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'Doing things you don't wanna do': young people's understandings of power inequalities and the implications for sexual consent

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ABSTRACT
Legal definitions of sexual consent emphasise 'freedom' as central to valid consent; however, power inequalities may complicate freedom. This paper discusses findings from a two-stage focus group study with young people (aged 13–23) in England exploring the implications of power inequalities for sexual consent. In Stage 1, 77 participants explored and ranked the types of power inequalities they felt were common within young people's sexual relationships, with age, gender and popularity being identified as the most common power inequalities. In Stage 2, 43 participants discussed power inequalities using scenarios based on the Stage 1 findings and considered their implications for sexual consent. Thematic analysis of the data produced two themes: powerless and powerful roles in consent communication and power inequalities implicitly constrain freedom to consent. Consent communication was constructed as a unidirectional process whereby those with more power initiate, and those with less, gatekeep. Such roles require deconstruction to position consent as mutual and actively negotiated by partners. Further, since power inequalities were seen to place implicit constraints on freedom to consent, we advocate for an explicit exploration of power and privilege within Relationships and Sex Education to equip young people to recognise, challenge and negotiate these constraints.

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Introduction

The current legal definition of sexual consent in England and Wales is that 'a person consents if he agrees by choice, and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice' (Sexual Offences Act 2003). This definition emphasises the voluntariness of consent (i.e. free from coercion or force and provided in instances where the 'giver' has the 'freedom' to make an informed decision), as well as 'capacity' (i.e. the competence) to make that decision. However, the concepts of 'freedom' and 'capacity' are not defined

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within the Act (Sjölin 2015), although the Act does make brief reference to instances where these may be compromised. With regards to 'capacity' the Act explains that a person may lack capacity due to age or a 'mental disorder', and while age and authority are suggested to have a potential impact on 'freedom' to consent, other factors are not explicated. In the academic literature, 'freedom' and 'capacity' to consent are often conflated (e.g. Pearce 2013), with both being associated with ideas around limited choice, when we would argue that 'capacity' might be better thought of as an individual competence to make a decision at that point in time. Research in England has outlined that young people are knowledgeable about the concept of 'capacity' and are able to recognise where this is compromised (e.g. in instances of alcohol intoxication or being asleep), yet they have a limited idea of what it means to have the 'freedom' to consent (Coy et al. 2013). Nevertheless, 'freedom' to consent has important implications for the extent to which young people's choices about whether to engage in sexual activity are constrained or not.

Power inequalities may have implications for a person's 'freedom' to consent. Whilst arguably more 'obvious' where there is a large age gap or abuse of authority in young people's relationships, power inequalities also persist in potentially more subtle ways. In line with a social ecological model (Caine 2020), we argue that power operates at different levels, including, individual, relationship, community, and societal levels. Understandably, within the context of sexual relationships, the primary focus has tended to be at the interpersonal or relationship level of the ecology. For example, one way power within intimate relationships has been conceptualised is as dominance or control over another, arising as a result of asymmetries in dependence between two partners (Lennon, Stewart, and Ledermann 2012). Maxwell and Aggleton (2010) explored conceptualisations of relationship power with 16–18-year-old young women in England via focus groups and interviews. The women reflected that they were able to take up a powerful position within the relationship by, for example, having the authority to make decisions about the relationship, having 'confidence' in themselves, positioning themselves as a 'strong and powerful' person and by being or feeling ambivalent towards sex and relationships (e.g. in comparison to a 'needy' and more invested man partner).

Whilst some theorists take this view of power as interpersonal or an individual domination of one person or group over another (e.g. Fiske 1993), Foucault (1982) challenges this conceptualisation of power as fixed, unidirectional and residing within individuals or groups. Foucault argues that 'power is everywhere' (Foucault 1978, 93). It is multidirectional, multifaceted, and context-dependent and whilst it can sometimes be wielded explicitly and have an obvious, direct and immediate effect, it often operates in more subtle and insidious ways. Crucially, whilst our actions might sometimes be dictated to or forced upon us by others, we are routinely encouraged to scrutinise, regulate and control *our own* behaviour and thus exercise power over ourselves at an individual level. Foucault's ideas also bridge the gap between individual/interpersonal and societal operations of power, i.e. societal discourses encourage us to self-scrutinise our own identities and behaviours. Discourses (often implicitly) invite, promote or condone certain actions, whilst discouraging or condemning others, thus making some actions acceptable or admirable, and others, unacceptable or taboo. Further, dominant societal discourses often reflect the values, assumptions, and interests of those in more powerful or privileged positions. Consequently, the range of actions made (un)available to people

within these discourses reflect, create, and perpetuate power inequalities. Powell (2010) suggests that Foucault's understanding of power helps us to theorise why women may consent to unwanted sex. Dominant societal discourses around sex suggest, for example, that women ought to be sexually passive rather than assertive, causing them to self-regulate in line with this discourse – meaning that, voicing non-consent requires them to transgress such discourses (Powell 2010).

An important concept in accessing power, particularly for young people's relationships, is the Bourdieuan concept of 'social capital' (Allard 2005). Allard argues that young people may be able to draw on social capital, that is, relationships and contacts that provide support and resources, to access power; however, the 'value' of said capital is dependent on the particular 'social field', that is, the different contexts within which capital is employed and the value ascribed to this. Allard (2005, 67) illustrates,

> Bourdieu's concept of a field or a game provides a useful tool for examining social contexts in which young people are positioned as agential (able to draw on social capital) and/or disempowered, (caught up in a game where they 'hold' no trump cards/no resources that will enable them to achieve their desired ends).

