



In Love or Just Curious

exploring young women's experience of first sexual intercourse

Concern about the sexual behaviour and health of young people and the rate of teenage pregnancy has given sexual health a high policy profile in recent years. Most of this work around sexual health focuses on physical facts and understandings. Much less explored are the meanings given to sexual behaviour by young people themselves. The study reported here explored what young women say about their first heterosexual intercourse. It seeks to contribute to our understanding of young people's experiences and the impact of broader social factors on sexual health. It also provides opportunities to consider connections between the two policy areas of violence against women and sexual health.

Key Points

- Whether or not first heterosexual intercourse was regretted depended on the subsequent relationship between the woman and her first sexual partner, rather than any particular quality of the experience itself.
- A significant minority of young women reported coming under pressure to have sex for the first time with over half saying they regretted their first experience of heterosexual intercourse.
- A significant minority of young women said their first experience of heterosexual intercourse was either unwanted or expressed ambivalent feelings, with some young women reporting sexual violence.
- Those young women whose relationships worked out following first sex had a positive story to tell whilst those young women whose relationships didn't work following first sex had a negative story to tell.
- Young women whose relationships worked out following first sex all reported that first sex was wanted; that they didn't come under pressure and had no regrets whilst young women whose relationships didn't work out following first sex reported that first sex was either unwanted or expressed ambivalent feelings and all said they regretted first sex.
- For sexual health interventions to be effective, we need to understand the connection that young women make between the physical act of sex and the subsequent course of the relationship.
- Policies on sex education and sexual health needs to take account of the relationship context in which young women view sexual experiences, rather than focusing on disease and unwanted pregnancy.

Policy context

Violence against women and sexual health are policy priorities for both the Westminster government and the Scottish Executive. In Scotland, a number of policy documents have been produced. Preventing Domestic Abuse: A National Strategy (Scottish Executive 2003) outlines a range of actions that local authorities, NHS Boards and others can take to prevent domestic abuse. Enhancing Sexual Wellbeing in Scotland: a Sexual Health and Relationships Strategy (Scottish Executive 2004) similarly outlines action to address sexual ill-health calling for a 'socially-orientated' approach to encourage a more open and positive view of sex and sexual health. Up until the publication of this strategy, sexual health had been framed in largely negative terms with policy efforts focused on the physical outcomes of sexual activity. The strategy acknowledges that previous initiatives which sought to address sexual ill-health have not consistently reflected the influence of the wider determinants of sexual health and the important role of other government departments. The starting point for this study was the wish to inform the development of effective policy and intervention with a greater understanding of how young women experience their first heterosexual intercourse in physical, emotional and social terms, and in particular, to offer greater insight into what young women mean by wanted and unwanted sex.

Study description

The study involved three components – a literature review, qualitative in-depth interviews and an analysis of key policy documents. This briefing concentrates on the findings of the qualitative interviews. In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-five young women accessing sexual health services from Caledonia Youth in Edinburgh. The youngest interviewee was fourteen years; the oldest was twenty-four years with most interviewees aged between sixteen and nineteen years. The sample was taken from a Caledonia Youth population as the study required young women who were sexually active. This makes the sample different from a general population of young women in that they are acknowledged to be sexually active, seeking agency support and were active in arranging their own contraception. As the young women were being asked about their first experience, at first sex, there is less to distinguish the sample from the general population. However, postcode analysis using the Social Needs Indicator Grid (Edinburgh City Council) indicated that the social class of the participants was a typical cross-section of the wider community.

There are a number of themes which emerge from the literature which document how young men and women experience sexual intercourse differently. The tendency is for young women to experience sexual activity as part of how they relate to boys and gain approval and social acceptance, while young men experience it as a form of achievement (Wight 1994, Wight et al 1998, Holland et al 1998). The gender differences are particularly apparent in the way that young men and women discuss sexual activity and the reasons they give for having sex. The most popular reason cited by young men was 'curiosity' while the most popular reason given by young women was 'being in love' (Dickson et al 1998). Boys' conversations

tend to be more explicit and involve physical description, banter and bravado, whereas girls tend to talk more about future relationships and previous partners than current relationships (Holloway 1984, Wellings et al 1994, Forrest 1997). A significant proportion of first sex is unwanted by girls; a higher proportion of men report that their partner was 'equally willing' at first sexual intercourse; and being 'forced' at first sexual intercourse was more common for women especially girls who had sex before the age of 14 years (Wellings et al 1994, Dickson et al 1998, Cheesebrough et al 1999, Wight et al 2000). The questionnaire in this study was designed thematically to explore some of these issues further.

