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Discourses of sexual relationships in a sample of German and British young people: A Q methodological study

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Abstract

Young people live in an environment which sexualises young people, particularly women, along traditional gender roles. This, in parallel with a silence about positive sexuality in policy development, means that sexual double standards prevail in young people's lives. The aim of this study was to explore the discourses young women and men from two European countries, Germany and England, draw on when making sense of sexual relationships, and how these are steeped in the local cultural climate and messages. The study used Q methodology and included 65 German and English young people between 16 and 19 years of age. Six accounts emerged: sex as responsible, intimate and shared experience; sex as joint fun; ideal versus reality; sex has to be responsible, consensual and shared; caring relationships offer the perfect context for fulfilling sex; and equality between partners. The importance of cultural context in the availability of specific dominant and alternative discourses is discussed with a focus on how this influences young people's sense-making with regard to sexuality and sexual relationships. Future directions for research are highlighted.

Keywords: Youth, sexuality, discourse, Q methodology, England, Germany

The sexualisation of young people, particularly of young women, through readily available media (American Psychological Association 2007; Ringrose et al. 2013) in parallel with a silence about positive sexuality in policy development (Moore and Prescott 2013), means that sexual discourses along traditional double standards prevail in young people's lives (Lamb and Peterson 2012; Tolman 2012). Although these dominant discourses are pervasive (Frosh, Phoenix, and Pattman 2002; Kehily et al. 2002; Maxwell 2007), alternative discourses resisting traditional masculine and feminine positions are available to young people (Allen 2003; Maxwell 2007; Smiler 2008). Higgins and Hirsch (2008), for example, found that despite reiterations of stereotypes such as women not having sex for pleasure, the young women in their study demonstrated the same focus on sensation and satisfaction as the young men.

The wider societal context can be central in influencing how young people utilise cultural discourses to make sense of their own sexuality, as dominant and alternative discourses are context and time dependent (Arai 2003; Gergen 1973). Therefore the particular cultural context in which a young person lives is likely to influence his or her choice of discourse, and the ability to resist certain discourses around notions of masculinity, femininity and teenage sexuality, or take up others (Allen 2003; Arai 2003; Ringrose et al. 2013) through a culture-specific process of sexual socialisation (Parker 2009).

Considering the growing availability of social media and its potential influence on young people's self-representations (Hartley, Wight, and Hunt 2014), understanding the role of wider cultural messages in young people's sense-making of their own sexuality is vital so as to help young people develop a positive view of sexuality. As McMillan and Worth (2011) highlight, different cultural contexts, even if in close geographical proximity, may well carry with them

different implications for intervention.

The aim of the current study was to use Q methodology to explore from a discourse psychological perspective, the positions young women and men from two European countries, Germany and England, take up when making sense of gender roles in sexual relationships, and how this is potentially steeped in the local cultural climate and messages. It was hoped that findings might assist in developing national programmes and campaigns to support young people in developing positive and healthy sexualities in an era of rapid technological development.

Germany and England were chosen because of key cultural similarities and differences, such as comparable percentages of mothers, including teenage mothers, in the poorest 20% of the population and differences such as Germany's greater acceptance of teenage sexuality as normative (Carpenter 2001; Cherry, Dillon, and Rough 2001). In addition, Germany has lower teenage pregnancy rates despite also having lower teen abortion rates (Franz et al. 2009).

Method

Design

The study took the form of a cross-sectional, cross-national investigation comprising the discourse element of a larger-scale mixed-method research programme into cultural and psychological influences on young people's sexual behaviour (Franz, Worrell, and Vögele 2013), which combined discourse and social cognition perspectives with the aim of moving towards a more comprehensive and holistic framework for understanding young people's sexual health.

Methodology

The current study employs Q methodology to identify the discourses that young people in Germany and England choose when positioning themselves with regard to sexual relationships. Q methodology is an established qualitative and critical methodology, whose underlying assumptions and procedures are exploratory and developed to be able to gain insights into people's subjective perspectives.

