‘You Couldn’t Say "No", Could You?’: Young Men's Understandings of Sexual Refusal
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‘You Couldn’t Say “No”, Could You?’: Young Men’s Understandings of Sexual Refusal

While several psychological theories of rape have been developed, Tannen’s ‘miscommunication’ model is dominant, informing ‘expert’ and popular accounts alike. Rape is constructed as an extreme example of miscommunication — whereby women’s ‘failure’ to say ‘no’ is interpreted by men as sexual consent. Kitzinger and Frith have demonstrated that young women have an implicit understanding of the normative interactional structure of refusal, and it is this that explains their difficulty in ‘just saying no’ to unwanted sex. However, Kitzinger and Frith’s study could not demonstrate, but only argue, that young men share this sophisticated understanding, such that women saying ‘no’ should not be necessary to refuse sexual intimacy. Here we extend Kitzinger and Frith’s study, via the analysis of data from two focus groups held with young men. We demonstrate that, as Kitzinger and Frith suggested, men not only do have a refined ability to hear verbal refusals that do not contain the word ‘no’, but also – and importantly – an equally refined ability to ‘hear’ the subtlest of non-verbal sexual refusals.

Key Words: conversation analysis, date rape, discursive psychology, miscommunication, young men

INTRODUCTION

Psychological accounts of rape tend to emphasize the supposed role of victims of rape in their own victimization (Allison and Wrightsman, 1993; Hansen, 2001) and, consequently, this focus informs psychology’s contribution to rape prevention (Crawford, 1995; Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). The notion of victim precipitation suggests that every woman who is attacked experiences a deep, unresolved conflict between the conscious wish to repel the rapist and the unconscious desire to encourage the violence, which subverts the ability of the victim to resist. As Karen Horney (1973) stated: ‘what the woman secretly desires in intercourse is
rape and violence, or in the mental hemisphere, humiliation’ (p. 22). As a result, women: ‘unwittingly cooperate with the rapist in terms of covertly making themselves available to the rapist’ (Littner, 1973: 28). Such thinking has, of course, reached its zenith (or perhaps nadir is more apt) in soi-disant ‘evolutionary psychology’, which suggests not only that women unconsciously emit invitations to (coerced) sex, but also that men are, simply, ‘hardwired’ to rape (Thornhill and Palmer, 2000; see Hansen, 2001, for a critical review).

Feminist scholarship, and in particular the work of Susan Brownmiller (1975), has problematized these accounts and their inherent victim blaming. However, many of these ideas, particularly those regarding (in)appropriate female behaviour, remain endorsed, however implicitly, in psychology and widely and explicitly within our culture – see, for example, a standard psychology text such as Nevid et al. (2005) for a recent instance; Hansen et al. (2003) for a broad analysis of the means of production of such individualized pathology by the psy-disciplines; Crawford and Marecek (1989) on the problematization of women specifically; Crawford (2004) on marital self-help psychology. Cowling and Reynolds (2004), however, offer a useful and timely corrective.

The alternative perspective offered by the social structural model of sexual assault (Crawford, 1995), suggests that the key to rape prevention lies not in training women to ‘just say no’, but rather in changing societal beliefs about rape (myths) as well as beliefs about men and women (Easteal, 1992). However, the social structural model has not replaced the victim precipitation model, and one reason for its failure may be that it ‘is a bit overwhelming to consider changing, family, educational, legal, political and economic systems as rape prevention strategies’ (Corcoran, 1992: 136). One recent example of such an attempt, however, is the Australian Government-funded campaign, Violence Against Women: Australia Says No, which aims to provide information on how to build and maintain loving supportive relationships and to send a ‘clear message’ that violence, including sexual violence, against women will not be tolerated (Commonwealth of Australia, 2004: 1). However, while apparently guided by a social structural account of rape, this campaign is equally influenced by Tannen’s (1990) ‘miscommunication’ model, as evidenced by the assumed need to say ‘no’ presented in the campaign slogan.

The prevailing popularity of the miscommunication model is often attributed to Tannen’s 1990 bestseller You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation. Tannen claims a dichotomy in conversational style exists between the sexes, making miscommunication almost inevitable. From this perspective, rape is simply an extreme example of miscommunication, whereby neither the man nor the woman involved is able to interpret the other’s verbal and non-verbal cues accurately, and the resulting communication breakdown ends in rape (Crawford, 1995; Kitzinger and Frith, 1999).

Tannen’s (1990) work has been fiercely criticized on both theoretical and empirical grounds. First, the approach has been deemed apolitical, in that it ignores institutionalized gender power relations (Cameron, 1992; Frith and
Kitzinger, 1997; Troemel-Ploetz, 1991), and fails to theorize how power relations at the structural level are recreated and maintained at the interactional level (Crawford, 1995). Furthermore, and as a result of its situated nature (i.e. within a Western patriarchy), the different-but-equal stance that the miscommunication model advocates cannot be sustained, as the difference is almost always transformed into a male as norm, female as ‘deficient’ interpretation (Crawford, 1989; Hare-Mustin and Maracek, 1988). Certainly, when employed to account for acquaintance rape, it is evident that exactly such an interpretation has been widely endorsed. For example, psychologists Murnen, Perot and Byrne (1989) have concluded that ‘if more women were able to communicate their disinterest, more of the unwanted sex would be eliminated’; similarly, Gershaw (2002) suggests that ‘some women hesitate to refuse or give conflicting indications, because they don’t want to be rejected. Women need to communicate their refusal clearly . . .’. Likewise, the burgeoning ‘abstinence movement’ produces pamphlets aimed at young women with titles such as How to Say No and Keep Your Boyfriend complete with specific ‘tips’ on effective ways to ‘stand up to pressure’ and ‘how to say no’ (journeyworks.com, 2004). Such sentiments are echoed in the majority of acquaintance rape programs and further evidenced by the fact that they have been, and remain, overwhelmingly directed at women and their assumed inability to ‘just say no’ to unwanted sex (Corcoran, 1992). It is these programs, which are either explicitly or implicitly underpinned by the ‘miscommunication’ model, and which serve to place the burden of responsibility for rape and its prevention onto the victim, that represent the second major focus for criticism.