For young people, school may be a particularly important social field, illustrating how power also operates at the community level of the ecology. The extent to which power in young people's relationships is situated within school cultures is highlighted in Renold's (2013) research with Welsh school children aged 10–12. Renold found that power dynamics within 'boyfriend-girlfriend cultures' played an important role in whether young people agreed or consented to 'go out' with someone and whether they felt comfortable in 'dumping' them. For example, young girls talked about 'going out' with boys whom they did not necessarily want to, because of the social pressures, that is, feeling pressured to participate in the valued boyfriend-girlfriend culture.

The above demonstrates that power can operate at individual, relationship, community, and societal levels to impact on young people's relationships. In terms of the kinds of power inequalities that might operate across these levels to impact on sexual consent, research has understandably often focused on gender and gendered power imbalances (Allen 2003; Bay-Cheng, Maguin, and Bruns 2017; Maxwell and Aggleton 2010; Metz, Myers, and Wallace 2021). Gender relations play a critical role in understanding power imbalances in mixed-gender sexual relationships; however, power imbalances are not limited to gender, and may manifest within young people's sexual relationships, and intersect, in various ways. For example, in addition to gender, power imbalances may result from differences in age, sexual experience, maturity, social class.

Within the context of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) and peer-on-peer abuse, disparities in age, intellect, emotional maturity, wealth and social status are acknowledged as having the potential to create power imbalances within young people's sexual relationships (Firmin and Curtis 2015; McAlinden 2018). In research exploring consent in the context of child sexual exploitation (CSE) – with young people aged 13–18 in England – researchers used video scenarios to examine constraints to consent (Coy et al. 2013). For example, one video depicted a homeless young woman consenting to sex with an older man as 'payment' for him offering his sofa for her to sleep on. The researchers found that, although the young people acknowledged that this was a 'survival

strategy', only half recognised that the power inequalities (e.g. of age, poverty and homelessness) placed constraints on her freedom to consent to sex.

Outside of the more 'specialised' HSB and CSE literature, there is limited research which explores the range of intersecting power inequalities for young people's relationships more broadly and the impacts on sexual consent. An intersectional understanding of power acknowledges that, 'each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives' (Collins 1990, 226). For example, penalty and privilege are dependent on a person's gender, age, race, class, wealth, popularity, sexual knowledge, and sexual experience. An intersectional approach to sexual violence has acknowledged the ways in which people experience varied, multiple and overlapping structural inequalities and that these have implications for their experiences of sexual violence and the consequent requirement for support (Crenshaw 2003; McPhail et al. 2007). There is also currently a dearth of research involving young people themselves in the identification of which power inequalities affect their sexual relationships. Accordingly, the current research aimed, firstly, to explore power inequalities directly with young people to identify what they constructed as common power inequalities in young people's sexual relationships, and informed by this, secondly, to explore the implications that these power inequalities may have for (and potentially, how they intersect to impact on) young people's sexual consent practices. Our analyses of these data will draw on Foucault's ideas to explore the varied and often subtle levels at which power operates, including, individual/interpersonal and wider societal/discursive levels. In addition, our analyses will utilise the Bourdieuan concept of social capital to explore the complicated nature of young people's access to power; for example, through social resources and within different contexts or social 'fields' at a school community level.

Method

Stage 1

The first stage aimed to identify the power inequalities that young people felt were common within young people's sexual relationships (e.g. gender, age, popularity, sexual experience). Focus groups were conducted with 77 young people from two mixed-gender state academy secondary schools and one LGBTQ+ youth group in West Yorkshire, UK. Both schools had 'good' Ofsted ratings and 11% (at the first school) and 13% (at the second) of students were eligible for free school meals (the national average around the time of recruitment was 13.6%; Department for Education 2018). Seven focus groups were conducted, each comprising of approximately 8–10 young people aged 13–23 (the majority were aged 14–17). Young people at each site were recruited via liaison with a gatekeeper (e.g. Form Tutor), who distributed a participant information sheet and consent form to the young people on the researchers' behalf. Young people who were interested, based on the study information, then volunteered to participate. Participants received no incentive to take part, although participants within the schools were released from school lessons to participate in the study. Forty girls, 32 boys, one non-binary person, one trans man, one genderfluid person, and two young people who preferred not to indicate their gender, took part in the study. Most participants identified as cisgender ($n = 69$); seven identified as transgender, and one as

questioning. Participants identified as straight/heterosexual ($n = 59$), bisexual ($n = 7$), pansexual ($n = 5$), lesbian ($n = 1$), asexual ($n = 1$), gay ($n = 1$) and three chose not to provide information about their sexuality. Participants predominantly identified as White ($n = 71$), as well as: White and Black African ($n = 1$), Indian ($n = 1$), Arab ($n = 1$), Greek ($n = 1$), Spanish ($n = 1$) and one person chose not to answer. Within schools, focus groups for girls and boys were conducted separately and according to school year group to minimise some of the power inequalities within their school cultures and try to encourage all to feel comfortable to talk about the topics freely. A mixed age and gender focus group was conducted with the youth group, as they all regularly met as a group to talk about similar topics; therefore, there were fewer concerns around power inequalities within the group inhibiting their comfortability.

In the focus groups, participants were introduced to the idea of 'power inequalities' (where one person has more/less power than another) and provided with an example of these within a different type of relationship (employer/employee). They were then asked to think about power inequalities within young people's sexual relationships, and to write down, in small groups, examples of these. They were then given a pre-prepared list of power inequalities created by the researchers to consider whether there were any on the list that they had not thought of but felt were important in young people's sexual relationships. Following this, participants were asked to rank their final power inequality lists in order from most to least commonly occurring in young people's sexual relationships. Next to each power inequality, they were asked to annotate the reason(s) why they thought this was a power inequality and why this was more common than the others.

