

Bases, stages and ‘working your way up’: young people’s talk about non-coital practices and ‘normal’ sexual trajectories

Abstract

While the symbolic importance of ‘losing your virginity’ has been described in many settings, meanings of non-coital sexual experiences are often ‘missing’ from theorisation of sexual transitions. Drawing on data from a qualitative mixed methods study with young people aged 16-18 in England (the ‘sixteen18 project’), we explore accounts about which sexual practices are considered typical, and expectations of the order in which different sexual activities first occur.

Our study demonstrates how gendered talk about a ‘normal order’ of non-coital sexual activities ‘leading to’ vaginal intercourse contributes to a heteronormative discourse shaping sexual narratives and experiences long before first vaginal intercourse. Pre-coital sexual experiences were accounted for in terms of providing an opportunity for young men to develop and demonstrate sexual skill, for young women to be prepared for penetration by a penis and to learn to enjoy partnered sexual encounters, and for both sexes to develop intimacy required for vaginal intercourse. Prior to ‘having sex’, young people’s talk about, and experience of, non-coital sexual activities helps circulate ideas about what ‘proper’ sex is, which sexual practices are valued and why, which skills are required and by whom, and whose pleasure is prioritised. If sexual health programmes are to challenge gendered inequalities in dominant assumptions about sex, non-coital sexual activities should be viewed as a legitimate area for discussion.

Keywords

Youth transitions, sexual trajectories, heterosexuality, normative sexuality, sexual behaviour, vaginal intercourse, non-coital, oral sex

Acknowledgements

The ‘sixteen18’ research project was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (RES-062-23-1756).

Introduction: non-coital practices as a ‘missing middle’ in research on young people’s sexual behaviour

In the context of youth transitions, ‘losing your virginity’¹ remains a significant marker in ideas about becoming an adult. For many young men, ‘virginity loss’ is a key moment in both personal and public understandings about the transition to manhood (Richardson, 2010, Wight, 1994, Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Among young women, the anticipation and experience of first sex is also significant in narratives of young femininities (Lees, 1993). However, while the symbolic importance of ‘losing your virginity’ has been described in many settings (Marston and King, 2006, Carpenter, 2005, Holland et al., 2000), we know less about the significance of other sexual activities which may or may not form part of a young person’s sexual trajectory.²

In the health literature on young people’s sexual behaviour, although studies have tended to be preoccupied with vaginal intercourse (particularly *first* intercourse), researchers are increasingly examining a wider range of sexual practices that young people commonly engage in. As part of this, there is growing interest in the age and order in which various practices are initiated, with studies attempting to classify particular sexual trajectories (e.g. de Graaf et al., 2009). We know from survey data that the vast majority of young people have non-coital sexual experiences before vaginal intercourse (Henderson et al., 2002, Schwartz, 1999), yet the meaning of such experiences are something of a ‘missing middle’ in our understanding of sexual transitions. One commonly suggested explanation for non-coital practices preceding first vaginal intercourse is that some young people substitute certain acts (e.g. oral sex or anal intercourse) for coitus as a way of ‘maintaining their virginity’. Yet the evidence, which mainly comes from studies in the US, is equivocal: for example, while anal intercourse sometimes appears to be used as a temporary substitute for vaginal intercourse during menstruation (Hensel et al., 2007), evidence on the timing, spacing and order in which different sexual activities are initiated indicates first anal intercourse rarely precedes first vaginal intercourse, and is not widely practiced as a more long-standing way to ‘maintain virginity’ (Lindberg et al., 2008, Haydon et al., 2012). Others have suggested that young people choose to engage in non-coital sexual activities, such as oral sex, before vaginal intercourse because they see them as less ‘risky’ (Cornell and Halpern-Felsher, 2006), but as little is known about the meanings non-coital sexual practices have for young people it is not clear to what extent this is accurate.

In this paper, we draw on our qualitative investigation of young people’s expectations about ‘normal’ sexual trajectories. We examine young people’s accounts about which sexual practices are considered typical, and their expectations of the order in which different sexual activities first occur and why. By using the word ‘normal’ we do not imply that particular practices, experiences or partnerships are ‘abnormal’. Rather, we explore dominant expectations about non-coital sex – what the young people we spoke to considered to be ‘typical’ or ‘normal’. As we discuss later, there was a strong heterosexual assumption within our sample, with participants assuming that practices would generally occur between men and women.

By focusing on young people’s talk about ‘normal’ sexual development, this paper addresses the theme of this special issue – ordinariness and ‘the missing middle of youth’ – in three senses. First, we examine non-coital experiences, which receive less attention than vaginal intercourse in investigation of sexual transitions. Second, we examine sexual experiences that young people consider ‘ordinary’, rather than specifically focusing on those at ‘the margins’. Commentators have highlighted a tendency in sexualities research to focus on ‘sexual others’, defined in relation to

¹ While ambiguities around terminology such as ‘virginity’, ‘sexually active’ and ‘having sex’ have long been recognised (Sanders and Reinisch, 1999, Miller et al., 1997, Bersamin et al., 2007), in dominant discourse ‘virginity loss’ usually refers to first penis-vagina penetration.