Kitzinger and Frith (1999) argue that rape prevention programs based on the miscommunication model are fundamentally misguided, in that it should not be necessary for a woman to say ‘no’ for her to be heard as refusing an invitation to have sex. Using conversation analytic findings on the normative structure of refusals, they demonstrate empirically that the advice offered to women to ‘just say no’ is simplistic if not futile, as it ignores the sophisticated and complex manner in which refusals are typically performed in everyday life. They show that it is most unusual to just say ‘no’ in any context. Drawing on data from focus groups held with young women, they argue that the difficulty many women report in just saying ‘no’ to unwanted sex is not specific to the situation, their age or even their gender. Rather, they demonstrate that it is precisely women’s knowledge of the culturally normative ways of doing refusals that makes it difficult for them to simply say ‘no’ to unwanted sex. Furthermore, they argue that as men share the same sophisticated understanding of these conversational ‘rules’, they do not need to hear an explicit ‘no’ to understand women as refusing sex. Therefore, Kitzinger and Frith (1999) conclude, male claims not to have ‘understood’ refusals that conform to culturally normative patterns can only be heard as self-interested justifications for coercive sexual behaviour – justifications that are readily validated by the widespread endorsement within our society of the miscommunication model of rape.

In the light of Kitzinger and Frith’s analysis of young women’s talk, the
purpose of the present study was to extend their work by examining young men’s ability to perform and comprehend refusals. In particular, we sought to explore, via the analysis of empirical data, the issue raised by Kitzinger and Frith (1999): that is, are the ways in which men talk about how refusals get done in both everyday and sexual contexts supportive – or otherwise – of the contention that they do not understand sexual refusals? Specifically, do women need, explicitly, to say ‘no’ in order for men to ‘hear’ that they are refusing sex?

ANALYTIC MATERIALS

Like the Kitzinger and Frith (1999) work on which our study is based, our analysis employs transcripts of focus group talk. As with their study, ours too suffers from being based not on actual (sexual) refusals, but rather on participants’ talk about such refusals in a social setting with peculiar interactional demand characteristics (see Puchta and Potter, 2002, for a discussion of some of the strengths and limitations of focus groups as social scientific research tools). The topic of sexual refusal presents a number of serious, if not insuperable, ethical and practical difficulties in obtaining naturally occurring data so, as did Kitzinger and Frith (1999), we perforce rely on participants’ ability to produce adequate (truthful, accurate) accounts, which are treated as providing access to descriptions of forms of conduct that would, ideally, have been observed in everyday interaction.

Two focus groups were conducted with nine, self-identified, heterosexual male undergraduates, aged between 19 and 34 years. Participants were recruited via an advertisement calling for participants posted to the ‘subject pool’ recruitment website of the School of Psychology at Murdoch University and were, as such, self-selected. Focus groups were conducted by a male moderator, following a semi-structured, open-ended, format in order to allow, as much as possible, for participants to set their own agenda (Wetherell et al., 1987). Focus groups were tape-recorded and transcribed employing a simplified version of Jeffersonian notation, which emphasizes readability rather than details of pitch, prosody and precise timing (see Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Wetherell et al., 1987). Extracts are annotated according to the focus group number from which the data were drawn.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

We adopt the analytic approach of discursive psychology, drawing on the conversation (Sacks, 1992; Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 1968) and discourse analytic traditions (Edwards and Potter, 1992, 2001; Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Briefly, discursive psychology (DP) involves the application of conversation analytic and discursive analytic principles and methods to psychological topics, such as attitudes, attributions, knowledge, prejudice and cognition in order to
redefine them as discourse practices (see, for example, Edwards, 1997; Edwards and Potter, 2001, 2005; Potter, 1996; Rapley, 2004; Wetherell, 1998, for more detailed accounts of the epistemological assumptions and analytic commitments of this approach). While DP has no method qua ‘Method’ as understood in mainstream psychology, in brief the approach entails the rigorous and systematic reading and re-reading of transcripts of interaction and, by virtue of extensive analytic familiarity with the extant conversation analysis (CA) and discourse analysis (DA) literatures, the identification of recurring themes, devices and tropes in talk-in-interaction. Thanks to its intellectual grounding in CA, studies of rhetoric, the sociology of scientific knowledge and both post-Wittgensteinian and post-structuralist scholarship, DP permits both the detailed analysis of the ways in which categories of persons and of their actions are sequentially constructed in talk and also the identification of the systematic deployment of everyday ‘commonsense’ understandings of ‘reality’ in such accounting (see Antaki et al., 2003, for a more extensive account of the analytic procedures of a broadly discursive psychological approach). Via a detailed reading of transcribed talk, we show that the young men here demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of the pragmatics of refusal in both ‘everyday’ and sexual situations.