Stage 2

The second stage aimed to explore how the power inequalities identified in Stage 1 shape the ways in which sexual consent is understood and practiced within sexual situations among young people. Focus groups were conducted with 43 young people aged 13–18 from two schools and one sixth form in West Yorkshire, UK. One school was a mixed-gender independent fee-paying school (0% of pupils qualified for free school meals). The other school was a mixed-gender state academy secondary school, with 11% of pupils qualifying for free school meals (national average around the time of recruitment was 15.4%; Department for Education 2019b). The sixth form college was part of a mixed-gender academy state school with 9% of pupils qualifying for free school meals. Young people at each site were recruited via liaison with a gatekeeper (e.g. Form Tutor), who distributed study information (information sheet and consent form) to potential participants on the researchers' behalf. Participants received no incentive to take part, although participants within the schools were released from school lessons to participate in the study. All participants identified as cisgender, with 23 girls and 20 boys. Across the education providers, eight focus groups were conducted, with separate focus groups for girls/boys and according to their year group. Forty-one participants identified as straight/heterosexual and two as bisexual. Participants predominantly identified as White ($n = 36$), as well as Pakistani ($n = 2$), White and Black Caribbean ($n = 1$), White and Black African ($n = 1$), Black African ($n = 1$), Chinese ($n = 1$) and one person chose not to answer.

Prior to the focus groups, the 10 most common power inequalities in young people's sexual relationships (reported later) were calculated using the ranked lists produced by the young people in Stage 1. The top 10 were calculated by numbering the position of each power inequality within the participants' ranked lists and then totalling these numbers for each power inequality across all the lists. Once the 10 most common power inequalities across the dataset were identified (i.e. the 10 with the highest total rankings), these were then used to create 10 brief vignettes or scenarios for discussion in the Stage 2 focus groups. Each scenario described a situation between two young people in which the power inequality was clear, but any other details were intentionally vague, to enable young people to draw on other intersecting power inequalities that they felt were relevant. For example, for the power inequality of 'popularity', the scenario was: 'Person A has lots of friends and is considered one of the most popular people in school. Person B is not as popular as Person A. If these two people were to have sex or take part in a sexual activity … '.

During the focus groups, participants were presented with the top 10 power inequalities outlined by participants in Stage 1, and from these, they were asked to choose three that they considered to be the most common in young people's relationships. We then discussed a scenario relating to each of their chosen power inequalities to explore how the selected power inequalities might impact on sexual consent in young people's relationships, including how consent might be understood, practiced, and communicated in these circumstances. For example, participants were asked whether they felt that the power inequality in their chosen scenario would affect their giving and getting of sexual consent, and if so, in what ways, and how the consent would be communicated between the people depicted in that scenario.

Ethical approval was obtained from Leeds Beckett University for both stages of this research. The education providers and youth group provided young people (and their parents if under 16) with a participant information sheet, inviting them to participate in the project. Written consents were obtained, involving either parental consent and participant assent for young people under 16, or participant consent for young people aged 16 and over.

Method of analysis

The focus groups for both Stage 1 and Stage 2 were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and all the data (transcripts and visual/written data) were imported into NVivo. The data from both stages were analysed together using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis was used to organise and interpret the data through the identification of key features or themes (Clarke and Braun 2017). The analysis used a latent and inductive approach and was informed by a social constructionist theoretical framework; this allowed for the consideration of the wider cultural resources or discursive constructions available to young people when formulating their understandings. The flexibility of thematic analysis was particularly useful because of the varied nature of the data to be analysed, which included textual transcript data, as well as visual written ideas and power inequality rankings/hierarchies (Braun and Clarke 2006; Gleeson 2012).

Table 1. Power inequality rankings from Stage 1 in order of commonality.

	Power inequality	Brief description
1	Age	Generally, anything over two years was seen to create a power inequality
2	Gender	Boys/men constructed as more powerful than girls/women
3	Popularity	Liked by many people; may have high social status
4	Emotional investment in the relationship	More invested people have more to 'lose' should the relationship fail and therefore less power
5	Attractiveness	Where one person is considered more 'good looking' than the other
6	Sexual knowledge	Where one person knows more about sex than the other
7	Wealth/money	Where one person has greater access to money than the other
8	Mental health status	Where one person may experience mental health problems and the other does not
9	Maturity	Generally talked about in terms of emotional maturity
10	Sexual experience	Where one person is more sexually experienced than the other

Analysis

The top 10 power imbalances in young people's sexual relationships, as identified by the young people in Stage 1, are provided in Table 1.

Two themes relating to power inequalities were constructed from the data, drawing upon both the Stage 1 power inequality ranking exercise and the subsequent discussions in the Stage 2 focus groups. These themes delineated powerless and powerful roles in consent communication and demonstrated how power inequalities implicitly constrain young people's freedom to choose. The two themes are presented below, and the power inequalities are discussed together within these themes because of the intersections between them.

Powerless and powerful roles in consent communication

Power inequalities appeared to influence the role that each person took up or was able to take up in their sexual encounter, particularly when it came to consent. The young people suggested that the more powerful person would initiate sexual activity and that often their initiations would involve assuming consent in some way. The least powerful person within the relationship dynamic was positioned as the gatekeeper of sexual activity. Young people's understandings drew heavily upon gendered power dynamics, which often appeared to 'override' other power inequalities, and traditional scripts that inform sexual behaviour were upheld. That is, boys were positioned as initiators and girls as gatekeepers (Simon and Gagnon 2011), even where boys may be less powerful on account of another power inequality (e.g. age).