² For a variety of reasons, some people may never have any experience they consider sexual. For more on the ‘sexual assumption’, see Carrigan, 2011.

dominant discourses (Richardson, 2010, Parker, 2009). By examining non-normative sexualities, many studies continue to contribute towards a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of young a/sexualities (Carrigan, 2011, Flowers and Buston, 2001). In this paper, however, our explicit focus is on ideas about ‘majority’ experience – in other words, ‘the middle’. Third, in previous studies exploring dominant sexual discourses, the focus has often been on the gendered dynamics of relationships between men and women, sometimes leaving the actual practices of sex implicit and ambiguous: “sex itself seems to be increasingly absent” (Parker, 2009: 261). While some qualitative studies have explored the meaning of specific non-coital sexual practices for certain groups of young people (Burns et al., 2011, Middelthun, 2002), to our knowledge there are no recent studies directly exploring the meaning and significance of a fuller range of sexual activities that young people identify as typical, and the relationship between such practices. This paper aims to complement a broader discussion about ‘ordinariness’ and youth transitions by contributing qualitative data about a wider range of common sexual practices than usually investigated. These in-depth accounts also allow us to explore some theoretical claims about the nature of contemporary sexual interactions.

Shifting norms? Young people, gender and normative heterosexuality

In the context of considerable social change in intimate relationships in late-modern societies, some theorists and researchers have argued that contemporary sexual life is characterised by greater ‘fluidity’, with more possibilities to live and love outside the restrictions of normative heterosexuality. Roseneil (2000), for example, has highlighted a number of ‘queer tendencies’ characterising the shifting organisation of sexuality, arguing that these are destabilising the hetero/homosexual binary. As a result, some have suggested we might be moving towards a ‘post-gay’ era (Savin-Williams, 2005), where for young people today, perhaps especially young women (Diamond, 2008), sexual identity categories are becoming less relevant than in the past. The extent to which we are seeing a ‘queering of intimate life’, has been questioned, however, with some arguing that, notwithstanding a shift towards liberal discourses of diversity, equality and democracy within personal relationships, sexual identities continue to ‘matter’ (Dinnie and Browne, 2011), and the institution of heterosexuality continues to be taken for granted as the normative form of sexuality in much of everyday life (Jackson and Scott, 2010). That is not to say the boundaries of normative heterosexuality are static, however, and sociologists continue to document and analyse the ways in which these evolving boundaries are regulated through everyday practices and discourse.

With respect to young people, a considerable body of work has explored how heterosexualities are constructed, prioritised, reworked and resisted in different settings, including families (Hockey et al., 2007), peer groups (Wight, 1994), and schools (Kehily and Nayak, 1997, Epstein et al., 2003). The relationship between heterosexualities and gender hierarchies has been key to these analyses, with identities conceptualised as fluid, contested and formed through discourse. In one influential study based on interviews with young men and women in the late eighties and early nineties, Janet Holland and colleagues (1998) developed the concept of the ‘male-in-the-head’ to explain the marked gender inequalities in young people’s accounts of their sexual interactions and relationships. They highlight the asymmetry of heterosexuality in prioritising men’s pleasure and desires, arguing that young women also contribute to the construction of ‘heterosexuality-as-masculinity’, through shared definitions of penetrative intercourse as ‘proper sex’, and the regulation of normative femininity. Twenty years on, the concept of the ‘male-in-the-head’ continues to inform sociological analyses of sexual encounters between young men and women, even as “the social and cultural context in which young people construct their adulthood and sexuality is perceived as changing” (Holland and Thomson, 2010: 346). Commenting on shifts in the social landscape since their original fieldwork, Holland and Thomson (2010) highlight increasing anxieties around the sexualisation of culture, and moral panic surrounding sexualised hyper-feminine identities. In the context of contemporary expectations for young women to perform as agentic sexual subjects, Renold and Ringrose (2011) use the concept of ‘schizoid subjectivities’ to describe how girls negotiate ‘multiple pushes and pulls’ between, for example, victim and empowerment or sexual innocence and excess knowing. In their analysis, girls’ sexual transitions are conceptualised as ‘multiple, liminal, reversible, rather than one

progressive state to another' (2011: 392). In this paper, we ask how might young people's accounts of non-coital sex contribute to our understanding of discourses surrounding contemporary sexual transitions? And what are the social norms shaping ideas about sexual practice for teenagers growing up today?

The sixteen18 project

We conducted a qualitative mixed methods study (the "sixteen18" project) to explore the range, sequence and meaning of sexual practices among a diverse sample of 130 young people aged 16-18. The study was approved by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine ethics committee and we obtained written consent from all participants. Fieldwork began in 2010 in three socially and geographically contrasting sites in England: (1) London, (2) a medium-sized northern, industrial city and (3) a rural area in the south west.

