The construction of women’s sexuality

A critical discourse analysis on consent research

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine how women’s sexuality is constructed in consent research, and to discuss hypothetically how this construction could come to affect practical social work. We believe that the way that sexuality is defined and discussed can have an impact on how professionals treat women who have been subjected to sexual assaults and rape, and work with adolescents in the field of social work. We wanted to explore this further. By doing a critical discourse analysis on research articles about women’s sexuality and consent, we found that traditional sexual scripts were widely reproduced and the concept of women’s own desire was nonexistent. We then problematised this by discussing how it might be affecting practical social work in a negative matter, whilst trying to formulate possible reforms. Our conclusion was that it is possible that the discourses presented in the examined articles could contribute to retrogressive perspectives on women’s sexuality, which in turn could influence the practical social work and its approach to female clients.

Key words: Sexuality, consent, women, critical discourse analysis, social constructionism, feminist theory

Nyckelord: Sexualitet, samtycke, kvinnor, kritisk diskursanalys, socialkonstruktivism, feministisk teori
INTRODUCTION

Spontaneously one might think that women’s sexuality would hardly be described as a social problem - that sexuality is more of an individual and private issue about preferences, desires and needs. Although this is true, sexuality is also defined and discussed in a more problematic and political way, since sexuality and sex is tightly connected to consent, equality, rape and violence in relationships. Practical social work encounter cases connected to sexuality daily in the field of prevention, perhaps most apparent in the work with adolescents, and the care and rehabilitation of victims of sexual assaults (Socialstyrelsen, 2016). For example, two nationwide studies in Sweden (Elman & Eduards, 1991; Elman, 2001) found out that women who had experienced coerced sex evaluated social workers as the least supportive professionals. This was explained through the social workers’ focus on the individual instead of the wider social context of rape and coerced sex and not seeing the act as a crime (Elman, 2001; Grände, 2005).

When one’s sexuality concerns other people in one way or another, consent is vital. Consent is by Swedish law a requirement for any sexual activity, without it the act is by definition assault or rape (Prop. 2017/18:177). Despite of this being articulated, consent is something that has been a burning topic in society over the last couple of years, much as a consequence of the “Me Too Movement” in October of 2017 and Sweden’s new sexual consent law that was approved in May of 2018 (Dagens Nyheter, n.d.; Sveriges Radio, 2018; Prop. 2017/18:177). Besides its legal definition (Brb 24:7: ansvarsfrihet; Asp, 2010), consent does not have a universally agreed definition. The term "consent" has been used in research without any (critical) definition; it is seen as a mutual agreement to engage in a sexual activity but there’s no unanimous agreement whether or not consent is a physical or psychological act (Beres, 2007). Beres (ibid.) also pointed out that it is not agreed upon if consented sex is the opposite of coerced sex or if these two can happen simultaneously. It seems that like in practice, consent in research is just assumed instead of discussed. And while consent in itself is a gender neutral concept, we wonder if that is how it actually translates to practice or if consent is discussed differently for men and women.

When it comes to the discourse of women’s sexuality in today’s society, media can be seen as a big contributor and influence to the discourse. Media often describe heteronormative
women’s sexuality in a very amphibolous way as passive yet constantly available for men, as non-existing yet oversexualised (Jozkowski, Sanders, Peterson, Dennis, Reece, 2014; French & Neville, 2017). Women are encouraged to be sexy and to have casual sex, but when doing so they risk getting shamed or punished for it (Jozkowski et al., ibid.). Similar patterns can be found consistently through today’s society, where women are seen, and see themselves, as empowered and at the same time restricted by the heteronormative roles and norms (e.g. Burkett & Hamilton 2012; Charles, 2010; French & Neville, ibid.). Another way to explain this ambiguity is that women’s sexual practices are trapped by their gender identities, which are constructed by society, and carry certain values and criteria (Kullberg, Herz & Fält, 2012). Gemzöe explains this from a feminist perspective, that the values and criteria included in women’s gender identities stems from the patriarchal society we still live in, where women are seen as the submissive partner with their wants and needs subordinate to men’s - and that this is something that is also internalised by women themselves (Gemzöe, 2010).

Since the classic article *Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire* by Michelle Fine (1988), women’s sexuality and sexual education has been a revisited research subject and has inspired a plethora of studies. Even so, the studies are mostly focusing on the absence of women’s sexuality compared to men’s sexuality when it comes to having sexual relations. This is demonstrated by the fact that many women have other reasons than their own feelings of desire, like wanting to feel companionship or being afraid of losing their partners, for engaging in sexual activities (Allen, 2013). This also connects to a trend in research about the postfeminist and neoliberal discourse on women’s sexuality (Burkett & Hamilton 2012; Baker, 2010), where women are seen as sexual, liberated subjects who independently choose to please men because they will benefit from it. This could however still be problematised with reference to what Gemzöe (2010) argued concerning women internalising patriarchal structures and making them empowering.

There are studies that have a critical approach to how women’s sexuality is seen in society, but their focus has not been to critically observe how the research itself contribute to the construction of women’s sexuality. Evidence-based practice has been the cornerstone of Swedish social work since the 1990s and emphasizes the usage of best possible material to evaluate and understand individual clients (Bergmark, Berkmark & Lundström, 2011). Bergmark and colleagues note that “the external evidence weighs heavier than authorities or
clinical experience or gut feeling” (our translation, p. 13). This means that 1. the social workers ability to both acquire external evidence (to study research) and critically discuss it has become increasingly relevant for the field and 2. the research that is made can have immediate effect in the daily encounters with clients. From a foucauldian perspective of power-knowledge, which we will elaborate further in this study, both the researchers and the social work professionals have the power to construct how sexuality, consent, sexual assaults, and the people involved, are viewed (Foucault, 2003). Ahrens (2006) for example showed that the way professionals treat information about sexual assaults is crucial for how the victims construct their traumas and deal with these trauma in the future.

Social work with women who have been exposed to coerced sex or rape, and the preemptive or treating work with adolescents, can be affected by these types of constructions which might risk leading to reproducing the traditional picture of the passive, available woman. A critical perspective towards the discourses that define our understanding and recreation of existing power structures, affecting how we see the clients of social work, could therefore be highly important and needed. This could also contribute to the equalisation of society’s views on women’s and men’s sexuality. We therefore see a need for such a study to investigate how research about consent contribute to the construction of women’s sexuality. We believe this to be important for social work because the knowledge that such a study could bring might lead to a higher awareness for professionals in the field and encourage researchers to reflect on their ways of expressing themselves and their findings. We also believe that our possible outcomes might be useful in the further development of the Social Work programs to highlight the importance of a critical standpoint.

PURPOSE

In the introduction we showed that there are discourses about women’s sexuality in today’s society that are producing and reproducing negative stereotypes about women and their sexuality. With this study we therefore aim to critically investigate how discourses in consent research construct women’s sexuality and how these constructions could come to affect how the clients of social work are met in the daily practice.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main question for this study is: How is heteronormative women’s sexuality constructed in research about consent?

Another question, that will be more hypothetically discussed, is: How could these constructions contribute to the conversations and practices in everyday social work?

PREUNDERSTANDING

The idea for this study mainly stemmed from two matters. First, we both have a strong, genuine interest in sexuality. We believe that sexuality is an important, but not sufficiently discussed, part of people’s life. Second, we both have working experience with women and adolescents. Rebecca works as a counselor at a sexual health clinic, and Nelli has worked with underprivileged adolescents and driven an organisation for young women. We have both witnessed women undermining their sexuality, and this made us wonder how women’s sexuality is constructed in research, since research to some extent influences the practical work.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In our study, we have chosen to not in depth define or discuss the concept ‘woman’, meaning if our study is cis-exclusive or not (cis in this context means that one's gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth: RFSL, 2015). The reason for this is that we do not differentiate between cis and trans women, because all women are affected by the reigning norms and discourses in our society.