The young people spoke about the more powerful person being in control of, and initiating, sexual situations because of the greater influence they have within the relationship, as illustrated by this example:

> Lucy: But also, if you're having sex with someone who's had sex before and you haven't, then you know that they're experienced so you're just gonna follow their lead and wait for them to kind of initiate it. Do you know what I mean? (Age 17, girl, heterosexual)

Lucy notes that when someone has more sexual experience, they would be the one to initiate sexual activity. This constructs the sexually inexperienced person as reliant on

the initiation of a partner who decides when sex will happen, but also as a passive follower of the desires of the more powerful person. Although there is currently limited research looking at consent practices in young people's relationships where there is a disparity in sexual experience, the young people here were clear that having less prior sexual experience means that they are ill-equipped for the role of initiator.

The Year 12 girls suggested that being in control of, and initiating, sexual activities would be similar for relationships with varying levels of emotional investment,

Lucy: Well, if someone's like, if you're more invested in someone than they are in you, then they're gonna be able to sense that so like if they know that, you've got them whipped you know.

[laughs]

Lucy: If they know that you've got them like wrapped around your little finger[1] then they're more likely to take advantage and maybe even use you.

Emily: You sound so bitter 'they're gonna use you'.

[laughs]

Maddie: Yeah, 'cause if Person A is really, really invested that means that Person B can sort of call the shots and Person A would sort of go along with it. (All age 17, girls, all heterosexual)

This group describes being emotionally invested as being 'whipped' or 'wrapped around someone's little finger' and that the less invested person is in control and is therefore more powerful. This exchange details that the less invested person can dictate what happens within the sexual relationship and make decisions relating to this because of their heightened power within the relationship dynamic. Here, the person with less power in the relationship again takes a passive role and may feel obliged to continue with unwanted sexual activity because they have minimal decision-making power within the relationship, while the other person (in a more active, controlling role) is able to 'call the shots', and they are left with little option but to 'go along with it'.

Within this theme, the roles were also heavily gendered. Boys were more often cited as being in control of and initiating sexual situations than girls were. For example, as the Year 12 girls' group states,

Summer (age 17): … they've [boys] got more confidence in the situation, it's like their control.

Grace (age 17): They're controlled.

[…]

Summer: Yeah, like you never normally, like the girl is never normally in control, it's like the boy chooses to like have sex with her, do you know what I mean? (Girls, both heterosexual)

The girls here note that the boys are 'in control' of the situation and 'choose' when to have sex; this is not described as a discussion or mutual decision but the boys' decision. Others noted in their power rankings that girls would be more likely to 'go along with stuff' (Year 10, girls), i.e. demands from a boy, illustrating the passive role that girls are assumed to take in relationships between boys and girls. The Year 10 and 12 girls draw upon familiar discourses of women as passive and lacking agency within their sexual relationships, where women are positioned as entirely receptive to men's sexual desires and thus their own sexual pleasure is obscured (Beres 2014; Jozkowski and Peterson 2013).

In the above extracts, boys are afforded more power because of their gender, and consequently, more confidence with sexual situations, as this is their domain, and they are in 'control'. Shefer and Potgieter (2006) write that, constructions of women as asexual and men in control of sexual situations position sexuality as a primarily male domain, where women are required to be 'shown the ropes' by men. Further, in the focus groups, it was also seen as more permissible for younger girls to be in relationships with older boys (compared to the other way around), so gender was likely to intersect with other inequalities, including sexual knowledge, sexual experience, and age, which, altogether, increases the likelihood of boys taking control and taking on the initiator role. Although men are constructed as powerful, active initiators in control of the sexual situation, women on the other hand, are frequently positioned in 'gatekeeping' roles, deciding whether sex is to occur or not (Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). The word 'gatekeeper' might imply a level of control (or power) to limit access to something; however, in the extracts from the girls above, girls are not constructed as having such control, appearing to follow the lead of more dominant boys, thus passively reacting to their initiations.

Despite this, some young people in the study (mainly older boys) constructed gatekeeping as a powerful role for girls and noted that girls held the power within boy–girl encounters because of this. The boys' group reinforced the gendered nature of the roles taken up during sexual activity and agreed that boys would take on the role of initiator, and girls, gatekeeper. However, they constructed access to power in these roles as entirely different, as illustrated in this example where the boys are talking about whether obtaining consent is easier for boys or girls:

Boris (age 17): More difficult for the boy probably.
Researcher: Yeah, why do you think that?
Jonah (age 16): Because like the woman holds the power … because like it's her vagina at the end of the day. (Boys, heterosexual)

The boys frequently constructed gatekeeping as a powerful role for girls and saw obtaining consent as difficult for boys as they perceived girls to hold 'the final say'. Although Jonah uses the phrase 'it's her vagina at the end of the day' to highlight that it is the girl who decides whether sex happens or not, this simultaneously constructs sex as something that happens *to* women (or their vaginas) rather than being a mutually desirable act. It could be argued that there is a shift in power dynamics after initiation, where women 'hold the power' to control or make the final decision about when or if sex happens; however, this notion is contested (Byers 1996; Jozkowski et al. 2014), as this 'final say' may in fact place an onus or responsibility on women to stop sexual activity (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). These gendered roles within relationships between men and women may be particularly damaging for girls who are expected to respond to boys' seemingly controlling and urgent sexual desire, which leaves them little room to acknowledge their own sexual desires in the process (Fine 1988; Morgan and Zurbriggen 2007).

