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Putting ethical sex into practice: sexual negotiation, gender and citizenship in the lives of young women and men

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When young people begin to explore their sexuality they are often subject to particularly strong surveillance from adults and the institutions of the state. How young people become ethical sexual citizens is not well understood. In recent years an increased focus on comprehensive sexuality programmes that include violence prevention have led to the development of a number of education programmes targeting young people. This article will draw on quantitative and qualitative responses of a three-phase (pre-group, post-group, follow-up) impact evaluation from 153 young women and men from Australia and New Zealand who participated in the *Sex and Ethics Violence Prevention Program* from 2009 to 2011. The Program encourages young people to explore alternative approaches to gender and sexuality and learn skills in ethical negotiation which they can utilise in 'real life' situations. This includes developing a reflexive ethical stance to consider how sexual choices impact on themselves and others. The primary aim of the Program is to reduce pressured, coerced sex and sexual assault in intimate relationships. Despite gender differences women and men were able to move toward behavioural change, explore alternative approaches to gender relations and increase their skills in sexual negotiation as ethical sexual citizens.

Keywords: sexuality; gender; sexual ethics; young people; sexual assault prevention

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing debates within the sexuality and violence prevention education fields and how this impacts on the lives of young women and men. One of the challenges facing all of us who work in this space is how to develop effective ways of working with young people around issues of sex and sexuality that is meaningful to them. Children and young people's difference from the adult 'norm' assumed of citizens in liberal models of citizenship result in overlooking their citizenship through constructing them as 'not yet citizens' (Moosa-Mitha 2005). This is exacerbated by a recent return to the extension of the period that many young people remain dependant on their families (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). Despite this they are often seen as a threat to citizenship in need of retraining (Carrington 1993), ethical reconstruction, discipline or protection by or from adults and the state (Bessant 2001). Young people are often subject to enhanced surveillance by institutions of the state (Kelly 2000). This is seen as essential to protect young people from sexual danger (Allen 2011) while young women remain subject to a

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gendered double standard walking a fine line between being seen as ‘frigid’ or as a ‘slut’ if they are seen to be too knowing (Powell 2010). This sits alongside notions of innocence and purity which are reinforced by withholding sexuality information and skills that can protect young people from potential dangers and also provide them with the building blocks for ethical identity formation. This paradox serves to maintain young people in a suspended state of not yet citizens which magically disappears at the legal age of citizenship which varies cross culturally. The situation is complicated by differing ages when the right to vote is granted, which in turn may differ from the age of sexual consent within countries and across cultures. It is assumed young people can then spontaneously take up fully formed citizenship with all its individual and collective rights and responsibilities at a predetermined age.

Rather than accepting this construction of young people, we want to argue for a more cultural or difference centred approach to citizenship following the call by Judith Vega and Pieter Boele Van Hensbroek (2010) to keep alive a focus on exploring the cultural turnings of the political. This call is also evident in the work of Mossa-Mitha (2005) who argues that a difference focus of citizenship creates the possibility of a more inclusive citizenship especially for children and young people. This approach places as central the lived experiences of young people, with their own voices and decision-making abilities. In this paper we explore the challenges raised by these ideas through the discussion of one particular programme – the *Sex and Ethics Violence Prevention Program* (referred to as the Program in short). We consider the possibilities it creates for young women and men to refashion dominant gendered practices in sexual contexts and develop their own sense of sexual citizenship. Specifically, drawing on quantitative and qualitative responses from a three-phase (pre-group, post-group, follow-up) impact evaluation, this paper highlights the ways that the Program expands young people’s ideas and skills around ethical sexual practice. To begin, we canvass some of the pressing challenges within sexuality and violence prevention education that inform the development of this research and education project.

