Towards a culturally situated understanding of bullying: Viewing young people's talk about peer relationships through the lens of consent

Bullying has typically been defined and studied separately from other forms of gender- and sexuality-related harassment and violence such as dating and relationship violence and sexual harassment, arguably obscuring the complex interrelations between these phenomena. This article is based on an EU-funded project which explored young people's understandings and experiences of sexual bullying (bullying related to gender and/or sexuality). Data collected via 41 focus groups with young men and women (N=253) aged 13-18 across five European countries (Bulgaria, England, Italy, Latvia, Slovenia) were analysed using thematic analysis. Participants highlighted intersections between bullying, dating and relationship violence and sexual harassment. They also drew upon notions of consent to determine whether and when certain actions constituted bullying. We argue that applying this lens of consent to young people's peer relationships illuminates the extent to which bullying (like other forms of gender- and sexuality-related harassment and violence) is culturally situated and embedded within hierarchical gendered power relations. We therefore advocate that Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and anti-bullying initiatives treat consent as a 'common thread' in discussing and challenging a range of gender- and sexuality-related forms of bullying and harassment within peer relationships.

Keywords: consent; bullying; sexual harassment; dating and relationship violence; young people; gender and sexuality.

Introduction

Bullying has tended to be studied separately, and treated as a distinct phenomenon from other forms of gender- and sexuality-related harassment and violence such as dating and

relationship violence and sexual harassment (Brion-Meisels & Garnett, 2017; Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2011; Harger, 2016). For almost 40 years bullying research has been dominated by work using Olweus's definition of bullying as "aggressive behavior or intentional harm doing that is carried out repeatedly and over time in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an actual or perceived imbalance of power or strength" (Olweus & Limber, 2010, p.125). According to this definition, in order to be classed as bullying, an interaction must exhibit three key elements or characteristics – intention to harm, repetition and power imbalance (although the validity and/or importance of these has been questioned c.f. Carrera et al., 2011; Finkelhor, Shattuck, Turner, & Hamby, 2016; Hamby, 2017; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014).

Sexual harassment is typically defined as *s*exual behaviour that is unwanted or not welcomed (Brandenburg, 1997) and as such, the focus is on the action being unwanted or unwelcomed by the target, rather than the extent to which the action was intended to harm.

Dating and relationship violence is a term that is commonly used to refer to intimate partner violence among young people and refers to actions such as "threats, emotional abuse, controlling behaviours, physical violence, and coerced, non-consensual or abusive sexual activities perpetrated by current or former, casual or steady partners" (Meiksin et al., 2020, p.1). Whilst there is some overlap in dating and relationship violence and bullying in terms of the kinds of actions that dating and relationship violence is considered to include, bullying definitions often exclude instances of violence related to dating/intimate relationships (Brion-Meisels & Garnett, 2017).

Research on dating and relationship violence and sexual harassment has tended to acknowledge these as rooted in patriarchal gender norms relating to sex and relationships (e.g. Gruber & Fineran, 2008, 2016; Shute, Owens & Slee, 2008, 2016; Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Aghtaie, Barter, Stanley, Wood & Överlien, 2018). In contrast, classical bullying research has been dominated by approaches stemming from Olweus' (1978) model of bullying which draws upon personality trait psychology. As a result, bullying has largely been treated as a problem which resides within the individuals involved (e.g. factors that make bullies more predisposed to bullying and victims at greater risk of being bullied) (Mitchell & Borg, 2013). It has been widely observed that this theoretical model of bullying is limited and the discourse that stems from it is problematic. For example, it has been argued that it is a pathological model, with the traits, characteristics and risk factors that are typically associated with both bullies and victims often being synonymous with deficit, disorder or dysfunction (Canty, Stubbe, Steers & Collings, 2016; Carrera et al, 2011; Duncan, 2013; Formby, 2015). It also contributes to the creation and perpetuation of bullying by pathologising and othering young people and their actions (Ringrose, 2008; Ringrose & Renold, 2010) and draws attention away from the structural and systemic underpinnings of bullying (e.g. marginalisation, competition, sexism, heterosexism; Formby, 2015; Ringrose & Renold, 2010).

There is, however, a body of research that has taken a more sociological approach to bullying, viewing it as socially constructed and contextual. This research highlights the complexity of bullying as a phenomenon that is multifaceted and likely to be understood differently across different locations (e.g. within different schools, Marwick & boyd, 2014), within certain groups (e.g. different age groups, Marwick & boyd, 2014) and in different

contexts (e.g. on social media, Marwick & boyd, 2014; when between friends, Formby, 2015; Forsberg, 2019; Marwick & boyd, 2014; depending on the gender of those involved and whether the behaviour is considered to be gender normative or not, Marwick & boyd, 2014; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). This research has also highlighted the extent to which bullying is culturally situated, arguing that certain cultural conditions (social structures, ideologies and cultural norms) enable bullying to flourish. For example, Ringrose (2008) argues that girls' conflicts are shaped by "(hetero)sexualization, racialization, culture and class" (p.510) and that viewing these conflicts through a bullying lens obscures this. Similarly, Carrera et al (2011) and Formby (2015) have argued that classical bullying research has failed to acknowledge the ways in which power inequalities stemming from patriarchy and heteronormativity give rise to bullying.