ANALYSIS 1 – TALKING ABOUT HOW REFUSALS GET DONE

In this section, we show that the young men in our focus groups have, and can express, a sophisticated understanding of the way in which refusals are normatively performed. As did the young women in Kitzinger and Frith’s (1999) study, their talk mirrors CA findings on refusal, illustrating that unlike saying ‘yes’, or accepting an invitation or request, doing refusal requires interactional work that is neither necessarily, nor sufficiently, achieved by the use of the word ‘no’ alone. Indeed, many of the characteristics that have been identified as typically present in the accomplishment of refusals, such as prefaces, palliatives and accounts, and which mark refusals as being dispreferred are, as in Kitzinger and Frith’s (1999) data, present here.

The difficulty of performing everyday refusals

Refusals are designed in order to achieve a number of goals, one of which is to successfully produce the refusal as ‘hearably’ a refusal, while avoiding as far as possible negative or critical consequences for either the person producing the refusal or the person receiving it (Antaki, 1994; Davidson, 1984). For the young men in the present study, the difficulty of performing refusals because they have the potential of effecting such negative consequences was evident. Negotiating sexual interest, or lack thereof, was described by the participants as a situation requiring ‘kid gloves’ (Jason), as an issue ‘you gotta be sort of delicate around’ (Jason), and as one in which ‘you sort of test the waters without making yourself
too vulnerable’ (John). This ‘fear of rejection’ was implicated on more than one occasion as a reason why people produce sexual refusals indirectly, and that to perform them any other way, ‘you’d have to be’ either ‘incredibly secure’ (George), or ‘very mature’ (James). The idea that refusals can inflict pain was also discussed as a reason why they need to be produced as dispreferred actions: ‘I suppose you always curb your answers or ah structure your sentences to be less hurtful or less um blunt’ (John), or even extra-discursively, ‘I think that’s why we end up with these cues in the first place um because no-one wants to be hurt and no-one wants to offend’ (George).

Despite most of the talk about the difficulty of performing refusals being in reference to refusals in a sexual context, analysis of the way in which men talk about performing refusals in everyday contexts shows that all refusals are recognized by these men as typically dispreferred actions, and as difficult to perform as anything but dispreferred actions in any context.3 In extract 1, the moderator has asked the participants how they would refuse a friend’s invitation to the pub on a Saturday night.

**Extract 1: FG1203**

83 Cam: That depends if they’re like really
84 anxious or keen for you to go () for
85 whatever reason basically you might like
86 come up with an excuse to let ’em down
87 softly () otherwise you might just go,
88 “ah () nup () don’t feel like it”
89 Kyle: Direct approach
90 Cam: Yep
91 Kyle: “No that(heh)inkyou () I’m feeling seedy
92 from last night”
93 Mike: You might come up with something to say
94 some other way you’re feeling at that time
95 that night “I’m sick so I’ll be in bed” or
96 “I’m going out with someone else” or “I’m
97 having dinner with my grandparents” that
98 kind of thing so
99 M: Yep
100 Jason: Depends on why you don’t want to go if you
101 don’t want to go ’cause you don’t want to
102 go that’s what I’d sort of like tell ’em
103 but that I got other stuff on well I’d say
104 “I’m busy”
105 M: Yep
106 Jason So try not to lie too much

Throughout the focus group discussions, there is a significant amount of talk that is readily interpretable as a ‘lay’ version of the CA concept of preference structure. In the discussion surrounding refusals, the dichotomous idea of a ‘direct’ versus a ‘subtle’ way of responding mirrors quite exactly the notion of ‘preferred’
and ‘dispreferred’ turns. Despite there being claims by some of the participants that, contra CA, refusals can readily be performed using a ‘direct approach’, closer inspection of the talk shows otherwise. For example, Cam proposes that he might ‘come up with an excuse’ or ‘... just go, “ah (.) nup (.) don’t feel like it”’ (lines 85–8). Although the second part of Cam’s claim is labelled by the next speaker, Kyle, as a ‘direct approach’ (line 89), Cam has hedged his hypothetical refusal with the word ‘ah’ and a micropause. These characteristics are typically present in refusals, and serve to warn the recipient of the impending rejection (Pomerantz, 1984; Potter, 1996). While Kyle himself offers an example of the ‘direct approach’ (lines 91–92), it too is actually a typical refusal rather than one characterized by ‘directness’. His ‘no’ is accompanied first by an appreciation, ‘thank you’ – and completed in what is produced as direct reported speech (Holt, 1996) – with a proffered excuse, ‘I’m feeling seedy from last night’. Furthermore, the excuse he provides is one that asserts his inability rather than his unwillingness to accept the invitation – a form of accounting also adhered to by Mike in the examples he provides (lines 93–8). It is evident that the excuses offered are explicitly recognized by participants as routinely culturally available fabrications that ‘you come up with’ (lines 85–6; 93) in order to ‘let ’em down softly’ (line 86), further demonstrating the men’s knowledge that direct refusals may produce negative consequences for one or both parties, and that the accountability of the refuser is further heightened when the inviter is perceived to be ‘really anxious or keen’.

