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## POWER TALK: YOUNG PEOPLE NEGOTIATING (HETERO)SEX

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**Synopsis** — With reference to data collected from heterosexual couples aged 17–19 years, this research explores how young people negotiate sexual activity in relationships. This data provides important contextual information for those concerned with the sexual health and the general well being of young people. It also contributes to understandings about the operation of power within heterosexual relationships by suggesting that male power may incorporate a measure of agency for women. While this agency is experienced as empowering and has real effects for young women's negotiation of sexual activity, it is argued that it does not render male power immediately "fragile" in these relationships. © 2003 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

In an attempt to contain the spread of HIV, research into the micro-practices of sexual relationships has increased since the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, data concerning types of sexual activity, use of safer sex methods and sexual power relations have been given heightened value. The "risk" of contracting HIV was originally linked by dominant social discourses to membership of groups like "gay men"<sup>2</sup> and intravenous drug users. As incidences of HIV amongst non-injecting heterosexuals increased, it became clear that a wider group of people were being infected by this disease. It was recognised that the risk of contracting HIV was more closely aligned with *unsafe sexual practices* than *sexual identities* and there was a need to target health promotion messages at diverse populations. As HIV's long incubation period pointed to the likelihood of transmission during early sexual encounters, young people's sexual knowledge and practices began to be investigated (Holland, Ramazanoglu, & Scott, 1990; Rosenthal, Giford, & Moore, 1998; Stewart, 1995).

While the advent of HIV/AIDs has infused new potency into research concerning heterosexual practices, the operation of power in these relationships has long been of interest to feminists. Feminist analyses

have drawn attention to the social construction of heterosexuality and the way in which it is premised upon a gendered relationship in which men exercise greater power than women. This power is institutionalised within discursive fields like the labour market, law, medicine, and education with the effect of "naturalising" it as a form of identity and practice (Mackinnon, 1982; Oakley, 1984; Rich, 1980). Recent feminist debate has centred on the nature and extent of this power in terms of its immutability and instability in heterosexual relationships. Some have argued this power is inescapably patriarchal and that (hetero)sex (particularly penetrative intercourse) represents the embodiment of men's domination and women's subordination (Jeffreys, 1990; Kitzinger, 1994). Others claim that heterosexual relations are contested and that male power is at some level vulnerable to subversion (Jackson, 1999; Smart, 1996).

This article takes the view that male power in heterosexual relationships is not simply monolithic nor sufficiently vulnerable to subversion to render it unstable. Rather, it suggests that while male power is pervasive in some form, it is simultaneously contested and negotiated in ways which afford women a measure of agency. This requires a more complex understanding of power than as operating through a dualism of domination and subordination. However, such a conceptualisation stops short at suggesting power is always necessarily "fragile", in the sense that its stability is easily challenged. Such a theory of power fails to take account of its relationship to

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gender and the way in which despite women's individual and collective resistances, their disadvantage within the social order is sustained. What is needed is a conceptualisation of power which captures both women's experiences of agency in heterosexual relationships and the way in which these relationships are simultaneously governed discursively and materially by male power.

This study of heterosexual power draws on the narratives of six New Zealand couples aged 17–19 years old whose relationships ranged in length from 3 months to 3 1/2 years. The larger project from which the data emerged was concerned with examining young people's sexual subjectivities, knowledge, and practices. In addition to couple interviews, these issues were explored through analysis of 411 questionnaires and the transcripts of 17 focus groups. While some of the survey data is referred to here, it is predominately findings from the couple work which is scrutinised. The research was framed by a feminist interest in power relations and a social context in which the importance of effective sexuality education for young people is realised. Like the work of Measor, Tiffin, and Miller (2000, p. 1), this research was premised on "...a commitment to the idea that effective and appropriate sex education can be developed only if we know more about adolescent sexuality and the view points which young people bring to sex education".