Beyond traditional approaches to sexuality and violence prevention education

Traditional approaches to sexuality education have often focused on the anatomical, the ‘plumbing’ and the risks of sexual behaviour in terms of unplanned pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and sometimes sexual assault (DiCenso *et al.* 2001, Scott 2005, Carmody 2009a). Dissatisfaction by young people with existing sexuality education is evident in a number of international studies. For example, a recent study (Hilton 2007) found that young men aged 16–17 in the UK wanted to know more about emotions and sexual techniques. A further study in Northern Ireland with 14 to 25-year-old young people found that they rejected what they saw as negative approaches to sexual feelings and emotions (Rolston *et al.* 2005). Despite decades of political and education campaigns to try and create sexual equality, school age young women who are too sexually knowledgeable continue to run the risk of condemnation by peers and others in the schoolyard while sexually active heterosexual young men are admired (Carmody 2009a). A gendered double standard remains. Violence prevention programmes also often have a limited scope by focusing almost exclusively on the risks faced by women. These limited approaches to sexuality and violence prevention education fail to grasp that young people do not segment

their lives in this way. They often understand more clearly than educators that sexuality involves embodied experiences that can shift to and from pleasure to danger in moments.

Central to developing alternative models is the need to move away from a moral-panic approach that fears and seeks to control the sexual lives of young women and men. There is a global recognition of the need and entitlement of young people to sexuality education as indicated in the International Guidelines on Sexuality Education produced by UNESCO (2009):

Few young people receive adequate preparation for their sexual lives. This leaves them potentially vulnerable to coercion, abuse and exploitation, unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. Many young people approach adulthood faced with conflicting and confusing messages about sexuality and gender. This is often exacerbated by embarrassment, silence, and disapproval of open discussion of sexual matters by adults, including parents and teachers, at the very time when it is most needed. Globally, young people are becoming sexually mature and active at an earlier age. They are also marrying later, thereby extending the period of time from sexual debut until marriage...It is therefore essential to recognise the need and entitlement of all young people to sexuality education. (UNESCO 2009, p. 2)

This approach recognises the complexity of young people's lives and articulates the importance of understanding both sexuality and gender and provides a challenge to educators, parents and others who work with young people. The complexity and diversity of ways it is possible to express sexual intimacy, whether casual or longer term, invites the exploration of new approaches to working with young people. New - approaches increasingly recognise that curricula needs to balance both the pleasurable aspects of sex with a recognition of the unintended consequences of sex including the high rates of pressured and unwanted sex experienced especially by young women. In Australia a large scale study of year 10–12 (age 16–18) school students has been conducted every five years since 1992 (Mitchell *et al.* 2011). The survey was last administered in 2008 and 38% of young women indicated they had experienced unwanted sex. They cited being too drunk or pressure from their partner as the most common reasons for having sex when they did not want to (Smith *et al.* 2009).

Despite these figures, young people can be active participants in shaping their own lives and the extent to which they conform or resist gendered scripts. For young women, there has been some indication of a shift in young women's positioning within heterosexual relationships. Recent research suggests that young women often contest their positioning as sexually passive, uninterested in sex and unable to enjoy and express sexual pleasures (Stewart 1999, Allen 2003, 2005, 2011, Carmody 2004, 2009b, Renold and Ringrose 2008, Ovenden 2011). Alternative possibilities for young men are also emerging within sexuality and violence prevention programmes. As Flood (2006), Berkowitz (2004) and Pease (2008) have argued, the inclusion of young men in prevention education may shift the discourse of young women's accountability, particularly surrounding alcohol consumption and 'risk' management, which currently dominates the prevention field.

While the research surrounding young people and sexual agency is subject to ongoing debate, it is clear that education programmes aimed at this group need to encourage participants to think beyond popular discourses surrounding sex, gender and sexuality. As Anastasia Powell (2008, 2010) has argued, education work needs to

engage both young men and women in embodied gender practice, as well as encourage verbal negotiation in everyday sexual encounters, to ensure consensual sexual experiences. Louisa Allen (2005, 2011) demonstrates clearly in her work with young people in New Zealand, that programmes which fail to acknowledge young peoples' lived realities are less likely to capture their attention. We agree with both these propositions and extend them by arguing that by attending to the development of young people's ideas and skills around ethical sexual practice, education programmes have the capacity to foster new configurations of gender. Furthermore, by encouraging young people to utilise skills in 'real life' situations, educative programmes may also be effective in 'opening up new frames' and developing counter and alternative discourses (Fine 1992, Fine *et al.* 2000).