To get a sense of how different sexual practices were discussed socially, we conducted nine group discussions, with three groups of six to nine participants in each of three sites: one all-men, one all-women and one mixed-sex (Table 1). For the first groups in London, we recruited friendship pairs to try to increase participants' willingness to contribute to discussion. Some pairs seemed understandably reluctant to discuss their thoughts on sexual practices with other unknown pairs, and so in the other fieldsites we recruited friendship groups. The discussions lasted between 60-90 minutes, and were conducted in a variety of settings, including a university teaching room (n=3), a school classroom (n=3), a private room in a cafe (n=1) and a private room near a health centre (n=2). We asked young people to list all the sexual practices they had heard of, and then discuss which they thought were typical for 16-18 year-olds, when they would expect them to occur and with whom. These discussions were valuable in giving us a sense of norms around initial sexual experiences, which we could then explore in individual interviews where, away from the peer group setting, we could see how participants articulated, reworked or resisted these norms in narrating their own, predictably more diverse, experiences.

Table 1 Number of participants in the study by data collection method and fieldwork site

	Women			Total women	Men			Total men	Total participants
	London	Northern city	Rural southwest		London	Northern city	Rural southwest		
All-men group interviews	-	-	-	-	8	7	9	24	24
All-women group interviews	6	7	8	21	-	-	-	-	21
Mixed-sex group interviews	5	4	4	13	4	3	3	10	23
Total group interviews				34				34	68
Depth interviews	11	13	13	37	12	10	12	34	71
Follow up depth interviews	7	9	10	26	4	5	8	17	43

NB 9 young people participated in group and individual interviews and so are counted more than once. Total unique participants in the study = 130.

Next, we conducted 71 face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 16-18 year olds (34 young men and 37 young women), with follow-up interviews one year later (n=43) (Table 1). Because our aim was to include young people from different social backgrounds, we recruited participants from a range of settings, including: schools/colleges (n=23), youth work services targeting young people not in education or training (n=9), youth organisations (n=8), a supported housing project for young people

living independently from their families (n=4) and informal networks (n=3). We also used snowball sampling (n=17) and, in the rural south west, we approached people directly in a town centre (n=7).

We did not sample for particular types of sexual experience (e.g. number and sex of partners etc). Instead we highlighted in our information leaflet and our conversations with potential interviewees that we were keen to speak to any young person, whatever their experiences. Although participants varied in terms of the range of activities they had experienced, and the number and nature of their sexual partnerships (e.g. 'long-term relationships', 'one-offs', 'fuck buddies' etc), the majority reported opposite-sex partners only. The majority of our interviewees were living with their parent/s (n=65), one with other family, and five were living independently. Most were primarily studying full or part-time (n=60), with two working, one in an apprenticeship and eight unemployed or looking for work.

In the first interviews, we explored participants' sexual experiences, including the sequence, timing, relationship, and situational context of events; perceptions of friends' and peers' sexual activity; and future sexual and relationship aspirations. The challenges of finding acceptable language to discuss sexual behaviour within a research encounter are well known, with debate about the use of common vernacular or technical terms (e.g. 'blow job' vs 'fellatio') (Eyre, 1997). In this study, as in others (e.g. Holland et al., 1998), participants' used 'sex' to refer to vaginal intercourse. However, many said it was 'awkward' or 'difficult' finding terms to talk about non-coital practices. Where possible, we waited for interviewees to introduce their own terms for practices, and asked them to define what they meant. We also took particular care not to assume the sex of any partner before the interviewee had identified them as a man or woman. However, the assumption among participants was that sexual experiences were between opposite-sex partners, unless otherwise stated. In the second interviews we asked participants whether they had ever had a same-sex experience, and how common they thought this was among people their age. Individual interviews lasted 50-90 minutes.

Our approach to data collection and analysis was informed by grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). We audio-recorded and transcribed interviews verbatim, and entered transcripts and field-notes into NVivo software to support data analysis. We 'open-coded' transcripts from the first interviews to identify key themes, concepts and processes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), then discussed initial themes, choosing some for further exploration in the second interviews. As well as exploring emerging themes in more depth, the second interviews aimed to explore continuity and change in young people's lives, both generally (e.g. family, friends, and education etc), and in terms of their sexual experiences and attitudes. The topic guide for the second interviews was tailored to individual participants so we could also follow up themes particular to them. We used 'memos' to develop our analysis, making constant comparisons between individuals' experiences and identifying 'deviant cases' to challenge interpretations.