To complete a Q sort, participants rank a set of statements representing a range of different perspectives on a topic. The set of statements are ranked along a continuum, from 'most disagree' to 'most agree'. Statements without meaning or value to the participants are assigned 0. During the sorting procedure, each statement is considered and ranked in relation to all the other statements creating a Gestalt account of the participant's position. Completed Q sorts are factor analysed to identify how people's individual accounts are related to those of other's through the identification of factors.

Once factors have been identified, an "ideal-type" Q sort (Stenner et al. 2006, 673) is created for each factor based on the average ranking for each statement. The average rankings for each statement are called factor arrays.

The potential of Q methodology for cross-cultural discourse research has been demonstrated by a number of researchers (e.g. Stenner et al. 2006). Although Q methodology does not allow for generalisations across whole populations, the emergence of factors (or discourses) defined by participants who belong to the same social group does provide some indication of potential trends in the shared meanings available to members of a particular culture (Stenner et al. 2006).

Development of the Q set

Initially, 209 statements were collected from the relevant literature, conversations with various people including adults and young people media including young people's forums as well as informal interviews with professionals who work with young people in the area of sexual health and/ or teenage pregnancy. The statements were classified across five themes which encapsulated the main topics of the statements: sexual responsibility and risk-taking; relationships and casual sex; rights and control within sexual relationships; sexual power; and social regulation and peer pressure. Corresponding numbers of statements were chosen for each, offset for positive, negative and neutral narratives. This procedure corresponds with the Fisherian variance design endorsed by Brown (1970, 1980).

To ensure that the statements were clear, they were discussed among the researchers and piloted in both countries. The pilot study in the UK was conducted with 16 participants, 14 young women and two young men. The participants came from two services. Eleven young women attended a vocational college in London, the rest of the participants were recruited at a service for young people who were excluded from mainstream education. The pilot study was focusing on comprehension issues with regard to the material and statements. The pilot study in Germany was conducted with 14 participants, seven young women and seven young men. The participants came from two classes at a vocational college, which offers dual vocational training for young people with low level learning difficulties. During the pilot study, final changes were made to the wording to improve the clarity of the translation.

The final sample contained 45 statements that were deemed to be representative of a wide variety of subject positions, including statements that both affirm and challenge traditional gender norms. The statements were translated into German using back-translation (Erkut et al. 1999; Van DeVijver and Tanzer 2004).

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Participants

Participants were between 16 and 19 years of age and still in education at the time of data collection. Thirty-two English participants completed the Q sort (16 young men and 16 young women). They were recruited from schools in the Greater London area. In Germany, 73 young people completed the Q sort (48 young men and 25 young women), recruited from schools in the federal state (Bundesland) of Baden-Württemberg (Stuttgart and the surrounding area). The level of the schooling for participants from both countries was comparable using the CASMIN educational classification system (Brauns and Steinmann 1999).

Table 2 provides a summary of participant characteristics across the six factors that emerged from the data, including age, gender and nationality.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Procedure

Participants first read the information sheet explaining the study and their rights, and then signed a consent form if they were happy to take part. Thereafter a set of 45 statements and a response booklet were handed to each student to complete on their own. Throughout data collection, the researcher was present to answer any questions and to ensure participants understood the sorting procedure.

Participants ranked the statements along a continuum, from -5 (most disagree) to +5 (most agree). The distribution used for the current study was as follows:

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| -5 | -4 | -3 | -2 | -1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 5 | 7 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 |

The numbers in bold represent the sorting categories from -5 to 5, the numbers below them represent the number of statements that the participant was instructed to place under these. After completing the sorting task, participants were asked to write any comments with regard to the study or the sorting process in the response booklet provided.

Ethics

The research was approved by the Roehampton University Ethics Board. All services in Germany and England were asked whether they would require additional ethical approval, however, none of the services requested this. Participating services were also offered the option of seeking parental consent in addition to the consent of young people themselves in accordance with their policies. However, again none of the participating services required this. All young people were informed that they had to read the information sheet and sign a consent form before the information they provided could be used for analysis.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted using PQMethod.¹ To ensure that factors were only defined by pure loadings at the $p < 0.01$ level, i.e. by people who only loaded highly onto one factor, the loadings had to be equal or higher than 0.385 (see Watts and Stenner 2005 and Brown 1980 for formula) and had to have a difference of at least 0.1 between the highest and second highest loading (Kitzinger 1989).