Although bullying has tended to be studied separately from other forms of gender- and sexuality-related harassment and violence, some researchers within the classical tradition of bullying have recognised that much of the victimisation that young people experience in schools is sex- or sexuality-related (e.g. Finkelhor et al., 2016) and since the early 2000s, studies within this tradition have begun to incorporate sexual harassment (e.g. Espelage, Low, Polanin & Brown, 2013; Felix, Furlong, & Austin, 2009; Pepler et al., 2006). Despite this, Shute et al. (2008; 2016) point out that these studies often assume a false dichotomy between sexual harassment, aggression and bullying and fail to interrogate the sexual politics (e.g. power inequalities reflected in, and perpetuated by, norms and discourses relating to gender and sexuality) underpinning these.

One area in which gender and sexuality norms have been widely acknowledged as contributing to bullying is in relation to homo-, bi-, and transphobic bullying (e.g. Aspendelier, Buchanan, McDougall & Sippola, 2009; Gini & Pozzoli, 2006; Pascoe, 2007; Toomey and Russell, 2013; Young & Sweeting, 2004). However, whilst there is a large and important body of work on homo-, bi- and transphobic bullying, this has tended to focus specifically on the experiences of LGBT+ young people, arguably implying that only LGBT+ young people experience these forms of bullying (Formby, 2015) and obscuring the extent to which the same gender and sexuality norms (e.g. heterosexist and essentialist discourses around masculinity, femininity, sexuality and desire - see Butler's 1990 work on the heterosexual matrix), underpin these and other forms of bullying such as slut-shaming and sexual harassment (e.g. Ravn, Coffey and Roberts, 2019; Renold & Ringrose, 2010; Ringrose, 2008).

Some researchers have acknowledged the intersections between bullying (including sexist and homophobic bullying and bullying relating to gender non-conformity) and sexual harassment. These researchers, often from educational and sociological traditions, view these phenomena through a gendered lens, arguing that they are all manifestations of gender socialisation and the policing of gender and sexuality norms (e.g. Duncan, 1999; Meyer, 2008; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Within this body of research, these phenomena (collectively referred to by Meyer, 2008, as 'gendered harassment' and Duncan, 1999, as 'sexual bullying') are conceptualised as culturally situated and as stemming from (hetero)sexist culture within and beyond the school. Other researchers have similarly pointed to intersections between dating and relationship violence and sexual harassment. For example, Wood, Barter, Stanley, Aghtaie and Larkins (2015) found an association between

dating and relationship violence and young women feeling pressured to send sexual images and Klein (2006) argues that dating and relationship violence and sexual harassment should be recognised as existing on a continuum of violence against girls relating to masculinity norms. Despite these notable exceptions, research on bullying, dating and relationship violence, sexual harassment and homo-, bi- and transphobia remains relatively siloed, with the definitions of bullying widely adopted within the classical bullying tradition still failing to acknowledge the complex gendered intersections between them. We argue that the failure to recognise these phenomena as inter-related and as existing on a continuum, obscures the pervasiveness of such problematic interactions in young people's everyday lives.

The current study

Our EU-funded project set out to explore young people's understandings and experiences of 'sexual bullying' across five European countries. Sexual bullying was conceptualised as an umbrella term, encompassing sexual harassment (unwanted sexual behaviour), bullying about a person's sexual identity or expression (e.g. homo- or bi-phobic bullying, slut-shaming, calling someone 'frigid') and transphobic bullying. The term 'sexual bullying' has been used and advocated by others (e.g. Duncan, 1999; Maxwell et al., 2010) and we considered it a useful term to adopt for brevity in this study; however, we do acknowledge the potential problems of adopting a bullying framework (Duncan, 2013; Formby, 2015; Ringrose, 2008) and discuss these later. In this paper we focus on data collected via focus groups, and more specifically, participants' talk around what they consider to be desirable and/or problematic within peer relationships and the conditions under which (inter)actions are viewed as bullying or harassment, rather than, for example, joking, banter, 'messing about', flirting, etc. Forsberg (2019) argued in this journal that contextual conditions (whether actions are

directed at a specific target, whether the target is seen as experiencing social or emotional harm and whether the target is a friend) seem to determine how young people make sense of their experiences, and specifically, whether they define them as bullying or not. In this paper, we offer additional evidence for this observation, but also argue based on our data that sexual bullying exists on a continuum of gender- and sexuality-related harassment and violence. Furthermore, the notion of consent, which arguably informs the definitions of both dating and relationship violence and sexual harassment (e.g. unwelcome and unwanted acts, coercion and non-consensual sexual activities), but does not feature in classical bullying definitions, is central to young people's talk around whether and when an (inter)action constitutes bullying.