The first stage of the data analysis involved establishing basic trends i.e. number of young women reporting coming under pressure to have sex. The second stage involved exploring connections and identifying patterns i.e. was there a connection between unwanted sex and the relationship ending. Following the second stage analysis, the young women appeared to be dividing into two groups – those whose relationships had worked out following first sex and those whose relationships didn't work out. This led to a comparison of the two groups' responses.

Wanted or unwanted sex

The evidence from the literature suggests that more young women than men report that first sex was unwanted. However, it is not clear, what exactly is meant by unwanted sex. The young women in this study were asked to describe their experience of first sexual intercourse and then asked specifically if they had wanted to have sex. Sixteen out of twenty-five young women said that first sex was wanted; five reported that it was not wanted; and four expressed ambivalent feelings. Those young women who said that first sex was not wanted also expressed disappointment that their expectations had not been met.

'He was so emotional beforehand and then showed no emotion immediately afterwards. I was pretty gutted' (Jane)

The young women who expressed ambivalent feelings i.e. they felt unable to say clearly that first sex was either wanted or unwanted, tended to report that it had happened unexpectedly.

'We were at a works' night out. It was a drunken night. He made the approach' (Marie)

One young woman talked about feeling unable to stop the process.

'It just happened. I felt I couldn't stop halfway through so I decided just to go through with it' (Karen)

For those young women, first sex appeared to be something that had just happened, albeit with their consent, yet they felt unable to say that they had wanted sex thus their feelings can be described as ambivalent.

For the young women who reported that first sex was wanted, the sexual experience was almost always talked about in the context of the relationship.

'It was like a continuation into the next stage of the relationship' (Ginny)

Their comments would seem to support the idea that when discussing first heterosexual intercourse, young women often describe a chronology where sexual intercourse is part of a 'natural progression' in the relationship (Holland et al 2002).

'We waited six months and discussed it. He asked me but I wasn't ready. When I agreed it was the right time' (Sally)

Pressure and coercion

To explore the issues of pressure, coercion and violence further, young women were asked if they had come under pressure to have first sexual intercourse. Eight out of twenty-five reported that they had come under pressure to have first sex.

'I would go to his flat every night and it was the same scenario over and over again' (Susan)

Four young women described being coerced into sexual intercourse.

'He was ignoring me even when I said I wanted to stop' (Linda)

The young women who reported coming under pressure included those who previously said that first sex was unwanted, two of the four who were ambivalent, and one who said that she wanted to have sex because all her friends were doing it.

'Everyone was doing it. I thought if I didn't the boys would slag me off' (Dee)

All eight reported that pressure came from male partners with some young women also citing pressure from friends. Two of the three who cited pressure from friends reported that they were asked to have sex in front of friends. Although not asked directly about violence, two young women reported serious physical violence from partners.

'He punched me for no reason. He bit the side of my head and put a metal ornament across my knee' (Shona)

One young woman disclosed child sexual abuse and another reported that she was being stalked by her ex-boyfriend and that it had been going on for about a year.

'I've never sat down and spoke to anyone like this before. The pressure's there 'cos my heart's racing now just talking about him. What made it worse was my dad turned round to me and said 'I can honestly say that he is one of the nicest guys I've ever seen you with' (Hannah)

Young women reported experiences across the continuum of violence thus supporting existing quantitative research which suggests that a significant number of young women come under pressure at first sex and that a significant proportion of first sex is unwanted.

Regrets

Thirteen out of twenty-five interviewees said that they regretted first sex, with twelve reporting that they had no regrets. The young women who said they regretted first sex included the five who said first sex was unwanted

and the four who were ambivalent. The comments made by the young women who regretted first sex indicated that the regret was more to do with the fact that sex did not get them to where they wanted to be in terms of the relationship.