Sexuality: can be described as an umbrella term, including everything from sexual orientation to preferences, gender identity, sexual feelings, emotions, and sexual acts (Muhamad, Liamputtong O'Halloran, Low, Moolchaem, 2016). For this study however, our focus was purely on the sexual feelings and emotions that, in our case, women have.
Consent: actively agreeing or giving permission to something (Asp, 2010). There is not a unanimous definition of consent in current research (Beres, 2007), but in this study we will use the term to refer to agreeing to suggested sexual acts.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

SEARCH PROCESS

We utilised EDS(EBSCO Discovery Service) and Google Scholar when searching for previous research. The search terms and keywords we started out with based on the purpose of this study were ‘women’s sexuality’ or ‘female sexuality’, and ‘sexual consent’ or ‘consent’. We then expanded our search with other search terms like ‘consensual’, ‘coerced’ and ‘rape’. We also had the criterion that the research had to be peer reviewed.

We found the research presented in this study by reading through abstracts and evaluating if it was relevant for us or not. What we saw as relevant was research in the fields of social studies, law, psychology or adjacent fields. When finding studies relevant for our purpose, we did retrospective searches where we went through the reference lists of the found studies to see if we could gather more relevant literature.

We decided to exclude research that was purely medical, had a clear non-hetero or queer standpoint, or research focusing on ethnicity or religion. This decision was based on our purpose to analyse the discourses of heteronormative women’s sexuality in consent research, we therefore argue that those subjects would add variables not included in our purpose.

FIELD OF RESEARCH

When we read the previous research for this study, three apparent themes that we found relevant for our purpose emerged. These themes were: Pressuring or negotiating sex, Gender norms and Critiquing constructions of sexuality, which we will discuss more in dept later. We will also discuss self-sexualisation which we saw permeating the other themes.
The majority of the articles we examined for our study was made by female researchers working in the field of psychology or law in the United States or Australia, with a few exceptions. The research mostly consisted of interviews or focus groups with women in varying ages, building on their own experiences and thoughts about certain matters, which the researchers then analysed, most often by using discourse or thematic analysis. We could also distinguish a few theoretical standpoints that were apparent though the research. Social constructivism seemed to color the analysis throughout the research that we engaged with. Social constructivism means that the structures are seen as constructed by individuals in the society instead of them existing as something absolute. One can assume that by acknowledging this the researchers also acknowledge that they will contribute to these constructions themselves. Feminist theory was another recurring theoretical perspective, even though not always expressed verbatim, that was used to explain the process and results of these studies.

PRESSURING OR NEGOTIATING SEX

Research of consent can not be stated as a field of its own yet, and is often presented through research about rape and coerced sex, or how individuals view and experience (non-)consent. The focus in “consent research” has distinctly been on coerced, pressured or negotiated sex and how young women experience this in their relationships (e.g Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Cook & Messman-Moore, 2018; French & Neville, 2017). While consent is the center of this research, the term does not have a general definition and these studies do not exclusively define what their version of consent includes. While there is not a unanimous definition, the traditional view on consent is that the consented act is also wanted: that consent and wantedness are either mutually absent or present. Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) questioned this dichotomic construction of consent and wantedness where the only possible options were either wanted consented sex or rape. They presented that consent and desire do not both have to be existing or non-existing in the definition, meaning that we can see sexual relations as both wanted and nonconsensual, and unwanted and consensual. The former alternative is rape by definition if followed through, but was described as unacknowledged rape (Peterson and Muehlenhard, ibid.), meaning that the victim did not see the act as rape. Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) found this kind of examples in their study, where young women had stated that they did not consent to the act, but wanted to please their significant other and hence did not see it as coercion. The latter alternative in Peterson and Muehlenhard’s (2007) study, unwanted and consensual sex, was a phenomenon present in multiple studies that we encountered.
(e.g. Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; French & Neville 2017), meaning that women consented to sex that they did not want. The studied women often explained that it either was expected from them as girlfriends, that they did it to avoid an argument, or that they thought of sexual relations as an exchange of currency to get some kind of emotional intimacy.

Beres (2007) divided the definition of consent in research into 4 categories: spontaneous consent, consent as agreement, the nature of consent and moral transformation. With spontaneous consent Beres meant that the concept is just assumed by the reader, that the researchers do not explicitly define consent, but leave it to the reader to define from their own background knowledge. This leaves a bundle of different uses for the same term, where some of the papers referred to consent as the line between “good and bad” sex meanwhile others used it as the line between a crime and an act of love. Beres explicitly mentions that the “spontaneity” is also gendered: it’s assumed that women give consent, and men ask for it. The second category, consent as agreement, negotiates the extent of expressed consent. The spectrum is between ‘any yes’, meaning that even saying yes under coercion is consenting, to consent being something that is given freely. Nature of consent debates whether consenting is psychological and attitudinal or a physical act, that is if certain behaviour or expression implies consenting, or if it is based on the person’s attitude towards the encounter - or a combination of both. Moral transformation means that a sexual act can be seen initially as moral or not, depending on if consent is present or not. Beres problematised this view and explained that such an approach shows all sexual activities in a negative light and “all sexual activities begin as morally problematic, and coercive” (2007, p.102).

A study we came about that clearly discussed what we brought up above was a study on how young women negotiate sexual consent (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). The authors executed interviews with female university students in Australia, about how they consented to sex and what their thoughts were about when and how consent was or needed to be presented. The authors then used discourse analysis to get a wider understanding of the sociocultural context that affected the ways the women negotiated consent, in the cultural context of postfeminism. The conclusion of the study was that despite it being the 21st century, there is still an imbalance in power when it comes to gender, and women’s sexual agency is still taken for granted. The authors also argued that while women have sexual agency, it is used to tend to men’s desires and needs.
Another study that demonstrated the phenomenon of consented but undesired sex investigated how young women identified sources of coerced sex (French & Neville, 2017). The authors operated focus groups with female adolescent students where they discussed what they thought about when they heard the term sexual coercion or if they believed that men and women used certain methods to pressure others into having sex with them. The authors then analysed the collected data with a thematic analysis. The conclusion was that the women saw coerced sex as “a push”, and identified four different sources to why they felt forced to have sex: a sociocultural context that coerced sex is normalised and socially accepted, internal scripts about wanting to satisfy one’s partner or fear of losing them, partner manipulation, and a developmental status concerning the pressure to lose one’s virginity. The authors then connected these sources to a larger societal and cultural context, where norms create expectations about sex and sexualises women.

Above are two examples of studies discussing women’s sexuality in the context of consent and forced or negotiated sex. A third study with a similar standpoint is one made by Christianson (2014), where she investigated the grey zone between consent and sexual coercion by doing several interviews with a woman that was raped and infected with HIV when she was 15 years old, after being “adventurous” and following a man home. The woman never told the man ‘no’, and “was horrified, suffered from self-blame, and let it happen.” (p. 774). The woman did not tell anyone what had happen for a long time, with the explanation that she felt stupid, ashamed and worried about what other people would think. Christianson had two theoretical standpoints when analysing her data: gender perspective and agency. She used these theoretical standpoints to discuss and problematise the social problem of forced sex, and the difficulties for women to talk about it because it is also something that is eminently accepted in today’s society.

The studies about nonconsensual sex in one form or another often led to discussions and problematisations about consent: when, how, or where the women felt like they could, should or had to give consent, with the conclusion that women often felt obligated, forced or responsible to engage in sexual activities with men as a consequence of the traditional, patriarchal ways and views in society. The conclusions about consent in these studies generally consisted of ambiguities about when women feel like they have to or should consent, or when they reluctantly consent to sexual activities because they feel like they do not have another choice or because it is easier to just get it over with (Burkett & Hamilton,
This reluctant consent that rises from men’s desire and is used by women as a coping strategy or exchange for romance was the central result in two of the studies that we discussed more thoroughly earlier in this segment (Burkett & Hamilton, ibid.; French & Neville, ibid.). The authors concluded that the imbalance in sexual agency culminates in women’s agency being used to cater men’s desires and needs, with both explicit and implicit pressure being present. None of the mentioned studies discussed consent as something women ask for, it was exclusively seen as something “given” by women.