The Sex and Ethics Violence Prevention Program

The *Sex and Ethics Violence Prevention Program* (Carmody 2009a, 2009b) resulted from a three-year Australian Research Council Grant from 2005 to 2008, which explored how to build ethical relationships between young women and men aged 16–26 years of age. The Program aims to reduce unwanted and pressured sex between people known to each other, but not at the expense of the positive experiences sex can provide. This alternative approach sees young people as having agency and the ability to negotiate ethical sexual lives. The Program offers them the opportunity to practice and develop or enhance knowledge and skills to realise this potential more fully. The 2 to 3-hour per week Program runs for six sessions and locates the individual knowledge and skills young people learn within a broader sociocultural context of gendered relations. It challenges them to reflect on the gendered expectations of sex in casual and ongoing relationships and ways to actively resist dominant beliefs that promote and condone sexual and other forms of intimate violence. An initial pilot with 47 young women and men was conducted in 2006, evaluated and minor adaptations were made. The Program has subsequently been rolled out across several states in Australia and in New Zealand and continues to be delivered to a wide range of young people in diverse settings.

The Program content was developed after in depth research interviews with young people across New South Wales (NSW) and considering the research findings of other researchers working with young people and sexuality issues. This reflects a commitment to take seriously the voices and experiences of young people. The Program provides young women and men opportunities to engage with 'real life' scenarios and to explore alternative ways of negotiating sexual intimacy. The areas included in the Program take account of issues the women and men felt were missing from their own sexuality education and what in hindsight they felt could have helped them negotiate the beginning of their sexual lives with more confidence and less distress and embarrassment (See Carmody 2009a for a more detailed discussion of young women and men's experiences).

The Program involves interactive activities conducted over six weeks to maximise impact on attitudinal and behavioural change. Topics include:

- Different cultural perspectives on sexual intimacy
- The sexual ethics framework and how to decide what is right for you and the impact on others

- How to handle pressures to be sexual
- Non-verbal communication skills
- Alcohol and drugs and the impact on sexual decision-making
- Skills in ethical consent and the law, ethical use of social media
- Negotiating conflicting desires and needs in casual and ongoing relationships
- Recognising the signs of abusive relationships
- Breaking up and
- Being an ethical bystander and standing up to sexual violence and other gender-based abuse in your community

The Program follows best practice prevention education principles including a clearly articulated-theoretical approach which in this programme is based on sexual ethics (Morrison *et al.* 2004). It is therefore more than a series of activities. Rather, it is a carefully planned programme that builds from general issues of sexuality, explores the negotiation of ethical practices for those engaging in sexual intimacy as well as considering the social and friendship context. It concludes by focusing on how young people can be active citizens in their communities and stand up against sexual and other forms of intimate violence.

The role of sexual ethics in reshaping gendered expectations of sex

Sexual expression is primarily a relational activity and as such raises the question of how we are 'to do' this relationship well if we wish to live an ethical life. The approach taken by Carmody (2003, 2006, 2009a) in relation to sexual ethics is concerned with determining the conditions for ethical exploration for different types of people, rather than establishing the borders of acceptable or unacceptable desires, thoughts and actions. This approach includes feminist conceptions of ethics; including a conception of gender that acknowledges the possibility of the many ways it is possible to be female or male.

We have found that the French philosopher Foucault's (1981) work on ethical sexual subjectivities has particular relevance to thinking through alternate spaces and possibilities in working with young people. Foucault suggests that if we wish to be sexually ethical we need to consider not only our own needs (care of the self) but that we need to be mindful of the impact of our desires on the other person (care of the other). This process of mutual concern is possible he argues through a process of constant reflection and renegotiation with ourselves and others (Foucault, as cited Rabinow 1997, p. 287). These concepts have been adapted by Carmody (2009a) and form the theoretical framework that underpins the Program.

How the Program assists young people to develop skills in ethical relating

Participants in the *Sex and Ethics Program* are introduced in Week 2 to an ethical framework based on the theoretical ideas discussed above and developed by one of the authors. The Program offers structured activities using real-life scenarios which prompt participants to think beyond popular discourses surrounding sex, gender and sexuality. For example, the role plays encourage participants to engage in a process of ethical reflection – asking them 'what is "really" going on', and what might be the consequences for the characters involved? This provides a space to

name and examine dominant gendered expectations about how men and women relate. It also encourages hearing a diversity of views and experiences from which group members can expand their own world views. Through a series of carefully constructed critical questions and individual and group reflection, young people are also invited to consider alternative possibilities for how people may relate in intimate situations.