'I thought I would be going out with him for ages. I was obviously naïve' (Jane)

Three out of thirteen who said they regretted first sex previously said that they had wanted sex. In these cases, regret tended to be retrospective in that they felt they were too young or had succumbed to pressure.

'Thinking about it now, I regret it. I was too young but all my friends were telling me to go ahead' (Sophie)

Thus young women could claim to want first sex but report that they regretted it confirming that the concept of wanted and regretted sex is complex and would seem, in the case of the young women in this study, to be linked to relationship outcomes. Young women may be trading the physical act of sex for an emotional pay-off, viewing sex less as a physical act and more as a means to an end i.e. to establish a loving relationship.

Relationship outcomes

The young women were asked what happened to the relationship following first sexual intercourse. The young women who reported a positive relationship outcome (11) were either still with their first sexual partner or had gone out with them for between one and three years.

'I was lucky compared to other girls I spoke to. I'm still with the same boyfriend' (Sally)

The implication here is that while she has received the emotional pay-off she was looking for in her own relationship, many of her friends have not been so fortunate. None of the young women who reported a positive relationship outcome said that they had come under pressure to have sex. The young women who reported a negative relationship outcome (14) said that they either never saw their first sexual partner again or that the relationship petered out shortly after first sex. These young women indicated that they had not received the relationship pay-off they had been seeking.

'I thought we were going to spend the rest of our lives together' (Jenna)

The young women in this group included the five who reported not wanting first sex and the four who were ambivalent and all previously said they regretted first sex. The eight young women who reported coming under pressure were also in this group.

'I wanted a fairy tale. An experience where it worked but it was a case of lie down spread your legs' (Laura)

The fact that young women may seek an emotional or relationship outcome from sex should not, it is suggested, be minimised. Indeed this knowledge should inform sex and relationship education and sexual health policies.

Conclusion

This study suggests that for girls, the language of sex is the language of relationships supporting existing evidence which indicates that first heterosexual intercourse is often seen as the price of keeping or taking forward a social relationship with a boyfriend (Holland et al 2002). Girls view first sexual intercourse through the relationship lens – and whether it will get them to where they want to be in terms of their relationship. Where the relationship works out, young women have a positive story to tell. Where the relationship doesn't work, first sex is viewed as a negative experience. Further research which explored young men's attitudes to first heterosexual intercourse would be useful. The study also supports existing quantitative evidence which suggests that a significant number of young women come under pressure at first sexual intercourse and that a significant proportion of first sex is unwanted.

There are few links made between policies on sexual health and policies on violence against women, which include sexual coercion. Policy documents on violence against women acknowledge that different forms of violence are linked to broader gender inequality and men's abuse of power (1). Sexual health policy and practice should therefore acknowledge the impact of broader social factors and specifically, the gender differences in young people's attitudes to, and experience of, heterosexual intercourse. It is suggested that young women (and

arguably young men) would benefit from a broader approach to sex education which places high priority on discussing relationship issues i.e. where sex comes in a relationship as opposed to focusing predominantly on the physical risks and outcomes of sexual activity. The key message for policy-makers and practitioners involved in educational interventions with young people is the need to promote relationships based on mutuality and respect.

Implications for policy and practice

- A clear understanding of the 'social conditions' in which young people engage in sexual activity; how heterosexual intercourse is experienced differently by men and women; and the need to make links with gender equality and violence against women policies, should inform the development of sexual health policy and practice.
- Framing young people's sexual health in the context of disease, infection and unintended conception will limit opportunities to effect change and make policy connections.
- Efforts should be made to change the focus from sex education to relationship education and clear messages about the unacceptability of coercion and the promotion of respect and mutuality should be the foundation of all sexual health and relationship work with young people.

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Notes

1. See Preventing Violence Against Women – Action Across the Scottish Executive, Scottish Executive, Edinburgh, October 2001.

Author

Evelyn Gillan is currently studying for a doctorate at the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships. She previously worked for the Royal College of Nursing and Zero Tolerance.

Contact details for CRFR

CRFR The University of Edinburgh, 23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN.

Tel: 0131-651 1832 Fax: 0131-651 1833 E-mail: crfr@ed.ac.uk

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