GENDER NORMS

The research that discussed and problematised how women are targeted for sexual coercion and unwanted sex often also brought up the contrast that women are also encouraged by society to solely enjoy and express their sexual freedom. The research brought up that women’s sexual agency is ambiguous, and tells them to celebrate their own sexual desires and needs at the same time as they are expected to put men’s wants and demands before their own (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Christianson, 2014; Cook & Messman-Moore, 2018; French & Neville, 2017). This is where our second theme, gender norms, derived from.

As an example, Charles (2010) did a study where she researched how femininity and sexuality is constructed in schools. She did this by attending an English class for eight weeks, where she interacted with the girls, held focus groups and activities like writing assignments about girl power. Her findings showed that girls, according to feminist theories, needed to balance between being sexually desirable and sexually modest, and needed to fill certain criteria when it comes to appearance and persona.

In the research we examined for this study gender norms were often discussed in relation to sex or rape, with a focus on trying to define how phenomena like these shape and constitute women’s sexuality. The general results of these studies told us that sex and sexuality is something that can be viewed and perceived very differently by men and women, by different groups of women and internally by women themselves. The conclusions often bring up the gender norms that operate in our society, for example women being subordinate to men, unapprised when it comes to sex and mere sex objects, and the reproducing of traditional roles and views on sex and sexuality overall as explanations to why it looks the way it does (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Charles, 2010; Christianson, 2014; Cook & Messman-Moore, 2018; French & Neville, 2017; Kennett, Humphreys & Bramley, 2013).
CRITIQUING CONSTRUCTIONS OF SEXUALITY

According to Rogers (2012) the critical perspective and constant critical approach on current research, as well as one’s own, has a possibility to minimise the oppressive notes and the power imbalance that it might contribute towards. We found that Beasley (2005) described this well: that to be critical means that you do not take (a discourse) for granted, but problematise the existing categories and products, for example in current research. In the field of research that is women’s sexuality, authors acknowledge this by recognising the need for more critical studies. Fahs and McClelland (2016), for instance, discussed the need for critical studies of sexuality because it would shed light on and problematise power dynamics, heteronormalcy and sexual privilege since they felt sex and sexuality research was normative and one-sided. Allen (2013) also points out that even though there are plenty of feminist studies about women’s sexuality, most of them reproduce the same discourse - even while trying to do the opposite - and argue that there’s a lack of critical research on the field of women’s sexuality. This previous research focuses on the problematisation and absence of sexuality rather than something “normal”, in comparison to male sexuality. When women’s sexuality is discussed with the notions of desire and lust, the focus is often on problematising this kind of behaviour (Allen, 2013).

Another part of this field of research focused on problematising and critiquing the discourse of consent. Consent is something that can be interpreted and conceptualised in many different ways, and that is what makes it so precarious and a target for criticism and scrutiny (Beres, 2007). Beres (ibid.) and Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) also argue that most research being made about consent revolving around sexual violence makes it harder to say anything about how consent works in actual consensual sexual situations. They encourage researchers to undertake more research on how consent works in healthy sexual encounters, to contribute to the knowledge about consent in a consensual context.

The discourse of women’s sexuality from a third wave feminist perspective has also gotten its critique. Lamb (2009) explains that the female sexuality that third wave feminism advocates repeat three main themes: subjectivity, active agency and the notion of desire and pleasure. According to her, these are a countermovement for the traditionally problematised areas of femininity: victimisation, objectification and the passive sexual female. Lamb (ibid.) points out problems in this approach: the ideal female sexuality does not only rise from a practise that is traditionally tied to men and a stereotypical view on femininity but also
pressures the teenage girl to have full control of her body and sexuality and connects “good sex” to pleasure exclusively. These are themes we also found recurring in other studies we examined in the field of women’s sexuality for this study (Allen, 2013; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; French & Neville, 2017).

**SELF-SEXUALISATION**

To encapsulate the aggregative understanding of the research we have examined, a thorough subtheme was self-sexualisation. Self-sexualisation means that the social push around consent and sexual norms towards women is so forceful and comprehensive that it becomes internalised, meaning that women act as if the behaviour was initiated from their own motives (French & Neville, 2017). For instance, young women discussed that they engage in unwanted sexual activities with their partners because they saw it as an obligation, and something that’s required by them to keep their partner (French & Neville, ibid.). Another example from the same study showed that women assume that saying yes to one thing - dancing, a drink, or a ride home - means that they have to say yes to the subsequent acts as well. This was not seen as a structural product or a pressure from a social level, but an active choice that the women made in the situation. Indeed, this can be seen as empowerment, where the woman is the active chooser to reproduce and perform the society’s standards from her own purpose and motivation, while it is repetition of the traditional social scripts and peer expectations and norms. Namely, this means that she is reproducing the social norms and contributes to the traditional social construction of women’s sexuality (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008; Lamb, 2009).

**SUMMARY**

What we take with us from how the field of research of women’s sexuality and consent looks like today is that there seems to be quite a strong portrayal of women’s sexuality as passive and dependent on men. This means that women’s sexuality is more often than not talked about in a matter of women as somewhat reluctant towards sex in general and the one’s expected to give consent to men (e.g. Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; French & Neville, 2017). There also seem to be a consensus that this is at least partially because of gender norms and traditional roles in society (e.g. Kennett et al., 2013; Cook & Messman-Moore, 2018).
Incidentally, what we discovered as a possible knowledge gap was something eminently similar to our own research purpose. We felt that studies about how research itself contributes to the discourses of women’s sexuality was missing in the field of sexuality and consent research. A few of the mentioned studies problematise the way women themselves construct their sexuality and agency in a disfavouring way, with the conclusion from the authors that women are part of social structures in society (Allen, 2013; French & Neville, 2017; Lamb, 2009). The way that the women see their sexuality, in comparison to men’s or not, is often presented by the authors without any criticism and as a stated fact, instead of them questioning if there might be underlying factors or if this construction is affected by a dominating discourse.

We believe that the studies discussed in this instalment are important for social work and our study because social workers in many different fields come in contact with these issues daily, and research is part of the construction and reconstruction of the social structures and norms in society that we are examining in this study. No matter if you work with social services, as a school counselor, or in health care, you will meet girls and women that are affected by these matters, and therefore we consider it important to be attentive and critical to one’s own influences, behaviour and approaches.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Our theoretical perspectives are based on how different practices are constructed in human interaction on different levels and what kind of effect this has on society and its population. Below we will outline the perspectives that we have taken and how we have positioned ourselves in the study.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Social constructionism builds on the thought that there is not one absolute truth about reality and our understanding of the world; that the way we see and perceive the world is something that is constructed between people and therefore should be discussed and handled with a critical standpoint. The world consists of categories that help us comprehend and relate to phenomena, and social constructionism points out that these categories are
made by people and that they are not statical or hard-lined. There is nothing objective or natural that decides what something is or how it should be categorised, all of this is constructed by us, the people - and our understanding of things change over time and space (Burr, 2003).

The perspective of social constructionism is carried throughout our entire research process. We believe that the concept of “reality” being something that is constructed by people thoroughly applies to our purpose and what we aimed to do. By approaching our study with the prejudice that everything is socially constructed, we hoped to have the sensibility to detect the predominant discourses more easily.

FOUCAULDIAN PERSPECTIVE

The foucauldian perspective on power states that the people with knowledge have the power to define the discourses we use to communicate with our surroundings (Foucault, 2003). Foucault also presented a construction that he called power/knowledge, that explains how power and knowledge is connected and dependent on each other: by gaining knowledge, one is gaining power, or by gaining power one can gain or create knowledge (Börjesson & Rehn, 2009). This means that in the field of sexuality, or sexual assaults, the ones that have the most knowledge, for example the researchers and professionals of the field, have the power to define how the society sees and categorises the phenomenon. According to the theory of discourses, these representations of language reflect on the way we treat the people that are affected by the phenomena. If we focus on the discourse that covers women’s sexuality, it means that all women are affected by how this discourse is practiced.