In order to gather these views, an exploratory method was designed involving an activity which the couple participated in together, followed by an interview conducted with each partner separately. The activity was aimed at understanding how sexual decision making was portrayed by the couple, as well as providing an opportunity to see how partners interacted together. It involved couples sorting cards with a series of phrases about their relationship into piles headed "Sometimes happens or happened in our relationship", "Often happens or happened in our relationship" or "Never happens in our relationship". Phrases on these cards centered on issues identified earlier in focus groups as points of contention in relationships. These issues cohered around condom use, one partner not wanting to engage in sexual activity or particular kinds of sexual activity, communication and subjective feelings about knowledge and the body.<sup>3</sup>

The second element of the couple session consisted of an individual interview with each of the partners. The decision to interview each partner individually after the activity, aimed to provide an opportunity to revisit what they had said in the activity context. It also allowed individuals to explain why they had agreed or disagreed with their partner, in an environment where they were uninhibited by that person's presence.

Comparing the couple activity transcripts with those from the individual interviews revealed how an individual's construction of sexual decision making was modified in the presence of the other partner.

With reference to these data, I examine how couples described the negotiation of sexual activity in their relationships. The term "negotiation" is drawn from the work of Crawford, Kippax, and Waldby (1994, p. 571) and refers to "... the interpersonal communication which takes place during a sexual encounter in order to influence what happens in that encounter in terms of the needs and desires of the two people involved". I argue that young people's conceptualisation of this negotiation can be viewed within a framework of three types of power: so-called "equal power" in which power is supposedly shared between partners; "mediated power" where young women carve out limited agency within the exercise of male power, and "coercive power" in which young men exercise repressive power over young women by attempting to overtly or covertly force them to engage in an activity they do not want. This framework supports the idea that while some young women perceive themselves as experiencing a measure of power in heterosexual negotiations, this does not appear to destabilise the exercise of male power generally within them.

### ISSUES OF CONTENTION IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Before examining how couples described negotiation around sexual activity, it is necessary to identify those contexts in which power is exercised most visibly in young people's heterosexual relationships. These are points of tension or disagreement, where problems arise and elicit a reaction from each partner. Such moments were revealed in young people's responses to an open-ended survey question which asked them to complete the sentence, "The kind of disagreements likely to arise in your relationship(s) about sexual activity are...". Answers were coded into main themes in the table below.

The kinds of disagreements likely to arise in your relationship(s) about sexual activity are...

Types of disagreements likely to arise in young people's relationships	Young Women (Total, N=210)	Young Men (Total, N=121)	Totals (Total, N=331)
Unequal sex drives	(33) 9.3%	(6) 7.8%	(39) 15.7%
Positions/types of sexual activity	(34) 19.9%	(20) 26.0%	(54) 21.8%

Types of disagreements likely to arise in young people's relationships	Young Women (Total, N=210)	Young Men (Total, N=121)	Totals (Total, N=331)
Pregnancy/Contraception	(24) 14.0%	(9) 11.7%	(33) 13.3%
Fidelity/Ex-partners	(11) 6.4%	(2) 2.6%	(13) 5.2%
Emotional issues	(12) 7.0%	(3) 3.9%	(15) 6.0%
Things that turn them off a partner	(1) .6%	(4) 5.2%	(5) 2.0%
First time sex	(9) 5.3%	(15) 19.5%	(24) 9.7%
Being found out	(4) 2.3%	(0) 0%	(4) 1.6%
No disagreements	(31) 18.1%	(5) 6.5%	(36) 14.5%
Where/how often to have sex	(55) 32.2%	(37) 48.1%	(92) 37.1%

Key: ( ) = Number of participants.

The most prevalent answer was dissension over where and how often to have sex (37%) with significantly more mentions from young men (48%) than young women (32%) (sig. 017). In relation to this problem, young people typically wrote, "When, where, how often" (Male, Not at School, 19 years) or, "Not wanting or feeling like it when they (i.e. their partner) want to" (Female, Not at School, 17 years). Another area of conflict was what "positions/types of sexual activity" to engage in. This was evident in responses such as; "Arguments over positions" (Female, Not at School, 18 years) and "Who wants to do what" (Male, Not at School, 17 years). There were no significant gender differences in the amount of times this was mentioned.

