



# Neutralising and Normalising Sexual Violence in Adolescence: Exploring the experiences of adolescent girls in England

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# Context

- Adolescence is both hyper-gendered and hyper-sexualised (Phipps *et al.*, 2017; Hunnicutt, 2009), yet adolescents' often cannot see or feel that this is the case (Taefi, 2009)
  - Increased levels of sexual coercion in adolescence (Gadd *et al.*, 2013)
  - 41% girls and 14% boys surveyed in England experienced sexual violence or coercion (Barter *et al.*, 2015)
- Victims of sexual assault often call upon rape myths (Burt, 1980) and gender stereotypes to neutralise (Sykes and Matza, 1957) and normalise (Weiss, 2009) their experiences of sexual violence and the shame (Goffman, 1967) attached to this
- Denials: a victim's avoidance of specific labels, realities and their subsequent consequences, specifically by utilisation of accounts (Weiss, 2009; 2011)
  - denies criminal intent;
  - denies serious injury occurred;
  - denies victim innocence;
  - rejects victim identity.

# Methodology

- Intersectional feminist exploration of adolescent intimate partner violence
- Free association narrative interviews (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000)
- Critical discourse analysis to unearth un/conscious attempts to neutralise and/or normalise their experiences

# Sample Profile

## Sexuality

- Heterosexual [N=14]
- Bisexual [N=2]
- Lesbian [N=1]

## Ethnicity and Nationality

- Arab British [N=1]
- White British [N=16]

## Disability

- Mental health [N=7]
- Physical impairments [N=2]
- Learning difficulties [N=1]
- Neurological conditions [N=1]

## Religion

- Catholic [N=4]
- Church of England [N=1]
- Christian [N=1]
- Muslim [N=2]
- Buddhist [N=1]
- None [N=7]

11 were mothers

10 had experienced  
familial Domestic  
Abuse

15 years average  
age of sexual onset

# Participants' experiences of sexual violence and coercion

- 24% [N=4] narrated non-consensual first sexual experiences
  - “When I was 15, erm, I was raped” Molly
- 41% [N=7] experienced sexual violence outside of intimate relationships, including child sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and acquaintance rapes
  - Poly-victimisation (Finkelhor, Ormond, and Turner, 2007)
- 94% [N=16] narrated experiences of sexual violence and coercion within their adolescent intimate relationships
  - 88% [N=15] answered no when asked structured questions about sexual violence and coercion

# Denies criminal intent

## 'Boys will be boys'

- “Ricky always used to say he had high testosterone levels so he demanded sex all the time.” (Milly-May)
- “... because he'd come in and seen me in the bath then he wanted to be doing things I didn't want to and I didn't think it was appropriate anyway” Rachel

## Beyond their control due to intoxication:

- “When he was on coke we'd have to do it 4 times a day minimum, sometimes I'd wake up and he'd be on top of me but he'd be like I'm nearly done just wait a minute and it's like [pause] not great really” Caitlin

# Denies criminal intent [continued]

## It's not his fault:

- “But, I don’t know, it’s like, something had come over him, I [sigh], I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s from the stuff he has gone through ... his mum walked out on him were one ... and then, when he were like, 14, he found someone hanging in a woods, so. [K: Mmm] It must screw someone up.” Milly-May

## It's not like him:

- “I absolutely adored the guy he did everything for me and looked after me ... And we were drinking one night, and me and him were sharing a drink and I thought the drink tasted funny I thought I’m being paranoid ... erm [4 seconds] woke up the next morning throwing up on the sofa ...and it was like a bad dream.” Emily

## Prompts sympathy rather than desire to report them:

- “He cried [afterwards] and I didn’t know what to do so I thought I’m guna have ta try and be strong for you now ... so I thought well he doesn’t see it as wrong so fair enough” Emily

# Denies serious injury occurred

## Attempts to minimise their experience:

- “waking up to oral sex. And god forbid I felt intruded upon or ... it’s a sexual fantasy!” Jane
- “At his flat. Erm. I just, I said I didn’t want that, you know, sex, but he still insisted on you know having it. So we did anyway. Umm.” Sam

## Comparisons with ‘*real* rape’:

- “We had sex virtually every day of the 4 years we were together ... [Neil] never forced himself. But always the rule that you can’t say no ... on a couple of occasions refusing to stop ... it never got to that assault rape type thing.” Natalie

# Denies serious injury occurred [cont.]

## Attempts to justify it as normal:

- “I really wanted to say do you know what I’m just so not comfortable with that but part of me was like if she’s done this with other girls then a) it’s fine it’s normal ... if I didn’t do it then what would she like think of me?” Lilly
- “But sometimes though isn’t it like that in a relationship if one of you wants it and the other one’s like no I’m tired or whatever I’m not in the mood?” Skye

## ‘Spousal duty’

- “I believed, my self-beliefs and beliefs about the world were, women should have sex with their partners. I used to just kind of lie there, cos I felt like it was due” Ishara
- “I was tired and I didn’t want to ... he said ‘you’re my girlfriend I’ve got rights’ so I did it ... but it weren’t vicious, it was, it wasn’t violent” Milly-May

# Denies victim innocence

Victim-blaming – she provoked him, took risks and/or did not effectively resist

## Provoked the sexual violence:

- “...it weren’t very often that I went out with friends, but when I did, that was always a time when I knew, I had to have sex when I came back” Jane
- “I spilt my drink on him, you know, by accident ... well he didn’t take no for an answer ...” Milly-May

## Accepts responsibility:

- “Sounds funny really but I felt left out. I felt like I wanted the attention, d’ya know what I mean [K: Mm] erm, I didn’t I I didn’t really want to be with him like that but I just wanted the attention” Molly
- “Jimmy’s a lovely guy at heart, I just bring out the worst in him, we’re not right together” Emily
- “But it’s my fault, I stayed with him.” Caitlin

# Denies victim innocence [cont.]

Victim-blaming – she provoked him, took risks and/or did not effectively resist

## Didn't effectively resist:

- “I was basically the hand-around, I did say no to those people but he'd arrange like threesomes and foursomes and he would take me dogging ... in the end I just kinda accepted it” Ishara
- “I, err, sometimes I'd just think, I can't even be bothered anymore I might as well just let him do it and get it over and done with cos I was that sick of it but, [K: Mm] I'd always kick, try and get out of it and stuff so” Skye
- “I was just tired, I was so tired, but I just had to ... he was looking after me so I just did it so that it wouldn't make anything funny, or cause any trouble” Rachel

# Rejects a victim identity

Focuses on own identity, emphasising resiliency, strength and independence (survivor), whilst disavowing helplessness, passivity and vulnerability (victim)

## Rejects victim identity

- “ .. but how, like (pause) I just, don't feel like a victim in any way” Lilly
- “he then told me he was guna leave me because I wouldn't sleep with him [K: Mm] there and then so I said well you know where the door is. [pause for 4 seconds]. He raised his fist to me. So I said I dares ya.”  
Emily
- “I don't mind that he's not guna have anything to do with [the baby] really. With the way he is I really don't mind. I think it would be best.”  
Sarah

# Conclusion and implications

- All four denials were identified within the narratives of the young women's adolescent relationships:
  - Participants denied the criminal intent of the perpetrator consequently denying a crime took place
  - Suggested they were not harmed, allowing them to move on
  - Accepted responsibility for the offence(s) promoting a sense of control
  - Some rejected a victim identity, emphasising their strength
- Inconsistent use of denials
- Unique to interview?
- Denials reinforce rape myths and victim-blaming culture - implications