We used the foucauldian perspective on power to analyse and discuss our results after the discourse analysis. We believe that Foucault’s reasonings about power and knowledge can be useful when connecting our study and the results we get to social work, since in our case it will be the researchers of the studies who have the knowledge and therefore also the power to define the discourse of women’s sexuality or consent. We argue that these definitions then contribute to the overall discourses that affect everyone, including social workers that work with the target groups we have mentioned in the introduction. One can also see this approach from a more critical perspective, since Foucault (2003) points out that power is not something passive, but an active position where an individual or a group has or is using specific strategies to gain or stay in power. This unquestionably applies to politics,
but it also has relevance in the bureaucratic approach to social work where the social worker is actively making choices from their power position.

**DISCOURSE THEORY**

Discourses exist in cultural concepts from which we construct our identities through linguistic practices in relation to others (Burr, 2003). Based on the “radical” social constructionism, it is only these discourses that are available for us to use, anything else, for example the discourses we do not know about or that do not have a linguistic representation, have no meaning in our social interaction (Burr, ibid.). The foucauldian approach to discourses reduces humans to our language without which we can not comprehend the world.

According to Foucault, these discourses are the limits for our understanding and creation of reality (Mattsson, 2015). Discourses in general has also gotten its fair share of criticism since discourse can be seen as a fashion term, as something that many use to discuss and describe certain phenomena without knowing or being able to define exactly what it is or means (Meyer, 2001).

Burr presents that “our subjective experience is provided by the discourses in which we are embedded” (2003, p. 119). For example, the concept of self-sexualisation (French & Neville, 2017) is a process where we internalise the external discourses, and they become part of our subjective identity. We then act from these internalised models and regenerate the discourse of women’s sexuality through our language and behaviour. This means that instead of this sexual discourse being something subjective, it is a copied model that is born from a cultural and societal concept, and not something that is “essential” or “authentic” to the individuals identity. Burr (2003) calls this positioning, that is, we take upon the role which is given inside the discourse, for example woman, social worker, or mother, and copy the identities which are constructed inside the discourse.

Burr (2003) explains that the predominant discourses are not easily challenged; the threatening alternatives are silenced by the majority. To achieve some kind of change, one must start from their own practices and positioning inside the discourse, by questioning and critically inspecting the discourses and the practices that follow it. This can take place on an individual level, such as a social worker distinguishing the predominant discourses on the professional field and their position inside the discourse or from a wider perspective - by observing the discourse of femininity, or sexuality and how these discourses fabricate the social environment which we live in. These comprehensive, dominant discourses are
maintained by the people in the position of power, and are therefore difficult to challenge by an individual. This is the essence of why we encourage a critical perspective from social workers who have the power to define their professional standpoints and relations. To find some ground on how women’s sexuality and the act of consenting is constructed, we look to the discourses that dominate the research field. The theory of discourses allows us to recognise repeated constructions of linguistic representations of (the perspective on) women’s sexuality in the context of consent.

**CRITICAL DISCOURSE THEORY**

Fairclough (1995) explains the importance of the critical perspective on discourse analysis through the relation between everyday life and the social structures. He points out that our daily interactions, the texts we write and the conversations we have all contribute to the larger social structure, even if it is not imminent to us. Individuals choose to contribute to certain norms and knowledge, hence strengthening those certain discourses. Fairclough argues that the critical perspective allows us to examine the “verbal interactions with an eye to their determination by and their effects on social structures” (1995, p. 38).

Fairclough (1995) points out that social institutions are the withholders of social discourses. The subjects (for example social workers) adopt the discourses and values of the institution in order to be part of it. These values can be see-through and hence the adoption process might be invisible to the subject. This means that in order to fit into the social service organisation, the social workers have to adapt to the dominant discourse or discourses and manifest them in their everyday practice. As said, our commitment to a certain discourse might not be imminent to us. This also means that information is presented as “knowledge” inside this discourse, is taken for granted and thereby becomes the norm and “background knowledge” (Fairclough, ibid.). This background knowledge is naturalised information that can even be seen as a required skill or technique that the subject has to master. In order to bring such norms to daylight, a critical perspective must be selected by both researchers outside the institution as well as the subjects in the institution. For instance, as pointed out earlier in this study, the definition of consent is rarely discussed in research, and it is often assumed that the reader has “background knowledge” of the subject and its practice.

Fairclough (2011) describes critical discourse analysis as a theoretical perspective that tries to explain the existing realities rather than describing them, and van Dijk (1993) points out that good critical discourse analysis does not only do the former, but also contributes to a
change in society because of its focus on pointing out imbalanced power structures. This means that researchers using critical discourse analysis unavoidably take a political position and perspective in their studies. While we do not assume to make a larger scale social change with our study, we aim to explain why the construction of women’s sexuality in consent research is important for the field of social work and how this construction could affect the clients and the social climate that we work in.

FEMINIST THEORY

The feminist theory seems axiomatic when talking about the construction of women's sexuality, since it focuses on explaining the oppression of women and how social roles and positions matter and formulate in society. Feminist theory also contribute to the problematisation of the power imbalance between men and women, oppression and identity (Payne, 2015), all of which we believe are connected to the purpose of our study.

Feminism claims that there are social structures in society that work in the favor of men and that puts their needs, desires and wants before women's. This is explained by the gender differences that are maintained in our society (Payne, 2015). Since we with this study wanted to examine how women’s sexuality is constructed we argue that it was highly relevant to keep feminist theory in mind when analysing our data and results, to see if we could detect anything in the constructions that can be related to or explained by feminist theory and the power relation between the genders.

The postmodern perspective that reality is constructed through interaction also means that there is not one absolute truth or reality and therefore we can not state that the patriarchal structure that feminism is based on is universal. Instead of women's subordinate position being a sum of separate or individual opinions, it is formed by the ones who are in (political) power for their opinion matters the most in society (Gemzøe, 2010; Payne, 2015). Postmodern feminism emphasizes the importance to critically study the constructed categories that exist in our society and the social relations between them, because there is a clear power imbalance where dominant categories try to discipline and control others (Payne, 2015).

We believe that Kullberg and colleagues (2012) have explained our reasoning for including feminist theory in this study well when they pointed out that the feminist perspective, when
applied to social work, encourages us to rethink and reformulate the way we talk about social problems and take men’s superiority in society into account when doing so.

One critique about the feminist theory and practice that we have to take into consideration for this study is that it has been argued that by focusing on ‘women’s issues’ one loses the general picture and these issues continue to be seen as simply ‘women's issues’ (Payne, 2015).

METHOD

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLE

Since we chose to use a qualitative method (critical discourse analysis) for our study on research articles, we started off by doing a literature study of the sample collected from Scopus. We read the articles thoroughly and sought out coherent and relevant themes in and between them, that we then processed using critical discourse analysis.

SAMPLE

Our sample consisted of articles about studies made on women’s sexuality and consent, since our purpose was to analyse how women’s sexuality is constructed in consent research. Like mentioned, we used Scopus to collect the sample, with the reason that we had a notion that Scopus was the superior search engine when it came to advanced literature searches because of its highly developed search tools. When operating the search we utilised certain criteria and specific search terms to narrow our results and to make sure that the articles were relevant to what we wanted to study.

The criteria for the sample were that the articles had to be peer reviewed, published during the past 6 years (2013-2018) in order to keep the sample as relevant to the present-day consent research as possible, and be written in English. The search terms that we used, based on our research purpose, were 'consent AND sex*' and 'woman OR women OR female', the latter term structured the way it is to include the plural form for the noun ‘woman’ and the adjective ‘female’. These terms are different than the ones we used to find previous research in the sense that here all of the terms had to be included in order to make our
sample. In the search for previous research it was enough if the research touched on one or a few of the chosen terms.

We limited the results to areas of social studies, psychology and arts and humanities, and excluded the area of medicine. We also utilised Scopus keywords function, with which we could specify our search even further. With the keyword function we were able to limit our search results to articles that, on top of having our search terms, also included any of the following keywords: female, sexuality, consent, rape, women and sexual consent. We also restricted the document type to articles and reviews only. This gave us 105 results. We read through the abstracts of these articles and just as with the search for previous research, we decided to not include studies that primarily discussed medical-, non-hetero/queer-, ethnicity or religious aspects. Our reasoning for excluding articles that discuss these topics was that we realised that it would have included variables that we did not intend on examining in this study and that it would have made it too broad and may have scattered our results. We also made the decision not to limit our search to certain journals, since we did not see it as needed to apply such limitations when the study is about the construction of sexuality in research. Out of the 105 articles from the search, 39 fit the topic of this study. We read through these articles, and while all of them discussed sexuality and consent, only 17 had differentiated between male and female sexuality.