A third most frequently reported altercation involved problems associated with "unequal sex drives" with significantly more women (9%) than young men (7%) mentioning this (sig. 021). Other disagreements centered on contraceptive issues such as, "wearing a condom" (Female, At School, 18 years) or "the type of contraception to be used" (Male, At School, 18 years). Three of the six couples participating in the couple activity also spoke at some length about how they chose or were choosing a particular form of contraception indicating this was a common tension for young people in the sample. Disagreements over "first time sex" revealed a highly significant gender difference with more mentions from young men (19%) than young women (5%).

### NEGOTIATION IN THE COUPLE CONTEXT: "YOU GOTTA TALK ABOUT IT"

Couples who participated in the couple activity explained their negotiation of the above conflicts by describing how communication and being respectful of the other person's desires enabled them to resolve these situations. When asked how they negotiated sexual activity in relationships, they revealed that talking to the other person before, during and/or after sexual activity was a means of ascertaining what a partner had or had not found pleasurable.

Ngairé who had been going out with George for 9 1/2 months revealed that they had handled sexual negotiation around new sexual activities as follows:

Ngairé Uhm I'll try something on him I'll say to him, "oh can I try this on you"? And uhm he'll say "yes", he usually says "yes" and if he doesn't like it he'll say "stop, stop... I don't want to do that". And I'll stop and yeah and then uhm yeah he'll say "can I do this to you"? A few times I've said "no". And uhm, only because I've been scared that it hasn't been until now that I've got, like I've had the courage to say "oh yes, I'd like to try that". (II, NAS, 18)<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Cam described how she communicated with her partner of 3 months, Chris, about whether or not sexual activity was pleasurable.

Cam Uhm I'd ask him to like if, if he's going too fast or too slow I tell him and if it's hurting offer a suggestion for changing so that it feels better and he does the same... like a lot when we are having sex we ask if each other's okay. (II, NAS, 19)

In the following extract during the couple activity, Nina and Neil who had been seeing each other for 2 years explained how "straight" talk was the means by which they decided whether or not to have sexual intercourse:

Neil I'd say that it's a mutual thing that we both agree about it.  
 Nina mmmm.  
 Neil It's pretty, we're pretty straight out now, we don't sort of muck around you know.  
 Nina Yeah.  
 Neil ...it's just "do you want to have sex"? "Yes" (Nina laughs). It's not you know there is no shyness or no mucking around.

Nina No, not saying the “s” word because that’s shameful. (CA, NAS, 17)

Similarly, during the couple activity Tim and his girlfriend of 6 months spoke about how they jointly came to the decision to have sexual intercourse in the first few months of their relationship:

Louisa So you said you talked about it before-hand?

Tim Uhm a long time before hand like a couple of days you know saying this is going to happen some time soon so let’s talk about it. . .

Louisa So what did you talk about in those two days before hand?

Emma Uhm how it would sort of change us. Whether it would change us. (CA, Emma AS 17, Tim NAS 18)

This kind of communication appeared to be sustained as their relationship progressed with Tim explaining in the individual interview how sexual pleasure was negotiated between them.

Tim . . . she’ll tell me, she’s very open, she’ll just say, she’ll tell me what she does like and what she doesn’t and stuff like that. (II, NAS, 18)

Amy also revealed during the couple activity that she and her boyfriend Peter who had been together for over 3 years, talked things through in order to ensure sexual decisions were made equally between them.

Amy We usually we have a discussion about it, I mean we don’t sort of just jump straight in at the deep end so to speak you know, I mean we plan exactly what is going to happen. But we sort of before hand sort of say well you know, “I better go and get that before hand” and then he might say well you know I think we might want to do something like that tonight and I’ll say “yeah that’s okay” you know.

Peter I don’t think you can just sort of walk into a room and jump on the bed, you gotta talk about it. (CA, AS, 18)

This finding diverges from other New Zealand research which reports young people believe it highly unlikely partners will discuss sex before engaging in it for the first time (Holibar, 1992, p. 48). However,

subjects in Holibar’s study were younger (15–16 years) perhaps implying “talk about sex” is more likely to take place between slightly older couples. Being in a long-term or “steady” relationship may also influence the occurrence of such talk, with young people experiencing fewer inhibitions in a situation where they have forged a bond with a familiar partner.