Method

Our sexual bullying project was a collaboration between Leeds Beckett University, UK and youth-focused non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in five European countries: Bulgaria, England, Italy, Latvia and Slovenia. Here we attend to focus groups undertaken as part of the project. Young people were recruited mainly from schools and colleges, youth centres and NGOs. They were given a participant information sheet, inviting them to participate in a project on bullying relating to a young person's gender, appearance, body or attraction to others. The young people in some focus groups knew each other well, whereas in other focus groups, this was not the case. Over the five countries, 253 young people participated with approximately equal numbers of young women and young men. The target age range was 13-18 (average participant age 15.27). Participants most commonly identified as White, though other ethnicities were represented (8% Black, 5% Asian, 2% Mixed). Nearly three-quarters of the sample were Christian, with the remainder being, Muslim (11%), Sikh (<1%), Other (1%) or with no religious affiliation (17%). Nearly all were in school, training

or other education and 4% were in paid employment. The majority stated that they were attracted to different-sex peers, with 2% stating that they were attracted to same-sex peers and 2% stating that they were attracted to both same and different sex peers. A quarter of the participants were currently in a relationship. Three-quarters of the participants lived in an urban area.

Ethical approval was obtained from Leeds Beckett University's Research Ethics Committee (ethics application no. 297). Data were collected via focus groups to enable young people to share different ideas and perspectives on the phenomenon of sexual bullying. Forty-one focus groups were conducted across the five countries (eight or nine per country) from June - November 2013, with a mean of six participants per focus group. The focus groups were cross-stratified by participant sex (male or female), age group (13-15 year-olds or 16-18 year-olds) and location (urban or rural)[1]. The decision to stratify by sex was based on consultation with our Young People Advisory Groups (YPAGs) and the decision to stratify by age group and location was based on discussion with our partners (e.g. ethical concerns over the appropriateness of 13-18 year olds discussing these issues together within a single focus group and a desire to minimise participants having to travel to participate). For participants under 16, parental consent and participant assent was obtained; for participants aged 16-18, their consent was obtained. The focus groups typically took place in a private room at the recruitment venue and were undertaken by two youth workers (either two women or one woman and one man) from the partner organisation.

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[1] Some small adaptations were made depending on the partner organization's context.

Focus groups were undertaken using a schedule of questions and prompts. Brion-Meisels and Garnett (2017), Canty, Stubbe, Steers, and Collings (2016), Harger (2016) and Marwick and boyd (2014) have all cautioned against imposing a priori definitions of bullying on participants, arguing that these can obscure bullying that does not fit neatly within bullying definitions. As we were keen to access the participants' understandings of bullying, rather than imposing our own, we began by discussing what makes a good peer relationship, and what kinds of tensions, problems or conflicts might arise in peer relationships. We then asked participants what they thought the 'rules' and expectations of peer relationships were, and what might happen if these are broken. Only then (by which time the young people had begun to refer to instances of teasing or gossiping or other forms of bullying) did we ask what they thought bullying was, and whether they felt that the kinds of tensions and conflicts they had been talking about were instances of this.

Having explored young people's understandings of bullying, we then asked them what they thought sexual bullying was and to give us some examples. Based on discussions within our research team, we were expecting variance across countries with regard to how familiar this concept would be. Some of our partners felt that without guidance, young people might struggle to comprehend what kinds of (inter)actions we were interested in. Therefore, after collecting their initial ideas on what sexual bullying might be, we used media clips to facilitate further discussion. Young people were shown scenarios depicting, for example, online and offline forms of slut-shaming and homophobic bullying, circulation of sexual images without consent and sexual coercion. We then asked them about the circumstances in which they felt that the actions in the media clips would be deemed to be sexual bullying. The six media clips were taken from two American television films (*Cyberbully* and *Betrayed at*

17, both aired in 2011) and two anti-bullying/anti-abuse campaigns (*This is Abuse*, UK, 2013 and *Stand Up! Against Homophobia*, Ireland, 2011). They were chosen in consultation with partners and the YPAGs in each country who felt that translating the clips was unnecessary. Permissions were obtained from the producers of these clips to use them in the research. How many and which clips were shown was determined by the focus group facilitators and depended on time available and how the preceding discussion had gone without the clips to facilitate it.

Canty et al. (2016) argue that attempts to apply the Northern European term 'bullying' uncritically to other cultures constitute a form of intellectual colonialism or cultural imperialism. As such, it is important to acknowledge that, whilst our study set out to explore what we termed 'sexual bullying', the term *bullying* was not universally used in the focus groups, and even where this term was used, we cannot assume that it held the same meanings or was understood in the same way across all countries. The primary term used within the Italian focus groups was '*bulissmo*', which our Italian partner identified as a well-recognised, direct translation for the English term *bullying*. Our Bulgarian, Latvian and Slovenian partners informed us that there was no direct translation of *bullying* in their languages. In Bulgaria, the term that dominated the discussions was *Тормоз*, which our Bulgarian partner translated as *harassment* and identified as encompassing insults, teasing, blackmail, threats, physical, verbal and psychological bullying. Where this had a sexual element, the participants sometimes used the term *Сексуален тормоз* (*sexual harassment*). In Slovenia, the participants used the terms *nasilnistvo* and *nadlegovanje*, which our Slovenian partner translated as *peer violence* and *sexual harassment* respectively. In Latvia, the most commonly used terms were *mobings*, a term originating in the work of Heinemann (1969) and used to

refer to situations where a group of children are aggressive to one individual, *apcelšana* (ridiculing or insulting) and *apsaukāšana* (name-calling).