A number of exploratory factor analyses were run to identify the best solution for the current data, including solutions with three, four, five and six factors, as well as solutions analysed using Centroid Factor Analysis and Principal Component Analysis, and either unrotated, rotated by hand or rotated using Varimax rotation. The factor analytic solution that was chosen had 65 participants loading on the six factors and explained 50% of the variance. The minimum loading of all representing sorts was 0.4 and the minimum number of participants defining a factor was three, which is deemed sufficient to interpret a factor (Brown 1980; Watts and Stenner 2005). The variance explained did not differ much across solutions, which meant that theoretical considerations were central in determining the final solution.

The factors, or groupings of individuals, in the chosen analysis, revealed distinctions along gender and country dimensions highlighting variation in dominant and alternative discourses according to cultural context, illustrating the value of this solution for the study. Bearing in mind the importance of considering context when engaging in discourse analysis, these dimensions offer an opportunity to explore (albeit tentatively) in what way culture may influence the discourses young people take up, and potentially highlight differences in dominant and alternative versions across different cultural contexts.

¹ A software package developed by Peter Schmolck, which can be downloaded at no cost from

<http://www.rz.unibw-muenchen.de/~p41bsmk/qmethod/>

Factor arrays (Stenner et al. 2006) illustrating the average ranking of statements for each factor can be found in Table 1. Factors are interpreted using these factors arrays in addition to participant comments and researcher knowledge. To illustrate the complete process of factor interpretation, the full interpretation of Factor 1 is provided followed by summaries for Factors 2 to Factors 6, as recommended by Watts and Stenner (2012). Statement rankings for each factor are represented in brackets, with the statement number preceding the ranking. Full factor interpretations for all factors can be provided by the first author upon request.

Factor 1: Sex as a responsible, intimate and shared experience

This factor represents the most commonly utilised account, with 13% of variance explained and an Eigenvalue of 13.52. Nineteen participants defined this factor: 11 German young men, 3 English young men, 1 English and 4 German young women. Table 2 illustrates some of the key demographics of participants contributing to this factor. As can be seen, the factor is mainly defined by German young people, especially German young men. However, English young men and German young women also define this factor indicating that this particular discourse is available in both countries and across gender.

One of the key aspects of this factor is its emphasis on the need to be responsible when having sex, with a particular focus on ‘conscientious’ contraceptive behaviour. This accountability transcends gender boundaries with both young men and young women being perceived as equally responsible for ensuring safe sex (19:+4 and 23:+3). As one of the German young women commented on statement 19 (Girls should always insist on having protected sex): “Man sollte mit der Verhütung erst aufhören, wenn man alt und reif genug für ein Kind ist!” (You should only stop using contraception when you are old and mature enough to have a child.)

This emphasis on using contraception creates an environment in which irresponsible sexual behaviour is unacceptable (17:-5; 9:-4; 7:-3; 21: -3) as reiterated by a German young man in response to statement 7 (It is okay for a boy to refuse to use a condom): “Es ist okay. Das Mädchen muss sich dann halt weigern Sex zu haben.” (It’s okay. Then the young woman just has to refuse to have sex.)

Within this factor, sex is not so much a physical act but a sign of intimacy and shared pleasure exemplified by respect of and sensitivity towards the sexual partner and his/ her wishes and needs (10: +5; 24: +4; 3: +3; 34: +3; 33: +5). One German young woman commented in response to statement 24 (One of the best things about sex is giving sexual pleasure to another person) simply: “Beide sollten sich dabei wohlfühlen!” (Both should feel good about it).

This factor strongly emphasises that sex is only acceptable when it takes place as the result of a joint decision, which both partners make out of their own free will and when they are ready (14: +3; 6: +3). Pressuring someone to have sex is unacceptable as is giving in to such pressures (28: -4; 40: -4). The ideal of respect is intrinsic to good sex and involves communicating and using contraception as a sign of respect for a partner and of wanting to share responsibility (10: +5; 33:+5).