### ESTABLISHING PRECEDENTS

Another way couples described their negotiation of sexual conflict was through decisions made at the outset of sexual activity which then remained unspoken throughout the relationship’s progression. These decisions most often concerned buying condoms, obtaining contraceptives and the procedure for employing these, such as who puts the condom on, who carries them, etc. These decisions were not always explicitly decided by the couple when beginning to have sexual intercourse, and sometimes fell into a pattern due to circumstances. For example, for Neil and Tim, it had been convenient for their girlfriends to purchase condoms at a reduced rate from Family Planning when collecting their contraceptive pill and so this became the customary means by which condoms were obtained. The following quotes are examples of couples who described pre-established patterns around sexual decision making.

Louisa So card “G” “Disagreement occurs over who is going to buy the condoms”?

Emma Never.

Tim Never.

Louisa And why is that?

Emma Uhm cause when I get my pills from the Family Planning Centre they give you a prescription and you get like about 12 boxes for \$3. (CA, AS, 17)

Tim also explained that the mechanics of putting the condom on were predetermined in their relationship.

Louisa So what’s the scenario with the condoms?

Tim Well it is just ah, it’s easier uhm like, I get the condoms or what ever it is and put it on cause otherwise it’s fiddly. (CA, NAS, 19)

Louisa So when sex is spontaneous how do you know who has the condoms?

Tim Oh just get into a pattern. . . we both have them at each of our houses.

- Emma We both have them.  
 Tim I guess we have meeting stations at her and my house. (CA, Emma AS 17, Tim NAS 18)

In Amy and Peter's case, buying the condoms was something that Peter automatically did because Amy was too uncomfortable undertaking this task. Consequently, it was taken for granted that he would buy them when they were required.

- Amy I can remember when you (*to Peter*) first starting going out and started buying it [condoms] cause I'm still not very keen on the idea of going out and buying any (*laugh*). It's really all down to Peter.  
 Peter The first time buying them was sort of quite hard, but then after that it just got easier and easier and I don't think about it anymore. It's just something you have to do, like getting a prescription or what ever you know. You just do it like you have too. (CA, AS 17, 18)

For Becky and Ashby who had been going out longer than any of the other couples (3 1/2 years), almost all decisions around sexual activity had been previously established, so minimal verbal communication occurred between them before sexual activity was undertaken.

- Louisa So you'd talk about [when to have sex] basically would you?  
 Ashby Well not really (*small laugh*).  
 Becky Well but we sort of seem to know (*she looks at Ashby here*).  
 Ashby Yeah it's just sort of like you know.  
 Becky We've sort of been with each other long enough now to sort of know what the other one likes. (CA, AS, 17)

As this type of negotiation was firmly established, its pattern was much harder to disrupt if one partner was no longer happy with a particular situation. Becky encountered this when in the last few months of her relationship she had insisted Ashby wear a condom when this had not previously been a prerequisite for their sexual activity. Although Ashby agreed, it was obvious he was annoyed by this stipulation because when recounting Becky's request he explained. "I'm a good boy, I do what I'm told". Such a remark implied this break from previous modes of practice may have caused some tension in their relationship.

## SEXUALISING POWER

The distribution of power between partners implied by the above descriptions of sexual decision making draws upon a discourse of "equality". In the extracts above, young couples described a process where decisions were made equally, after consultation with the other partner whose views were respected and taken into consideration. This kind of negotiation where communication is paramount and a mutual feeling of satisfaction over decisions is achieved represents an ideal of power relations. From their narratives, it appeared most of the young couples wished their relationships operated in this way and implied that at various moments they did. For example, Amy and Peter claimed during the couple activity that they made sexual decisions equally.

- Louisa Okay what about "B"—'Decisions about sexual activity are made equally between us'. Where would you put that?  
 Amy (*To Peter*) We always make decisions equally, wouldn't we?  
 Peter Uhm, it would be, we are pretty equal there the average is about half and half I guess. (CA, AS, mixed)

Similarly, Tim and Emma claimed sexual decisions were made equally in their relationship and this was evident from the fact that each partner was happy with the result of such decisions.