Jason, however, provides two seemingly truthful accounts – one to be offered when he is genuinely unwilling, ‘if you don’t want to go ’cause you don’t want to go that’s what I’d sort of like tell ’em’ (lines 100–2), and a second to be deployed in situations when he is genuinely unable, ‘but that I got other stuff on well I’d say “I’m busy”’ (lines 103–4). That an account is offered by Jason at all (‘I’m busy’) reflects the CA literature on refusals and demonstrates an awareness both that refusals are not only not normatively achieved with a simple ‘no’, but that the word ‘no’ is not even necessary to accomplish a refusal.

ANALYSIS 2 – PERFORMING SEXUAL REFUSALS

Refusing unwanted sex

In extract 2, discussion moves from talking about performing everyday refusals to discussing how the men would refuse unwanted sex.

Extract 2: FG0705

122 M: Cool. So um, the next scenario is (.)
123 you’re back at your house with a girl (.)
124 it’s looking like sex is on the cards for
125 whatever reason you really don’t want to
126 have sex with her tonight (.) how do you
let her know
John: You could come up with one of ya (.) your clichés like “I don’t think this is a good idea”, or ah, you know, “I’m not ready for this” or you know one of the clichés (.) as soon as you come out with that cliché they know (.) they know what you’re trying to say because it’s used all the time, whereas if you sort of (.) try and dance around the clichés they might not get the point straight away
M: Mm hmm (.) okay (.) anyone
James: I’ve got no idea
George: I know people that will do anything for a root (laughter)
George: If it got to that stage (.) obviously you’re interested (.) well I’d assume that’d be the case so then why would you say no (.) you always it’s easier to make an excuse the next day than at the time
M: Hehe (.) how do you say no
James: If it’s a disgusting woman (.) I mean just a platonic kind of friend but a disgusting woman (.) you gotta make a face if they’re sort of implying something then they’ll probably get the picture
M: Yeah
James: I don’t think I’d (.) don’t think I’d ever say “no”
John: You just say
James: If they were at my house then it’d be for a reason so
John: Oh yeah (.) “this isn’t quite what I expected tonight” and then they’d say “what did you expect” (.) “not this I just thought we’d have a drink and then you’d go home”
John: Hehehe
James: And then they’d start to get the idea (.) I’d call a cab
Andrew: (inaudible) rather sensitive excuse (.) I guess
John: Yeah you don’t wanna say
George: You couldn’t say “no”, could you
John: You don’t wanna say “no” (.) I don’t like you now” (.) you know you’d come up with some excuse
George: “You looked good in the soft light at the pub but now”=
John: =“I’m sobering up now”=
George: =Yeah hehehe
Perhaps the first point of interest in this extract is the way in which the participants orient to the question of how they, as men, would refuse unwanted sex. It is evident in the talk that, compared with the previous discussion, which centred on everyday refusals, for some of the participants this question proves much more problematic. The difficulty that participants display illustrates two concerns: the first is ‘global’, in that the question is oriented to as an ‘unthinkable’ proposition (Wetherell et al., 1987). The second issue – which is clearly imbricated in and flows from the first – turns on self-construction within the group: specifically, participants work to present themselves as a certain type of man, in this instance as a man who would not normally refuse sex (Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell and Edley, 1998, 1999; cf. Sacks, 1992, on not wanting to be seen to be interested in a ‘chick’ in the GTS data). For example, in James’s first utterance, he claims to ‘have no idea’ about how he would refuse sex (line 139) before providing a reason why he would refuse sex, ‘if it’s a really disgusting woman’ (line 151); finally, although he offers an example of how he would refuse sex, ‘you gotta make a face’ (line 151), he quickly follows this with ‘I don’t think I’d ever say no’ (lines 155–6), reconfirming his position as the type of a man who does not refuse sex, which works to produce himself as, for example, a ‘macho’ man (Edley and Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell and Edley, 1998, 1999). Here we see a striking difference between the talk of these young men and the women in the Kitzinger and Frith (1999) study who, far from presenting themselves as being unwilling to miss any opportunity for a ‘root’, talked of engaging in unwanted sex to accomplish ‘emotion work’ so as not to hurt men’s feelings (see Frith and Kitzinger, 1998).

In terms of the examples of refusals that are given, participants’ knowledge of the characteristics of normative refusals is again evident. John, as he did during the discussion of everyday refusals, again identifies the use of cliché, although this time explicitly, as a means of refusing sexual invitations that is particularly effective: ‘as soon as you come out with that cliché they know, they know what you’re trying to say because it’s used all the time’ (line 131–7). He produces two examples (lines 129–31). The first example is notably void of agency: it is not himself or the other person, but ‘this’ that’s ‘not a good idea’ and, in replacing ‘sex’ with the deictic ‘this’, again the refusal is softened. The second example is produced in the form of a delayed acceptance, as not being ‘ready for this’, which attends to his recipient’s face (cf. Lerner, 1996) by allowing for the possibility that he might be in the future.

Importantly, the participants’ knowledge of how refusals are typically performed is further evidenced through their explicit demonstration of how refusals are not normatively accomplished. George, in line 171, spells out that ‘you couldn’t say “no” could you’, showing his understanding that the proffering of a direct and unvarnished ‘no’ is not readily achievable. Accounts given for refus-
ing invitations are normatively unlikely to implicate the person offering the invitation as the reason why the invitation is being refused, and this is reflected in the account given by John, who acknowledges that: ‘you don’t wanna say “no I don’t like you now” you know you’d come up with some excuse’ (lines 172–4).