Reflection is used in a specific way in the *Sex and Ethics Program*. Reflection allows us to experiment with alternative approaches and to try them out. It provides an opportunity to consider our real-life experiences and try to make sense of them. Reid (2002, p. 126) uses a reflective cycle to describe the process involved. This includes considering what happened, what you were thinking and feeling, what was 'good' or 'bad' about the experience and how you can make sense of what happened. This is followed by considering alternatives and what you might do if it happened again. In this Program these steps are extended beyond a purely individual and internal process. Rather this concept is extended to understand how we are situated in our lives and how age, ability, gender, sexuality, culture and faith, may intersect and impact on our reflective stance and the possibilities we are able to imagine. A consideration of these additional factors moves beyond individual musing to locate these very musings within an historical, cultural and gendered context. Therefore participants are encouraged to move from a position of personal reflection to reflexivity.

Young people's involvement in the *Sex and Ethics Program*

Young people have been recruited into the *Sex and Ethics Program* primarily through youth workers and other people in key professional relationships with young people. They have been drawn from a range of settings such as: generic and specialist youth services, schools, university residential colleges, football clubs, university student associations. To date these have been located in rural, regional and urban areas in NSW, Queensland, Western Australia and Wellington New Zealand. The young people are sexually, geographically, economically and culturally and gender diverse and vary in age from 16 to 26 years of age.

The effective delivery of the Program is enhanced by providing a comprehensive four-day training Program for educators who run the Program. This reflects a commitment to build the skills of the community sector to respond to issues of sexuality and violence prevention. The objective of the training is to learn the Program philosophy and the skills needed to deliver the Program effectively and safely. All potential educators spend the first three days participating in six sessions of activities that they will deliver to young people. This provides them with an opportunity to reflect on their own ethical stance in relation to the Program content and their beliefs and values about young people and how this might impact on Program delivery. This is complimented by a fourth day when educators present their understanding of the ethical framework used in this Program and an activity from the Program to the whole training group. They receive feedback on their understanding of the theoretical underpinning of the Program and their presentation skills.

The research

The following section will discuss the data collected by educators and analysed by university research staff involved in the Program. The data were collected from 2009 to 2011 from multiple locations across Australia and in Wellington, New Zealand. Human Ethics Committee Approval was obtained from the University of Western Sydney in NSW and also from the Health Service in New Zealand to collect evaluation impact data. Written consent was obtained from all participants and parental consent was also obtained for 16 to 18-year old participants unless they were recognised as independent young adults living away from their family of origin.

The data that follow are based on survey responses from 153 young women ($N = 71$) and men ($N = 81$), aged between 16 and 26 years (*mean age* = 19.4 years). Participants self-reported over 35 different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, the largest being Anglo-Australian (26.2%), Pākehā-New Zealander (20%; non-Maori New Zealander) and Samoan (7.8%). Participants also identified with a range of sexualities, including gay (9.8%), queer (6.5%), bisexual (5.9%) and lesbian (3.3%) with the largest group identifying as heterosexual (66%).

The method for data collection involved administering a short standardised survey at three time periods. The first baseline data were collected at the first group meeting (pre-group survey); it was repeated again at six weeks in the final session of the Program (post-group survey). A further email survey was administered 4–6¹ months following completion of the education groups (follow-up survey). There were 153 participants who completed the pre-group survey in Week 1 and again in Week 6 (post-survey). At the 4–6 month follow-up email survey stage, 94 participants (61.4% of the original sample) completed the web-based survey. Of this remaining group, 52 participants (55%) were male, and 42 (45%) were female. The attrition rate across the post-group and follow-up survey was 38.6%. This rate is to be expected but lower than anticipated given the lapse in time between the end of the Program and the follow-up survey (which was between 4 and 6 months), and the method of delivery (which was an online link send to participants' nominated email address). Given the online mode of survey delivery, as well as the transitional lives of the young people who took part in the Program, we have no clear data regarding whether these participants received the email to partake in the follow-up survey. Unfortunately, there is no way of ascertaining whether those participants who did not respond to the follow-up survey had negative or positive experiences.