- Louisa So decisions about sexual activity are "always" [referring to where they have placed the card] made equally between you? How do you know that?  
 Tim Because we are both happy with the outcome. If we are both happy with the way it turned out, that's what we wanted to do so.  
 Emma And if I wasn't happy I'd tell him (*laugh*).  
 Tim And I'd probably concede (*Says this jokingly. All laugh*).

This was also the case for Ngaire and George.

- Louisa So you've put the card under "always" make sexual decisions equally between you. So how do you know?  
 Ngaire (*laugh*) Satisfaction.  
 George Expressions (*laugh*).  
 Ngaire He wants it next time..uhm..yeah (*laugh*) it's pretty hard case. (CA, NAS,19)

Cam and Chris described their sexual decision making as a mutual activity with no one person assuming control.

Cam I reckon it's...I reckon it's equal it's like we decide equally, like when and how often and how.

Chris Yeah see the decisions yeah it's not just decisions about sexual activity we make together it's like everything. Cause there is no one in charge here. (CA, NAS, 19)

As indicated earlier, heterosexuality has often been theorised by feminists as a repressive institution in which men exercise power over women (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1994). While heterosexuality can operate as an oppressive institution, its power is not monolithic and neither are young women and men "docile" subjects who act in complete absence of agency within its nexus. The above narratives indicate young people were able to perceive their sexual relationships as involving power sharing and not simply the designation of power to the male by virtue of his sex/gender. At least at a perceptual level, young couples in this study saw institutional forms of heterosexual power as contestable.

While power relations were constituted by these couples as "equal", it was apparent that sometimes young people's narratives of sexual negotiation involved a mediation of power. This was particularly the case in relation to how sexual pleasure was experienced in the relationship and by whom. Within prevailing discourses of heterosexuality, it is men's needs and desires which are prioritised (Hollway, 1984) reflecting unequal gendered power relations. While young women produced narratives which appeared to affirm this situation, they did so in a way that seemed to maintain their sense of agency. For example, Ngaire and Becky presented the way in which they prioritised their partner's sexual pleasure over their own gratification as an active choice.

Ngaire If I don't, If I don't give him one [an orgasm], I get upset and think, oh we've got to do it again until you do (*laugh*)...all the time I want to and uhm I don't mind if I'm not satisfied as long as he is. (II, NAS, 18)

Becky ...I wanted him to get what he wanted from it you know, and I didn't really care cause I was quite happy just for him to you know [orgasm] and sometimes he'd say 'oh do you want me to stop and I'd be like "oh

it's okay" even though I sort of wanted him to, I still wanted him to get what he wanted from it. Because I didn't want him to be dissatisfied... (FG, AS, 17)

On one level, these narratives appear to comply with constructions of heterosexuality that give preference to the greater importance of male pleasure and the requisite of male sexual gratification. However, they also invoke a sense that men's pleasure and sexual needs take priority because these two women permit it. This is implied in the way that Ngaire says she is upset when her partner doesn't orgasm and *wants* to try again so he can, and when Becky explains that she wanted her partner "to get what he wanted from it". It seems that these young women have reconstituted their own pleasure so that it is indistinguishable from that of their partners.

For other young women who participated in the couple activity, privileging their partner's pleasure over their own was not stated as explicitly as Becky and Ngaire, although it was evident they did this in their relationship practice. For instance, when I asked Cam about satisfaction and pleasure in her relationship, she spoke about wanting to make sex more pleasurable for her partner Chris:

I feel like that in some ways I could make it better for him and like I've got to try and find a way to make it better. I don't know why I feel that way it's just how it is. (II, NAS, 19)

Later in the interview, she expressed dissatisfaction with the way Chris sometimes rushed the part of sexual activity she described as "foreplay":

Chris's really good with stuff like that but other times he's not and...it doesn't mean that the sex is bad it's just not as fulfilling as it could be. (II, NAS, 19)

Despite her dissatisfaction she had never mentioned this to Chris because:

I find it hard to say like...things like that to him because he's very sensitive about stuff like that anyway that he's not satisfying me enough and I feel like if I said it to him...he'd get very I don't know on guard. (II, NAS, 19)

Instead of conforming Chris with her own lack of satisfaction, Cam pushed this aside to assert she needed to try harder at pleasing Chris sexually, clearly prioritising his sexual gratification over her

own. Similarly, Nina described in her individual interview how she sometimes faked orgasm with her boyfriend Neil. She explained this in terms of wanting to give Neil the impression she had enjoyed sex and that he had pleased her—"I have, I have faked it but that is only to make him feel better". In faking orgasm, rather than demanding her own corporeal satisfaction from the relationship Nina symbolically concedes Neil's pleasure is more important than her own (Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe, & Thomson, 1998, p. 121; Roberts, Kippax, Waldby, & Crawford, 1995). However, Nina describes the act of "faking" as something she decides to do out of her own desire to "make him feel better".