The focus group discussions were digitally recorded with participants' permission and then transcribed and anonymised by partners. The focus group transcripts were translated into English (where required), uploaded to NVivo 11 and analysed using inductive semantic thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first two authors undertook the data coding together, enabling discussion of codes and themes. The project was grounded in critical realism which contends that, whilst there is a 'real world' that exists beyond language and thought, our access to this is mediated by our perceptions, theories and constructions (Maxwell, 2012). Thus, whilst we argue that the data provide insights into young people's understandings of bullying, we recognise that these are historically and culturally situated and that the range of meanings available to young people when making sense of their experiences will be shaped and constrained by the cultural resources available to them. Whilst there were some differences across countries in terms of the findings (see Turner-Moore, Milnes and Gough - currently under review), unfortunately an exploration of these is beyond the scope of this paper.

Findings and discussion

Data analysis identified three themes relating to the contexts and conditions influencing whether and when participants interpreted (inter)actions as bullying. Each of these sees the participants drawing (usually implicitly) upon the concept of consent to make sense of these (inter)actions. For context, we preface a discussion of these three themes with a brief

description of the kinds of (inter)actions the participants considered to be examples of bullying.

A spectrum of gender- and sexuality-related bullying practices

Across all five countries, young people identified problematic interactions in their relationships that fell beyond the scope of classical bullying definitions. It was widely recognised that bullying can include physical, verbal, psychological, and cyberbullying, and that these could take sexual and non-sexual forms. When asked what kinds of (inter)actions they would see as bullying, participants identified a wide range of direct actions, including insults (with appearance-based bullying – sometimes relating to gender non-conformity - and slut-shaming being the most commonly mentioned forms), making comments of a sexual nature, teasing or name-calling relating to sexual orientation, disrespect or humiliation, sexual touching or groping, exposing someone's body (e.g. pulling their trousers down or lifting up their skirt), stalking and being controlling towards a partner. They also identified a range of less direct actions, including circulating sexual images of someone without their consent, gossiping, slander or spreading rumours, ignoring or excluding someone, undermining confidence, harming self-esteem and violation of personal space. Whilst some of these actions fit neatly within classical definitions of bullying (e.g. insults repeatedly directed at someone less powerful and intended to harm), others have tended to be categorised as sexual harassment (e.g. unwanted sexual touching), or dating and relationship violence (e.g. being controlling towards a partner). There were also some notable overlaps, that is, instances that appeared to have elements of both bullying and either sexual harassment or dating and relationship violence. For example, undermining and humiliating people, or making them feel unsafe or unsettled, were recognised as forms of bullying when they occurred between peers.

Thus, participants' understandings of bullying extended beyond the narrow confines of classical bullying definitions, incorporating behaviours generally seen as examples of sexual harassment or dating and relationship violence. They also included slut-shaming, name-calling, teasing and insults related to sexual orientation and gender non-conformity (which according to Olweus' definition, only constitute bullying if they are repeated and intended to harm).

Consent as a 'common thread' in young people's talk about sexual bullying

Whilst our participants identified a broad range of gender- and sexuality-related bullying practices, which cut across definitions of bullying, dating and relationship violence and sexual harassment, a 'common thread' in their talk around these (and particularly around when they constituted bullying) was the concept of consent. Current academic conceptualisations of consent tend to equate consent with willingness (i.e. consent constitutes an agreement to do x). There has been a longstanding and widespread conflation of *willingness* and *wanting* in sexual violence research/policy and among laypeople (e.g. Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). However, Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski and Peterson (2016) argue that willingness and wanting are separate concepts that can act independently of each other (e.g. someone may be willing to have sex with their partner to make them happy, but may not actually want to have sex) and that their conflation renders invisible the possibility of willing participation in unwanted interactions. Unsurprisingly, the participants in this study also conflated willingness and wanting, and in the remainder of this paper, we will explore how the notion of consent was drawn upon in ways that could obscure, legitimise or justify unwanted or problematic interactions between peers.

In some cases, the notion of consent was drawn upon explicitly, with participants arguing that regardless of intent, actions that are non-consensual (articulated here in terms of being unwanted) are a form of bullying:

> Anja: If you have a wish for something not to be done to you but it's still being done (Slovenia, Young Women, 16-18)

> Delta: I have known people who have suffered bullying and who were forced to do things that they did not want to do (Italy, Young Men, 13-18)

However, the concept of consent was also more implicitly drawn upon and employed in differing ways, as demonstrated by the three themes presented below.