There is talk towards the end of this extract of excuses that do implicate the person offering the invitation, and as well the invitation itself as one that is unattractive and unwanted. George offers the example, ‘you looked good in the soft light at the pub but now’ (line 175–6), a scripted formulation (Edwards, 1995) that John immediately completes with ‘I’m sobering up now and I’m having second thoughts’ (lines 177–9).7 However, these are both met with laughter. What makes these accounts understandable as funny is the participants’ display of their shared knowledge that such excuses are immediately hearable as sexual refusals, despite the fact that they do not contain the word ‘no’, as they trade on cultural common knowledge (e.g. commonplaces such as ‘the more I drink the better you look’); as well their knowledge that the use of accounts that implicate the person offering the invitation is not how accounts for refusals are normatively constructed. This is underlined by George who, directly after the joke, concludes that ‘a soft gentle excuse would be the best one’ (line 180).

Performing non-verbal sexual refusals

The two refusals that James does provide in extract 2, ‘you gotta make a face’ (line 151) and ‘I’d call a cab’ (line 167), are examples of non-verbal refusals and these illustrate an important point of divergence found between the talk focused on everyday refusals and that discussing refusals in a sexual context. While no non-verbal refusals were offered as ways of refusing an invitation out, non-verbal refusals were identified as being effective means to ‘avoid’ sex, as can be seen in extract 3.

**Extract 3: FG1203**

170 Jason: Usually um if sex is gonna he on the cards
171 then you both sort of have to (. ) dare I
172 say work at it (. ) so if you got ’em back
173 to your place (. ) um (. ) if it’s if you
174 didn’t really play up on the whole sex
175 thing it probably can start but sort of
176 wouldn’t develop into that so you could
177 just sort of just um (. ) sort of avoid it
178 by not putting the effort into it if you
179 get what I mean
180 M: Yeah
181 Mike: You can almost tell like if you have the
182 girl back at your house you’re always
183 doing everything dim the lights pour a
184 drink something like that but if you sat
In this extract, the participants demonstrate their explicit awareness of how non-verbal refusals are performed, their own ability to perform them and a clear appreciation of why they are effective. Non-verbal sexual refusals are explained here by contrasting them with non-verbal invitations to have sex. Rather than sex being understood by the participants as something that ‘just’ happens, sex is constructed by Jason (lines 170–9) as a sequential event, with a beginning and an end, which requires a great deal of interactional work in between. This script formulation presents the prelude to sexual activity as an ordinary, routine and predictable series of events (cf. Frith and Kitzinger, 2001). Furthermore, this is described as intersubjectively produced and consensual: movement from one point, the ‘start’, to the end point requires ‘both’ parties to ‘work at it’ in order for it to ‘develop into that’. Therefore, and in contrast, by ‘not putting effort into it’ or not ‘really playing up the whole sex thing’ is, effectively, to produce a refusal.

Mike describes invitations to have sex as accomplished by ‘always doing everything’ (lines 181–7), cementing his claim that a continuous stream of well-known, culturally shared, actions are readily ‘hearable’ as invitations to have sex, and that work to maintain a ‘mood’ supportive of the possibility of sex is essential with two extreme case formulations, ‘always’ and ‘everything’ (Edwards, 2000; Pomerantz, 1986). He provides examples of such actions in the form of a three-part list, which works to strengthen his point that it is not sufficient to simply issue a one-off invitation, but rather the production of several consecutive invitations, or ‘doing everything’, is necessary in order to demonstrate one’s continued sexual interest (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). Furthermore, the two discrete examples he offers – ‘dim the lights’ and ‘pour a drink’ – are unmistakably ‘hearable’ as clichéd invitations to have sex. Indeed, the very vagueness of the third part of the list, ‘something like that’, displays his knowledge that the fine details of other ‘effective’ seduction techniques are also shared by his audience.

Mike makes it clear, then, that non-verbal sexual refusals may be achieved by not displaying conduct that is culturally available as a sexual invitation – for example, by forms of conduct that are readily ‘hearable’ as discouragers, or ur-refusals, such that if ‘you sat down and put the TV on’ to ‘try and kill the mood’ these actions would be readily ‘hearable’ as indicating that a sexual encounter was not desired.

It is notable, however, that whilst Jason asserts that for sex to occur, ‘you both sort of have to (. ) dare I say work at it’, throughout the remainder of his turn, and in Mike’s elaboration of ‘killing the mood’ as a way to ‘get out of it’, it is the demonstrable and active work (or lack thereof) of young men that is given a primary and determining role, through the repeated deployment of ‘you’, to characterize the likely actions of (other, hypothetical) young men in general, in
similar situations. This gender stereotypically ‘active’ role, in initiating sex, is in contrast to the ‘emotion work’ reported by Frith and Kitzinger’s (1998) sample of young women, who, rather than describing ‘working’ (or choosing not to work) to *make sex happen*, gave accounts of ‘working’ to salve men’s egos in refusing sexual invitations, or even engaging in unwanted sex so as not to hurt young men’s feelings.⁸

*‘Hearing’ women’s verbal and non-verbal sexual refusals*

The difficulty of performing refusals that was acknowledged in previous discussions is again evident here. Rather than just saying ‘no’ to sex, non-verbal refusals are presented here as particularly effective means to ‘avoid’ (line 177) or ‘get out of’ (line 186–7) invitations to have sex. Importantly, in addition to the participants’ identification of the effectiveness of performing non-verbal refusals to ‘avoid’ sex themselves, refusals performed extra-discursively were also explicitly identified as one of the ways in which the men hear women’s refusals – as is evident in extract 4.