The opposing extracts from the girls and boys present a clear example of the relational and socially constructed nature of power within sexual relationships. Two competing constructions of women and girls' role as gatekeeper are outlined: girls are either constructed as responsible for stopping unwanted sexual behaviour, with little power to do so (e.g. in Grace and Summer's exchange above) or as having all of the power or privilege to decide

what type of sexual activity to engage in and when (as Jonah outlines). This therefore illustrates the fluctuating nature of power and the ways in which, as Foucault outlines, power is relational and discursively constructed, rather than residing within an individual (Foucault 1978).

Whilst the roles within sexual encounters were constructed by many young people within the study as non-consensually assumed, rather than negotiated (i.e. in most instances, the more powerful person would automatically take on the role of initiator), young people from the LGBTQ+ youth group used different terminology in their ideas about power inequalities within sexual relationships. The LGBTQ+ young people linked power inequalities to the roles taken up within BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism). When collating ideas for what would feature as a power inequality, they noted both 'dominant/submissive' and 'switch' as roles that have implications for the amount of power someone holds. This suggests an understanding of both the 'submissive/dominant' binary of power distribution, and how these roles, and therefore the distribution of power, may be fluid or 'nondualistic', as indicated by the term 'switch' (Martinez 2018). This perhaps indicates that the young people within this group constructed sexual relationship roles as more consensually agreed in advance, rather than assumed based on social characteristics.

To summarise, this theme illustrates that for many young people in this study, power inequalities constrain the roles that are seen to be accessible to themselves and others when it comes to sexual consent. There was an understanding that those with more power tend to be automatically positioned in the role of initiator, and those with less, the role of gatekeeper; although gatekeeping was commonly constructed as passive following, rather than actively permitting. However, in some young people's understandings, those who held the power within these roles was reversed, with several boys constructing the gatekeeper role as affording power to women/girls. Further, the young people from the LGBTQ+ youth group constructed power within young people's relationships differently, drawing on understandings from BDSM, and thus implied a more consensual and mutual negotiation of roles.

Power inequalities implicitly constrain young people's freedom

Discussions around how power inequalities influence sexual consent communication highlighted that the young people felt a power imbalance within a relationship would constrain the choices available to them or other young people. Expanding on the previous theme, it is not only the roles that people take up within sexual situations that are assumed to be influenced by their relative power, but also the freedom that each person has to convey their consent and refuse unwanted sexual advances. The person with more power was assumed to be freer and more able to communicate their (un)willingness to engage in a sexual behaviour, whereas the person with less power was assumed to be constrained in their decision-making. The less powerful person was positioned as inhibited by various factors that affected their ability to communicate their (non)consent freely, such as a desire to maintain the relationship and please the other person.

The young people cited that the person within the relationship who had more power was able to convey their (non)consent more freely in line with their actual wishes,

Max: The more attractive person might be like more confident so they might be able to say like 'yes' or 'no' easier, but they also might be able to ask the person for consent easier. (Age 14, boy, heterosexual)

Lilly: Yeah, I think the older person would find it easier because they can just be like 'maybe not now, maybe we'll do it later' and they also have more life experience, maybe they've had to say 'no' before to somebody else so it's like it was probably going to be easier for the older person to say 'no'. (Age 15, girl, bisexual)

Max notes that people who were deemed more attractive compared to their partner would likely be more confident in their communication of consent, stating that it is easier for them to both give and gain consent in their relationships. Consequently, Max's point suggests that confidence provides someone with the freedom to communicate (non)consent. The idea of the person in the more powerful position being more confident was drawn upon several times within the focus groups, illustrating that confidence is commonly ascribed to those who have power, or that 'confidence' is one way of being powerful within a sexual relationship (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010). Lilly echoes Max's point in terms of age disparities, in that an older person is more able to refuse unwanted sexual advances due to their experience and their heightened power, which implies that their non-consent will be listened to.

The disparity between the more powerful and less powerful person's freedom of choice was also noted when considering the scenarios depicting emotional investment. For example, the young people, when asked whether being less invested makes it easier or harder to give consent, noted,

Jakob: I think it makes it easier to refuse it and accept it.

Researcher: Right ok, yeah, why do you think it would be easier?

Jakob: Because it can be more a sort of … it's not going to mean as much to them. (Age 17, boy, heterosexual)

Jakob highlights that being less emotionally invested means that you are more able to 'accept and refuse sex' because of the meaning attached to the relationship; when the relationship is not meaningful, this affords a person greater freedom to communicate their consent in line with their wishes. This reflects previous findings in this area in which young women were able to access power by being 'ambivalent' about sex and/or relationships (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010). Further, in their power inequality ranking activity, a group of Year 12 girls noted that emotional investment would be the most common power inequality and would impact sexual consent practices because 'if you are scared to lose them, you do what they want to avoid that'. This suggests that whilst a less invested person may be more ambivalent to sex, and can therefore consent freely, a more invested person has more to lose and therefore their choice is more limited.