The survey, which was developed by Carmody for the original pilot study in 2006 (See Carmody 2009a for the published results of this), included two specific survey items to determine what impact, if any, the Program had on young people's behaviour and sexual relationships, and whether this was maintained six weeks and four or six months later. In the subsequent research over 2009–2011, there was a range of data collected from the three-stage evaluation survey (pre-group, post-group, follow-up) including information on knowledge about sexual assault and the most important factors in negotiating sex. This paper reports on the results in relation to two specific survey items designed to assess the impact of the sexual ethics approach on the lives of young people's sexual decision-making. The original pilot indicated that young people found the approach helpful so we wished to understand if this was still the case with a larger and more diverse sample. The five-point Likert scale in the survey asked them to identify their level of agreement with the statement:

'I know how to work out what I want from a sexual experience'. The second item aimed to determine participant understanding of their partner's needs in sexual experiences. In particular, we wanted to assess their ability to care for themselves in sexual situations and secondly to understand their desires or behaviour has an impact on another person. This focus on self-care and care of the other reflects the approach to sexual ethics underpinning the Program and described above. The following section firstly addresses statistical research results concerning these questions and this is followed by a discussion of the qualitative findings.

Statistical results

A paired samples *t*-test was conducted to compare participant scores from pre-group to post-group, and from pre-group to follow-up. The results from the statistical analyses indicated that participants reported a significant increase (from pre-group survey to post-group survey; and from pre-group survey to follow-up survey) in their understanding of their own needs and their partner's needs in sexual relationships after they had completed the *Sex and Ethics Program*. These results indicate a significant increase in participants' understanding of themselves and their partners in negotiating sexual relationships (see Tables 1 and 2 for an overview of the results for these items). As outlined in Table 2, the follow-up email survey results indicated that the increases achieved by the end of the Week 6 session were maintained a number of months after the Program had ended. The follow-up survey also asked young people to tell us if they were using any of the ideas or skills learnt in the Program. We found that 4–6 months after the Program was completed, 88.3% of young people reported using the ideas and 87.2% reported using the skills they had learnt in the Program, as well as using ethical bystander skills.²

Differences across young women and men

The statistical data revealed that, when analysed as separate groups, both young women and young men reported a significant increase in their understanding of their own needs and their partner's needs from pre-group to post-group survey (see Table 3). These results suggest that the impact of the Program had similar benefits across both genders.

However, there was some differences in the baseline (pre-group) scores for these items; with young men recording higher baseline scores than young women regarding their understanding of their own, and their partner's needs. Specifically, gender differences were observed in terms of self-reporting for 'understanding of their own

Table 1. Mean scores and *t*-values for the pre- and post-group survey items: 'understanding own needs' and 'understanding partner's needs' in sexual experiences.

	<i>n</i>	Pre-group <i>M</i> (SD)	Post-group <i>M</i> (SD)	<i>t</i>
Understanding own needs	153	3.73 (0.97)	4.40 (0.70)	8.9***
Understanding partner's needs	153	3.43 (1.05)	4.14 (0.88)	9.0***

*** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Mean scores and *t*-values for the pre-group and follow-up survey items: 'understanding own needs' and 'understanding partner's needs' in sexual experiences.

	<i>n</i>	Pre-group <i>M</i> (SD)	Follow-up <i>M</i> (SD)	<i>t</i>
Understanding own needs	82	3.82 (0.94)	4.34 (0.69)	4.77***
Understanding partner's needs	83	3.48 (1.04)	3.94 (0.85)	4.32***

Note: The number of participants included in this analysis reflects the number of participants who answered the survey items in both the pre-group and the follow-up survey.

*** $p < 0.001$.

needs' and 'understanding of their partner's needs' in sexual experiences. Furthermore, for young women, the largest increase in mean score observed across the pre-group and post-group survey was for 'understanding of *own needs* in sexual relationships'. For young men, the largest increase in mean score across the pre-group and post-group survey was observed in their 'understanding of their *partners needs* in sexual relationships'. These patterns in the data are promising when we consider gender differences in sexual relationships in the broader cultural context. For example, previous research suggests that young women are likely to take on their partner's, rather than their own, needs in sexual relationships (Holland *et al.* 1998). Young women's increase in understanding of their own needs following programme completion suggests that the Program offered young women new perspectives in terms of their own needs and wants in sexual relationships. Similarly, the notable increase in men's understanding of their partner's needs underlines the effectiveness of the Program in this critical area for relationships education. This is particularly important given the elevated levels of sexual assault for this age group often arise in a context where women's wants and needs are invisible or ignored (Tolman 2002, Gavey 2005, Carmody 2009a).