Normative expectations of initial sexual experiences

Expectations of a 'normal order'

The young people we spoke to routinely identified five genital sexual practices as typical among their age group: (vaginal) fingering, 'hand jobs', 'blow jobs', 'licking out' and 'sex' (vaginal intercourse)³. Both young men and women expected these sexual practices to be experienced incrementally in a series of 'bases', 'stages' or 'steps', with non-coital practices often described as 'building', 'working' or 'leading' up to vaginal intercourse, which was widely constructed as the most significant practice:

³ Two further practices were often mentioned as an extension of the typical range of acts: anal intercourse and simultaneous mutual genital-oral contact ("69er"). Generally, however, these were only expected to occur within 'longer-term' boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, and only after a couple had already had vaginal intercourse.

I generally assume that people sort of [...] they will sort of go, kind of build up, going, mainly you know, do things with their hands, then maybe develop into things with their mouths but because, you know, vaginal sex is sort of the kind of most intimate thing, that is usually something I would expect people to leave till last.

(Sarah, woman, London)

Participants appeared to perceive a 'normal order' to sexual development, in which hand-genital practices would be experienced before oral-genital practices, which in turn would be experienced before 'losing your virginity'. This order was described as rigid: "*I think the order is actually set though isn't it?*" (woman, mixed-sex discussion group, London), and: "*I just kinda think it's an order which has just been around since, because sex is kind of like seen to be the biggest thing, and it is really*" (Flora, woman, south west). Within talk about this order being 'set' or 'fixed', some young women described an expectation from male partners that once a practice had been experienced once, it would be done again; for example, this young woman (who had not yet had vaginal intercourse) described being pressured by a boyfriend to give him a 'blow job' after he found out that she had done this with another man previously:

So yeah, I did a blow job twice but the second one was because I told the guy I had done [...] The second one, the guy was out to move on, I've done it before so do it again, do it to me and then I just felt obliged to do it then, you know, just to please him and stuff.

(Iyawa, woman, London)

This sense of obligation to do a sexual act because it has been done before, which was also present in other women's accounts, illustrates the common characterisation among our interviewees of sexual development as progressive and irreversible.

Although young people rarely reported discussing non-coital practices in school sex education, they often referred to this expected pattern of sexual activities as something they had learned or been taught. As in other studies (Richardson, 2010, Wight, 1994), we found peer groups were a key site for (re)production and regulation of normative sexualities, with the idea that there was a normal or 'correct' – and in turn an 'incorrect' – way to move through different sexual activities, produced between sexual partners and friends through discussion about 'how far you've gone'. As seen in Pippa's extract below, this meant that the ordering of sexual experiences formed one more component of young people's policing of 'appropriate' sexualities:

The first time you actually do it ever, like there's always steps. Like you wouldn't just jump straight in to sex and not do anything else. Like we'd hear about people that did and we'd be like, 'what, they just like had sex and not done anything else?' So like there was the order, like first do oral sex, then sex.

(Pippa, woman, rural south west)

In line with expectations that non-coital practices would precede 'having sex', most of our depth interviewees had experienced some form of partnered genital contact before first vaginal intercourse. However, a significant minority of our sample reported 'losing their virginity' during their first partnered experience. Most of these encounters were described as occurring when they were between 12 and 15 years old, and being pressurised or unwanted, unexpected, unprotected, and often with sexual partners with whom the participant was not in a relationship. In accounts of 'having sex' before non-coital practices, young people stressed that their experience was atypical, referring to the so-called 'normal order' as their benchmark. For example, one young man recalled his first sexual experience at a party aged 13 with an older girl: "*It was horrible [...] for some reason it all escalated*

in one night and I lost my virginity the first time I snogged. Mm, it was not very nice, no, not a good experience for me no, didn't know the hell what I was doing, I was scared shitless basically" (Gav, rural south west). Although Gav noted it meant he had got 'it over and done with', he described his experiences as 'completely different' from other young men:

Most guys round here, as, as I said, it was more, it was more of a procedure, more of a step-by-step, you start off here, then you do that, then you get to this level, then you get sex. If you know what I mean? [Would you have wanted it to be like that for you?] It would probably been better. [Why?] Because it's more of a, it's not chucking you in the deep end, it's more paddling towards, learning actually how to swim. I was just being, chunked in and then left to drown for a couple of years.

While young women's regret about the timing and circumstances of first sex was discussed by both sexes in group and individual interviews, the possibility that young men might feel they had sex 'too soon' was only discussed in the individual interviews, suggesting that for men, a dominant discourse of eagerness to have sex constrains the ways in which non-normative sexual trajectories can be articulated.