Young people noted that being more emotionally invested meant that a person's wish to maintain the relationship would influence decision-making despite their own desires, i.e. putting the other person's 'wants' before their own. Previous research has suggested that engaging in unwanted sexual activity may be an attempt to equalise power imbalances (Edwards, Barber, and Dziurawiec 2014); however, here, rather than acquiescing

to try to attain a favourable outcome (an equalising of power), they appear to be acquiescing to avoid negative outcomes (to avoid losing their partner). Further, the presence of a power inequality in a sexual relationship appears to act indirectly on the available actions of the least powerful person (e.g. Foucault 1982). The power inequality does not have an 'immediate' effect in the sense that there is no direct threat of force or pressure from the more powerful person, but instead, works to constrain the 'possible or actual future or present actions' as the possible negative consequences of saying no exerts an indirect pressure (Faubion 1994, 340).

Other young people echoed the sentiment that being less powerful within the relationship would mean that their choices were constrained. For example, in relation to popularity,

> Faith: Yeah, I feel like the person who was less popular would have to try and impress the most popular one because they could easily just move on – the more popular person – and have the other people to fall back on so they might feel pressured into saying 'yes'. (Age 14, girl, heterosexual)

Faith notes that a less popular person would need to bear in mind that their partner could easily 'move on' if the relationship were to terminate. An implication of this might be that less popular people are expected to consent to unwanted sexual activity to keep their partner, resulting in a choice that is constrained by the implicit pressures of being in a relationship with someone more popular. The young people frequently couched their talk around power inequalities and consent in terms of 'capital'; for example, certain people may have 'more to lose' if they have invested more in the relationship, meaning it is more damaging for them should the relationship fail. However, less powerful people may acquire social capital by being romantically involved with someone who has a more desirable social network (e.g. is more popular) that is, by virtue of being 'with' that person romantically, they are also able to increase their own social capital and therefore power through access to valued resources (Bourdieu 1993).

Others noted that this was also the case in relationships where there was a disparity in age,

> Lucy: And if you're 14 as well, and your boyfriend or girlfriend is like older like that, like 17 then, it's like people may think like 'oh they're cool' like going out with like an older person … So, they'll do like things that they don't wanna do to like, to keep that like status.
>
> […]
>
> Emily: Definitely, difficult like if you were the younger person to say like, if they're older they're gonna have older friends, they're gonna have older people they can hang around with and as well when you're that age you're about to turn 18 so you're going to start going out clubbing, more parties things like that so it's easier for them to be like 'well bye, you're only 14' … So, I think for them, for the younger person to say 'no' it would be harder just due to like, I dunno, maybe fear of them leaving them or just looking like an idiot really. (Age 17, girls, both heterosexual)

Another aspect of the limited choice is touched upon here: younger people gain status from being in a relationship with an older person, which ultimately constrains their ability to convey their (non)consent freely. An older age intersects with access to alternative social resources outside of the relationship, thus exacerbating this power inequality,

that is, because they are older, the older partner can 'go out' and have more access to opportunities to meet other people. The status or capital acquired from being in age disparate relationships is particularly valued in the 'social field' of the school (Duncan 1999), and without this, certain young people hold limited resources to retain their 'cool' status within this social field or context (Allard 2005). Consequently, the complexities of power unequal relationships are highlighted. In some ways, young people may benefit from the status acquired in such relationships (i.e. through an increase in social standing or capital) but find themselves in a difficult bind between reaping the benefits of this relationship and the subsequent constraints that this puts on their freedom to negotiate consent (i.e. communicating non-consent risks rupturing this status). Within the field of the school, power unequal relationships can be thought of as a 'high stakes game' in which an older or more popular partner is the 'trump card' that make the difference between winning and losing. Therefore, although young people may benefit in some ways from being in power unequal relationships, this benefit is precarious and dependant on the other person.

In summary, this theme highlights that less powerful people in a relationship may acquiesce to sexual activity because their choices are indirectly constrained. These constraints to freedom are somewhat implicit; the young people in this research talked about acquiescing not because of a direct threat or force from the more powerful person but because of the impact that communicating non-consent might have on the security of their relationship and/or their social standing.

Discussion

The findings presented in this paper illustrate that young people understand power inequalities in sexual relationships to have important implications for sexual consent, both in terms of the roles young people are able to take on and their freedom to communicate sexual consent in line with their wishes.

The top 10 most common power inequalities ranked by the young people appeared to reflect the power imbalances highlighted in concerns around harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) or peer-on-peer abuse, i.e. of gender, age, wealth, social status (or as noted in Table 1, 'popularity'), maturity, and in particular, emotional maturity (Firmin and Curtis 2015; McAlinden 2018). Age and gender represented the two most common power inequalities in this research. Young people's lives are hierarchically structured around age, particularly in the field of the school, where age-disparate relationships are constructed as more desirable because of the status that can be acquired by having a partner outside of one's year/age group (Duncan 1999). Regarding gender, its ubiquitous presence in young people's lives, and the stereotypes that accompany this, has been illuminated in previous research (Renold et al. 2017), and it is therefore understandable that young people also referenced this as a particularly common power inequality.

However, the power inequalities that featured in the 'top 10' are also undoubtedly shaped by the social positions occupied by the participants in the study and the power or privileges related to these. Most participants in Stage 1 were White; therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that race or ethnicity did not feature highly within the young people's power rankings. Similarly, although the Stage 1 sample included participants from an LGBTQ+ youth group, most participants were straight and cisgender, and

therefore, it might also be anticipated that sexual or gender identity would not commonly feature in the total sample rankings either. Most participants in Stage 2 were also White, straight and cisgender, which likely impacted on the scenarios they chose to discuss. It may be easier and more common for people to identify ways in which they are disadvantaged/oppressed (and therefore name these as power inequalities), without recognising the ways in which we are privileged (and therefore do not name as power inequalities; e.g. Collins 2000), meaning that the young people may have chosen power inequalities which reflect the ways in which they felt disadvantaged without recognising the ways in which they too held power, privilege and advantage within sexual situations.

