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'Talk, listen, think': Discourses of agency and unintentional violence in consent guidance for gay, bisexual and trans men

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Abstract

Attention to men's attitudes towards sexual consent and violence has led to sexual consent guidance targeting men specifically. This article examines conflicting notions of consent and the construction of implied readership in a UK corpus of online sexual consent guidance for gay, bisexual and trans men. 'Positive consent' discourse presents consent as free, active and able to be withdrawn. 'Talk, listen, think' discourse recommends clear and explicit communication about boundaries. I argue that these discourses present gay, bisexual and trans men as effective moral agents, but these conflicting discourses also weaken the message of consent as free and affirmative. I show how synthetic personalization constructs solidarity between the implied reader and an imagined community of gay, bisexual and trans men who share the aim of ending sexual violence, but also constructs solidarity with men who are presented as unintentionally violent. I conclude by suggesting ways to improve consent guidance.

Keywords

Critical discourse analysis, implied reader, institutional discourse, masculinities, presupposition, sexual consent, sexual violence, sexuality and gender, synthetic personalization

Introduction

Feminist activism has traditionally critiqued the tendency for sexual violence prevention campaigns to focus on victims' actions and communication (Cameron, 2007;

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Ehrlich, 2001; Kitzinger and Frith, 1999), as this focus implies that sexual violence can be avoided by acting or communicating differently, shifts responsibility onto victims/survivors to prevent violence, and does not capture the coerciveness of sexual violence. This critique has motivated efforts to challenge attitudes of intimate partner violence acceptance (Rape Crisis Scotland, n.d., 2010), to which young men are more susceptible than their female peers (Amnesty International and NUS Wales Women's Campaign, 2008; Amnesty International UK and ICM Research, 2005; White Ribbon Foundation, 2008). Recent years have also seen increased reporting of sexual violence perpetrated against men, and increasing awareness of male survivors' support needs (Stern, 2010). As a result, men are increasingly seen as a specific target audience of sexual violence prevention and survivor support campaigns. This article examines the discursive construction of consent and the beliefs and experiences that are projected onto the implied reader (Talbot, 1995) in texts that have the stated aim of engaging men in sexual violence prevention by 'getting men to take more responsibility for their sexual behaviour' (Galop, 2013a) and making sex 'equal, safe and positive' (Galop, 2013b).

I focus on three conflicting discourses that are prominent in a UK corpus of consent guidance for men: 'positive consent', 'talk, listen, think', and what Meyerhoff calls 'moral–aesthetic' discourses (Miriam Meyerhoff, personal communication), that is, discourses that draw on both morality and other normative evaluative frames, especially those related to pleasure or desirability. I begin by outlining these three prominent discourses. 'Positive consent', presents valid consent as free, affirmative and able to be withheld or withdrawn at any point. 'Talk, listen which, think' discourse recommends being clear and explicit in communicating about boundaries with a sexual partner. 'Talk, listen, think' discourse constructs men as effective moral agents with a shared goal of taking a stand against sexual violence, but also presents sexual violation as the product of miscommunication or unintentional mistakes. I show that moral–aesthetic discourses project motivations and evaluative stances onto the implied reader and implied author. These projected stances and motivations construct consent and non-violence as key attributes of moral masculinity, but present gay, bisexual and trans men as driven by sexual desire and as potential sexual predators. I then demonstrate how these discourses present conflicting notions of consent and construct a hegemonic ontology of violence. Finally, I conclude by suggesting strategies for improving sexual consent guidance for men.

Institutional consent discourses

In England and Wales, rape and sexual assault are defined in terms of intentional sexual penetration or touching, where the accused does not reasonably believe that the complainant *consents* (Sexual Offences Act, 2003: s 1–3) – that is, that the complainant agrees 'by choice, and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice' (Sexual Offences Act, 2003: s 74). Although the statutes require that valid consent be a free choice, Ehrlich shows that adjudications may interpret non-consent through an expectation of 'utmost resistance' (Ehrlich, 2001, 2007). In her analysis of a university sexual assault tribunal, Ehrlich shows how the university's tribunal panel questioned the complainants' mode of communication by listing communicative options that they

supposedly had, thereby suggesting that the accused's failure to read the complainants' communication as a refusal should have prompted the complainants to communicate more directly. By contrast, Ehrlich argues, the accused was not questioned extensively on his interpretation of the complainants' communication. The tribunal's questions centre the accused's actions and interpretations, shifting the responsibility for the communication of consent onto victims of assault – rendering victims' attempts to communicate non-consent as 'inaction' (Ehrlich, 2001, 2007) if they do not 'just say no' directly.