*Extract 4: FG1203*

```
261 M:  Mhmm great okay so are there ways of
262     knowing when it’s not on the cards (.)
263 how would a guy pick up that sex is not
264     on the cards that way
265 John: Body language
266 James: Yeah (inaudible) body language
267 M: What’s that sorry
268 James: It’s all put down as body language
269 M: Oh yeah
270 James: Women are pretty good (. ) fakers (. )
271     teasers no but it’s body language all the
time
272 George: The conversation gets shorter
273 James: Mhmm
274 George: Very abrupt
275 John: Start looking at their watch and you know
276     (inaudible) “It’s getting late” (. )
277 Andrew: “How long does the taxi take to get *here*”
278     that type of thing
280 George: Hehehe
281 John: “I just remembered I’m working early in
282     the morning” you know there’s always
283     little hints like letting you know that
284 “I’ve just uh changed my mind” (. ) yeah
285 there’s always little hints
286 M: Yeah (. ) so as you *did* for the scenario
287     up here of a guy not wanting to have sex
288     can you think of some type of
289     hypothetical way in which a woman might
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let the guy know that she doesn’t want to have sex like some examples of things that she might say or do

John: This is back at the house
M: Um yes say it’s back at the house similar things to this only reversed so the woman doesn’t want to have sex how would she go about it
James: I think they should say it straight out you know “I’m not interested in sex you’re a nice guy that’s it” so then it doesn’t have to develop into the guy thinking that sex is going to happen when it’s not everything will be all clarified
John: Usually what I’ve found the same thing you know they say “look you know I don’t want this to go to sex at this stage I think you’re nice but now we’re back here I kinda don’t feel like it” or something like that and most of the time they’re pretty honest about it so it’s good (.)
takes a lot of pressure off (. all the guessing out of it

In this extract, the participants demonstrate their ability to understand how women indicate that they do not want sex, and specify both verbal and non-verbal methods of communicating this refusal. John immediately suggests (line 265) that it is simply women’s ‘body language’ that alerts men to a refusal. This claim is upgraded by James, who extends John’s formulation by stating that ‘it’s all put down as body language’ (line 268), employing the extreme case formulation ‘all’ to increase the intensity of his claim. He further strengthens this claim in his next utterance, ‘women are pretty good fakers teasers no but it’s body language all the time’ (lines 270–2). That is, despite the fact that women are ‘pretty good’ at ‘faking’ and ‘teasing’, men know, ‘all the time’, when women are refusing unwanted sex. As John later elaborates, ‘there’s always little hints letting you know that “I’ve just uh changed my mind” yeah there’s always little hints’ (lines 281–5), demonstrating that women need to say neither ‘no’ nor ‘I’ve just changed my mind’, as there are ‘always little hints’ letting men know that this is so.

In addition to identifying non-verbal refusals, the participants also provide examples of verbal refusals that they claim are readily ‘hearable’ as refusals of sexual intimacy. For example, John suggests that, when women ‘start looking at their watch’ and saying ‘it’s getting late’ (line 276–7), they are refusing sex. This account is produced in the form of a cliché, as is the next example he offers: ‘I just remembered I’m working in the morning’ (lines 281–2), demonstrating that John not only invokes clichés to do refusals himself (see extracts 2 and 3), but equally he recognizes that clichés are used by women as devices to effect
sexual refusal. Again, in the examples of verbal refusals that might be made by 
women, the word ‘no’ remains notably absent.

Toward the end of this extract, there is talk about how women ‘should’ ideally 
perform sexual refusal. James suggests that women should ‘say it straight out you 
know “I’m not interested in sex you’re a nice guy that’s it” ’ . . .’ (lines 298–300). 
However, the example of the ‘straight out’ verbal refusal that he provides here is 
more typical of a normative refusal than one given ‘straight out’. It incorporates 
a palliative in the form of a compliment, ‘you’re a nice guy’, and an account, ‘I’m 
not interested in sex’, which implicates ‘sex’ as the reason for the refusal rather 
than the person who is offering the invitation. John then claims that women refus-
ing sex ‘straight out’ is ‘usually’ what he has found (line 305); that women say, 
‘Look you know I don’t want this to go to sex at this stage I think you’re nice but 
now we’re back here I kinda don’t feel like it’ (lines 306–10). However, much 
lke that given by James, John’s example incorporates many of the features 
normatively present in refusals. It is firstly hedged with ‘look’, and followed by 
a delayed acceptance ‘at this stage’, in which ‘sex’ is again implicated as the 
reason for the delay rather than the person who is offering the invitation. This is 
th en followed by a palliative, ‘I think you’re nice’, and is completed with a 
qualified account, ‘I kinda don’t feel like it’, in which the word ‘sex’ has once 
again been euphemized to the deictic, ‘it’. Indeed, such a refusal mirrors precisely 
suggestions made in a number of more recent sexual assault prevention programs 
aimed at young people that stress communication in (potentially) sexual situa-
tions, but which eschew the simple-mindedness of ‘just say[ing] no’ (see, for 
example, Project Respect, 2004).

Again, and importantly, even in the context of how women ‘should’ ideally 
refuse sex in order for ‘everything’ to be ‘all clarified’, the word ‘no’ remains 
conspicuously absent; an absence that continues throughout extract 5.

Extract 5: FG0705

309 M: Yep sure (.) okay ah the next thing we
310 wanted to look at was are there ways of
311 knowing when sex isn’t on the cards when a
312 woman doesn’t want to have sex with a man
313 at that point in time