Qualitative findings and analysis

The statistical results for the 153 participants indicate some very positive outcomes with significant changes reported and maintained over time. However, the qualitative results add a depth of understanding to how young women and men used the

Table 3. Young women's and men's mean scores and *t*-values for the pre- and post-group survey items: 'understanding own needs' and 'understanding partner's needs' in sexual experiences.

	<i>n</i>	Understanding own needs			Understanding partner's needs		
		Pre-group <i>M</i> (SD)	Post-group <i>M</i> (SD)	<i>t</i>	Pre-group <i>M</i> (SD)	Post-group <i>M</i> (SD)	<i>t</i>
Young women	71	3.59 (1.14)	4.31 (0.80)	6.04***	3.37 (1.06)	4.03 (0.93)	5.93***
Young men	81	3.84 (0.79)	4.49 (0.59)	6.78***	3.48 (1.05)	4.25 (0.83)	6.70***

Note: One participant who identified as 'transgender' was not included in the analysis.

*** $p < 0.0001$.

Program ideas and skills in their real-life situations. Their responses provide insight into the process of developing their identities as ethical sexual subjects and citizens.

The extended response questions were analysed using thematic decomposition, an approach outlined by Stenner (1993) and Braun and Clarke (2006), which focuses on identifying ‘themes’, in participant responses, as well as the inter-connection of these themes with wider, socially produced, discourses. The following section describes some of the qualitative responses from the follow-up survey, which asked participants to give specific examples (and describe a situation) where they used the ideas and skills from the Program to negotiate a sexual relationship. It begins with responses from young women and this is followed by the responses from young men. No real names have been used.

Responses from young women

The statistical results indicate that the young women in this study did report increased understanding of their own needs. This was embodied in a number of ways as the following examples highlight. For a number of young women who participated in the Program, considering their own needs, and the needs of their partners, represented an entirely ‘new’ way of thinking about sex. For example, one young woman suggested that the Program ‘opened up a path’ for her to talk and think about things that she had not considered previously. This opening up was reflected by several young women and took a number of different forms. For example, one young woman suggested that the Program had given her confidence to ‘be straight forward about what (she) wanted’ rather than assuming that her partner will ‘just know’. For another it involved skills in communicating more effectively, to ‘have the courage and skills to check things out verbally’ which she felt was often quite difficult with a casual partner. For another the Program ‘taught me how to avoid unwanted situations, like someone trying to push me into something I didn’t want to do’.

These examples highlight the complex processes of negotiation that are required before and during sexual intimacy and how the young women felt the Program equipped them with more skills to tackle the sensitive negotiation required. By encouraging young women to talk openly about their needs and desires, and take up a more mindful position as a sexual agent, the *Sex and Ethics Program* also attempts to counter what Deborah Tolman (2002, pp. 21–22) refers to as a ‘silent body’ in the matrix; where sex is something that ‘just happens’ to women. The following example highlights how one young woman renegotiated her own needs and desires during sexual activities:

I had sex with someone I knew. During sex I did not enjoy it and felt that it was something not for me. I stopped and explained to the person that this is not something I want to do, and that I wanted to talk about what else to do instead of sex, as I was not ready and felt uncomfortable. It felt good. Usually I would either hide away or would let the person have their way without them knowing what I was going through or thinking.
(Tess aged 21)

Her ability to halt the process and renegotiate indicates a high level of self-care and as she herself indicates ‘usually I would either hide away or would let the person have

their way'. This is a challenge to sexual compliance and feeling pressured to continue sex despite feeling uncomfortable. In addition, she demonstrates a sense of responsibility to her partner in making it clear that she was not enjoying what was happening. Her ability to do this and that her partner respected her wishes highlights the importance of understanding that sexual consent is a *process* of mutual negotiation rather than a one-off agreement that may have been communicated verbally or non-verbally before sex began.

