand up for. So when the pressure came I said ‘no’. There was sexual abuse though. It didn’t really ever happen. In looking back a little it almost was because of the amount of pressure that was there at times. At the time it was never thought about as abuse. At the time it was sort of basically him being turned on, him being excited and nothing more taken out of it when I look back at it I thought he didn’t need to do that. That shouldn’t have happened. (Emma, 17 yo, esb, chs, mc).

In the young women’s accounts of their experiences of violence and abuse, a common thread is that, whilst they feel that the events are significant enough to talk about to the interviewer, they do not present themselves as indelibly scarred by these events. They have, with hindsight in some cases, reflected on the experiences and positioned themselves as less likely to be vulnerable to such situations in the future—it was a bad individual choice that will not be repeated. They have learned about such relationships and will be able to ‘choose’ a boyfriend more carefully in the future. Here the individualistic discourse predominates as the young women present a positive outcome of the violence to demonstrate to the interviewer that they are not victims. In these interviews, male violence against women generally is not challenged at any level. Social structures (including patriarchy) remain outside the explanations the young women in this study offered for male violence against women.

Conclusion—heterosexual dominance, equality and individualism: how does this impact on young women’s experiences of violence and sexual coercion in dating relationships?

The interviews reveal that young people use a discourse of equality to explain their sexual relations—an unintended legacy of feminism that disguises and displaces the power relations that continue to shape young people’s intimate heterosexual interactions. The young women employ two discernible strategies to equalise their relationships—being knowledgeable about men

and emotion work. These strategies in conjunction with the discourse of equality do not challenge the existing gender hierarchy.

The individualistic discourse supports young women’s rights to choose to stay or leave a relationship. However, it also dictates that should she remain in an abusive relationship that it is her ‘choice’ to do so as she is an individual of free will, with the social context (gendered power relations) not taken into account. In total, this leaves gendered power relations relatively intact as they are invisible within an individualistic discourse which further masks the effects of gender inequality.

The dominance of heterosexuality as institution and practice supports young women to take on the individual identity as girlfriend and the joint identity as couple. This often has considerable impact on her relations with other young women as their primary importance can wane and the new inter-dependence of identities with her boyfriend can trap her into having to explain his behaviour in ways that show he is not acting abusively or unequally. This hides power differences in these heterosexual relationships and indicates how early the process of taking responsibility for his behaviour can commence.

For those young women who do experience violence and abuse from their boyfriends it is difficult to both acknowledge and address. Defining the situation as violent after the ending of the relationship is easier as their identities are no longer interdependent. The study shows the continuing dominance of individualistic explanations which privilege male power and blame women for ‘choosing’ violent men as boyfriends. This remains an ongoing challenge for feminists committed to stopping male violence against women, and particularly to prevent equality being distorted to mean an individual woman’s choice to stay in a violent relationship.

In conclusion I have attempted to highlight how heterosexual dominance specifically acts on young women’s capacities to have equal relationships and on young women’s understandings and experiences of violence and abuse. There is a need for the further unpacking of how the institutions and practices of heterosexuality support gender inequality and disguise acts of violence and abuse in order for them to be speakable and redressed for young women.

Endnotes

¹ Social Learning Theory proposes that we learn behaviours through social interaction and observation of the environment around us.

² There are no public boys' schools in the city where the research was conducted so there was no comparable school.

³ Parents' occupations were divided broadly into blue and white collar categories, with young people identified as being from either a working or middle class background. Young people's descriptions of their parents' occupation were categorised according to the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO). Where a participant's parents were in both categories (for example father a professional and mother a sales assistant), participants were assigned to the middle class classification.

⁴ Age is yo (years old). Cultural background is nesb (non-English speaking background). Otherwise it is assumed they are from an English speaking background. Source of referral: chs (co-educational school), ghs (girls' high school), or ys (youth service). Class is mc (middle class) or wc (working class).

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