1 Introduction

Rewriting the rules?

CONTEMPORARY WESTERN CULTURE has been described as the 'age of raunch', 'generation sex' and generation SLUT (Sexually Liberated Urban Teens).[1] These are the times of an unprecedented sexualised, sex-crazed and sex-everywhere culture, following the so-called liberation of the 1960s and 1970s. The rules for negotiating a sexual relationship have changed and are still changing. Today's young people – meaning those born in and after 1982, collectively referred to as 'Generation Y (Gen-Y)' or 'Millennials'[2] – are negotiating their early love and sexual relationships in an increasingly fluid and uncertain environment. The apparent mellowing of traditional values towards sex, marriage and the family mean that Gen-Y is redefining these new rules. But just what is it about these rules that is changing? In what ways have they changed already? In what ways are they still the same?

Certainly, young people today are first engaging in sexual intercourse at an earlier age than their parents or grandparents did. The nature of their love/sex relationships is also changing. With most people marrying later, young people are more likely nowadays to have many sexual partners before settling down.[3] The sexual double standard, the concern with sexual reputation that once precluded women from engaging in sex for pleasure and outside of a long-term committed relationship, may have shifted and may even no longer exist.[4] We have been described as living in a post-feminist age, a time of girl power where 'young women are saying, "We have a right to sexual pleasure," and they're going out and getting it.'[5]

Despite this apparent sexual freedom, however, rates of sexual assault continue to be of concern. For instance, Victoria Police data show that women represent 92 per cent of victims of sexual assault, while

99 per cent of offenders are male, consistent with figures across Australia and internationally.[6] How can we speak of 'liberated' and 'empowered' Gen-Y women when, according to Australian figures, as many as 10 per cent of women aged 18 to 24 will have experienced sexual violence in the last 12 months and young women aged 16 to 20 and 21 to 25 are the most likely to experience sexual assault?[7] The lived experience of young women brings these figures into sharper focus. As 'Grace', a 21-year-old woman living in metropolitan Melbourne, reveals:

> I started seeing this guy and he knew I hadn't had sex before and I wanted to wait and I wanted to, you know I wanted it to be special and everything blah, blah, blah. And in the end, I can only just remember before and then remember seeing him on top of me and then after it was over, I panicked . . .

Grace's experience of forced sex from her boyfriend further demonstrates a common feature of sexual violence: that it is most often perpetrated at the hands of a known man rather than at the hands of a stranger. Perhaps as tragic as the experience itself, is that Grace holds herself at least partly responsible for it, another common feature of women's experience of sexual violence:

> . . . like it obviously was kind of partially consensual, I don't know whether you'd classify it as rape or anything, but it was an experience I'd never want anyone else to go through, it was very traumatic. But, I don't know how I should have dealt with it differently. I think I should have maybe not put so much trust in him.

Sexual assault data for younger teenage women are difficult to come by, but in one national survey, as many as 14 per cent of young women aged 12 to 20 reported that a boyfriend had tried to physically force them to have sex, and 6 per cent reported that they had been forced to have sex.[8] However, statistics on the prevalence of physically coerced sex are not representative of the self-reported 21 to 30 per cent of young women who have experienced unwanted or pressured sexual intercourse; figures range from 40 to 77 per cent of teenagers and young adults who report having experienced unwanted sexual activity.[9]

Yet what are we doing to help prevent experiences like Grace's? What are we doing to truly empower young women and to place the responsibility for sexual violence where it belongs? Thirty years of law reform, programs and education to try to prevent sexual violence have not been enough

to truly change the experiences of young women. Tighter laws, teaching young women refusal skills and running campaigns that 'no means no', have not changed the old rules of negotiating sex and consent. It is time to seriously re-think our approach to reducing sexual violence. We need to engage both young women and young men in challenging a culture that continues to allow sexual violence to occur.