Despite adjudications' expectations that refusals of consent will be expressed directly and explicitly, conversation analysis research shows that 'just saying no' is not necessary for a refusal of sexual consent to be understood. Kitzinger and Frith (1999) found that a focus group of young women reported using the same strategies to turn down sexual propositions and non-sexual invitations, such as saying they felt unwell, or mitigating their refusals with compliments and palliatives, such as 'it's very flattering of you to ask, but …' (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). O'Byrne et al. (2008) found that a focus group of young heterosexual men also reported that they would rely on 'little hints' to communicate if they or their date did not want to have sex, such as looking at their watch or saying 'it's getting late' (2008: 177). These findings show that men and women are able to use and understand indirect strategies to 'communicat[e] in ways which are usually understood to mean refusal in other contexts and it is not the adequacy of their communication that should be questioned, but rather their […] partners' claims not to understand' (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999: 309–310).

Moreover, if we do think that sexual refusals are likely to be communicated differently from non-sexual refusals, it is likely to be in precisely the opposite direction from that suggested by the 'just say no' model. We might think that indirectness could be used to avoid face threat in situations that are emotionally laden or to try to minimise the risk of escalation of violence. In either case, one might reasonably expect that sexual refusals might be *more* indirect than non-sexual refusals. Courts' expectation that refusals of sexual consent will be communicated by 'just saying no' conflicts with the considerable evidence that direct, unvarnished refusals are 'not how refusals are normatively done' (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999: 302).

The implied reader

I use critical discourse analysis to examine the *framing* – or perspectival organization – of experience (Goffman, 1979). There are two senses of *discourse*: one is simply 'a communicative event' and the second is a frame or 'sets of propositions in circulation about a particular phenomenon, which constitute what people take to be the reality of the phenomenon' (Cameron and Kulick, 2003: 16).

One way that institutional talk is framed is through what Fairclough calls 'synthetic personalization' (2001: 52) – the simulation of direct communication with an individualised mass readership through the projection of experiences, values and beliefs (Talbot, 1995: 147–148). I adopt Talbot's (1995) framework for the analysis of implied readership through two sets of features, namely, *simulated reciprocal discourse* and *simulated friendship*. *Simulated reciprocal discourse* is the use of questions and imperatives that create the impression of a mutual rapport. *Simulated friendship* is attention to the reader's positive

Table 1. Sources and word counts of consent guidance texts for men in the data corpus.

Source	Where published	Number of articles	Word count
Galop	Galop	52	9311
Galop	Do What You Both Want	23	7802
Total		75	17,113

Galop: Gay London Police Monitoring Group.

face by constructing the implied author and implied reader as co-members of the same community, through the use of pronouns such as *we* and *you*, and the use of presuppositions that set up shared or projected beliefs. I argue that in these consent guidance texts, simulated friendship and simulated reciprocal discourse construct *solidarity* between an implied reader, implied author and imagined community (Anderson, 2006). That imagined community includes victims/survivors of sexual violence but, more worryingly, it also includes men who perpetrate sexual violence.

This article focuses particularly on the use of presuppositions to project beliefs and experiences onto the implied reader, which is a prominent feature in the simulation of solidarity in the texts examined here. Presuppositions are backgrounded information or, more technically, content that is not 'at-issue' (see von Fintel, 2001) and are hallmarked by their defeasibility and projection out of negation – characteristics that distinguish presupposition from other forms of inference, such as entailment and implicature. Ehrlich argues that these characteristics make presuppositions available for ideological work, since they can be used to present beliefs that, not being the at-issue content of an utterance, might be difficult to address directly in certain genres of talk (Ehrlich, 2001; Ehrlich and Sidnell, 2006). Presuppositions can be triggered by a range of constructions, although some are controversial among linguists. Classic presupposition triggers discussed here include aspectual predicates such as *start* and *stop* (Abusch, 2002, and others), WH-questions and clauses (Belnap, 1966; Prince, 1986 and others), and definite noun phrases (Russell, 1905, 1957; Strawson, 1950 and others).

The data

As part of a larger project on the construction of consent in guidance for the British public, a corpus of approximately 120,000 words was compiled from guidance produced by local and national organizations, while endeavouring to model the officially sanctioned institutional dissemination of information about sexual consent to the general public in the United Kingdom. This article focuses on a 17,113-word subset of that corpus: consent guidance that targets gay, bisexual and trans men, produced by an non-governmental organization (NGO), Galop. The data are summarised in Table 1.

Galop was founded in the 1980s to address mistreatment of gay and lesbian communities by police. They now focus their advocacy on issues related to hate-motivated crimes and policing and provide advice and support services to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people who have experienced anti-LGBT abuse or violence, including sexual violence, or problems with the police or criminal justice system (Galop, 2014). Galop's

(2013a) Do What You Both Want campaign on sexual consent, which specifically targets gay, bisexual and trans men and men who have sex with men, was launched in 2012.