In relation to the thematic analysis, the first theme outlined that young people understood power to be a prerequisite for certain roles within sexual relationships. Through understandings of sexual roles as dependent upon the amount of power individuals hold within their sexual relationship, consent is constructed not as a mutual discussion but as a unidirectional process, where the more powerful person, who tends to act as an initiator, can demand or dictate agreement from a less powerful partner. Disparities in sexual experience and gender had a particularly obvious influence on the roles taken up in sexual situations. The implication of these roles varying, dependent on the level of power, is that less powerful young people are understood to be receptive and passive in sexual situations. It is therefore important that these roles are deconstructed to position consent as something that is negotiated by both partners, as a mutual and active negotiation. Palmer (2013) advocates for a change in understandings from 'consent' to 'freedom to negotiate', and notes that this would entail a shift in conceptions of sexual consent as something one person proposes and another accepts or refutes, towards a model of freedom to negotiate, where mutuality and interactive discussions take place about whether and what type of sex to engage in. Such an approach within sex education may involve questioning how power and responsibility are constructed at a wider societal level, and the intersections with gendered norms and sexual scripts, which may help to reject neoliberal notions of choice and responsibility that cloud existing sex education provision (Elliott 2014).

The second theme illustrated the social status or capital that can be won or lost by being in power unequal relationships (particularly within the social field of the school), the normative community or societal assumptions that can govern these relationships, and the implicit constraints these have on freedom to consent. We have been conscious to frame young people's constraints of choice in the data as impacting their 'freedom', rather than 'capacity' to consent, to acknowledge that young people are not always individually impaired in their decision-making ability (capacity), but rather, their choices are limited, for example, by the perceived or actual ramifications of making certain decisions when it comes to sex (freedom). Capacity, of course, applies in some individual situations, for example, where age, developmental or learning disabilities, or inebriation may complicate a person's ability to make decisions. However, this is in addition to, or aside from, a power inequality, as power inequalities constrain the range of decisions that can be made or the choices that are available. As argued in the Introduction, power operates at all levels of the ecology – individual, relational, community and societal – and consequently, power inequalities should be conceptualised as impacting on freedom to consent, rather than capacity to consent, as capacity individualises those power inequalities. For example, it may not be that young people are individually lacking capacity or

competence but that their freedom to make choices is constrained either by the relative powerful position occupied by the person they are in a relationship with and/or the social fields they inhabit (i.e. community or societal assumptions constraining what is perceived to be 'acceptable' or 'desirable').

From the second theme, it was also evident that young people's choices were typically not constrained in ways that were overtly intentional or exploitative on the part of the more powerful person, but rather, were a result of more implicit and covert community (e.g. within the social field of the school) or societal pressures. For example, age-disparate relationships are particularly valued, and the young people cited a pressure to consent to avoid losing the status gained from these kinds of relationships. Further, the findings illustrate the widespread permeation of power including the disciplinary power of discourses which encourage us to regulate and scrutinise our own behaviour (Foucault 1978, 1982). For example, normative societal discourses that position 'good' relationships as involving sex (between men and women), sexual consent as something women 'give' to men, and women as passive, rather than assertive (e.g. Powell 2010), cloud the freedom to make certain decisions about sex by constructing only certain behaviours as permissable. These societal discourses place pressure on young people, and young women in particular, to consent to potentially unwanted sexual activity. When power is exercised interpersonally, such as one partner coercing another, it is clear that freedom is compromised; however, when power is exercised discursively via assumptions or norms around sex, this compromise to freedom to consent is not problematised in the same way and the implications for sexual consent are less well-recognised (Linander et al. 2021).

Within the literature and policy around child sexual exploitation (CSE; typically, an adult exploiting a child/young person) and harmful sexual behaviour (HSB; typically, a young person harming a child/young person; e.g. McAlinden 2018), power inequalities are recognised as having important implications for sexual relationships. For example, within child sexual exploitation policy, power imbalances that are often exploited by adults engaging in harm against children include the child's 'age, gender, sexual identity, cognitive ability, physical strength, status, and access to economic or other resources' (Department for Education 2017). It would be helpful to extend these understandings within CSE and HSB of how power unequal relationships and certain social contexts can influence young people's freedom of choice, to power unequal relationships among young people more generally, to acknowledge the varied ways in which young people's freedom to choose may be inhibited; for example, by differing levels of power or the social fields they inhabit (e.g. community or societal pressures/assumptions). Acknowledging these pressures and assumptions would help to reject neoliberal notions of individual choice and responsibility and acknowledge the wider context within which young people's consent to sex may be constrained (Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008). These constraints to freedom ought to be addressed not only in CSE prevention efforts, but in Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) guidance more broadly, where there is often a lack of acknowledgement about how power inequalities may play a role in limiting the choices available to young people (Le Mat 2017).

This is not to say that young people are necessarily always unable to consent within power disparate relationships, and indeed, most relationships are affected by power inequalities in some way. Instead, it may be a matter of considering the extent to which power inequalities are experienced (and compounded) and the degree to which

they constrain a person's freedom to consent. A distinction between interpersonal coercion (from another person) and social coercion (resulting from discourses that limit our available actions; Finkelhor and Yllö 1983; Gavey 2005), helps to illustrate why some experiences could be considered coercive and harmful despite a lack of direct coercion from another person (Beres 2007). Consequently, acknowledging, within RSE, disciplinary forms of power which shape normative assumptions about sex, and encouraging partners to explicitly reflect on the ways in which they access power and how this might implicitly affect their partners' freedom to negotiate, would support young people to engage in more ethical sexual practices (Carmody 2015). This might involve encouraging partners to consider their own privileges and what they can do to open avenues for more freedom for a less powerful partner when it comes to consent.