This book provides a window into the changing world of young people's love/sex relationships. Through the perceptions and stories of 117 teens and young adults of diverse backgrounds and sexualities, the unwritten rules for negotiating sex and consent are explored (see Appendix 1). A central concern is the extent to which these rules might still represent unequal and potentially harmful understandings of gender and consent. Young people's experiences of equal and ethical negotiation in their love/sex relationships are also explored. By talking to young people in Victoria, Australia, about how they negotiate their sexual encounters, this book sheds light on the complexity of sexual consent and on the varying capacities of young people to actively engage in consensual sexual practice. It considers several key questions. What meanings do love/sex relationships hold for Gen-Y? How do young people negotiate sexual encounters and why might they do so in these ways? How can we account for the persistence of pressured and unwanted sex in young women's experiences? What are we doing to try to prevent young women's experiences of pressured and unwanted sex and, crucially, what more needs to be done?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To answer these key questions, this book engages with current theoretical debates, emerging international research and the lived realities of Gen-Y Australians aged 14 to 24 years. By bridging these different perspectives, I develop a unique and challenging approach to both our understandings of youth sexuality and the prevention of sexual violence. Tackling these issues presents numerous challenges: understanding young people's experiences of unwanted sex and negotiations of sexual consent; seeking to understand the contemporary influences on these negotiations; and at the same time resisting particular problematisations of youth as a fixed category and of sex as something inherently risky and dangerous. Recognising this complexity, this book is as much about acknowledging young people's varied experiences and voices as it is about sexual violence prevention – the two

are absolutely connected and young people's voices should always inform policy and program work. Thus a key theme that emerges is the need to take seriously the views and experiences of young people themselves in the development of policy and programs that affect them. In doing so, it has been my intention throughout this book to bring both sociological theory and qualitative empirical research to bear on policy and practice for those *in* policy and practice.

At the same time, this book articulates some critical social and theoretical analyses regarding sex, gender, violence and prevention. The theoretical perspectives with which we seek to understand these issues have important implications for what we do in practice. In this book, drawing significantly on the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu and engaging with postmodern feminist and gender theorists, I develop a theoretical framework for understanding gendered power relations and the negotiation of consent. This framework seeks to take account of both the persistent social structures and rules governing these negotiations and young people's capacity to rewrite the rules and negotiate consensual and ethical sex. In turn, this framework informs the empirical work undertaken and the models of sexual violence prevention that have been considered.

WHY YOUNG PEOPLE?

In the earliest stages of developing the research on which this book is based, I decided to focus on young people, whom I defined as aged 14 to 24. This decision is not intended to dismiss the fact that sexual violence affects individuals across the lifespan. Indeed, recent Australian survey research indicates that women aged 25 to 69 also report experiencing sexual violence, and there is much evidence to suggest that pressured and unwanted sex, particularly in intimate relationships, remain significant issues for adult women, despite being rarely acknowledged.[10] Nonetheless, women aged 18 to 24 are repeatedly reflected in various data sources, including police reports and national surveys, as the most common victims of sexual violence.[11] As a young woman myself, while undertaking this research, I also felt compelled to focus on the experiences of young people. Yet more than this, I and many people I spoke to had also observed that media and public debate frequently focused on young people and sex, often within an overwhelmingly negative risk-based framing of the issues. Debates appear to focus on young people only as problems to be managed, and often name young women's sexual behaviour in particular as risky

or dangerous[12] without acknowledging the broader gendered context in which young people's sexuality is lived and experienced. With so much discussion circulating about young people and sex, I became concerned to make sure that young people's own views and experiences were somehow entered into these debates.

WHY PREVENTION?

The overarching concern of this book is with the *prevention* of sexual violence. This is not in any way to downplay the continued need for support and services to assist victim/survivors of sexual violence, or the importance of police and justice responses to perpetrators. There can be no doubt that these sectors play a pivotal role in dealing with sexual violence. Yet we also know from national research that many victims of sexual violence never report their experience to police or other formal response services. Indeed, 85 per cent of women who experience sexual violence do not report it to police.[13] Moreover, as this book discusses, there is much sexual pressure and unwanted sex that, while not necessarily fitting within the legal frame of sexual assault, nonetheless requires societal action.