The data examined in this article come from the 'Help & Advice' directory of Galop's main website, and Galop's Do What You Both Want campaign, which comes from a separate website devoted specifically to the campaign. I treat the website text as a form of computer-mediated communication. In order to maximise genre consistency across the corpus as a whole, I excluded leaflets, or texts that are implicitly but not explicitly instructional such as lifestyle magazines produced for gay men,[1] and instead focus specifically on online texts which are presented as advice on sexual consent or sexual violence as the communicative instance under analysis. The webpage HTML text was converted to plain text[2] and analysed using critical discourse analysis.

Although the texts from Galop's main website ostensibly address LGBT people in general, the texts make reference to homonormatively (Puar, 2007) gender-stereotyped activities such as cruising,[3] cottaging,[4] and meeting sexual partners on Grindr.[5] Consequently, even ostensibly gender-neutral texts seem to be primarily directed to men. Lesbians, bisexuals and trans people are most commonly mentioned in descriptions of the services that Galop provides or in texts that contain information about trans identities. While some texts do focus on trans identities, the texts' use of *they* to refer to trans men, together with the introductory nature of these texts – for example, their inclusion of definitions of the words *trans* and *cis*[6] – suggests that they are primarily addressing cis readers and speaking about, rather than directly to, trans men.

'Positive consent' discourse

'Positive consent' discourse is prominent in the corpus of texts for gay, bisexual and trans men and presents consent as *active[ly]* and affirmatively *saying yes*, and *freely choosing*. Examples (1)–(3) emphasise that *shout[ing] stop* or *say[ing] no* are not necessary for a sexual assault or sexual offence to have occurred. In so doing, they contrast valid consent with merely *[going] along with it* or a situation in which one *didn't say no*. This frames the giving of sexual consent as necessarily an affirmative *saying yes*, distinct from a lack of resistance:

(1) In law,/consent/ means giving your agreement or 'saying yes' to something, in this case sex. The law says that consent is something active. It means /freely choosing to say 'yes'/. (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Consenting To Sex, What Does Consent Mean?)

(2) Remember, consent means your freely given agreement to a sexual act or activity. You do not have to be touched for a sexual offence to be committed and you do not have to shout 'stop'. If you are tricked, persuaded, forced or frightened into any activity which is sexual or for the sexual pleasure of the person forcing you to do it, without your consent, this is called sexual assault in law. This makes it a crime. (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Consenting To Sex, What is Sexual Assault?)

(3) /I felt really scared so I just went along with it. I can't have been sexually assaulted because I didn't say no./

> You don't have to say no in words. Many people who are threatened, frightened, tricked or stopped from escaping feel so scared that they choose not to say anything and not to 'fight back'. This is a way people survive sexual attack. The law says that your consent has to be given /freely/. (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Consenting To Sex, Some Questions About What Consent Means)

The texts also stress that consent must be specific to each act, and conventions that might be seen as indicating interest in sex, such as *making out*, *flirting*, *cruising*, going home with someone, or meeting online *with the assumption that you'll have sex* (Examples (4)–(6)) do not constitute valid consent:

(4) /If I'm in a club, sauna, public toilet or cruising ground – or I meet someone through Gaydar, Grindr or another website – /that means I'm agreeing to have sex, right?/

> No. You may meet someone through a website or App designed for people to meet up, with the assumption that you'll have sex. Or you are in a place where sex happens. But the law says you can agree or not agree to any sexual act, whatever the circumstances. Whatever you're both expecting, you have to negotiate and agree on what sexual activity to do together. And you have the right to change your mind at any point, even if you've talked about it or agreed beforehand. (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Consenting To Sex, Some Questions About Meeting Partners)

(5) /What if I go home with someone – am I consenting to sex?/

> If someone invites you back to their home or hotel room – or they come to yours – it doesn't mean that you are automatically agreeing to sex. You have the right to say no at any time. Similarly, if someone you've met agrees to come back with you, don't assume they are consenting to sex. (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Consenting To Sex, Some Questions About Meeting Partners)

(6) /Can I change my mind about having sex? What if we've already started making out or we've got our clothes off?/

> The law says everyone has the right to withdraw their consent at any time. This means you can stop at any time, whatever you're doing. It might be awkward or frustrating for you or the other person but that's not the point…. you have the legal right to say stop and no one should force you to continue or do something you're not comfortable with. (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Consenting To Sex, Some Questions About What Consent Means)

The emphasis on consent as retractable at any point is in striking contrast with the 'just say no' model (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). Instead, these texts caution readers against *assum[ing]* a partner has consented or that consent is *automatic[ ]*, and the right to withhold or withdraw consent *at any time* is emphasised through repetition. Although Example (4) presupposes that expectations and assumptions are in play with *the assumption that you'll have sex* and *[w]hatever you're both expecting*, these assumptions and expectations are contrasted with partners' obligation to *negotiate and agree*, which challenges the normative weight of the social expectations in play.