314 Cam: I spose if you get slapped in the face or
315 kneed in the knackers it’s a good
316 st(heh)art
317 Mike: Ye(heh)ah you try and pull a smooth line
318 and get no reaction from it so that’s that’s
319 a pretty good sign
320 M: Yeah
321 Jason: Yeah girls are usually fairly get at
322 letting blokes know (.) when it’s not on
323 M: Yeah
324 Jason: Usually they don’t let you get any (.) get
325 (.) anywhere (.) just usually cold (.) to
a certain extent
Kyle: First base second base (.) no base (.) and again we communicate with cues body language um a bit touchy feely whatever um
Jason: Of course then you have a cock tease
Mike: Yeah certain girls like doing that too
Jason: (inaudible)
Mike: Gives you the vinegar stroke9 and then up (.) then stop (.) yeah
M: Yeah
Cam: (inaudible)
Mike: Yeah, yeah hehe
M: So when we’re talking more about say an advanced state of play so to speak ah could we (.) think of some hypothetical ways that a woman would not (.) would want to have sex with him at that point in time
Kyle: Physically (.) pushing him away
Cam: Yeah that’s right
Mike: Yeah
Kyle: I mean it doesn’t have to be (.) down the stairs but it can be (.) on approach of physical contact
M: Yeah
Kyle: Gesturing (.) if nothing else (.) kind of thing
M: Yep
Kyle: Um
Jason: And stopping you from taking her clothes off ((general laughter))
Mike: you generally sort of un generally undress each other to some degree and if she’s not ripping your shirt off you know (.) and you try and um rip hers off you know (.) and she doesn’t respond in the same way then you know it’s a pretty good sign and you’re not on the same level
M: Yeah
Jason: If she’s holding her shirt down
Mike: Yeah yeah (.) or wearing an iron chastity belt
Cam: Personally I’ve never come across that yet ((general laughter))
Jason: That’s a good one

What is most remarkable in this extract is the complete absence not only of examples of verbal refusals made by women that contain the word ‘no’, but of verbal refusals of any kind. Rather, in the extensive array of possible refusals that might be offered by women, every one of the examples the men give are non-verbal.
refusals. In all, there are 17 examples of non-verbal refusals that serve to further demonstrate the participants’ sophisticated ability to ‘hear’ details of women’s conduct as clearly refusing unwanted sex. Jason, for example, states that women are ‘fairly apt at letting blokes know when it’s not on . . . usually they don’t let you get . . . anywhere’ (lines 321–2). Many of the examples provided are extraordinarily subtle. The men claim that simply getting ‘no reaction’ from a woman (Mike, line 318), women being ‘just usually cold to a certain extent’ (Jason, lines 325–6), or ‘gesturing if nothing else’ (Kyle, line 353) are forms of conduct that, although extremely indirect, successfully accomplish a clear refusal. Cam’s employment of the word ‘just’ and equally Kyle’s ‘if nothing else’ are both examples of extreme case formulations employed by the speakers to bolster their claims that behaviour as subtle as being ‘cold to a certain extent’, or simply ‘gesturing’ is solely what is required of women for them to be ‘heard’ by men as not wanting sex (Pomerantz, 1984). As Mike later suggests, if a woman ‘doesn’t respond in the same way then you know it’s a pretty good sign and you’re not on the same level’ (lines 364–6). However, Jason points out that ‘of course then you have a cock tease’ (line 330), which works to problematize the notion that sexual negotiation is as straightforward as has been claimed. This supposed confusion that Mike claims (on line 331) ‘certain girls like’ to create is also resolved non-verbally when Mike notes that even a ‘cock tease’ will ‘stop’ (line 334).

In addition to the examples of very subtle refusals that the men provide are examples that can be described as extremely overt. Cam supposes that ‘getting slapped in the face or kneed in the knackers’ constitutes ‘a good start’ (lines 314–6). Mike’s example of a woman ‘wearing an iron chastity belt’ (lines 369–70) is similarly unambiguous and clearly indicative of a sexual refusal. Here the extremity of the formulation, and the shared laughter with which it is met, displays clearly the men’s knowledge that such unambiguous, overt, extra-discursive displays are not necessary for women to be ‘heard’ by men as refusing an invitation to have sex (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). Furthermore, when Jason proposes the example of a woman ‘stopping you from taking her clothes off’ (lines 357–8), which might be describable as a less obvious account than the two presented above, this too is met with laughter, illustrating that women need produce only mildly ‘obvious’ behaviours for them to be readily understood by men as refusing unwanted sex. For, as Kyle has suggested, men do not need to be pushed ‘down the stairs’ (lines 349–350) in order for them to successfully ‘hear’ a woman refusing sex; rather ‘gesturing if nothing else’ is all that is required.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Kitzinger and Frith (1999) demonstrated that the difficulty young women report in refusing unwanted sex is not a function of situation, age, or gender, but rather results from the refined knowledge that they possess of how refusal is normatively accomplished. While Kitzinger and Frith (1999) claimed that men share the
same sophisticated understanding of the culturally defined ways in which refusal is typically achieved, their data could not but leave the questions of the extent and subtlety of men’s knowledge unexplored. Those questions have been answered here.

While recognizing that focus group data are necessarily limited, the ethical and practical difficulties (if not impossibilities) of obtaining naturally occurring data showing how refusal is achieved in sexual contexts are considerable (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). Courtroom transcripts may provide a more ‘naturalistic’ data source; however, because of the heightened issue of accountability, a straight telling of the ‘facts’ can even less readily be assumed (Coates and Wade, 2004). Another venue for the exploration of sexual refusals may be ‘cyber-space’. However, this too is problematic, as the issue of real-life, physical rape might easily be trivialized and, clearly, the important and subtle extra-discursive doing of refusal is much less available in ‘narrow bandwidth’ interaction (Hansen, 2003).