In these instances, young women reported a kind of mediation of male power by actively "choosing" to assent to it. They claimed they placed their own sexual pleasure in secondary importance, in order to enable their partner's needs, pleasures and sense of appropriate masculinity to take precedence. In a sense, they appeared to actively subject themselves to this power, seeing it as something they had control over through their active participation in sustaining it. They constituted themselves as exercising power because they had *made a choice* to continue with sexual activity they were not really enjoying, or to give their partner's physical pleasure in the absence of their own. However, such exercises of power were limited by the fact that these contexts were largely defined by young men's pleasure and needs.

The operation of power in the extracts above might be theorised as an example of effective patriarchy whereby young women have been duped into servicing male requirements to their own disadvantage. It might also be argued that they are subject to a disciplinary power which produces them as "docile bodies" complicit in the process of their own subordination (Foucault, 1979). However, this would seem to negate the sense of agency with which young women describe actively making the decision to put their partner's pleasure first. To say that a mediation of power was occurring here is not to deny power's disciplinary effects, but to suggest that the subject produced is more than "docile" or totally determined by this power.

In addition to young people's narrative portrayals of "equal" and "mediated" power, a final type—coercive power, was evident. This involved young men endeavouring to compel young women to engage in sexual activity they did not want or were not sure about, through verbal or physical means. As might be expected, coercive power was not demonstrated by couples during their interaction in the research context, as the "rules" governing the

research situation served as a restraint on abusive behaviour. However, inconsistencies across narratives produced in different methods indicated the equal distribution of power young couples recounted, was not always a reality (all of the time) in their relationships. This was revealed in discrepancies between their purported opinions about coercive sexual behaviour and other narratives which depicted actual behaviour in their relationships. Without exception, all subjects emphasised during the couple activity, that if either of them did want to have sex or did not want to perform a particular activity they would not be impelled to do so.

Ashby . . . if they really don't want to do it then you know there's nothing you can do about it. You can't force them or anything. (CA, AS, 17)

Chris Well uhm. . . if someone doesn't want to do something you can't force them to do anything I mean you can't I mean it would just ruin what we have between us if I was to force my opinion on her (*to Cam*). (CA, NAS, 19)

Neil Cause if one of us doesn't want to have sex we won't we'll just say "no".

Nina It's not like.

Neil You don't feel obliged.

Nina Yeah we don't have this thing where I will because you want to, but I don't really want to kind of thing. (CA, NAS, 17)

Peter Cause it has happened before one person wants it and the other person doesn't or can't or something like that.

Louisa So what usually happens in that kind of situation?

Amy Then the person who doesn't usually wins out, or, I mean if you were to go ahead it would be rape really and that's not you know that's not something that Peter and I want to go through. (CA, AS, 18)

While resolute in voicing these opinions about their relationships, evidence from their partners or other narratives they offered indicated unequal power relations were sometimes or predominately at work. In Nina and Neil's case, decisions about sexual activity appeared to not always be decided as equitably as portrayed. Nina described a period in their relationship when Neil wanted her to perform oral sex on him and she refused. At this time, Neil used

physical force in an attempt to pressure her into this activity. Nina explained, “He’d always keep on pushing my head down there and I’d go ‘ow don’t do that’” (II, NAS, 17). Clearly, Neil used his physical might to exert power over Nina to engage in an activity she did not want, indicating that sexual decision making was not always conducted as democratically as depicted.