This factor places a lot of emphasis on the emotional depth and sensitivity that is needed for sex, in contrast to the idea that young people – and especially young men – do not care about emotional involvement but have sex to, for example, gain status and to improve one’s reputation in the peer group. Within this factor, young men are described as enjoying sex more with a partner they care about and want to satisfy (3: +3; 37: -4).

This discourse seems to reproduce a narrative, which suggests that joint and freely made

responsible sexual decisions are the ideal for many young people, albeit achievable ones. For example, the ideal that young women should only have sex when they feel ready for it (14: +3), is paralleled by the perception that most young men are sensitive to the wishes of their partners (3: +3), and that it is seen as unacceptable to pressure someone into sex (28: -4). Furthermore, the contraceptive ideal that a person should always use a condom out of respect for their sexual partner (10: +5), that it is not okay for a young man to refuse to use a condom (7: -3), and that young women should always insist on having protected sex (19: +4), is mirrored by the perceived reality that many young men use contraception every time they have sex (23: +3), that having unprotected sex is not just part of being young (17: -5), and that 'risky' sex does not improve a young man's reputation (9: -4). Finally, the ideal that contraception should always be a joint decision (33: +5) is mirrored by the reality that most young people fully discuss all aspects of their sexual relationship with their sexual partner (34: +3)

This factor offers an account which emphasises young people's wish for intimacy with regard to sex. It is interesting that this particular discourse is the most important of the six factors in terms of number of participants defining it and variance explained. This clearly is a valid and important discourse which young people can and do draw upon when making decisions about sex and sexual relationships.

Factor 2: Sex as joint fun

This factor has an Eigenvalue of 11.4 and explains 11% of the variance. It is defined by 19 participants, 9 German participants (14%) and 10 English participants (42%). Again participants loading on this factor vary greatly in terms of characteristics such as gender and nationality.

This factor, like the first factor, strongly suggests that sex should only happen when you are ready to have sex and are aware of your own sexuality. In contrast to the first factor, however, emotional involvement is not a prerequisite for sex. Sex can happen out of curiosity and to have fun and in a more casual setting. Confident sex partners are more enjoyable as they do not require the same level of sensitivity, which reduces guilt and increases pleasure. As one German young man wrote in response to statement 37 (Boys enjoy sex more with someone they don't love): "[...] so kann man die Person vergessen, hat keine Schuldgefühle und nur Spaß." ([...] this way you can forget about the person, you don't feel guilt and can simply enjoy yourself). The reason that this factor emphasises the preference for confident partners might be due a greater level of sexual insecurities when compared to Factor 1. For example, one English young woman wrote in relation to statement 34 (Most young people discuss fully all aspects of their sexual relationship.): "They are too afraid to talk about it." She further commented to statement 35 (It is important to get to know your partner's body before sleeping with him/ her.): "People want to, but they don't want to scare off/ upset their partners," and a German boy explained in response to statement 3 (Most young men are sensitive to the wishes of their sexual partner): "Sie versuchen es, aber ich denke, da wird meist nichts draus." (They try, but most of the time it doesn't work.). These comments indicate that although young people would like to be sexually confident and considerate, they do not always have the confidence and skills to succeed.

Factor 3: Ideal versus reality

This factor has an Eigenvalue of 4.2 and explains 4% of the variance. It was defined by three English young people (23%), one boy and two young women (see Table 2 for a summary of demographics).

As in factor 1, the ideal context of sex is that of a caring relationship, where partners respect

each other and there is joint decision-making. Responsibility more so than emotional involvement is a strong aspect in this discourse, with unprotected sex unacceptable. One of the English young women commented: “[...] you should be old enough to understand you need to use protection.” As is the case for factor 2, this account suggests that it is predominantly the young woman’s responsibility to introduce condoms; however, once the subject of contraception has been brought up, a boy cannot refuse to use condoms.