Same-sex experiences

Many young people said it was relatively commonplace for girls to kiss each other, and several of the young women reported having done so, although this was often qualified as being 'for dares' in front of friends when drunk, suggesting that it was sometimes not seen as a 'real' sexual experience. A small minority reported same-sex genital contact, although again some questioned whether this 'counted' as a 'proper experience'. For example, Alicia (London), who was with the same boyfriend in both her interviews, talked about her first sexual experience, which involved 'hands down knickers' and both giving and receiving oral sex with a woman. Although Alicia told friends she had 'had sex' with a girl, she described feeling unclear whether the experience 'counted' as losing her virginity: *"that's what we were talking about when we were drunk. We were saying does it count? Like afterwards when we were like 'what?' Um, but I don't know. I don't know what I'd count it as, to be honest. I'd say it's all blurred. [...] But I still felt like a virgin."* This reflection highlights the inadequacy of heteronormative constructions of sex and virginity loss (i.e. penis-vagina penetration) for making sense of same-sex experience.

Whereas a woman having had a same-sex experience did not seem to make her 'lesbian', for young men, there was little sense of any separation of experience from identity. For instance, while many of our interviewees talked about isolated incidents of boys 'coming out' to their friends or at school, young men were not expected to experience any same-sex sexual contact unless they were 'gay' (indeed, only one young man in our sample reported any same-sex sexual contact, and he identified as gay). This distinction was reflected in Shane's second interview:

Um with girls, I've noticed it [same-sex experience] is actually very common these days. I don't know why. It's just kind of, I don't know, it's become really common. I've really noticed that. Like with boys it's, obviously you're gay or you're not. But with girls they just don't seem to know and er, during teenage years, I've noticed a lot of teenage girls, I reckon they're just, they, they don't even seem to know themselves, but. Oh it's mad [...] I mean a lot of girls tend to do it and then just, you know, just kind of, it was nice but I'm like straight again, but I dunno, a lot of teenage girls I know are just, they just like to try. It is just this thing, it's very common yeah, that they're doing that.

(Shane, man, London)

Shane contrasts the perceived hetero/homo binary for young men ('you're gay or you're not'), with the broader possibilities for young women to 'try', and explains this difference in negative terms - by constructing young women as not 'knowing themselves'.

Among our interviewees, then, non-coital experiences were largely imagined in terms of heterosexual norms, with ideas about the appropriate ordering of different sexual activities rigidly constructed and policed through discourse. Although young people's actual sexual experiences were more diverse than those they considered 'normal', the script of normative sexual development shaped the way in which they narrated their own experiences. In the next section we examine how young people's talk about the role of non-coital practices in sexual development reveal clear gender differences in the significance of those practices for young men and women.

Why are non-coital practices expected to precede 'virginity loss'?

When reflecting on the 'normal order' of sexual 'firsts', individuals often stressed that their personal experiences had not been planned: "*you know what they say, like one thing leads to another? It just kinda happens*" (Helen, woman, rural south west). Yet, as described above, our interviewees' accounts revealed a clear expectation of 'normal' sexual development, with certain practices experienced step-by-step in preparation for 'having sex'. Young people explained why they expected non-coital practices to precede 'losing their virginity', by calling on ideas that non-coital practices help develop and demonstrate sexual skill, prepare girls for vaginal intercourse, enable learning about partnered sexual pleasure, and are part of developing intimacy in a relationship.

Developing and demonstrating sexual skill

Many young people, particularly men, talked about 'getting used to' or 'practising' preliminary activities before 'moving on' to sex. Engaging in non-coital practices provided an opportunity to achieve familiarity with particular activities, and to develop skills required to be a proficient sexual partner. Such accounts were generally characterised by a sense of building a portfolio of sexual skills that could be applied with any partner, rather than being grounded within a specific relationship, and were more common among those who had experienced different sexual 'firsts' (e.g. first 'handjob', first 'blowjob' etc.) with different people, rather than within one longer-term girlfriend/boyfriend relationship.

For young men, non-coital sex was a chance to gain 'first hand' (i.e. not through watching pornography) experience of opposite-sex genitalia. Many men described vulvas/vaginas as 'disgusting' or 'dirty', and yet still wished to encounter them. This participant, for instance, had already been 'tossed off' and 'sucked off' on previous occasions by different girls:

I hadn't fingered anyone before and I'd always wanted to. I'd rather finger someone than have anything done to me at the time cos I wanted to, I'd never experienced a girl's like, um, like area or anything like that so I really wanted to know what it was like and feel it.

(Matt, man, rural south west)

Another young man, who had experienced different sexual practices with a relatively large number of women, reflected on his first sexual experience, which was with a girlfriend when he was 13 years-old:

...basically I fingered her like not, well technically I didn't really finger her because I don't really like doing that because it's not really what you should do. You shouldn't really just put a finger in a girl, but like... [Why do you say that?] You can't do it straight away like in some aggressive way. You can't just like force your fingers in and just go up and down – it's not like that. Unless you, obviously it is, and eventually it will end up being like that if it just goes a bit more intense, yeah, but you start off by like, I don't know, like rubbing and caressing and that and then just if you can see she's liking it, then just put a finger in or

something like that, yeah. [So that was the first thing that you did?] Yeah, that's the first thing that I did. That basically opened my eyes and actually just made me like, I don't know, just like made me a bit... it put me up a level basically.