The question–answer sequences used in Examples (3)–(8) are a commonly used strategy in consent guidance texts. Questions simulate reciprocal discourse, presenting definitions of consent, and set up projected beliefs for critique:

(7) /If I go out on the scene, or go on a date with someone, I'm basically agreeing to sex, aren't I?/

> No. Not unless you want to! Everyone has the right to give or withhold their consent to any sexual act at any time. Dressing up, dancing, flirting, getting drunk, making out … nothing gives anyone the right to force you to have sex in any way you don't want to. (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Consenting To Sex, Some Questions About Meeting Partners)

(8) /It's OK for me to keep going as long as the other person doesn't say no, isn't it?/

> The law says each of us is responsible for making sure our sexual partners are giving their free consent to what we want to do. The law says you must have a 'reasonable belief' that the other person wants to do what you want to do. A reasonable belief is something active. You must go on their body language as well as their words. If in doubt, ask! (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Consenting To Sex, Some Questions About What Consent Means)

As discussed by Talbot (1995), simulated reciprocal discourse projects beliefs and experiences onto the implied reader, positioning the implied author as a sympathetic and more knowledgeable peer. Simulated reciprocal discourse allows critique or correction of the views projected onto the implied reader, while still taking the activities themselves – *drinking or taking drugs*, *flirting* and *making out* – as ones with which the implied author has empathy. In a social context in which violence is often attributed to drinking or flirting, simulated reciprocal discourse mitigates the face threat that advice or correction might otherwise cause and creates solidarity with potential victims/survivors of violence.

Discourses of clear communication as preventing unintentional violence

Clear communication as violence prevention

Consent information for gay, bisexual and trans men recommends *clear* and *honest* communication by *talk[ing], listen[ing], think[ing]* as an effective strategy for preventing assaults, as shown in Examples (9)–(10):

(9) Just remember to talk, listen, think … be clear about what you want and what your boundaries are and listen to the other guy's. (Do What You Both Want, Safety for everyone, Using the web and apps)

(10) Say what you want to do or have done to you. Be explicit (Do What You Both Want, Doing it, How to get what you both want)

'Talk, listen, think' discourse suggests a model of affirmative consent in that it presents consent as *explicit* talking and listening about *what you want to do or have done to you* and instructs men to listen to their partners. Talking clearly and explicitly is presented as being for the purpose of maintaining *limits and boundaries* or eliciting information about a partner's boundaries:

(11) Be clear about what sex you're comfortable doing and stay within your boundaries. You have the right to say 'no' to sex or 'no' during sexual activity. Others also have the right to say 'no' to you. (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Cruising, Cottaging And The Law, Your Safety)

(12) Talk about your own limits and boundaries. What are those things that are absolute no's for you (that night or forever, it doesn't matter). How would you indicate or pick up from someone that you're not feeling OK with what's happening? (Do What You Both Want, Doing it, How to get what you both want)

Examples (9) and (11) instruct the reader to respect their partner's boundaries. Examples (10)–(12) suggest that *be[ing] clear* and *explicit* is an effective way to *stay within your boundaries*, and that *say[ing] 'no'* is an effective way to *be clear* – although we saw above that refusals of consent are generally not done through direct refusals, and men report that they use and understand politer indirect refusals.

Although the emphasis on clear and explicit boundaries resonates with 'just say no' discourse, these examples also show important differences. The presupposition-laden WH-questions *What are those things that are absolute no's* and *How would you indicate or pick up from someone that you're not feeling OK?* in Example (12) distance 'talk, listen, think' discourse from 'just say no' discourse by setting up a shared belief that boundaries are *absolute no's* and presupposes that men would pick up on a partner's discomfort. Men are then instructed to *listen* to and respect their partner's boundaries. By constructing consent as enacted both through clear and explicit communication of boundaries and through respect for boundaries, the texts present non-violence as a set of twinned rights and responsibilities (Bell and Binnie, 2000): the right to refuse and have that refusal respected, and a responsibility to communicate refusals clearly.