However, as in factor 2, this ideal is not always met, with many young people portrayed as careless and casual about sex, possibly due to the pressures on young people highlighted by this factor, such as peer pressure and, in the case of young women, pressures from partners. As one of the English young women wrote in response to statement 20 (Young men often feel pressured into having sex by their girlfriends): “No, it’s the other way round.”

This factor, more so than factor 2, stresses the difference between how sex is and how sex should be. While factor 1 hardly acknowledges the casual side of sex and the pressures that this places on young people, factor 3 advocates the relationship so central to factor 1, but also acknowledges that for many young people sex occurs in a more casual and complex context.

Factor 4: Sex has to be responsible, consensual and shared

This factor has an Eigenvalue of 8.3 and explains 8% of the variance. It is loaded on by eleven German participants (25%), nine young men and two young women (see Table 2 for a summary of demographics).

In this account, sex is constructed as an intimate experience between two equal, consenting and - ideally - experienced adults. More so than in previous accounts, consent and joint decision making are stressed with young people having to clearly consent to and agree on all

aspects of sex, including contraceptive use and specific sexual activities, such as oral sex.

This could be because of the emphasis given to the serious consequences of sex, which do not allow for excuses or gender-specific rights to forego responsibility. One young woman defining this factor added to statement 7: “Deine Verhütung geht vor.” (Your protection comes first.). However, in an ideal world this factor is advocating a highly intimate experience characterised by partners being sensitive to each other’s needs and wishes.

This factor is only defined by German participants, predominantly boys. It is characterised by a very straightforward idea about sex as a responsible and mature decision. It lacks the focus on insecurities expressed in factor 3, and in this respect resembles factor 1. It firmly advocates sharing the experience and pleasures of sex and making healthy mature decisions. Both factors 1 and 4 lack the ambiguity of factors 2 and 3, where young people seem to struggle more with uniting reality and ideal.

Factor 5: Caring relationships offer the perfect context for fulfilling sex

This factor has an Eigenvalue of 7.3 and explains 7% of the variance. It was defined by four German young men (14%) and three English young men (15%) (see Table 2 for a summary of demographics).

One of the key aspects of factor 5 is its emphasis on consensual sex, as illustrated by the significance attributed to the importance of waiting to have sex until a person is ready. In addition, sex has to happen free of pressures and between equal individuals. This factor, like factor four, very much emphasises the pleasurable aspects of sex, whereby intimacy enhances a person’s enjoyment of sex. However, this factor seems to construct intimacy as resulting from a relationship not casual sex and therefore appears more similar to factor 1 in this respect. This factor also supports a more stepwise progression towards penetrative sex

starting with knowing your own body to knowing your partner's body to, when you are ready, having sex in a trusting and sensitive relationship.

The importance of viewing contraception within a relational context is emphasised by participants' comments such as the following one from an English young man: "Many [Q items] talk of condoms as if they were the only means of contraception. I believe they should be used regardless of any other current means in the early stages of a relationship. But later other means can be used solely."

In this account, sex is about emotional involvement, intimacy and giving pleasure to the other person, and happens between two equal individuals. Sex is not generally engaged in lightly and ideally should happen without pressure and when both are ready. In this it is very similar to factor 1. However, it advocates the need for a trusting relationship almost more strongly than factor 1. Sex is something that evolves out of an intimate relationship. This account very much condemns power abuses, with both partners perceived as equal in their rights to have fulfilling sexual lives. This account appears to combine both traditional elements such as having sex within a relationship with other aspects such as an emphasis on equality between sexual partners.

Factor 6: Equality between partners

This factor has an Eigenvalue of 7.3 and explains 7% of the variance. It was defined by six participants (11%), four German participants and two English participants.

This factor's main emphasis is equality between sexual partners. Contraception for example has to be a joint decision with unprotected sex never acceptable, and the responsibility for contraception not gender-specific. The ideal context for sex is a trusting relationship, with partners getting to know each other physically before having sex, and with partners being

equal in terms of their rights to have a fulfilling sexual relationship. The abuse of power and exerting pressure on a partner to have sex or perform any sexual act are condemned. Equality should exist between all sexual partners and across all sexual contexts.