(Rabi, man, London)

In this extract, this young man describes an etiquette in which digital penetration is 'aggressive' if sudden, and must be negotiated following 'rubbing and caressing'. For Rabi, this initial non-coital experience appeared to be significant both in terms of developing his 'technique', and becoming competent in judging his partner's pleasure (although it is unclear how he ascertains that 'she's liking it').

Non-coital practices were also described as a way in which young men could demonstrate their 'skill', as well as developing it, to encourage women to have intercourse with them. For example, when asked whether certain 'common' practices were more enjoyable than others, the following exchange occurred in a mixed-sex discussion group:

Woman 1: They all give you different feelings but for me I think it's sex really.

Woman 2: Yes, sex.

Woman 1: All of that [fingering and oral sex] to me is building up to that [sex].

Woman 3: [directed at the men in the group] If you do a good job here, you get that [sex]. You do shit there, you don't get that. You stay there [i.e. not having had sex]

(Extract from mixed-sex discussion group, London)

This extract might be read as an illustration of the competing discourses young women navigate in their sexual 'becomings' (Renold and Ringrose, 2011): despite the final statement assertively positioning women as 'in control', the notion that men demonstrate sexual skill ('do a good job') in order to 'advance' to the pinnacle of sexual relations (vaginal intercourse) echoes conventional discourses about men as sexual initiators, and of women resisting vaginal intercourse (Simon and Gagnon, 1984).

'Preparing' girls for vaginal intercourse

In line with the conventional discourse of men always being ready for sex, our interviewees did not talk about the need for boys' bodies to be prepared for having intercourse. By contrast, accounts of 'fingering' revealed a clear assumption that vaginas need to be physically 'prepared' for penetration by a penis:

Woman 1: You have to get fingered before you have sex you know.

Woman 2: Loosen.

Man 1: Practice.

Int: So that has to happen does it?

Woman 1: It doesn't have to but it helps.

Woman 3: It's an aid.

Man 2: It can happen like days before.

Woman 1: Nah I don't mean like a minute before. I mean like before you think about having sex like.

Woman 2: That's the first step, yes.

(Extract from mixed-sex discussion group, London)

The most common explanation for the need for fingering was to reduce pain for the woman when it came to penetration by a penis, as illustrated by this account from a young man:

...and then after about five months of going out, we decided to have sex. And yeah, and we, it really hurt her at, like, quite hurt her a lot. Like we'd been trying like, it sounds quite crude, but like I'd started using more fingers - instead of one, I'd use two, just so it wouldn't hurt her as much when we had sex, cos she was really worried about it. [So had you talked about that?] Yeah, we had. Like cos we'd started speaking about like, oh, do you? I feel like I do wanna lose my virginity to you and stuff. And then she told me that she was really worried that it would hurt and she doesn't want, want it to. So I was like, well, look, we can do this to make it a lot, which will probably make it easier if she does it, yeah, it's a really good idea. So we started like, I started doing it more to her and using more, more fingers. And then, and then we did it [had vaginal intercourse].

(Dan, man, rural south west)

As seen in these extracts, rather than being conceived as a worthwhile practice in itself, fingering often appeared to be considered instrumental in achieving comfortable intercourse for girls through 'stretching' the vagina. This notion of the need to 'loosen' vaginas conflicts with popular discourse among young people, and others, about the desirability of vaginal tightness. As also noted elsewhere (Braun and Kitzinger, 2001), the interplay of these two contrasting discourses constructs vaginal size as irreconcilably problematic. As well as reducing pain for women, some young men said they themselves might experience pain or even physical injury if their partner had not been properly 'prepared' for sex through fingering. For example, when a young man revealed in an all-male discussion group (northern city) that he had had vaginal intercourse before ever having fingered someone, the other men appeared surprised, asking him whether she was 'wet enough', while another warned: "That might've hurt that, you know, you might've snapped yer banjo [frenulum]."

Fingering was also described as necessary before *any* intercourse – not just first intercourse – to 'help' women 'get in the mood':

Woman 1: Like you don't have sex first and then get fingered.

Woman 2: What's the point?

Int: Why not?

Woman 2: Cos what's the point? How would you get in the mood? There's no touching, there's no foreplay, there's no building up. You're just going to put your willy in me and then go and then try finger me afterwards? I don't think so!

Woman 3: [...] you've got to be like moist for it to be like put in you because otherwise it's going to fucking kill ya.

Woman 2: And that's the reason why you get fingered first.