Notably, in the last five years, there has also been a significant focus within Australian Government and policy debates on the role of prevention to address violence against women, including sexual violence. This focus is reflected at Federal level in the work of the National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, and at State level in the various departmental policies guiding both responses to and prevention of violence against women. For example, the Victorian Government launched a state plan to prevent violence against women in November 2009.[14] The plan builds on a public health model for primary violence prevention, i.e. before it occurs, supported by the work of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) on a framework for preventing violence against women. The Victorian State Plan to Prevent Violence against Women is the first of its kind in Australia and indeed one of the few examples of concentrated government policy and leadership for the primary prevention of violence against women in the world. This local context and the significance of this work internationally, places the prevention of sexual violence firmly on the policy agenda. Now, more than ever, there is a need for conceptual and empirical work that brings together the issues of sex, power and consent with frameworks for violence prevention.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

The language used to describe sexual violence, and those who experience it, can carry with it particular meanings that are important both symbolically in the field and in legal terminology. Throughout this book, experiences of pressured and coerced sex are discussed under the umbrella term 'sexual violence', alongside criminally defined offences of sexual assault. I deliberately use the term sexual violence broadly so as to acknowledge the full range of experiences (see Chapter 2), and to remain consistent with the approach adopted by the sexual assault service sector. For instance, Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) in Victoria refer to sexual violence as: 'any behaviour of a sexual nature that makes someone feel uncomfortable, frightened, intimidated or threatened'.[15]

This book is also primarily concerned with the prevention of sexual violence against women because 92 per cent of the victims of sexual violence are women. I do not intend to ignore or silence men's experiences of broad forms of sexual violence. There is a growing acknowledgement and service response to male victims of sexual violence, as evidenced by the funding of specialist counsellors in many sexual assault services specifically for male victims. At the same time, men's experiences of sexual violence differ from women's in some important respects, which reflect the particular gendered pattern of this form of violence. For example, where men are victims of sexual violence, it is also often the case that the perpetrator too is male.[16] Thus prevention of sexual violence against women requires separate analysis and strategies from prevention of sexual violence against men.

Consistent with the scope of this book, the term 'victim' has been used throughout to refer to women who experience sexual violence. I acknowledge that there are significant ongoing debates over the use of this term, with some women – including many in the sexual assault service sector – preferring to use the word 'survivor' or the dual term 'victim-survivor'. In legal proceedings, a victim of sexual violence is typically referred to as the 'complainant' or 'alleged victim'. While each of these terms could be equally valid I have, for consistency, used the term victim. Likewise, for the purposes of this book I have also used the word 'perpetrator' to refer to those who engage in sexual violence against women (or 'alleged offender/perpetrator' when referring to a specific criminal case). I use these terms in this way because together they more accurately reflect the gendered nature of sexual violence and the seriousness of the harms that women experience, most commonly, at the hands of men. It is also the language adopted throughout much Australian public policy and

as such provides a level of consistency with the terminology referred to in that field.

'Prevention' too, is a term that can vary in meaning across disciplines and professional fields. For simplicity, I use 'prevention' throughout this book to refer broadly to the primary prevention of sexual violence, that is, to strategies that target the underlying causes of violence before it occurs.[17] Primary prevention as a category is typically used to distinguish this kind of work from both secondary prevention, which targets 'at risk' populations, and tertiary prevention, which responds to past victims or perpetrators of violence to prevent future occurrences. I use 'secondary' and 'tertiary' prevention only to refer to these specific elements. However, as noted by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) and others, it is not always possible to draw clear boundaries around these three levels of prevention.[18]

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

In Chapter 2 (Generation Y: Problematic representations of youth and sex), I consider the popularised 'problem' of youth sex, and the extent to which pressured and unwanted sex remains a feature of Gen-Y's sexual encounters. I suggest that the ways in which Western society understands and responds to youth sex generally has clear implications for the ways in which we understand and respond to pressured and unwanted sex. This is followed by a discussion of young people's own views and experiences regarding the various unwritten rules influencing their sexual encounters in Chapter 3 (Sex: The 'new' rules of engagement).