1)   It's not bullying if it's between friends (i.e. consent can be assumed between friends)

Much of the young people's talk suggested that whether certain actions constitute bullying (as opposed to an annoyance or joking/banter) depends on whether they occur between friends or not. Across all five countries, young people said that the same actions might be acceptable within friendships, but unacceptable between strangers:

> Ivan: If you send a few jokes to a friend it isn't a problem, but if a stranger was writing these things to me it wouldn't be very nice and that would cross the border to harassment (Bulgaria, Young Men, 13-15)

Jošt: If you say it to a friend, it's usually okay. It's not like I shout it at some random babes on the street. (Laughter) (Slovenia, Young Men, 13-18)

Forsberg (2019) also observed that young people were more likely to understand their interactions as bullying if they involved a non-friend, rather than a friend. The author suggests that this may relate to the dominance of bullying discourses that construct bullying as characterised by a power imbalance, leading young people to see bullying as something that is unlikely to occur in the context of friendships.

In line with this, young people often said that within their friendships, there is a mutual understanding that terms of abuse and sexual advances or touching are only meant as a joke:

Luna: If my best friend says, "hey you, bitch", this is a joke because we constantly call each other that (Slovenia, Young Women, 13-15)

Sally: I spoke to him for about less than an hour and then suddenly he started acting all sexual and I just thought to myself "whoa I don't know you". I mean I have another friend, who I have known him for a really, really long time and it's okay for him to do stuff like that, because I know that it's the type of relationship that we have is a jokey relationship and it's fine, it's fine (England, Young Women, 16-18)

and in some cases (particularly among young men), joking of this kind was seen as something that was valued or that bonded the group together:

Facilitator: What's good in your friendship, in your relationship? How would you characterise it?

Sīdžejs: We tease each other.

2paks: Harshly (giggling)

Sīdžejs: We tell harsh jokes and we understand it (Latvia, Young Men, 16-18)

Building on Forsberg's argument above, we suggest that the concept of consent is central here, with young people implying that within the context of their friendships , there is an assumption of mutual consent to name-calling, teasing, sexual or intimate touching, etc. In some cases (e.g. Sīdžejs and 2paks) this seems to be constructed as something that is valued or enjoyed (i.e. wanted) and in other cases (e.g. Ivan, Jost and Sally), as something that is accepted ("isn't a problem", "okay", "fine"- i.e. willingly consented to). There are parallels with the sexual consent literature here, which has indicated that in the absence of a refusal, sexual consent tends to be assumed within the context of dating/established relationships (Beres, 2014; Humphreys, 2007; Muehlenhard et al., 2016).

Participants did recognise that, even within friendships, jokes can 'go too far', particularly where these are repeated:

Centomila: … they started to call me "the son of a bitch", which goes well as a joke between friends. "Son of a…", "your mum is a…" is fine, if it's just once. I'm not saying that it is a nice thing, but that's okay. But if that line is said to you yesterday, today and continues tomorrow, next week, etc. 3 to 4 times a day, you have to realise that if it's like that for 7-8 months it is tough. (Italy, Young Men, 13-18)

Yet being able to 'take a joke' was seen as vital to young men's friendships and an unwillingness to 'play along' with the joke (i.e. non-consent) was often seen as a 'deal breaker':

> Caos: It should also be said that some people, let's say, are not able to join the group. For example today, the last day of school for us, we were playing with water balloons, and one of us went to a teacher because he was touched by some splashing water. It is this very reason that prevents him from joining the group. You try in every way to allow him in, but then, when he behaves in this way, it is not easy. (Italy, Young men, 13-18)

In this highly gendered account, Caos's disdain for the young man he is referring to is clear and his exclusion from their friendship group is presented as self-explanatory. In reporting this 'joke' to the teacher, the young man has positioned himself as a victim, a label which Ringrose and Renold (2010) argue (using Butler's 1990 terminology of abjection) to be abhorrent and repulsive to young men due to its associations with femininity, weakness and vulnerability. Caos's assertion that this kind of behaviour precludes his peer from joining the friendship group, highlights the victim-blaming that young people are likely to face if they object to or report instances of bullying within their friendship group (particularly in the context of boys' friendships, where this also transgresses gender norms). In Hyde, Drennan, Howlett and Brady's (2008) study of secondary school students' experiences of sexual coercion, young men reported feeling socially coerced to subscribe to conventional

heterosexual norms. We argue that in this context, young people (and young men in particular) may feel coerced into 'going along with the joke', even when they do not want to.

Particularly in situations where young people have initially shown willingness to 'go along with the joke' (as in Centomila's account above) they may feel unable to 'withdraw' this consent without compromising the terms of their friendship. Again, there are parallels with arguments made in the sexual consent literature, that consent should be conceptualised as an active ongoing process (with consent being continually negotiated), rather than a finite one (where consent for one activity or at one point in time is assumed to be generalisable to other activities/points in time; Beres, 2010, 2014). The distinction between willingness and wanting is also applicable here, as it could be argued that young people may be willing to accept teasing, name-calling, sexual touching, etc., as a means of maintaining their friendships, even when these actions are unwanted,. This would be consistent with the finding that many people report having consented to unwanted sex within the context of committed dating relationships because they wished to avoid relationship tension (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010).