(Extract from mixed-sex discussion group, London)

Although the notion that fingering might be enjoyable for girls was implicit in talk about it getting girls 'wet' and 'in the mood', and although some men distinguished between clitoral stimulation

(‘clit-rubbing’) and digital penetration, this was nevertheless *pleasure with a purpose*: to make girls want to have intercourse, and to generate lubrication for this to be comfortable. Very few participants talked about fingering as being pleasurable in and of itself, and only a few of the more sexually experienced young women said they found being fingered more pleasurable than having intercourse. Rather, as in the extract above, fingering was often constructed as ‘a means to an end’, with some young men questioning why they would do it if it were not going to lead to vaginal intercourse:

It [fingering] is rubbish man. What do I get from that man, just that my finger starts aching, that is about it man. [Why do you do it then?] Because mostly when a guy is hard the girls get on it, do you know what I am saying, like it makes them wanna screw you. So that is the only time I really do it then, if it is going to lead to something. If it is not going to lead to nothing, I am not going to do it then.

(Thomas, man, London)

Learning to experience partnered sexual pleasure

Another explanation for experiencing non-coital practices before ‘losing your virginity’ was that it takes time for girls to learn to experience sexual pleasure, which in our interviewees’ talk often appeared to be synonymous with orgasm. Gendered expectations and assumptions about masturbation and orgasm seemed to be central here. Although ejaculation was regularly described as the ‘obvious’ outcome of penile stimulation for men, orgasm was described as less straightforward for women, and thus less certain to occur. In addition, while boys’ first sexual experience was widely expected to be solo masturbation, rather than any partnered sexual activity, masturbation by girls was seen as less universal: “*I mean all boys toss themselves off but not all girls finger themselves*” (man, mixed-sex discussion group, London); and “*boys get more practice in wanking*” (Katie, woman, northern city).

This widely-perceived gender disparity in the practice of masturbation was used to explain boys’ eagerness to have intercourse and girls’ reluctance to be penetrated, either digitally or by a penis:

I think a boy like really looks forward to it, like, ‘oh, I can’t wait to have sex first time’. Whereas a girl thinks more like, ‘oh, I’ll do it when I’m in a relationship’, cos they don’t actually know what it feels like. I reckon if they knew what it felt like they’d want to because obviously it would feel nice so if they played with themselves. [So is that, oh, so you’re saying that like cos guys wank quite a lot when they’re younger-] Yeah, yeah. [That, they kind of have more of a-] Yeah, they have an urge to do it because they know it’s nice kind of thing whereas girls are unknown to it.

(Matt, man, rural south west)

The idea that sexual pleasure is unanticipated by girls until they are with a man provides the counterpoint to the conventional construction of male sexual activity as unproblematically and inherently pleasurable. While boys were expected both to envisage and experience pleasure from intercourse given any opportunity, girls were expected to need longer to learn to experience sexual pleasure (i.e. orgasm) in the absence of masturbation (which was perceived as rare). Young women were therefore thought to require non-coital practices to help them get used to partnered sexual experiences before ‘losing their virginity’. Although talk about young women enjoying non-coital and solo sex potentially opens up possibilities for de-stabilising penetrative intercourse as the ultimate goal of heterosex, accounts of women needing time –and the help of a male partner – to learn how to enjoy sex work to reproduce a gender hierarchy in which women are constructed as sexually deficient compared with men.

Developing intimacy in a relationship

In many accounts, the incremental progression from non-coital sex to first vaginal intercourse was linked to the gradual evolution of trust and comfort within a specific relationship. These accounts were usually given by individuals who had experienced many – and sometimes all – of their sexual

'firsts' with a particular partner. While the expectation of romance and intimacy at first intercourse is widely documented among young women (Holland et al, 1998, Jamieson, 1998), and borne out in many of our interviews with women in this study, conventional gender stereotypes construct young men as eager to have sex, regardless of the nature of their relationship with the available partner. Diversity in young men's expectations of sexual intimacy, however, is well-described (Wight, 1996, Richardson, 2010), as are the ways in which dominant ideas about masculinity limit how men can publicly express their hopes and anxieties about sex (Holland et al, 1998, Richardson, 2010). In this study, some young men did talk about the significance of non-coital sex in developing emotionally intimate and trusting relationships:

I think in most relationships it starts with like a kiss and a cuddle, and then it ends up being hands and then it ends up being oral and then ends up working its way up to, because that's what you basically hear of [...] Yeah, it's like, as if you gradually build up your trust with that person you know. It's letting yourself go and letting yourself feel comfortable with that person enough to trust them to do that with, do that stuff with. Well for me it is anyway. I wouldn't ever sleep with anyone that I didn't trust or I didn't feel emotionally attached to or you know.

(Max, man, northern city)

In these accounts, vaginal intercourse was constructed as something that should occur within an emotionally close, trusting relationship. Non-coital practices were seen as one element in gradually achieving this type of intimacy, and a necessary part of getting to know each other, and becoming comfortable with each other's bodies. Describing the progression between different non-coital practices in his relationship, one young man said he and his girlfriend discussed whether they were 'ready' to move on to each new 'step'. Reflecting on their first experience of oral sex he commented:

Yeah, it was enjoyable. I think it was, kinda, as, as you, like you, with each time you kinda progress the relationship, I think, um, if you go through that like progression together, it's, it involves a lot of kinda trust and stuff. So it feels nice, you know, putting trust in that person, and, you know, you having it back, like that kind of trust.