Consent is often constructed as multiple ways of saying no to sex, especially for women (Carmody 2009a). Historically and legally the law has placed particular scrutiny on women's conduct around sexual consent resulting in a denial of women's sexual agency (Cowling and Reynolds 2004). In the *Sex and Ethics Program* consent is seen as a dynamic process that recognises positive statements of desire and sexual negotiation and allows women the space to explore their sexuality rather than seek to control it. This was evident in responses made by several young women, e.g. the following excerpt from a young woman who was 'able to ask for things without feeling insecure':

Being intimate with someone and being able to confidently ask what they liked, and being confident to say no to things without feeling insecure and also being able to ask for things and say yes to things without feeling insecure. I've changed a lot of my behaviours because of what I've realised from the Sex & Ethics Program. (Jane aged 18)

Given the findings from the Australian study of secondary students (Smith *et al.* 2009) about the high levels of unwanted sex experienced by young women due to being drunk, the following comment from Barb aged 18 indicated how the Program helped her take better care of herself when she was drinking:

Meeting a person I was attracted to whilst drinking, I found that my perspective on what was healthy for myself and them sexually was a lot different- and I felt like I considered the decision much more in depth . . . Afterwards, I felt like I'd considered my own welfare much more than I would have before the course- not that I now feel I have a disapproval of one night stands, but I am glad that I consider them more carefully now.

The above examples demonstrate some of the multiple ways in which women who participated in the *Sex and Ethics Program* increased their levels of self-care and in the process refashioned traditional expectations and the power operating around gender and sex. This is particularly important for women whose needs are often seen as secondary in the context of heterosexual intimacy. The following section will explore how young men reacted to the Program.

Responses of young men

The research findings indicate that not only are heterosexual women reshaping their expectations about sexual intimacy, young men are also restyling their own traditional gender performances. The following qualitative data indicate how young men responded to this opportunity.

While men did demonstrate some evidence of increased self-care, e.g. 'The Program taught me how to be open about what I like and dislike', the most significant finding demonstrates an increased recognition of their partner's needs.

For example, ‘I gained a better understanding of body language and how to read it’; and an increased awareness of the need to communicate clearly to ensure ‘we were both understanding each other to ensure that neither of us got into a situation that we did not want’. For example, speaking openly about the possibility of sex helped one man get a better understanding of what his partner wanted:

My girlfriend wanted to have sex although I didn’t know and got the wrong impression. We had a quick talk of what we want in future. I felt fine, although a little hesitant at first and confused to what she wanted. Communication worked. (John age not specified)

For a number of young men who participated in the Program, the examples they raised underlined their understanding of the importance of negotiated consent, and ‘making sure’ it was established before they engaged in casual sex or sex with their regular partners. For example, one participant indicated he decided not to have sex because his partner ‘was too drunk’. This was both an important ethical decision but also reflects recent legal amendments across Australia on sexual consent which indicates consent cannot be freely and voluntarily given if the person is too intoxicated (Crimes Act 1900 (NSW) for example). For other young men, their responses focused on the importance of ‘negotiating sex’ when their partners ‘were ready’ and ‘making sure (they) both agreed’.

Other young men extended this knowledge of a dynamic approach to consent to an understanding of how a situation can easily become sexual assault if there is a failure to pay close attention to what is going on. As Jack aged 22 indicates:

By that I mean that I gained a better appreciation of how signals can be misinterpreted. It (sexual assault) can happen even if it wasn’t planned. A yes at the beginning is not final. People can change their mind at any stage and that has to be respected.

This approach also applied to men being able to say no to sex; a challenge to traditional assumptions about male sex drives as inevitable and constant. For example, one young man indicated that the Program had helped him to talk to his partner and find a way to ‘say no’ to sexual requests or pressure to have sex:

My girlfriend wanted sex but I wasn’t in the mood so we talked and everything worked out fine. (Henry age 17)

For others an awareness of the impact of their desires on another was demonstrated by stepping back from a traditional male aggressive pursuit of a woman that they were interested in. For example:

The other night I was out, met a girl, she wasn’t giving me good signs. So I knew to walk away. (Darren aged 18)

The importance of reflection and how this impacts positively on communication was also discussed by another man:

I went into the group thinking myself to be aware of my sexual ethics and felt I was of a high moral standard. I realised I had a lot more to learn. Listening to my partners about their needs and encouraging them to tell me those needs. (Bruce aged 21)

This comment indicates a reflective stance on his own behaviour and highlights the importance of young people and others recognising that living an ethical life is an ongoing process rather than a one-off decision.