2) It's only bullying if it upsets or bothers the target (i.e. consent can be assumed if the target doesn't object)

A second factor that participants appeared to consider in deciding whether something constituted bullying or not was the target's reaction. In Forsberg's (2019) study, the extent to which the target expressed some kind of emotional harm appeared to be central to the participants conceptualising an incident as bullying. As we demonstrate below, our findings echoed Forsberg's, however, we explain this in terms of consent, with the implication being

that if the target shows apparent signs of enjoyment (wanting) or gives no sign that they want something to stop (are unwilling), then consent (willingness) can be assumed and it is therefore not bullying.

As discussed in the previous theme, both young men and young women said that, within the context of friendships, they accepted or enjoyed a range of behaviours that might be seen as problematic if enacted by a stranger. Some participants (particularly young men) also claimed that peers outside of their immediate friendship group enjoy or accept comments about their bodies or their sexuality:

> Grega: Some like it, if you mention their tits, for example … Same with gays ….
> (Slovenia, Young Men, 13-15)

The target's enjoyment (wanting) or acceptance (willingness/consent) of these often appeared to be assumed, with some participants suggesting that if an (inter)action is unwanted there will be clear signs to indicate this:

> 2paks: You can tell it by one's face, emotions and, you could say … "it's not funny anymore" … (Latvia, Young Men, 16-18)

Again, there are parallels with the sexual consent literature here. For example, when asking young adults how they inferred the (un)willingness of potential sexual partners, Beres (2010) found that they referred to a "tacit knowledge" (p.5), suggesting that it is easy to determine or sense sexual interest.

However, whilst there was a widespread assumption that they would 'be able to tell' if someone was upset, the participants simultaneously drew upon a common rape myth to suggest that some young people might 'pretend' to be upset and unwilling (i.e. to be non-consenting) or offer 'token resistance' (Muehlenhard, 2011; Osman, 2007) when they are actually enjoying the attention of their peers:

> Ula: Yeah, some girls like to be the centre of attention and then supposedly scream if a boy grabs their ass, but actually like it, because it's attention (Slovenia, Young Women, 16-18)

Here, Ula appears to be drawing upon a gendered discourse observed by Ringrose and Harvey in their 2015 study of sexting, which frames girls who 'show off' or try to solicit attention as "attention whores" who are lacking in self-respect (p.208). In doing so, Ula frames the girls' 'screams' as a façade, thinly veiling their 'shameful' (and consensual) desire for sexual attention.

In addition, laughter or smiling tended to be (or was claimed to have been) straightforwardly read as indicating that the target was enjoying (wanted) or did not object (i.e. willingly consented) to what was happening. In the following exchange (from the only mixed sex focus group) smiling is assumed to imply a level of consent even though the target has clearly expressed non-consent verbally:

Nikolai: Well actually, I have done it...I have pulled bras...there were about five –

             six of us boys, one girl was stood up and we were fooling around.

Facilitator: And in some way are you not humiliating her?

Nikolai: No, because she did not see it as humiliation!

Facilitator: And in this situation, when there were seven boys and one girl, can you

             determine whether that is pleasant or not?

Svetlana: Yes! Put yourself in her position

Monika: Imagine what it would be like if it were you

Nikolai: It wasn't like how you imagine, there were seven of us boys and she ran

             off and we went after her ……

Monika: Exactly....imagine what it would be like…..

Facilitator: When she ran off did she say that she didn't want you doing that?

Nikolai: Yes, she said she didn't want us doing that, but at the same time she was

             smiling….

Svetlana: Maybe she was just scared….to say. (Bulgaria, Mixed Sex, 16-18)

Here, the young women challenge Nikolai's assertion that the target of this bra-pulling was

not upset and point out that she may have been scared (presumably scared to voice her

discomfort without tempering her response with a smile). In this extract, the female

participants recognise that a target's apparent response (in this case smiling) might not

necessarily indicate consent. The young women's repeated requests for Nikolai to put himself

in the target's position appear to be a reference to the power inequality here (with several

boys targeting one young woman). Gavey and McPhillips (1999) argue that a dominant

discourse around the giving and getting of sexual consent positions women as the

'gatekeepers of heterosex', i.e. as responsible for clearly and assertively saying no to unwanted sex. However, they point out that this discourse fails to acknowledge the constraints that gender norms (e.g. that women should be 'nice', 'polite' and 'passive') and gendered power inequalities might place on women's ability to articulate non-consent, particularly in a forceful manner. Indeed, the young women in Kitzinger and Frith's (1999) study were concerned that refusing sex would be seen as rude and some had engaged in unwanted sexual activity as a result. More recently, Burkett and Hamilton (2012) found that whilst highlighting their own sexual agency and implying that refusing sex is simple, the young women they interviewed simultaneously recounted instances where they had struggled to express non-consent.