Sexual violence as communicative deficiency and unintentional mistakes

By instructing men to *talk, listen, think*, the texts present men as communicatively and cognitively deficient. Imperatives, such as *[b]e clear*, *stay within your boundaries* and *talk about your own limits and boundaries* (Examples (11) and (12)) simulate reciprocal discourse and project experiences onto the implied reader: those of not being clear, not staying within one's boundaries, and not communicating about boundaries. In Examples (13)–(15), this projected experience is made more explicit:

(13) You are your sober, sane, everyday self … of course you think about what you do. But many of us are not thinking when we're in a sexual context or, at least, we're only thinking about one thing! (Do What You Both Want, Doing it, How to get what you both want)

Aspectual predicates such as *start* and *stop* trigger the presupposition that the events under discussion have natural temporal boundaries (Abusch, 2002). In Examples (14)–(15), the aspectual predicates *start being honest* and *start changing how we think and do* triggers the presupposition that *being honest* and *changing how we think and do* have natural starting points, prior to which the reader was not *being honest.* The aspectual presupposition presents the advice to *talk, listen, think* about consent as information that men would not previously have been familiar with:

(14) So let's start being honest about what's happening and changing how we deal with our communication and behaviour so sex can be good for everyone!

Talk, listen, think … (Do What You Both Want, Doing it, Consent, What is sexual assault)

(15) Let's start changing how we think and do …, Guys that talk, listen and think are HOT! (Do What You Both Want, Doing it, How to get what you both want)

In Examples (14)–(15), *let's* and *we* set the aspectual presuppositions up as shared between the implied author and implied reader, positioning the implied author as a sympathetic figure who previously had not communicated honestly and shares the projected enterprise of changing behaviour.

The advice to *talk, listen, think* is presented as preventing non-consensual situations, as in Example (16), but frames situations in which one person *experienc[es] something they didn't want and didn't agree to* – as lapses due to getting carried away by *the heat of the moment*:

(16) So why the need for this campaign? Well, at Galop we get to hear about those times when sex isn't what you both want. When drink, drugs, the location, the situation, the heat of the moment leads to one person doing what /they/ want and the other person experiencing something that they didn't want and didn't agree to. (Do What You Both Want)

The framing of non-consent as unintentional is made explicit in Examples (17) and (18), with the repetition of *easy* in Example (17), and use of *unintentionally* in Example (18), presenting situations of non-consent as supposedly understandable lapses or *mistakes*:

(17) No one is born knowing how to negotiate sex: we all have to learn it and we all make mistakes. It's really easy to ignore your own or someone else's boundaries about what's OK at that particular moment. It's easy to assume that because we're in a sexual context – a club or sauna or house party or cruising ground or even your own bed – the person you're with has consented to any and all types of sex. Add alcohol, drugs and social expectations to the mix and boundaries can be crossed. (Galop, Do What You Both Want, Doing it, How to get what you both want)

(18) But many of us may find ourselves crossing the boundaries of consent unintentionally, because we're in the heat of the moment or under the influence of drink or drugs. (Galop, Do What You Both Want, Doing it, How to get what you both want)

The pronouns *us* and *we* present as shared the belief that *unintentionally* crossing the boundaries of consent is *easy*, creating solidarity between the implied author and reader. Quantifying expressions *many of us* and *we all* hint at a wider imagined community consisting of *many* gay, bisexual and trans men, who also participate in the same shared belief, and are presented as sharing the experience of having actually crossed the boundaries of consent. Unlike in Examples (7)–(8), where beliefs are projected onto the implied reader for the purposes of critique or correction, neither Example (17) nor (18) presents a critique of the belief that sexual violence is a *mistake[]* or *understandable* lapse. Instead, the violation of boundaries due to supposed *mistakes* is validated by being framed as the behaviour of *many*, or even *all*, men, constructing solidarity with an imagined community that includes sexually violent men.

The framing of assaults as being due to *the heat of the moment* suggests that men are driven by sexual desire – a discourse that Ehrlich argues is used in sexual assault adjudications to present men as being driven by sexual arousal that, once provoked, is uncontrollable (Ehrlich, 2001). The male sexual drive discourse is reinforced by recurring discussion of gay, bisexual and trans men negotiating consent primarily in stereotypically one-off or short-term contexts, such as in a *sauna* or *cruising ground* (Example (4)), which stereotypes gay, bisexual and trans men as promiscuous and represents gay, bisexual and trans relationships as primarily casual and fleeting. Baker (2005) highlights a similar trend in his work on British tabloid discourses about homosexuality, in which he found that collocates of *homosexual* such as *'cruising'*, *saunas*, *rape* and *rapist* link homosexuality to discourses of gay relationships as fleeting and casual and to discourses of criminality and violence (Baker 2005: 74–76). The tabloid discourses in Baker's work resonate with the discourse in consent guidance that presents gay, bisexual and trans men as being driven by uncontrollable sexual urges and deficient with respect to *talk[ing], listen[ing],* and *think[ing]*, to the point of sexually assaulting their intimate partners.