Doing the search as explained above gave us a diverse sample of 17 articles, which can be found in the appendix. The sample consisted of 11 quantitative and 6 qualitative studies. The quantitative research was survey based, and the qualitative research was mainly based on interviews or focus groups and thematic analysis, with one exception being a discursive text analysis. 13 out of the 17 studies had college or university students as the target group. Most of the studies were conducted by female researchers, with a majority based in the United States. A few studies were conducted in the United Kingdom and Canada. The overall aims of the studies were exploring sexual consent, unwanted, coerced or nonconsensual sex, rape, with a few exceptions like online harassment and specific sexual conduct codes.

We argue that the diverse sample was something positive, since it did not limit us to just studying one specific phenomenon, but a broad variety of phenomena that were all connected to women’s sexuality and consent.
ANALYSIS METHOD

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Foremost, we chose to do a discourse analysis because it had been the choice of analysis in several of the studies that we examined in the research summary, and we therefore believed that it would be a method that we could use to successfully pursue our study. After exploring discourse analysis further, we became certain that it was the analysis we wanted to do, and the one with the best qualifications to help us answer our research questions. More specifically we decided to do a critical discourse analysis since we believed that the critical discourse analysis would be the most fitting choice for our research purpose. Critical discourse analysis can be seen as a tool for developing a deeper knowledge of the messages that we are expressing through the way that we write and speak about certain matters (Janks, 1997). This brings the possibility of revealing and exploring latent discourses that otherwise go unnoticed because of the reigning structures in society. However, a downside to critical discourse analysis worth mentioning is that since there is such a plethora of methods of discourse analysis in general, and in our case critical discourse analysis specifically, there are not any clear, distinct techniques on how to perform a critical discourse analysis (Janks, ibid.; Meyer, 2001).

Critical discourse analysis is a problem-oriented method meant for social problems, such as the purpose of this study, with a focus on the connections and relations between discourses and society (Reisigl, 2013; van Dijk, 1995). Choosing Fairclough’s approach to critical discourse analysis distinguished us from the more pure linguistic forms of discourse analysis, to a focus on the semiosis and social impact of the studied discourses (Fairclough, 2001).

Fairclough (1992b) emphasizes that a good critical discourse analysis focuses on both the form of the text (micro-level) and the context it is in (macro-level). This means that one has to focus on what is said and how it is said - the grammar, the vocabulary and textual orientation, as well as the intertextual aspect. The intertextual aspect can be seen as the relation of the text to other texts, how it uses discourses and how it reflects the current state of the society. This means that the text is both produced and consumed in a certain historical standpoint, which gives it a different frame for understanding. For example, the risen focus on women’s neoliberal agency shows that we live in a society where women’s rights are so
developed that the focus has switched from a structural level to an individual one, which would not have been possible a few decades ago - and still is not in some parts of the world.

To have an exclusive approach to the material, we utilised Fairclough’s tool of three dimensions of critical discourse analysis (1992b; Reisigl, 2013), as this tool enables taking different perspectives to the text and examining it from all three dimensions equally. The first dimension consist of analysing the text itself, including the vocabulary, grammar and structure. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) summarise the components of textual analysis to interactional control, ethos, metaphors, wording and grammar. Of the latter, we focused on transitivity and agency. Transitivity is described as the relation between the verb, and the subject and object (Jørgensen & Phillips, ibid.). It can take an active form with a responsible agent for the verb, or a passive form, where the responsible agent is absent. We used Halliday’s (Eggins, 2004) approach on transitivity to define what kind of positions women and other actors have been given in the articles in relation to their sexuality and focused on the verbs that were used to describe sexuality, consent or a relation to these. According to this approach, transitivity is used to describe how we experience reality, and hence by giving a certain position to a participant the authors direct how the individual defines their experience. We also focused on how agency in the clause was constructed by both the researchers and the subjects, since it represents who is given responsibility in the clause and situation.

The second dimension, the discourse practice, is the process of production and interpretation and consist of on the one hand how the text is written and on the other had how it is received and processed. This dimension includes analysis on how the research and its receivers relate to existing discourses and genres. Here we identified similar and contradictory themes in the articles regarding women’s sexuality, and focused on whether or not they supported the dominating discourse or contributed to an alternative discourse. The discourse practice also includes intertextuality and interdiscursivity, which means the ways texts and discourses relate to each other, and how no text or discourse exists solely and separately from a wider context. We explored how different discursive practices draw from each other and which way they describe both themselves and the relation to other discourse practices and texts. We also focused on how text relate to other texts, meaning the way that the articles position themselves in relation to previous research and its results. The discursive practice, that means the second dimension, can be described as the link between the first and third dimension. Therefore, we examined how certain textual aspects, such as metaphors, grammar and agency impact the construction on female sexuality in both a wider
social level as well as within the individuals. For example, we focused on recurring themes and explored how these contribute to both the discourse practice and to the socio-cultural context.

The third dimension focuses on the socio-cultural context: when and where the text was written and what it says about the possible social change that is going on. In other words, what the conditions are for the production and interpretation. Here we focused on the context, discussing how all of this connects to the totality and what we can use to theoretically explain it. We positioned the research into its historical time frame, and found that it indeed projects the overall social climate of neoliberalism and individuality. The socio-cultural context also includes the analysis of hegemonic processes: how the discourse and the power that comes with it is practiced. It draws upon the the non-discursive practices such as the institutional and economic conditions, which should be considered through the analysis. Because of our focus in social work, we explored how these discourses can affect the institutional practice and what kind of effect they might have in both individual and social contexts. An aspect that we also choose to focus on was the wider context of feminism and how women’s role in society reflects with how women’s sexuality is constructed.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

We chose to discuss trustworthiness in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The reasoning for this was that we did a qualitative study and according to Bryman (2011) these terms are often used as the equivalent terms to the more respected quantitative terms validity and reliability. We also decided to use Brymans’ definitions (ibid.) when discussing how we have approached the trustworthiness in our study.

Credibility has to do with how believable the results are, and can be established by comparing our results with the ones from other, similar studies (Bryman, ibid.). While we have not found any studies researching the exact same question as we did, we argue that our results can still be compared with adjacent studies like the ones we discussed in the introduction and the previous research.

Transferability is accomplished by using well-known methods and theories, so that one simply can apply it to other contexts (Bryman, ibid.). Critical discourse analysis although being a very detailed methodology, does not have any distinct guidelines for analysis, but do provide us with a set of analysis tools (Fairclough, 2011), and while these are open for some
interpretation we tried our best to describe and apply them thoroughly to provide some kind of transferability.

We tried to accomplish dependability by thoroughly explaining every step in our research process, since dependability is about ensuring that our research process is as available and approachable as possible (Bryman, ibid.). We systematically searched for literature with definite and explicit keywords, using only specific databases and comprehensively explained what we included or excluded and why, and we tried our best to be explicit about what we have done and why all throughout the text, which hopefully makes our process easy to follow and to reproduce.

Confirmability is accomplished when evident that the researchers have not operated with any sort of ill will or been clearly biased (Bryman, ibid.). While it is not possible to be completely objective, we tried our best to keep an unprejudiced standpoint throughout this research. However, as van Dijk (1993) and Fairclough (1992b) among others have pointed out, doing a critical discourse analysis implies that the researchers by definition adopt a specific political standpoint.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Since we did a literature study, and hence did not involve any study participants or examine any primary data, we did not have to consider the requirements for the protection of individuals, like the protection against harm or infringement, for this study (Vetenskapsrådet, 2011).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

We have chosen to introduce our results and analysis by presenting the discourses that we have derived from thematising the articles. We have also chosen to integrate our analysis with the results, because we believed that the overall content would benefit from an alternate discussion between the two. When we discussed or took examples from specific articles from our data, we referred to their respective numbers that can be found in the appendix.
REGIMENTING TRADITIONS AND THE GATEKEEPER PARADOX

The first discourse we could distinguish consisted of notions about what is expected of the heteronormative woman in sexual situations, with the terms gatekeeper and tradition recurring so remarkably often that the name we chose for the discourse seemed obvious. What is presented here was particularly palpable in the articles about quantitative studies, which will be demonstrated below.