Beyond approaches to youth sexuality in particular, there are a number of social and cultural understandings of sex, love and consent that guide love and sexual relationships. In Chapter 4 (Power: Framing sexual violence in young people's everyday encounters) I employ contemporary social and feminist theories to account for the rules of sexual engagement, and to begin to consider the structural and cultural explanations for pressured and unwanted sex in young people's love/sex encounters.

In Chapter 5 (Consent: Negotiating consensual sex) I explore young people's views and experiences of responding to pressured and unwanted sex and negotiating sexual consent. Drawing on Grace's story, as well as the varied experiences of both young women and young men, the gaps between young people's experience of negotiating consent and current legal models of consent are also explored. Chapter 6 (Technology: Unauthorised sexual images and sexual violence) further explores legal issues in relation

to the emerging use of information and communication technologies to distribute images of sexual violence and other unauthorised sexual images among youth.

Then, in Chapters 7 and 8 (Education: Sex, power and consent in schools and Prevention: Policy, programs and practical strategies), the implications of the previous discussions are considered for how we approach both sex education in schools and sexual violence prevention with young people more broadly. By engaging both with young people's experiences, and with informed critiques of sexuality education and violence prevention, I examine the promises and limitations of current education-based initiatives to prevent sexual violence amongst youth.

Finally, in the Chapter 9 (Conclusion: Rewriting the rules and preventing sexual violence), the closing thoughts and implications of the main research findings are summarised. I suggest that there is a continuing need to frame responses to youth sexuality and the prevention of sexual violence in a way that engages young men and women as active agents in their sexual choice-making and capable of reflection upon these choices. In the absence of this framing, the sexual choices of Gen-Y women, and indeed Gen-Y men, will remain forced choices – or at the very least, pressured. As the title of this chapter suggests, there is a need to continue to re-write the gendered rules governing the negotiation of sex and consent if we are ever truly to prevent sexual violence.

NOTES

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11 Victoria Police, *Crime Statistics 2008–2009*; Mouzos & Makkai, *Findings from IVAWS*; M Heenan & S Murray, *Reported rapes in profile: A problem of attrition. A report to the Victorian Office of Women's Policy (OWP) on behalf of the Statewide Steering Committee to Reduce Sexual Assault*. (Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2007).
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15 Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) website, http://www.casa.org.au/
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2 Generation Y

Problematic representations of youth and sex

TURN TO PRINT and television media or public debate and the message is consistent: youth are a problem in need of a solution. According to the media, public officials and many parents, youth crime is up and teenage sex and oral sex have reached epidemic proportions at the same time that school results, homework and university ambition have gone down.[1] Yet, 'hardly anybody has confronted them with the plain fact that *all of those statements are false*'.[2] What has not changed is the tendency of adult generations to become anxious about perceived problem shifts in youth values and behaviours.[3] This is perhaps especially true when it comes to youth sexuality. As University of London youth sexuality researcher Peter Aggleton and his colleagues exclaim: 'Put the words "youth" and "sex" together and you are sure to generate controversy'.[4] Yet if we take a closer look at youth sexuality we see that while some things have indeed changed, many things have changed much less than is commonly believed.

I begin by setting the scene of youth sexuality with a brief review of the changes experienced by Gen-Y in the Western context. There are a number of challenges faced by today's young people, brought about largely by the processes of modernity and in particular an advanced consumer-capitalist society, as well as gendered social change. I then consider the popularised 'problem' of youth sexuality, as well as the very real issue of sexual violence, with a particular focus on young womens' experiences of pressured and unwanted sex. Finally, I review the implications of sexual pressure and coercion for young people's sexual health. In doing so, this chapter gives a broad background to the specific exploration in later chapters of pressured and unwanted sex in young people's love/sex relationships.