Moral–aesthetic discourses of consent and agency

The consent guidance for gay, bisexual and trans men frames talking about consent with intimate partners and challenging sexual violence as a shared community responsibility, and as a facet of agentive moral masculinity, as shown in Examples (19)–(21):

(19) There are some people around who don't care that they are sexually assaulting someone else – or even sometimes seek to do so. As a community, we should all be on the look out for such behaviour and have the courage to intervene, speak out, support each other to challenge this behaviour and help those who experience assault. (Galop, Do What You Both Want, Doing it, How to get what you both want)

(20) What can you do to ensure you're aware of other people's boundaries? (Galop, Do What You Both Want, Doing it, How to get what you both want)

(21) So let's all take action to make sure that the people we want to have sex with agree to it. As many guys already know, it's hot to negotiate and agree around sex and /you/ can do it! (Galop, Do What You Both Want, About, About the campaign)

In these examples, prevention and intervention of sexual violence are presented as a shared community responsibility, emphasised by *[a]s a community* and *each other* (Example (19)). The quantifying expression *we ... all* in Example (19) refers to an imagined community of men with the shared enterprise of *interven[ing], speak[ing] our, support[ing] each other* and *challeng[ing] this behaviour and help[ing] those who experience assault*. In Example (20), directly addressing the reader with a question simulates reciprocal discourse, projecting the desire to be *aware of other people's boundaries* as shared. Quantifying expressions *let's all* and *many guys* (Example (21)) construct a larger imagined community of men who take action to negotiate consent, validating communication about consent and constructing solidarity between the reader, author and the imagined community.

[E]nsure and *make sure* emphasise that by *talk[ing], listen[ing], think[ing]* men are able to take effective action to be certain as to whether their partner consents. The WH-question *what can you do* in Example (20) triggers the presupposition that there is something that the reader can do to ensure their awareness of others' boundaries, and Example (21) provides a motivation for practising consent: *it's hot to negotiate and agree around sex* – a belief that is projected to a broader imagined community of *many guys*. This 'consent is hot' discourse motivates the practice of consent by presenting it as being a good idea because of instrumental aesthetic benefits:

(22) Do what you both want … sounds obvious doesn't it? It's what we all want: hot sex with another guy (or guys!), everyone enjoys themselves, everyone feels good. (Galop, Do What You Both Want)

(23) It's about enjoyment isn't it? And if you or the person you're with doesn't want it anymore it isn't fun. (Galop, Do What You Both Want, Doing it, Consent, Changing your mind)

(24) As we said above, it really isn't sexy to sexually assault someone. It may even be committing a crime and that has potentially devastating consequences for everyone involved. Do you really want to be the kind of guy that causes hurt and trauma to other guys? That's not the kind of reputation anyone wants. (Galop, Do What You Both Want, Doing it, How to get what you both want)

In Examples (22)–(24), consent is presented as aesthetically transformative, differentiating *hot* sex from something that *isn't fun* or *isn't sexy*. Although Example (22) presents consensual sex as something *everyone* would enjoy, Example (23) frames the implied reader as the main experiential agent of sexual enjoyment, presenting sexual pleasure as solipsistic. This sexual solipsism extends to sexual assault, as shown in Example (24), which focuses on how men who might assault their partners might feel about the consequences. Although Example (24) presupposes the causing of *hurt* and *trauma* to survivors, this text also presents the *potentially devastating* effects of sexual assault as being effects experienced by *everyone involved*, presenting the trauma of sexual violence as shared by victims and perpetrators. In the texts for gay, bisexual and trans men, the evaluative language that is used to express moral stancetaking is primarily focused on the emotional lives of the implied reader and how *they* might feel if they had

assaulted someone else. These texts centre potential perpetrators, but not survivors, as the main experiential agents and do not incorporate survivors' stories or voices, so do not construct solidarity with a broader community of survivors. While addressing the concerns of potential perpetrators might have strategic value for violence prevention, one might reasonably think that the trauma of sexual assaults affects victims/survivors more than it does perpetrators.

The texts for gay, bisexual and trans audiences also frame assault as mutual experiences by shifting between constructing the implied reader as a potential victim of sexual violence, and constructing the reader as a potential perpetrator, sometimes moving from one audience to the other in consecutive sentences without overtly marking the shift, as in Example (25):

(25) If you're so out of it that you can't stand or talk properly, don't know what you're agreeing to, or can't remember what you've done, then you probably don't have the ability to make a decision about sex at that time. If you're with someone in this state, think very carefully about whether you have sex with them. You could be committing an assault if it later turns out they lacked the ability to give their consent. (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Consenting To Sex, Some Questions About Meeting Partners)

In the first sentence, *you* refers to someone who is too *out of it* to have the capacity to consent. In the second and third sentences, *you* refers to someone who *could be committing an assault* on the referent of the first sentence. The reader is advised to *think very carefully* about sexual interaction with someone whose capacity is impaired, but they are not expressly advised against it. Shifting between an implied audience of potential victims and an implied audience of potential predators constructs victimhood and perpetratorhood as roles that the same person could have, separating sexual violence from the dynamics of coercive control that typically characterise intimate partner violence (Respect UK, 2013).