Discussion

In summary, the current study identified a varied set of discourses promoting very different sexual behaviours. Although across all solutions, it was common for participants to load highly on more than one factor, the six factors had only one consensus item, i.e. an item that does not distinguish between any pair of factors. This was statement 14 (Girls should only have sex when they feel ready.) and was ranked +3 for factor 6, +4 for factors 1, 3 and 4, and +5 for factors 2 and 5. That this analysis had only one consensus item illustrates that although some factors are sharing elements, they offer independent accounts and deal with different issues with regard to young people's sexual relationships. For example, in line with previous research (e.g. Maxwell 2007; Allen 2003), young people taking part in the current study drew on the one hand on discourses, which challenged gender inequality within sexual relationships, and on the other hand, they utilised discourses, which reinforced them, highlighting the multifaceted nature of available discourses on adolescent sexual behaviour (Ingham 2006; Ricardo et al. 2006).

All of the factors above tie in with prevalent ideas on young peoples' sexuality as illustrated in the following sections. Discourse 1, for example, the most common of the narratives produced by the young people in the study tells a story of responsibility, intimacy and sensitivity. Within the context of existing research as well as dominant societal and media portrayals of young men (Joshi, Peter and Valkenburg 2011; Hyde et al. 2012), the number of

young men who drew on this factor is surprising. In this it supports research by Smiler (2008, 17) who identified relational reasons for young men's dating and sexual engagement and challenges researchers to go "beyond stereotypes when examining boys' romantic and sexual relationships". Another point of interest is that although four German young women loaded on this factor, only one English young woman did so. This might suggest that the ambivalence around young women's sexuality, often along the lines of traditional double standards (e.g. Ringrose et al. 2013), makes it difficult for English young women to take on positions that emphasise assertive sexuality. If this is the case, this is an important starting point to help young people gain positive and healthy sexualities.

Factors 2 and 3 highlight a lot of ambivalence and insecurity in the sexual encounters of young people. However, while the account in factor 2 places sex in a casual and fun setting, the third discourse highlights a struggle between a relational ideal and a reality defined by lack of control around sexual activity. This factor supports research that highlights the potential problems that can emerge when more prohibitive societies portray especially young girls' sexuality as something that is dangerous and needs to be controlled, instead of highlighting the right of young people to experience sexual pleasure freedom as more sexually open societies seem to do (Joshi, Peter, and Valkenburg 2011; Hyde et al. 2012). It seems that these mixed messages are taken up by young people themselves.

In contrast to factor 3 and in line with research on media depictions in more permissive countries (Joshi, Peter and Valkenburg 2011; Tincknell et al. 2003; Carpenter 2001), the fourth discourse, defined only by German participants, drew on a story that highlighted pleasurable and intimate experience based on respect and consent. Here sexuality and sex are

a normal part of young people's lives and happen in a context of responsibility for oneself and the partner. However, this does not have to occur in a relationship.

Factor 5 is the only factor highlighting the need for a stepwise progression towards full penetrative sex. It is only loaded on by boys and even more strongly than Factor 1 shows that young men cherish the intimacy and the emotional security that is offered by a relationship at least as much as young women.

Discourse 6 brings in another element often ignored by the other discourses: namely power abuse and pressure. Much research highlights that young people do experience either partner pressure or peer pressure (Ingham 2006; Ricardo et al. 2006) and this factor specifically identifies this as unacceptable. Sex in this account is not so much an intimate and emotional connection or experience as it is one that should occur in an equal, shared and trusting relationship.

All the factors together illustrate that young people have a range of discourses available ranging across relational and other dimensions often along gender and culture lines. The discourses most often used by English participants tend to involve more careful negotiations between how sex should be and what the reality of sex is often like, such as in factors 2 and 3, fitting in with research suggesting that England holds a generally prohibitive attitude to teenage sex and sexuality (Moore and Prescott 2013; Tincknell et al. 2003). In comparison, German participants seem to draw more on discourses that encourage an exploration of both pleasure and intimacy as well as acknowledge the need to protect oneself and ones' partners against pregnancy or STIs. For example, factor 4, mainly defined by German young men, constructs sex as a mature and responsible decision and leaves little room for insecurities.