Similarly, although Ashby insisted on the importance of not “forcing” someone to have sex, Becky his girlfriend spoke in the focus group session about continuing to have sex when she did not really want too. Adding support to this, Ashby hinted that he may have sometimes coerced Becky into sexual activity:

You know if like you can try and persuade them but you know (*Becky laughs*). You can say ‘Are you sure, are you sure’ you know I mean, you know give them a taste... (CA, AS, 17)

Chris (who also stated above that sexual activity should be an equal choice) admitted in the individual interview the first time he had sexual intercourse with his girlfriend Cam, he had pressured her into it, “I didn’t want to, I didn’t want to put, I mean like I was putting a bit of pressure on her like...”. That Cam was reluctant to have sex was communicated during the individual interview when talking about her emotional anxieties surrounding it and the way she described her experience of this sex as “indifferent”.

Amy also revealed that, although Peter had never forced her to have sex when she had said ‘no’, he certainly exerted pressure on her. This was disclosed in two separate comments she made during the couple activity:

Amy Like uhm he might be in the mood but I might not be and it’s sort of like you know “oh you never want to give me any” (*putting on Peter’s voice*).

Amy I mean Peter will usually say “How about it” or something like that, it sort of you know “oh no, I don’t really feel like it tonight” or you go (*to Peter*) “Oh come on, please man”.

Clearly, Peter did not take Amy’s “no” as her final answer and in some instances appeared to have exerted additional emotional pressure “you never want to give me any” to try and persuade her into sexual intercourse. While in Nina and Neil’s rela-

tionship the expression of power was one of overt physical force, the last three examples demonstrate more subtle forms of coercion. These involved emotional pressure and persuasion through sexual enticements which Ashby described by revealing how he tried “to turn Becky on” to sexual activity by giving her “a taste” of how good it would be for her. These examples are differentiated from the operation of mediated power in the way that young women had expressly stated their desire not to engage in a particular sexual practice. In the examples of mediated power above, young women did not articulate their reluctance around particular activities instead making a private decision to participate in an activity that subordinated their own physical sexual pleasure.

What is apparent here is a fracturing between young people’s construction of negotiation and its contingent power relations and their descriptions of their practice, a phenomenon they may not have been consciously aware of. Young people’s depiction of a relationship in which power is always shared equally, may have been attributed to a kind of “wish fulfillment” in absence of this situation in reality. The likelihood of this was referred to by one young woman during a focus group. In a general discussion about young people’s relationships, she commented that it was common to “say oh yeah I’ve got an equal relationship but you don’t, no one ever does I don’t think” (FG, AS, 17). The fact that admitting imbalances of power may invoke unpleasant feelings could be a reason why couples did not dwell on this in their talk.

Other New Zealand survey research supports the finding that young people experience sexual coercion in relationships with 18% of subjects aged 16 and over reporting at some time being forced to have sexual intercourse (Coggan, Disley, Patterson, & Norton, 1997). Clearly, sexual coercion and violence feature in young people’s experience of sexual relationships. However, I would argue that dismissing the exercise of power that young women describe as experiencing around sexual negotiation in relationships runs the risk of ignoring the complexity with which heterosexual power operates. This sense of power to participate in sexual negotiation apparent within the conceptualisation of “equal” and “mediated” power is at the very least experienced at a conceptual level by these young women (Holland et al., 1998). There was additional evidence in the young women’s talk to suggest that in some instances this might have been achieved at an experiential level also. For instance, after breaking up with Ashby because he had slept with someone else, Becky

accepted him back on the basis he abided by rules she had concerning the use of contraception, having an HIV/AIDS test and telling her where he was going and what he was doing. He had managed to adhere to all such stipulations up until the time of their participation in the research.

Similarly, Neil and Nina's relationship had undergone substantial changes since Neil had nearly lost his life<sup>5</sup>, which had prompted him to stop drinking and reflect upon his aggression. In addition, he had lost interest in sex while Nina was now the one likely to initiate this activity. In Chris and Cam's case, Cam appeared to have considerable hold over Chris by virtue of his love for her. In addition, she was planning a working holiday alone abroad which suggested an assertion of her independence.