(Owen, man, rural south west)

As in the extracts above, much of the talk about needing non-coital activities to achieve emotional intimacy appeared in the context of narratives about first intercourse, rather than subsequent sexual encounters and partnerships. Once a young person had 'lost their virginity', the expected order in which they would experience practices with a new partner relaxed somewhat; while some felt they might continue to go through the same order, others said it was plausible to 'skip' certain practices and go 'straight to sex':

... like that kind of idea that like you would, you'd get off with them say and then like perhaps after a week or so the next thing, you wouldn't just have sex you'd do the toss off or you'd finger and blowjob and then lick out kind of stages and then you'd have sex. But I think as you get older those stages don't necessarily matter if everyone's experienced them, if you know what I mean. Like I reckon you could just meet someone and have sex with them.

(Matt, man, rural south west)

The idea that first intercourse needs to be preceded by a gradual 'build-up' of non-coital practices relates to what Hockey et al (2007: 14) call the 'hierarchisation of special moments' in the production of heterosexualities. As also reported elsewhere (Carpenter, 2005, Lees, 1993), many young men and women in this study discussed the need for first intercourse to be 'special', and engaging in non-coital practices was part of the process of developing the required trust, comfort, and mutual intimate

knowledge to create a sense of 'specialness'. For some young people, then, non-coital practices are a key part of first sex 'meaning something' in a relationship, as opposed to subsequent and/or more casual encounters which might only involve vaginal intercourse: "*if I was at a party, I'd just stick it in really*" (Daryl, man, northern city).

Discussion

These accounts help us understand the significance of non-coital sexual activities, which are often missing from theorisation of young people's sexual transitions. Our interviewees' talk about sexual development revealed a normative expectation of non-coital sexual experience before 'virginity loss'. The wide acceptance of this 'normality' is clear: not only did most young people's actual experiences conform to this norm, but where they did not, they described their experiences as diverging from the 'expected' pattern. Ideas about what non-coital sex is 'for' varied among our interviewees, especially by gender and by the types of sexual relationships they had experienced. An over-arching commonality, however, was that non-coital sexual activities preceding first vaginal intercourse were rarely described as valuable in themselves: they were usually framed in terms of preparation for first 'sex', suggesting that 'normal' sexual development is still predominantly viewed as leading to this 'inevitable' event.

In this paper, we have shown how ideas about a 'normal order' to pre-coital sexual experience operate as a heteronormative discourse shaping sexual narratives and experiences long before first vaginal intercourse. Although there was some evidence of the normalisation of same-sex kissing among young women, genital contact was imagined in terms of relatively rigid heterosexual norms, with limited 'fluidity' across the hetero/homo binary. Of course it is likely that some of our interviewees will go on to have same-sex experiences and relationships. It may be, however, that the 'heterosexual assumption', and attendant expectations about different sexual practices, apply more rigidly to experiences before 'virginity loss' than after. Prior to 'having sex' young people's talk about, and experience of, non-coital sexual activities helps circulate ideas about what 'proper' sex is, which sexual practices are valued and why, which skills are required and by whom, and whose pleasure is prioritised. Gendered expectations specifically relating to 'virginity loss' are played out in prior non-coital sexual experiences; for example, the expectation that first vaginal intercourse will be physically painful for young women features in explanations of the 'need' to stretch vaginas in preparation. The restrictive effects of normative heterosexuality may affect young men as well as young women, by limiting men's opportunities for talk about non-normative experiences, and by reinforcing familiar (and constraining) discourses of male sexuality in terms of performance and technique (Holland et al, 1998, Richardson, 2010).

If sexual health programmes are to challenge gendered inequalities in dominant assumptions about sex successfully, non-coital sexual activities need to be viewed as a legitimate area for discussion. Such discussion rarely features in curricula, reflecting the way sexual health is often narrowly construed in terms of avoiding unplanned pregnancy, STIs, and non-consensual vaginal intercourse, with less attention paid to the quality of sexual relationships and experiences. The emphasis on vaginal penetration in sex education may also reinforce the "reproductive and hence heterosexual priority of sexual activity" by ignoring the many alternative ways of giving and receiving sexual pleasure (Ingham, 2005: 382). Young people's own understandings of the broader range of sexual practices, and the meanings they have for them, may be a valuable starting point for discussion to challenge some of these assumptions. For example, discussing 'bases and stages' could help trigger critical examination of the notion that young people should 'go as far as they have gone before', that practices should occur in a set order, that they should culminate in vaginal intercourse, or that they should occur at all. In this way we can begin to challenge assumptions about 'normal' sexual trajectories that serve young men and women unequally in achieving sexual pleasure and well being.

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