It seems that cultural differences influence young people to choose certain discourses over others, changing the likelihood of some discourses becoming 'dominant' or the norm with respect to young people's sexuality. For example, factor 1, provides a positive picture of caring and respect for a sexual partner, which is available to young people in England (as illustrated by young people drawing on this discourse) as well as in Germany. However, in the present study, it appears to be an alternative for English young people, not a dominant discourse. In contrast, the German young people seem to draw on this narrative more readily. Overall, these cultural differences seem to be in line with research findings suggesting differences in societally shared notions of gender and sexuality.

Future directions

This study used samples from two quite small geographical areas. The samples may, therefore, not necessarily be representative of English and German young people in general. Other participants may have expressed additional and other discourses. However, the present findings offer a good range of discourses with both dominant and alternative discourses within them, and are in line with other research that has looked at one or the other country separately.

In future work it may be valuable to explore the consistency and impact of discourses on young people's realities, and to look in more depth at how cultural messages and discourses are taken up by young people. Although some discourse research, particularly into how young people negotiate pornography, has explored how some young people engage and internalise cultural and media messages (Lerum and Dworkin 2009), there has been little or no research that explicitly compared these discourses with those actually taken up by young people.

Conclusions

The current research has explored the discourses young people draw on when making sense of sexual relationships and highlighted the importance of cultural context in the take-up of differing accounts. Young people have a range of discourses available to them by which to make sense of sexual relationships. However, there seem to be cultural differences in terms of which of these discourses are dominant and alternative. By identifying the discourses and possible cultural trends, the current research has provided a basis for future education and interventions to help young people develop healthy and assertive sexualities. Furthermore, it offers a starting point for identifying which discourses need to be encouraged more in any one country through, for example, education to help young people deal with the complex sexual situations they encounter.

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Table 2: Participant characteristics across the seven Q factors

| Characteristics | | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 | Factor 4 | Factor 5 | Factor 6 |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Country | Germany | 15 | 9 | 0 | 7 | 4 | 4 |
| (No. of participants) | England | 4 | 10 | 3 | 0 | 3 | 2 |
| Gender | Young men | 14 | 8 | 1 | 9 | 6 | 2 |
| (No. of participants) | Young women | 5 | 11 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Age (Mean) | | 17.33 | 17.70 | 16.33 | 17.71 | 18.17 | 18 |
| Has had sex (No. of participants) | | 10 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 5 | 3 |
| Has not had sex | | 2 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| No. of sex partners (Mean) | | 9.67 | 3.33 | 1 | 1.40 | 4.20 | 2.67 |