One of the most considerable terms we encountered in the articles was “gatekeeper”. This term was used to describe women as the “gatekeepers” of sex. What this meant was that women were presented as the deciding party when it came to sexual activities, something that recurred in the majority of articles analysed. 10 out of 17 articles discussed this matter, 8 were quantitative studies and 2 were qualitative. 6 out of these 10 explicitly used the term “gatekeeper”, and the remaining articles brought up the same matter by discussing it in terms of women’s responsibility to “set sexual parameters” (article 8, p. 101), that women are “expected to be reactive to the male date’s overtures” (article 6, p. 281), that women are being held “responsible for allowing sexual activity to occur; therefore their role in consent activities is to give or deny consent” (article 9, p. 282), and that “men are expected to ask women for consent, women are expected to refuse sex, at least initially” (article 10, p. 198). The authors used these concepts to describe how women are generally seen as having the “power” to decide whether sex would happen or not, that it was their responsibility to say “yes” or “no”. However, the men were still always referred to as the initiators of sexual acts, and it turned out that women’s “no” were more often than not disregarded by the men, or the women did not feel like it was worth to say no or they did not feel like they were entitled to do so (e.g. articles 2, 7, 12, and 14). This implies that women were seen as mere receivers, by the researchers as well as the participants of the studies, despite being described as the weigher if sex happens or not: “women are passive, men are sexual aggressors, and women are expected to react to a man’s sexual initiation” (article 11, p. 642).

The term “gatekeeper” has a strong and active sense, and signals that the person described as such is an active subject. It is also a metaphor, as it paints a picture of women standing in front of a gate where they solely would decide whether the gate would open or remain
closed. The way that women are discussed in the articles otherwise, as passive receivers, is therefore paradoxical with this active enunciation.

Akin to the phenomenon of the “gatekeeper” in the articles was tradition. Tradition was discussed in a matter of how a lot of norms and values are still lingering in society despite being obsolete, for example through traditional gender roles, traditional attitudes, traditional beliefs, and most commonly, traditional sexual scripts. Discussions about tradition occurred in 12 out of the 17 articles analysed, whence 11 out of the 17 explicitly referred to traditional sexual scripts. Out of the 12 articles discussing this matter, 8 were quantitative, survey based studies and 4 were qualitative, consisting of 2 focus groups, 1 interview and 1 discursive analysis of text messages.

Traditional sexual scripts can be interpreted as reigning norms in society, deriving from our opinions, external influences (like media) and history (article 10). The traditional sexual scripts emphasize that there is a distinct frame and label for how women (and men) are supposed to be and act. Examples of traditional sexual scripts brought up in the articles were: that women are receivers of sex and should not initiate it because if doing so they risk getting labeled as a whore or a slut, that women are encouraged to “play hard to get” to not seem slutty - often discussed in terms of token resistance, that there has to be some amount of sex happening in a relationship in order for it to work - meaning that women have to “give in” to having sex even if they don’t want to (articles 2, 6, 11, 12, and 13).

The researchers in the respective articles stated that women generally conformed to these traditional scripts, based on how women chose to answer questions or how they described their sex life, sexuality, or certain sexual encounters. A few of the researchers problematised this by connecting it to “emotional labour” (articles 7 and 16) or “sexual care work” (article 2), or “the sexual double standard” (articles 7, 10, 15, and 17). Emotional labour and sexual care work were terms used to describe the phenomenon of women engaging in sexual activities without personally desiring or wanting them, but something that they chose to do to satisfy, please or comfort their partner or relationship (articles 2, 7, and 16). This emotional labour or sexual care work reaches from faking one’s orgasm to not disappointing one’s partner or hurting their feelings (article 16), to submitting to painful anal sex because it is seen as normalcy (article 7).
Emotional labour and sexual care work could be explained with feminist theory, through something that Gemzöe (2010) calls the division of labour between genders. This division of labour does not build on biological differences between genders, but the cultural prejudice about them. Gemzöe (2010) gives an example of this where milking in farming communities is seen as something that is only for women, meaning that the (male) farmer needs a woman to milk his cows. The same principle is detected in this study, where women are seen as “needed” for their male partners satisfaction. Gemzöe (2010) also points out that these gender specific tasks entails a taboo or prohibition for the unaffected gender to do the task - the male farmer would be frowned upon if he did the womanly task that is milking the cows. This could also be applied on the results of this study, with the sexual care work being seen as women’s work, and women being responsible for men’s satisfaction but disregarding their own, which also is not attended to by the men. An apparent example of this is the so called “orgasm gap”, originating from studies about men and women’s orgasm frequencies (Frederick, John, Garcia, & Lloyd, 2018; Wade, Kremer, & Brown, 2005). These studies found that heteronormative men orgasm noticeably more often than heteronormative women do during sexual activities. This also supports the results of this study since it shows that women’s orgasm, or pleasure, is not “assigned” to any of the genders and therefore not cared for the same way that men’s orgasms and pleasure is, since those are for women to fulfil.

The sexual double standard was used to describe the idea of women being admonished to stay away from premarital sex and protect their innocence and be cautious of promiscuousness, while men are permitted and encouraged to take advantage of their sexual freedom and be as sexually active as possible (articles 7 and 15). The sexual double standard was also used to illustrate the actuality of promiscuity justifying abuse (article 17). These instances can also be connected to something that Gemzöe (2010) draws attention to when discussing sexuality and feminist theory. She argues that the society and culture we live in have constructed preconceptions about women being passive but despite that always sexually available for men, leading to women’s submission being seen as normalcy.

Three articles discussed similar scripts to the traditional sexual one, but without mentioning the term tradition. Instead, they discussed scripts in terms of normative-, gendered- or simply sexual scripts (articles 3, 7, and 16). The researchers did however discuss these term in the same way as we have presented above.
These traditional scripts, and the gatekeeper phenomenon, could be seen as clear examples of the oppression that women suffer from on account of the patriarchal society referred to by the feminist perspective. Gemzöe (2010) remarked on this with the statement that “sex is associated with male dominance and female submission, men’s sexual needs are universally prevailing and sexual violence towards women is accepted” (our translation, p. 97). While this is a somewhat heavy statement, there are several similarities to the concepts discussed above. The reference to men’s superiority and women’s inferiority can be found both in the discussions about traditional scripts (for example women as receivers - not initiators), and gatekeeping (the excavated mandate women are said to have to decide if sex is happening or not).

Above we have discussed that there seems to be unanimous understanding in the articles of women as mere receivers and men as takers of sex, despite the researchers attempts to make the women into active subjects by referring to them as “gatekeepers”. We also established that this phenomenon was more often than not explained by traditions and scripts that are prevailing in our society.

THE AMBIGUITY OF PLEASURE AND DESIRE

The second discourse we came across dealt with the unclarity concerning women’s own pleasure and desire. The articles presented that “wantedness” now exists in women’s heteronormative sexual encounters and that Fine’s (1988) “missing discourse of desire” is history, but we found that this statement is inherently problematic. Some of the studies (articles 1, 2, 6, 9, and 16) referred to Peterson and Muehlenhard’s (2007) matrix of consent and wantedness to demonstrate this. These articles explained that the “traditional” way of seeing sex exclusively as either wanted and consented or unwanted and non-consented is not legitimate anymore and instead these variables are more in a continuum than absolute binaries. Despite this, we argue that wantedness and “desire” are not synonyms, with wantedness being explicitly defined through women’s “want” to please their partners. To discuss wantedness, the majority of the articles (articles 1, 2, 5, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15) used the word “willing” instead, and differentiated willingness or wantedness from consent. Consent was seen as agreeing to the act while wantedness or willingness included a motive or reason to engage in a sexual act. Willingness especially has a very passive tone to it, and to us it represents only a step forward from consent. Willingness as a word was used very
differently than wantedness and desire, and was often used more as an agreement than an initiative even though this difference was not articulated in the studies. Article 3 pointed out the difference between being willing to engage in a sexual activity and desiring a sexual activity as “sexual compliance [is] defined as willing and consensual, despite one partner’s lack of desire to engage in the sexual activity.” (p. 1830). This is the only occasion where an explicit distinction in definitions between the different terms was made.