What the men in this study have explicitly articulated, however, is a sophisticated and subtle appreciation of how refusal is normatively achieved – an appreciation that importantly mirrors completely both the empirical conversation analytic work on the normative structure of refusals, and the cultural knowledge articulated by the young women in Kitzinger and Frith (1999). While recognizing that a self-selected sample of young, male, university students may not be representative of men of different socio-economic, cultural or educational backgrounds, the difficulty the men reported in performing refusals reflects that reported by the women in Kitzinger and Frith’s (1999) study, supporting their claim that the problem of performing sexual refusals as anything but delayed, indirect, and accountable conversational acts is not related to one’s age, gender or indeed the context in which the refusal occurs. Rather, it is the result of all members’ implicit, yet extraordinarily refined, awareness of how it is that refusals, typically, are achieved.

More important, however, is the comprehensive ability that the young men here articulated to ‘hear’ women’s refusals, which encompassed not only verbal refusals that do not contain the word ‘no’, but also the subtlest of extra-discursive refusals that achieve the same effect. Although Crawford (1995) has criticized the miscommunication model extensively, she concedes that ‘because sexual communication is indirect, subtle, complex and shaped by gendered norms for interaction, genuine miscommunication undoubtedly does take place’ (p. 108).

On the basis of the data examined here, we are not so confident. There is some evidence that sexual agreement is (successfully) conveyed non-verbally (Muehlenhard and Hollabaugh, 1988) and the present data suggest a strong role for non-verbal methods in the accomplishment of sexual refusal.

In light of the sophisticated knowledge of how refusals get done that these men have demonstrated, we are led to conclude that (date) rape does not routinely result from innocent misunderstandings by men of women’s supposedly ambiguous refusals, but rather from the witting intention by men to engage in coercive
sexual penetration. The present findings have implications for psychological theories of rape and rape prevention programs. Namely, their emphasis on the role of women in contributing to their own victimization needs to be seriously challenged. We would argue in support of Kitzinger and Frith’s (1999) proposal that to focus on women’s ‘deficient’ communication styles in the perpetuation of rape is, at best, empirically unfounded and, at worst, provides an exculpatory warrant for the self-interested declarations made by rapists who claim ‘not to know’ (Kitzinger and Frith, 1999). As such, rape prevention, like other social psychological interventions, should be directed at the population producing the problem behaviour – men – and not, as it has been primarily, at women. Furthermore, rape prevention programs should not be aimed at improving men’s ability to ‘hear’ women’s refusals to have sex, as it is apparent that in this regard men already excel.

NOTES

1. Gray’s (1992) *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* has been equally influential in popular culture; however, it is Tannen who has received the most criticism within academia, due to the esteem in which she was held prior to the publication of this book (Crawford, 1995).

2. The decision to employ a male moderator was two-fold. First, feminist research is generally guided by the principle that the impact of the researcher on the researched should be reduced as much as possible (Speer, 2002). Second, by improving the level of comfort felt by the participants, higher levels of participant disclosure can be achieved (Krueger and Casey, 2000). We acknowledge the usual concerns about (self-selecting) psychology students as a data source.

3. It is important to note here that the terms ‘preferred’ and ‘dispreferred’ carry no psychological connotation regarding the likes and dislikes of speakers, but are used under the rubric of conversation analytic work whereby ‘preference’ refers to the normative structural organization of talk-in-interaction. See Antaki (1994) and Kitzinger and Frith (1999) for discussion of CA work on the normative structure of refusals.

4. Numbers preceded by ‘FG’ (such as in this case ‘FG1203’) correspond with the specific focus group from which the data are drawn. In the extracts, ‘M’ denotes the moderator and ‘Cam’ the pseudonym given to the participant. All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality. Transcription employs a simplified Jeffersonian notation frequently used in conversation and discourse analytic work. The aim is to attempt to capture prosodic as well as syntactic features of speech.

5. We note that in the accounts of refusals here, while they manifest their awareness of dispreference structures, speakers can be seen also to orient to cultural norms of ‘honesty’ and ‘directness’ as socially valued, while at the same time taking pains to avoid being untruthful, impolite or unkind. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this to our attention.

6. Of course, by their very vagueness and lack of specificity, clichés are finely applicable to whatever precise sexual activities are underway with whatever partners. Again, we are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.
8. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this point.
9. The ‘vinegar stroke’ is defined by Urbandictionary.com (2004) as ‘the final climactic stages of intercourse or masturbation. As in: “Would you believe it? The phone rang just as I was getting onto the vinegar strokes.” From the similar facial expression associated with sipping vinegar.’

REFERENCES


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