Table 1: Q statements and their factor arrays

| Statement | Factor 1 | Factor 2 | Factor 3 | Factor 4 | Factor 5 | Factor 6 |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| (1) For a boy, not getting a girl pregnant is far less important than having sex. | -2 | -1 | -5 | -2 | 1 | 3 |
| (2) A girl often has to have sex to keep her boyfriend happy. | -3 | 0 | 1 | 5 | -2 | -2 |
| (3) Most boys are sensitive to the wishes of their sexual partners. | 3 | -1 | -1 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| (4) Boys are more likely than girls to introduce condoms during sex. | 1 | -2 | -2 | 0 | -2 | 3 |
| (5) Boys use sex more often than girls to get things they want. | 0 | -2 | 1 | -2 | -3 | 1 |
| (6) Virginity is the most precious thing that someone can have and should be kept until the person is mature and ready for sex. | 3 | 4 | 5 | -4 | 4 | -1 |
| (7) It is okay for a boy to refuse to use a condom. | -3 | -4 | -2 | -4 | -4 | -5 |
| (8) There comes a point when it is too late to change your mind about whether you would like to have sex. | -2 | -5 | -1 | -2 | 0 | 1 |
| (9) Having 'risky' sex improves a boy's reputation. | -4 | -3 | -5 | -5 | -4 | -1 |
| (10) A person should always use a condom out of respect for their sexual partner. | 5 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 |
| (11) The possibility of getting pregnant is less important for many girls than the possibility of losing their boyfriends by refusing to have unprotected sex. | -5 | 1 | 0 | -3 | 0 | 0 |
| (12) There is a lot of pressure on young people to lose their virginity before the legal age of consent. | -2 | 3 | 4 | -1 | -1 | 0 |
| (13) Girls experience greater peer pressure to have sex than boys. | -2 | 0 | 2 | -1 | -3 | -3 |
| (14) Girls should only have sex when they feel ready for it. | 4 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 3 |
| (15) Boys can expect a girl to give oral sex even if she does not want to sleep with him. | -1 | -3 | 5 | -3 | -2 | -4 |
| (16) Sex without love is meaningless for girls. | 0 | -2 | 3 | 0 | -1 | 2 |
| (17) Having unprotected sex is just part of being young. | -5 | -2 | -3 | -4 | -1 | -5 |
| (18) Girls in our society have more | 0 | -2 | -1 | 3 | 2 | -1 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| power than boys about how and when sex takes place. | | | | | | |
| (19) Girls should always insist on having protected sex. | 4 | 2 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 5 |
| (20) Boys often feel pressured into having sex by their girlfriends. | -2 | -4 | -4 | -1 | -5 | 2 |
| (21) Many young people do not care about the possibility of getting pregnant when having sex. | -3 | 0 | -4 | -5 | -1 | 1 |
| (22) It is very difficult for a girl to remain a virgin if all her friends have already had sex. | -1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | -2 |
| (23) Many boys use contraception every time they have sex. | 3 | -3 | -4 | 0 | 1 | - |
| (24) One of the best things about sex is giving sexual pleasure to another person. | 4 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 | -1 |
| (25) It is okay for girls to be as sexually active as boys. | 0 | 2 | -1 | 2 | 4 | 0 |
| (26) Young people do not always respect their sexual partners. | -1 | 3 | -2 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| (27) For boys, the most important part of sex is the initial conquest. | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2 | -3 | 2 |
| (28) To make your partner have sex if he/ she is unsure about it is an acceptable way to get sex. | -4 | -5 | -2 | -2 | -5 | -2 |
| (29) Many boys do not feel able to talk about their sexual wishes with their sexual partners. | -1 | -1 | -3 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| (30) Boys have more power than girls in sexual relationships. | 1 | -1 | 1 | 2 | -4 | -4 |
| (31) It is important for both boys and girls to get to know their own bodies and what they enjoy sexually before having sex for the first time. | 0 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 |
| (32) Sexually active girls are more attractive to boys. | 2 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 2 | -4 |
| (33) The use of contraception should always be a joint decision. | 5 | 0 | 3 | 5 | 0 | 2 |
| (34) Most young people fully discuss all aspects of their sexual relationship with their sexual partners. | 3 | -4 | 0 | -1 | 1 | 1 |
| (35) It is important to get to know your partner's body before sleeping with him/ her. | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 4 |
| (36) It is easier to have unprotected sex. | -1 | 1 | 4 | -2 | 3 | -3 |
| (37) Boys enjoy sex more with someone they don't love. | -3 | 0 | -3 | 3 | 0 | -2 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| (38) Sexually active boys are more attractive to girls. | 2 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | -3 |
| (39) It is okay for a girl to take the lead in sex, including asking a boy for sex. | 2 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 3 |
| (40) A boy can't refuse sex with a girl in case his friends will laugh at him. | -4 | -3 | 0 | -3 | 0 | -3 |
| (41) Boys think that girls who carry condoms sleep around. | 0 | 0 | 0 | -1 | -2 | 0 |
| (42) Many girls believe that boys do not listen to their sexual wishes. | 0 | 3 | -1 | -3 | -3 | -2 |
| (43) Young people often have sex out of curiosity rather than love. | 2 | 5 | -3 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| (44) Boys enjoy sex more within a trusting relationship. | 2 | -1 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 |
| (45) Girls are more sexually adventurous than boys. | 1 | 0 | -2 | 0 | -2 | 0 |