Gender is widely acknowledged as a site of power inequality within relationships between men and women, and subsequently, is emphasised as an important factor to consider within RSE and sexual violence prevention (Carmody and Carrington 2000; Haberland 2015; Hong and Marine 2018). This is a vital step, however, it is also important to acknowledge the range of ways in which power might manifest and intersect to constrain choices within young people's relationships; as outlined here, many power inequalities, including, for example, age, emotional investment, and popularity, can serve to limit this choice. Consequently, it is important for inclusive RSE to address the implications of power imbalances within young people's sexual relationships, and how these play out at the intersections of 'social, cultural, geographical and cognitive' differences (Renold and Mcgeeney 2017, 52).

In line with this, despite a few sexual consent educational programmes recognising the role of the wider social systems which shape young people's experiences and understandings of consent (Burton et al. 2021), this is particularly important when it comes to addressing power inequalities within sexual relationships (Jones, Milnes, and Turner-Moore 2021). It is crucial that the societal and systemic nature of power imbalances are unpacked in discussion with young people (Jones, Milnes, and Turner-Moore 2021), in order to encourage young people to reflect on the power and privilege they may access at a structural level and how this subsequently may serve as a barrier for others to communicate their discomfort or non-consent (Milnes, Turner-Moore, and Gough 2021). Whilst sexual violence is gendered (Muehlenhard et al. 2017), the findings here often illustrated a reluctance to acknowledge gendered power and privilege when it comes to sexual consent. However, illuminating the way that boys, for example, may hold multiple, intersecting positions of power, would help to illustrate the far-reaching nature of their powerful position as a result of their gendered social status and how this may be exacerbated by other power inequalities (for example, on account of their age and sexual experience) and help to highlight how girls may not be in a more powerful position after all, as was often constructed by the boys in this research.

Although RSE guidance for England acknowledges sexual consent as an important topic, it fails to address the importance of covering power inequalities within young people's relationships and the implications these have for negotiating sexual consent (Department for Education 2019a). Despite this, some online sex education resources acknowledge this gap; for example, BISH UK outline the varied and subtle nature of power inequalities within sexual relationships and the implications that these can have for freedom of choice (BISH UK 2016). The findings outlined here illustrate that

incorporating such resources into RSE is important. However, having conversations about power inequalities within educational settings may not be straightforward. These conversations may be met with some backlash or defensiveness about the amount of power held, as was the case at times among the boys in this research (discussed further in our forthcoming paper; Jones, Milnes and Turner-Moore in preparation).

Limitations and future directions

Whilst the intersectional nature of power inequalities was touched on in this study, in some ways, the methods used inhibited the ability to fully explore these intersections. Power may be a particularly abstract concept (Kitzinger 1997); consequently, focusing on a specific power inequality at a time helped to make the focus group discussions more accessible and enabled a thorough consideration of each inequality in relation to sexual consent. Other details in the scenarios were left vague to enable young people to draw on other intersecting power inequalities that they felt were relevant; and this did occur to an extent. For example, the young people spoke about it being more acceptable for younger girls to be in relationships with older boys than vice versa, and boys were positioned as 'in control' of sexual situations and other inequalities compounded this (e.g. age, sexual experience/knowledge, confidence), thus reflecting how power inequalities may intersect in 'real life' (Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut, and Johnson 2018; Collins 2000). Despite this, the methods used may have inhibited the participants' ability to fully contend with the implications of these intersections by oversimplifying the discussions to focus on one power inequality at a time. Therefore, future research may look to engage young people in discussions about how power inequalities may overlap and intersect within sexual relationships, and the implications for sexual consent – perhaps by adapting the methods used in this research. For example, by 'filling in the blanks' in the written scenarios with the possible intersecting power inequalities or using the written scenarios as part of an individual story completion activity (Clarke et al. 2019), before discussing these stories as a group.

Conclusions

The findings in this paper illustrate many power inequalities which the young people considered to be common within young people's sexual relationships, with age, gender and popularity featuring particularly highly within these rankings. Power inequalities were understood by the young people in this study to have important implications for sexual consent. Firstly, power inequalities constrain the roles young people can take up in a sexual relationship, and consequently, sexual consent was constructed as a unidirectional process (which, often a more powerful person would initiate, and a less powerful person would respond to). This negated the possibility for mutual and active negotiation of consent and positioned only certain people as equipped to decide when and if sex happens. In addition, within power unequal sexual relationships, young people understood there to be implicit constraints on their freedom to make choices about sex. Normative assumptions about what sexual relationships should be like, and the possible implications of refusing a more powerful person's sexual advances, impacted on freedom to consent to sexual activity. Thus, whilst choices were limited, this was not

always a result of pressure or force from a partner, which may be more easily recognised as problematic. An explicit consideration of power inequalities and disciplinary forms of power within RSE would help to highlight how young people's choices are constrained by normative assumptions which shape sexual relationships. Further, encouraging partners to explicitly reflect on the ways in which they access power and how this might implicitly affect their partners' freedom to negotiate, would support young people to engage in more ethical and freely negotiated sexual experiences.

Note

1. Wording reflects the participants speech, although it is likely the participant meant '*they've got you* like wrapped around *their* little finger' based on the latter half of the point.

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