All of these circumstances reveal that these young women exercised some power in their relationships and that their experience of male power was not simply one of domination. They were however also subject to more oppressive forms of power by way of pressure and coercion exerted by their partners. These incidences reveal the stable exercise of oppressive male power in their relationships. Young women's portrayal of decision making as equal and their sense of being actively involved in this, suggests that heterosexual power incorporates some agency for them. As young women in this study describe themselves as having experience of power and provide evidence of its effects, this cannot be simply dismissed as "false power".

It may be that this interplay of power and agency within heterosexual relations, is what sustains the pervasiveness of male power. For if a subject has access to agency how can they be subject to repressive power? As Foucault (1983, p.221) notes, "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free". This is not to infer that the pervasiveness of male power is immutable or that the potential spaces for women's agency are pre-determined or finite. This would dismiss the gains which some women have made within the social order and their personal relationships. Rather, I would suggest that within heterosexual relations male power by its nature operates so as to always offer spaces for female agency the potential extent of which is constantly shifting. This potential is governed by multifarious factors such as a person's social location (including their access to particular discursive resources) and the material and historical conditions in which they live. What this paper has endeavoured to show is how the power configured by these circumstances is played out in some young people's conceptualisations of sexual decision making.

## CONCLUSION

This article has had several aims. On one level, it has sought to contribute to understanding the kinds of issues which cause contention around sexual activity in young people's heterosexual relationships and how they describe their negotiation of them. This information is increasingly valuable in an environment where HIV is thought to be contracted in its highest proportion by heterosexuals during their late teens. Data about how decisions are made and when and how sexual activity takes place offers important information for those who not only design and teach sexuality education but who create health promotion messages. For example, knowing who purchases condoms and the logistics of their utilisation are valuable insights for encouraging safer sex practices. As Measor et al. (2000) have pointed out, understanding more about young people's attitudes to sexuality and sexual behaviour enables the development of policies which will meet their needs more appropriately and effectively.

At another level, this article has endeavoured to engage with feminist theory about the distribution of power in heterosexual relationships and argue for a more complex understanding of power's operation than simply male domination. Drawing on the narratives of young couples aged 17–19 years, I have argued that power is conceptualised by them as operating either "equally" or for young women being seen to be "mediated". Careful analysis across narratives obtained during the couple activity and individual interview reveals a coercive power also in existence. The presence of this power in young people's narratives suggests that while young women's narratives give evidence of their exercise of power, the operation of oppressive male power is not occluded. This suggests that at least at a perceptual level some form of agency is exercised by these young women in their heterosexual relationships. Such findings contribute to a theorisation of heterosexual power relations which recognise that while male power is not monolithic and may indeed allow some young women access to agency, it enjoys a constant presence. Deciphering exactly how this operation of power is sustained may provide the key to a more equitable operation of power within heterosexual relationships.

## ENDNOTES

1. These studies are reviewed in detail by Breakwell and Fife-Shaw (1992) and Wight (1990).
2. While publicly, this sector of the population was conceptualised as gay men, these are more accurately described as men who have sex with men.

3. The full list of phrases is as follows. Card A: We don't always agree about issues surrounding sexual activity. Card B: Decisions about sexual activity are made equally between us. Card C: Sexual activity is talked about before it takes place. Card D: One person wants sexual activity and the other one doesn't. Card F: One partner doesn't always find a new sexual activity pleasurable. Card G: Disagreement occurs over who is going to buy the condoms. Card H: Safer sex and contraception are talked about before we have sex. Card I: One person asks the other if they want to start a sexual relationship, the other person is unsure about wanting this. Card J: How each or one of us feels about our body, influences sexual activity in our relationship. Card K: One partner feels that the other partner knows a bit more about sexual activity than they do.
4. Each extract is followed by firstly, the method data was collected from FG=Focus Groups, II=Individual Interviews, CA=Couple Activity, Q=Questionnaire. Secondly whether the subject was AS="At School" or NAS="Not at School" at the time the research was conducted. Lastly, the subject's age 17=17 years, 18=18 years, 19=19 years, Mixed=Subjects whose ages are varied but between 17 and 19 years.
5. Neil had been critically injured in a fight outside a pub one night. The experience had encouraged him to reflect on his priorities in life and as a consequence he gave up drinking and mixing with what he described as "the wrong crowd".

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