From the articles examined, it seems like the discourse of “desire” is still missing from the discussion about women’s sexuality. The word “desire” was used in the articles to refer to either “partner’s desire” or “men’s desire” (articles 7, 11, 12, and 13), or it was not used at all (articles 4, 5, 8, 10, and 15). When discussing the lack of or low desire (article 2), it was seen as something unbenevolent, since desire seemed to be validated through their partners desire and the actual definition of desire and adequate desire was bypassed. Women’s “low desire” (article 2) was seen as a problem, not because the women wanted to “desire more”, but because their partners had higher sexual drive, thus women felt obliged to answer to their partners needs. We see desire as a feeling of arousal and a longing for pleasure, and although this could be achieved together with other people we believe that the feeling itself is connected to one’s own person and not dependent on any other beings.

We believe that the concept of wantedness falls between willingness and desire, since wantedness has a more active tone to it - “I want” versus “I am willing to”. Wantedness differs from willingness by its transitivity. Wanting something is a material process whereas being willing is a relational process. The biggest difference between these two is that wanting (the material process) only has one participant (the actor) while willingness (the relational process) requires two participants (the actor and the value). Transitivity is used to present how reality is experienced (Eggins, 2004). This means that by using the word “willingness” the authors place the experience of deciding to engage in the sexual activity further from the person with the addition of the second participant and thereby making it less personal. “Wantedness” is closer to the subject with only one participant, and expresses a more personal commitment to the statement. The difference is also presented through the type of process: material processes are types of doing while relational processes are types of being (Janks, 1997). This approach also supports the passivity of the term willingness where being willing is not an action taken but more a passive state.
Article 15 states that not all unwanted sex has to be negative because the act can contribute to “partner satisfaction, the promotion of intimacy and avoidance of relationship tension” (p. 612). In studies that focused on women’s experiences about sex and emotional labour (articles 2 and 16), their own desire was never the origin, but was instead diminished to the desire to please their partner, receive any form of intimacy, or to end an argument. This is emphasized through the interviewed women’s own quotes like “I did it [anal sex] just to please him” and “sometimes I do actually cry [when having sex]” (article 7, p. 510) or “Oh, my God. The doctor told me I can say no.” (article 2, p. 2091) which clearly pinpoints that their own pleasure or desire was sacrificed to please their partners.

The main focus in Fairclough’s second dimension (Fairclough, 1992b) is on how the text is produced and consumed. Part of the production and the “interactive” part of the discursive practice of the studies is in the encounter between the researcher and the subject. Foucault’s concept of power and knowledge places the researcher in dominating position where they have the power to define the discourse around sexuality. This means that the way the researchers formulate the questions sets the framework through which the subject constructs their own experience of sexuality. The quantitative surveys were built to be gender neutral, which means that men and women were asked the same questions. How these questions were interpreted was up for the subjects to define. However from what we could see from the qualitative questions, women were seen as “the gatekeeper” and not asked questions about initiating consent but about giving consent. This means that the questions on their own guide how the subject construct their own sexuality through the questions asked. If given the premisses where they are already seen as the passive “giver” they are unconsciously thinking inside this discourse, and not constructing their sexualities through the possibilities outside the discourse. Since the researches are seen as the authority in the interview or survey situation, they have the power to formulate the discursive practice according to Foucault’s power/knowledge concept.

THE UTOPIA AND THE REALITY (INTERDISCURSIVITY)

As demonstrated in the segments above, we found two very different discursive ways of describing women’s sexuality: one active and conscious and one passive and available. Since the passive and available one is referred to as the traditional (dominant) discourse, the opposite one is thereby the alternative discourse. As we will discuss below, this alternative discourse is not as strong as what could be interpreted from the articles, hence why we named it the utopia of women’s sexuality.
Women’s sexuality is set in a neoliberal framework; women now decided to engage in painful or undesired (articles 2 and 7) sexual activity, but they did it as individuals, rather than it being the representation of social and cultural norms. Concepts such as the sexual caretaker (article 2) or emotional labour (articles 2 and 16) were explained as a conscious decision taken by the women, and they motivated this through internal reasons. In article 4 the interviewed women described that women have responsibility over their behaviour that “led to rape” and the responsibility to make sure that they communicated consent clearly enough. With these tools an active, independent, and sexual woman was created. Even when facing coerced or negotiated sex, it was described as a motivated choice to engage in the activity. As we discussed in the first part of the results and analysis, even the traditional role of a “gatekeeper” was presented as an activity of choosing if sex is going to happen or not.

In summary, this means that according to the researchers the passive, available woman should be history. On the other hand, the interviewed women signalised an alternative interpretation. The interviewed women in the qualitative studies described their sexuality almost as something that is just there to be taken - even if they did consent to sex, they did it because it was assumed to be their “job” or “duty” (articles 2 and 3). Even in situations where sex was described as painful (articles 2 and 7), undesired (article 2), or unwanted (articles 2, 3, and 7), the women felt the need to be available for their partners. At the same time, the interviewed women never refer to their sexuality as being affected by structural or discursive practices. When women described their own experiences, they always used an active subjective position in the clause, introducing themselves, or other women, as the responsible agent to what happened instead of describing it from a passive perspective. Rarely did they position the male partner as an agent or the initiator, but took the responsibility over coercion and painful or unwanted sex (articles 2, 4, 7, 8, and 16). They reproduced the “gatekeeper” metaphor even though it was not as much of an empowering, active choice whether or not they allow sex to happen or not, but an act of finally giving in. Indeed, the interviewed women seemed to refer to the traditional sexual scripts and the division of labour when discussing their own sexuality. This means that the active role that the researchers give to these women is not reconstructed by the women themselves.

I want to cry, I don’t want to have sex. But I feel like I just sometimes…Like if I’ve said,“No,”today, and tomorrow I say,“No,” then the next day I feel like,“OK, how long
can I say no for before this is going to create a problem?"
(article 2, p. 2091)

The theme of self-sexualisation was imminent in many of the studies. The internalising of social or cultural structures and expectations was demonstrated through an obligation, duty or responsibility (articles 2 and 3) to engage in sexual activity, that a part of being a woman is to please their partners, which we have discussed earlier. Some articles touched on the subject directly (articles 4 and 8) and referred to “interpersonal and cultural scripts” (article 6) that had been internalised by the women. This internalisation is also, according to Gemzöe (2010), an important part of feminist theory since it stems from a twisted view on women and their sexuality which women interiorise because there is not anything else to base their opinions or beliefs on, because we live in a patriarchal society.

As mentioned before, 15 out of 17 studies referred to traditional notions, with 7 that distinctly discussed traditional sexual scripts, and the respondents to these studies reproduced the same scripts, i.e. internalising the cultural and social expectations and norms. The interview studies (articles 2, 7 and 16) discuss same “cultural assumptions” (article 3) or “internal pressures” (article 7) and the interviewed women reproduce the discourse as “[sex] it’s something [women] need to do as a wife” (article 2, p. 2089), “[anal sex] seems like it’s just the thing to do” and “Girls talk about anal sex like it’s no big deal to them” (article 7, p. 512). When talking about the obligation to sexual activities, women saw the social norms as a personal feature “I am the type of person who likes to satisfy my partner” (article 2, p. 2088) The process of social pressure was also imminent in how women described other women’s sexuality: other women should take personal “responsibility for nonconsensual sex” (article 8) and “are responsible for navigating safe environments and need to conduct themselves accordingly” (article 4) and that “such women may believe that women should function as gatekeepers” (article 11). The results of the quantitative studies, for example articles 11, 12, 13 and 14 show that students still reproduce the traditional sexual scripts of the available woman and the initiating man. For instance, article 12 found that students of both gender still rely on traditional scripts when conceptualising consent and article 14 referred to “the gatekeeper” to explain differences in refusal strategies. We can further argue that this shows the reproduction of the dominating discourse of women’s passive sexuality.