The idea that enjoyment (wanting) or acceptance (willingness) can necessarily be assumed based upon a target's reaction (or lack thereof) is further disrupted by the participants' talk around the importance of hiding or covering up one's feelings when encountering bullying:

> Mario: It also depends on the reaction of the victim, if the bully sees that the victim is suffering, he is further encouraged (Italy, Young Men, 13-18)

> Nina: But you must also react right. Often it happens that if you don't panic about it and don't worry too much, they stop making fun of you or there's less of it. (Slovenia, Young Women, 16-18)

So, whilst on the one hand participants appeared to rely on the target's reaction to inform their judgement of whether their behaviour was acceptable (i.e. consensual and therefore not

bullying), there were also widely held conflicting assumptions. The first of these is that targets' reactions do not always correspond with what they 'really' feel/want (i.e. 'no' might not mean no). A second, is that when being targeted, it is essential to hide any signs of discomfort or upset (i.e. potential signs of non-consent). Our intention here is not to invalidate young people's use of tacit knowledge (Beres, 2010) to gauge how their peers are responding to their (inter)actions. Rather, we argue that educators should encourage young people to contextualise this knowledge through interrogating how culturally located assumptions (such as the two assumptions identified above) might impact upon their own and their peers' ability to freely express consent or non-consent.

3)   It's not bullying if the target is to blame (i.e. 'asking for it' is a form of consent)
A third factor that participants appeared to consider in deciding whether an action constituted bullying or not was whether the target 'deserved' their treatment or had 'asked for it'. Ringrose (2011) argues - drawing upon the theories of Guattari and Deleuze - that "school space is shaped through commodified, gendered and sexualised norms and idealizations (discourses), which striate the space" (p.602), creating an environment characterised by hierarchical power relations and rigid rules. In line with this, participants observed that bullying was often a consequence of transgressing norms or expectations relating to gender and sexuality:

> Karl: … it's usually like something to do with how masculine or how feminine they
> are, you know what I mean. Because if you are not … if you are different then you
> are going to get picked on … (England, Young Men, 13-15)

Grega: Yeah, a girl in class, for example, looks a bit like a boy, short hair and not

much tits or butt and she's like, well, a boy. Well, she's often made fun of that

she's a lesbo.

Tian: But it's not necessary she's a lesbo, you can just say it so, because she looks

like that, right? (Slovenia, Young Men, 13-15)

Here, Tian points out that the girl's sexual identity is irrelevant and that the reason he and his

classmates "can" call her "a lesbo" is because she has 'crossed the line' in terms of her

'failure' to look sufficiently feminine. In other words, her transgression of gendered norms

around self-presentation is framed as warranting this abuse.

Other transgressions of gender and sexuality norms were also framed as inviting bullying:

Facilitator: … for example a girl makes out with several guys at a party and then

people, let's say, call her slut at school.

Denni: She has asked for it

Pingu: If you make out with 10...

Denni: You have asked for it

Cipo: You know what you are up against. That is not sexual bullying.

(Italy, Young Women, 13-18)

Ravn et al (2019) found that despite their male participants being critical of the heterosexual

double standard, they were still drawn into framing young women who were deemed to be

"too forward" or "over-confident" in sending sexts through the 'abject figure' (Tyler, 2013)

of the slut. They point out that in doing so, the participants draw upon an individualised logic of risk that positions victims of the subsequent non-consensual sharing of their sexual images as responsible for their own victimisation. Here the same logic is in operation. When the girl knowingly (i.e. "you know what you are up against") 'chose' to transgress gender and sexuality norms by making out with several boys at the party, she 'asked' to be called a slut and therefore this is not sexual bullying.

Kelvin made a similar argument with regard to couples engaging in same-sex "public displays of affection":

> Kelvin: … holding hands in public … I'd say that's fine, OK, but it's a case of people will discriminate, they will, you can't really change that you know … so just don't have public displays of um affection like that … (England, Young Men, 13-15)

Once again, we argue that this can be understood in terms of consent, with those who make certain choices being seen as 'asking for it' and this, in turn, being constructed as constituting a form of consent (or at least as having relinquished the right to non-consent). In all these examples, young people are constructed as 'fair game' for abuse, because they have 'chosen' not to conform to social norms. There are links to the sexual violence literature here, which has identified victim-blaming as common in discourses around sexual assault (e.g. Eigenberg, 2003; Hayes, Lorenz, & Bell, 2013; Moor, 2010). Within victim-blaming discourse, the target's behaviour is constructed as 'blurring the lines' when it comes to consent/non-consent. For example, it might be argued that the target's dress or behaviour indicated consent or invited sexual attention even where they had clearly expressed non-consent in other ways. We

argue that a similar rhetorical device is being adopted here to position bullying as 'invited' or 'provoked' by the target's 'failure' to conform to gender and sexuality norms. So, whilst these targets have not explicitly consented to their treatment, their 'wanton abandon' of these norms is seen as implicit consent to the bullying, or at the very least, as something they 'should have seen coming' and have failed to protect themselves from.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have argued firstly, that sexual bullying exists on a continuum of gender- and sexuality-related harassment and violence and secondly, that the notion of consent - which arguably informs the definitions of both dating and relationship violence and sexual harassment (e.g. unwanted and unwelcome acts, coercion and non-consensual sexual activities), but does not feature in classical bullying definitions - is central to young people's talk around whether and when an (inter)action constitutes bullying.

With regard to the first of the arguments, we contend that the participants' understandings of bullying incorporate a range of behaviours that might be excluded from research or practice using existing bullying definitions and be defined instead as sexual harassment or dating and relationship violence. We argue that treating these as separate and unconnected phenomena, each affecting discrete groups of 'victims', rather than recognising them as existing on a continuum of gender- and sexuality- related harassment and violence, obscures the pervasiveness of such problematic interactions in young people's everyday lives.