Overall, these insights provide an important counter discourse to dominant views of male-gender performance and sexuality. They disrupt biological essentialist assumptions of men as unable to control their sexual desires prior to and during sexual situations. This suggests that for young men, the Program has assisted them to reflect on their attitudes and behaviour and recognise that ethical relationships require recognition of a partner's needs as well as their own.

Conclusion

We began by arguing that young people are often constructed as 'not yet citizens' and as such are often the focus of control by adults and the state especially if they engage in an active sexuality. This is particularly problematic for young women. Both men and women are often prevented from having access to the knowledge and skills they need to become responsible ethical citizens. A difference centred or cultural approach to citizenship emphasises the citizen as a relational self or as a dialogical self that gains a sense of self through relationships with the 'other' (Yuval-Davis 1999). This echoes the work of Foucault on ethical sexual subjectivity that underpins the *Sex and Ethics Program*. Crucial here is also a focus on the voices and concerns of the young people as they navigate their way through the complex territory of their own sexual lives which is not necessarily tied to normative expectations of adults or dominant cultural practices. This is not purely a matter of rights to express one's sexuality. Rather it is about social, personal and cultural practices and exploring alternative ways of being a citizen. This is where opportunities for young women and men to explore alternative gender possibilities become so important. As Delanty (2002, p. 65) points out:

'as a learning process, citizenship takes place in communicative situations arising out of quite ordinary life experiences... and how these individual life stories are connected to wider cultural discourses'.

The *Sex and Ethics Program* brings together the everyday experiences of young people and sexuality and locates it within a critical interrogation of cultural discourses. The Program demonstrates the way in which young people can and do embrace a positive form of agency in developing ethical sexual lives. Our experience of working with young people around the *Sex and Ethics Program* indicates that young women and indeed men are actively participating in diverse subject positions which resist and reshape gender relating in intimate sexual encounters. The evaluations at the end of the six-week programme and 4–6 months post-group surveys reveal ongoing evidence of women and men using knowledge and 'skills to deal with everyday real-life situations'. While this sample of young people was diverse on many criteria, a larger sample would be needed before results could be generalised to wider populations of young people.

The qualitative data indicate that women and men have reworked issues around communication, consent, interpreting body language, finding a voice to set limits on specific sexual activities and speaking up about their desires for pleasure and

challenging potentially sexually coercive situations. Young women learnt new ways of caring for themselves which included the possibility of an active sexuality. By doing so, they demonstrate an active resistance to traditional gender norms. Young men increased their awareness of understanding the impact of their desires on their partner and the need to listen actively to their partner's needs. By these actions, they resisted the dominant discourses of male sexuality as a self-focused sexual pursuit with little regard for the needs of a partner. Through ethical reflection, gaining an understanding of the impact of these sexual scripts on others and learning new skills in negotiation they performed a different kind of masculinity based on ethical mutual concern. They were fashioning new identities as ethical sexual citizens.

There are a number of important implications of the research findings for all of us concerned with young people. The declining global age of first sex and the overrepresentation of young women as victims of sexual assault by young men of similar ages (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005), suggests a pressing need for a range of educational strategies to prevent further social and psychological harm and to reduce the incidence of unwanted and coerced sex. Full participation in society is not possible if you live in fear of abuse or are constantly dealing with the impact of past events. At the same time the pleasures that sex can bring to people's lives needs to counter the balance of danger and risk. The findings also challenge all of us working with young people to consider whether our practices are unwittingly seeing young people 'as not yet citizens' who we prevent from accessing diverse forms of sexual knowledge. If we promote their rights and access to this knowledge are we willing and able to live with their ethical stance or do we seek to control the outcomes? The findings from this study suggest that young people are capable and willing to explore new skills and opportunities for living ethical sexual lives and in the process rework their practices around gender. The challenge for youth workers and other staff working directly with young people is whether we can respectfully embrace *their* choices concerning the embodied experiences of sexual citizenship.

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Notes

1. The difference in length of time was determined by when the follow-up time period occurred. For example, if the follow-up date fell at six months in December or January, the chances of securing meaningful return rates would have dropped considerably due to summer holidays. Therefore, some groups were followed up earlier at four months.
2. The use of bystander skills to encourage community challenges to sexual and other forms of intimate violence is considered to be a leading intervention in violence prevention work. The response of young people who took part in the *Program* to this issue is the subject of another publication in press. See Banyard *et al.* (2004, 2007) for detailed discussion of the bystander approach.

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