The construction of men as effective moral agents is a positive face strategy that builds solidarity and may have strategic value in persuading men to change their behaviour. However, it also seems to be in tension with the discourse of sexual violence as unintentional discussed above that presented men as deficient in their thinking and communication and driven to sexual violence by uncontrollable sexual urges. We will now turn to an examination of this tension.

Conflicting consent discourses

The consent guidance for men presents a constellation of conflicting and ideologically dilemmatic (Billig et al., 1988) discourses about consent. 'Positive consent' discourse is striking in its presentation of consent as free and affirmative such that lack of a refusal or resistance does not imply valid consent (Example (3)), specific to each act such that consent to kissing does not imply consent to sex (Examples (4)–(8)), and retractable such that one has an automatic right to withhold or withdraw consent at any point (Example (6)).

The texts for gay, bisexual and trans audiences focus primarily on negotiating consent in the context of short-term or one-off encounters (Example (4)). The focus on cruising

and short-term encounters could be argued to challenge the myths of male sexual arousal as uncontrollable (cf. Ehrlich, 2001) or of male sexual desire as implying consent (cf. Rumney and Hanley, 2010) or as challenging the social script of sexual encounters as naturally progressive and climactic (cf. Archard, 1998; Frith and Kitzinger, 2001). Discussion of short-term encounters could also validate a diversity of relationship models. However, recurring mentions of cruising online or in saunas and public toilets also paint a stereotypical picture of gay and bisexual men as promiscuous and of same-sex relationships and sex as primarily taking the form of risky and casual encounters. Longer-term same-sex relationships are almost completely absent from the corpus, and when they are mentioned it is as sites of domestic abuse, as in Example (26):

(26) /It doesn't count as rape if it's your partner and you've had sex before, does it?/

> You can be raped by your partner. Rape and sexual assault can occur within relationships. If you didn't freely agree, then it's illegal, whoever does it to you. If this situation rings bells for you, then maybe you are experiencing domestic abuse. (Galop, Help & Advice, Your Rights & the Law, Consenting To Sex, Questions About Consent and Relationships)

The potentially positive effect of discussing shorter-term encounters is therefore in tension with the interpretative frame Baker identifies in the British tabloid press of gay men's relationships as trivial, dysfunctional and lesser, and gay men as sexually predatory (2005), and, as Donovan et al. (2014) note, risks positioning gay, bisexual and trans identity as 'the problem'.

While gay, bisexual and trans men are presented as having solidarity with an imagined community of guys, they are not presented as respecting, caring or experiencing any other feelings towards their partners apart from sexual desire. Instead, they are presented as motivated primarily by the solipsistic instrumental benefit of *hot sex* (Example (22)) and sexual drive, which is framed as being so strong as to inhibit men's ability to think and communicate, supposedly causing men to *unintentionally* (Example (18)) assault their partners. While abuse sometimes happens in some same-sex relationships (Henderson, 2003; LGBT Youth Scotland, 2011), research on intimate partner violence does not support the idea that gay, bisexual and trans men are especially likely to be sexually violent. The overwhelming majority of sexual violence is perpetrated by men against women and girls (Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Office for National Statistics, 2013; National Institute of Justice and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2000), and the majority – an estimated 72% (Hillman et al., 1990: 503) – of perpetrators of male same-sex rape are identified either by themselves or by their victims as heterosexual, leading researchers to suggest that anti-gay bias is a factor in such assaults (Scarce, 1997).

While 'talk, listen, think' discourse does instruct men to listen to and respect their partners' boundaries, encouraging men to be *explicit* and *clear* about boundaries in order to avoid being assaulted undermines the texts' message of consent as free and retractable. 'Talk, listen, think' discourse depends on the popular belief that sexual violence results primarily from misunderstandings, and that being *explicit* would effectively prevent assaults. As we saw above, refusals of consent are not normally done explicitly, and

focus group participants' reports provide evidence that indirectness in sexual refusals is normal and not unclear (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999; O'Byrne et al., 2008). The 'mistakes' discourse provides the scaffolding to see sexual violence as something a nice guy might do 'unintentionally' instead of as abuse, and in a society in which intentions are seen as important in the allocation of moral responsibility (see Thomson, 1985 and others), representing sexual violence as accidental diminishes perpetrator responsibility.