With regard to the second argument, we propose that the notion of consent (whilst not explicitly referred to using this term) was central to the participants' talk around whether and

when an (inter)action constituted bullying. This was deployed in a number of ways that justified and normalised sexual bullying in certain contexts. Firstly, through constructing interactions between friends as consensual and therefore necessarily harmless and benign, the participants rendered the notion of problematic interactions within friendships invisible, which could potentially make the challenging or reporting of these unthinkable. Secondly, through constructing the target's reaction as a clear and objective 'barometer' of consent (i.e. acceptance, willingness, enjoyment) they obscured the extent to which power inequalities and social norms related to gender and sexuality might function as barriers to expressing discomfort and displeasure (i.e. non-consent). Finally, through constructing transgressions of gender and sexuality norms as 'inviting' bullying (i.e. 'asking for it' and therefore relinquishing the right to non-consent), they positioned bullying as an inevitable consequence and engaged in victim-blaming. Like other researchers (e.g. Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gavey & McPhillips, 1999; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999), we contend that the negotiation of consent cannot be understood without considering structural power inequalities, which in turn, are often related to intersecting social categories such as gender, sexuality, class, race and (dis)ability. We therefore argue for a theoretical framework that conceptualises consent, gender and sexuality norms, and structural power inequalities as integral to explaining and preventing gender- and sexuality-related bullying and harassment in peer relationships (intimate or otherwise).

The adoption of such a theoretical framework has important implications for Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) and anti-bullying interventions, suggesting a move away from prescriptive approaches focusing on 'victims' and 'bullies' towards a more relational and structural approach engaging young people in discussions around how problematic

interactions (e.g. bullying, sexual harassment, dating and relationship violence and homo-, bi- and transphobia) with their peers might be related to gender and sexuality norms, power inequalities and consent. We believe that this would have a number of benefits. Within this research, we found that facilitating general conversations about peer relationships enabled participants to reflect upon their own past actions as problematic without necessarily positioning these actions as bullying or themselves as bullies. This is important, since research suggests that young people are (unsurprisingly given their negative connotations) resistant to the labels of bully and victim (Harger, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2014; Ringrose & Renold, 2010) and anti-bullying interventions are unlikely to be effective if young people "don't buy into the construct" of bullying (Brion-Meisels & Garnett, 2017, p.969) or see their own actions as an example of it. We believe that recognising the interconnections between bullying, sexual harassment, dating and relationship violence, and homo-, bi- and transphobia (rather than treating them as distinct issues affecting different individuals or groups of young people) would help to establish their relevance for all young people. This would pose a much-needed challenge to the current deficit model of bullying which positions certain groups (e.g. LGBT+ youth) as being more vulnerable or 'at risk' than others and frames bullying as an inevitability for these groups (Formby, 2015). In addition, we feel that discussing all of these forms of gender- and sexuality-related bullying and harassment as part of a broader focus on consent within peer relationships (that includes, but is not limited to, negotiating *sexual* consent) would challenge the notion that consent is only relevant to sexual relationships (i.e. is necessarily 'about sex'), thereby potentially making discussions of consent within a school-context (where discussions of sex are often avoided or resisted, e.g. Formby, 2015) less daunting and less controversial.

As with all research, there are limitations to this study. Of particular relevance to this paper is the use of differing terminology for 'bullying' across the five countries, which could be seen as having 'muddied the waters'. However, we argue that it is important to recognise these linguistic complexities and differences (rather than obscuring them through the imposition of a single definition or term). Whilst perhaps our analysis raises questions about whether young people in England and Italy (where we used bullying terminology), Latvia and Slovenia (where we used terms similar to bullying and with an emphasis on violence/aggression) and Bulgaria (where we used harassment terminology) were necessarily talking about the same phenomenon, we believe that it has proved fruitful in highlighting important conceptual overlaps between bullying and harassment across and within the five countries that might otherwise have been obscured.

As the data were collected in 2013, it is also important to acknowledge and reflect briefly on how the global discussion around sexual harassment in particular has changed in recent years with the prominence of the #MeToo movement. Whilst we have no way of knowing how our data might be different were we to conduct focus groups again now, we wonder whether young people may have more awareness of consent, and possibly of the complexities of negotiating this, as a result of the movement and related campaigns. For example, if young people are more aware of issues relating to consent, they may be less likely to engage in victim-blaming. However, the participants in Ravn et al.'s 2019 paper, framed girls as sluts, despite their critical stance towards the heterosexual double standard, which highlights the persistence of victim-blaming even in the face of increased awareness and resistance to problematic discourses. We believe that our arguments that sexual bullying exists on a continuum of gender- and sexuality-related bullying and harassment and that consent is a

'common thread' that is central to young people's understandings of a range of actions on this continuum are still likely to be of relevance in the current climate. Consequently, we urge researchers and practitioners to further explore young people's understandings of consent and how these shape their navigation of peer relationships.

Acknowledgements

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