So while 'talk, listen, think' discourse is distinguished from 'just say no' discourse in that 'talk, listen, think' allocates responsibility for the prevention of violence to potential perpetrators by instructing them to listen to and respect their partner's boundaries, they both rely on the same cultural narratives of sexual violence as a *mistake* and of men as cognitively and communicatively deficient – a narrative that has been powerfully critiqued as legitimising harmful distributions of epistemic and communicative labour (Cameron, 2007; Ehrlich, 2001), and as framing sexual violence as a problem of individual psychology or behaviour (Cameron, 1994; Connell, 2005; Dobash and Dobash, 1992 and others) rather than a structural injustice. The 'mistakes' discourse also conflicts with the agentive moral–aesthetic discourse that motivates consent practice. Although opposition to violence is presented as a shared goal (Examples (19)–(21)) that can be achieved through taking action *together* to *stop rape*, the kind of action that men are advised to take is primarily individual rather than collective: men are advised to modify their own communicative style in sexual interaction as a 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 1988).

The conflicting consent discourses in the consent guidance for men construct a hegemonic ontology of violence through the use of what Kulick calls 'dual indexicality' (2005: 622): the expression of moral outrage tells us what is considered unacceptable, and its absence tells us what is tolerated (cf. Baker, 2008). One might well think that moral outrage about assaults when a person is *tricked, persuaded, forced or frightened* (Example (2)) is deserved; but we might well also expect to see that outrage in other contexts too, such as when consent is violated through supposed *mistakes*. While the texts describe assaults as *devastating* and causing *hurt and trauma* (Example (24)), violations of consent that are attributed to *mistakes* are described as *easy* and *unintentional [ ]* (Examples (17)–(18)), suggesting that not all violations of sexual consent are perceived as blameworthy violence. This depiction of what is considered to count as blameworthy violence is more consistent with hegemonic conceptions of rape as sexual violence that involves extrinsic force (Estrich, 1987), than with ontologies of violence that emerge from LGBT/queer and women's liberation organising. Feminist critique emphasises a spectrum of gendered and sexual violence (Kelly, 1988; Rich, 1980 and others) that ranges from extrinsically violent rape to normalised coercive control, such as threats of outing a partner (Henderson, 2003); control of money or clothing (LGBT Youth Scotland, 2011); non-consensually removing or withholding prophylactics (Miller et al., 2010); controlling contact with family and friends (Henderson, 2003; LGBT Youth Scotland, 2011); and other forms of coercive control (Donovan et al., 2014).

Implications and conclusion

Consent guidance would be strengthened by shifting away from presenting sexual violence as primarily caused by unintentional mistakes, and instead critiquing common

misconceptions about sexual violence such as the notion that sexual violence is predominantly caused by misunderstandings or 'uncontrollable' sexual desire. Discussing sexual violence in terms of dynamics of coercive control or normalised pressure would better represent survivors' experiences (Kelly, 1988) and would strengthen the message of consent as free, specific and retractable. Such a shift could help organizations explain the concept of consent in ways that do not reproduce problematic ontologies of violence. Representing a more diverse range of identities and relationships – including discussion of respectful and realistic communication about consent in both long-term and short-term relationships – could help challenge the stereotypes of gay, bisexual and trans men that are reproduced in these texts.

Conflicting notions of consent also have the effect of confusing the texts' aims and agendas. Discourses of sexual violation as unintentional lapses might be seen as providing support or vindication to potential abusers, rather than preventative education or support for victims and survivors of sexual violence. This could be addressed by centring survivors' voices and experiences, and delineating target audiences according to the relationship they have with the violence and providing separate texts for each target audience: victims/ survivors, their supportive community, perpetrators, and so on.[7]

By implying that victims are in a position to avoid being assaulted by communicating differently, these texts do not represent the coerciveness of sexual violence. What starts out therefore as a promising project for raising men's awareness about consent and violence and aiming to make sexual interactions equal and safe, perpetuates regressive stereotypes about sexual violence, and about gay, bisexual and trans men who are presented as being so driven by uncontrollable sexual urges as to be potential sexual predators. Despite the differences between 'just say no' and 'talk, listen, think' discourse, both provide the discursive scaffolding to present sexual violence as the kind of understandable mistake that any man might make, ultimately shifting responsibility for sexual violence onto victims/survivors.

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Notes

1. A detailed discussion of genre is outside the scope of this article, but see Baker (2005) on genre 'crossing' in sexual health documentation for gay men.
2. On conversion to plain text, bolds and other formatting are rendered as slashes, which is original to the texts. Underlining is added to highlight features for discussion.
3. Seeking out sexual partners in a public place, gay/lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) venue or online, stereotypically for one-off or short-term casual encounters.
4. Cruising or engaging in same-sex sexual activity in a public toilet, stereotypically as one-off or casual encounters.
5. A smartphone app designed for gay, bisexual and curious men to meet up, stereotypically for casual sex.
6. Someone who feels that the gender they were assigned at birth describes them accurately over the course of their whole lifetime.
7. This practice is already in use by some organizations, especially organizations that work with survivors, and could be extended. I thank Sally McConnell-Ginet for this helpful suggestion.

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