Thereby, women’s sexuality is constructed through two different discursive practices, and combined to a bipolar unit that draws away from the dominating discourse without letting go
of it. The informative focus in the articles is in the traditional sexual scripts: the traditional norms and discursive practices that construct women and their sexuality in a submissive, passive way. The difference is that instead of rooting these to the patriarchal structures, the responsibility is given to individuals. Reproducing the traditional scripts by acting accordingly is seen as a personal choice, which advocates the new neoliberal, active discourse. This interdiscursivity, combination of two discourses, is what we have chosen to call the utopia of women’s sexuality: like Fairclough (1995) and Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) both claimed, new, creative discourses convey a change in the social climate. This means that even though the focus of the articles is in the dominating discourse, the neoliberal influence on the approach does imply a change in the discursive climate. This change happens in the limitations of the current social climate. (Fairclough, 1995) This can be seen in the relation between the two discourses, where the dominating one is still practicing the hegemonic power - the alternative discourse has the space and opportunity where the dominating one allows it. The majority of both the authors and the subjects in the articles were reproducing the traditional discourse and thereby contributing to the existence of that discourse and further to the hegemonic social practice. As explained through self-sexualisation, the way a dominating discourse is reproduced is by internalising and projecting the discourses values and ideologies in everyday conversations. To emphasize the transparency, this ideology is not questioned or criticised by the individuals within the discourse (Fairclough, ibid.). The nature of a dominating discourse is indeed this unquestioned order of practices that is reproduced by the subjects of the discourse.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this qualitative study was to examine how heteronormative women’s sexuality was constructed in research about consent by doing a critical discourse analysis, and discuss how those constructions hypothetically could contribute to everyday practical social work. With a sample consisting of research articles extracted with precise criteria, we executed the study by deep reading said articles and thematising their content within the framework of critical discourse analysis.

The first and most apparent result of this study was that the existence of the “gatekeeper” concept and the traditional scripts was something that the articles did not criticise, but stated
as facts. It therefore seems evident that structures and practices that could be seen as obsolete are still reigning and repeating, possibly without any significant criticism or motivation towards improvement, like a questioning or problematisation of the state that women’s sexuality is currently at and an elevation of possible solutions to truly empower women and their sexuality. We believe that this prevalence could be explained by Foucault’s power/knowledge construction, which states that the people with the most power or knowledge have the leverage to gain or create the other (Börjesson & Rehn, 2009). In our case this means that the people with the power and knowledge are sustaining the concepts of the “gatekeeper” and the traditional scripts instead of working towards innovation.

This power/knowledge construction can also be projected to the relation between social workers and their clients. As explained earlier in this study, how certain questions and themes are introduced to the subject could affect how the subject constructs the concept and thereby their personal experience or identity. The same way that researchers have the possibility to guide how their subjects construct their sexuality through explaining the questions in a traditional framework, the social worker can reproduce the same framework in a meeting with a client. Also, as stated earlier in this study, the feature of the dominating discourse is that it seems transparent to the people in the discourse; the discursive practices are seen as the ideologically right choices. If the discourse of the traditional, passive and available women’s sexuality is presented as the norm in client work, the institution risks transferring these values to its clients. To have a concept presented from an institution that has hegemonic power over its clients may lead to the internalisation of these discursive practices. We explored the production of women’s sexuality through the choices of wording in the surveys, focus groups, and interviews and explored the differences between “willingness”, “wantedness” and “desire”. The choices of wording themselves direct the reader towards a certain concept of sexuality, and this again can be applied to the practical social work. If a client is asked whether or not they were willing to engage in the sexual act or whether or not the client desired the sexual act sets a different tone to the process. As stated, the transitivity between these verbs represent how we experience the world - and in this case, sexuality. By choosing a certain word we also choose how the reader or client constructs their own sexuality.

As Fairclough (1992b) said, texts either promote an alternative discourse or contribute to the existing dominating discourse. We believe that while these articles might have a goal of exposing patriarchal structures, their results and their approach to sexuality and desire could
contribute to the opposite. The repetition of concepts similar to “the gatekeeper” and “traditional sexual scripts” merely emphasizes the dominating nature of these, instead of showing an alternative. We believe that the research examined could problematise these concepts more, or at least establish that this is not a given fact, and draw the reader’s attention to the patriarchal and destructive structures that these norms have risen from.

The discursive practice also takes place when the finished text is consumed. What is included and excluded in the results will automatically set the tone for the practice. We found that the focus in the articles were exclusively on the negative experiences. This was the case even in studies where the researchers evidently had received positive responses from their study participants, the positive responses were simply not addressed in the results or in the discussion. Although these responses admittedly were the minority, we still consider them relevant enough to be included properly in the studies, if nothing else as a comparison. We have asked ourselves if it simply is not possible to examine the existence of consent when the sexual experience is not only consented and/or wanted, but also desired from all parties involved, and we have not been able to identify any reasons why this would not be possible to do. However, a possible explanation for this might be that the majority of these studies discussed consent in the context of some kind of coercion, where talking about desire seems to still be a taboo. Although this is understandable, we believe that the presence of desire in coerced sex is an important topic that needs to be investigated more.

The biggest challenge we faced in the process of this study was researching and learning the method. We chose to do a critical discourse analysis - a difficult, somewhat abstract and not distinctly explained variant of discourse analysis. This meant that a lot of our time was spent trying to grasp and understand how the analysis worked and how it was supposed to be performed. We are mere students without any expertise in discourse analysis or linguistics, which of course are disadvantages when executing a study like this one. We do however believe that we utilised the knowledge we do have to the best of our abilities, and managed to abridge the analysis to such an extent that it was manageable for us and still filled the purpose of our study.

One thing we want to point out is that most of the issues and instances we have discussed in this study of course affect men in a negative matter too. For example, a part of the traditional sexual script for men is about them always wanting sex and therefore not having to give consent, which could make it harder for men to say no or refuse sex when they do not want
it. But, since this was not the focus of this study we had to abstain from discussing this any further. However, this does not mean that it is not an equally important issue.

We are concerned that seeing this emotional labour or sexual care work as something positive could lead to the opposite outcomes in a professional relation between the social worker and their client. If social workers reproduce this model, and see coerced sex as something that was “wanted” by women and motivated through this care work, there is a danger that women keep on with this carework. This also might predispose the women to different forms of violence if they keep on internalising these discourses. This clearly demonstrates the foucauldian model of power; that the knowledgeable social worker has the power to construct women’s sexuality and thereby reproduce the traditional discourse, which could hinder the development of a more equal society. We presented a study (Elman, 2001) in the introduction that stated that social workers do not always criminalise coerced sex. We came to the conclusion that the studies that brought up emotional labour contribute to this view, since the researchers did not problematise or criticise the concept further. We also argue that the line where sex becomes coerced is subjective, and studies that do not problematise unwanted sex endanger women in such situations not to be understood or to be misunderstood. This can affect both how the professionals construct the situation and how it further affects how women construct their own relationship and sexuality. As we mentioned in the introduction, Ahrens (2006) emphasized that professionals opinions play a role on how victims of sexual assaults construct their traumas.

We do not suggest that all sex that is not equally as much desired should be criminalised. We call for a more critical view towards sexuality, and for women’s sexual desire to be the center and the initiative instead of it being there to be taken would contribute to a more empowering position. This could give women a possibility to own their sexuality instead of it existing as a tool for men’s sexuality.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In the previous research we brought up that researchers has emphasized a need for studies exploring the prosperous and healthy side of sexuality, consent and relationships. Just as Allen (2013), Beres (2007), and Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) stated, we too would like to see women’s sexuality and consent explored in a more positive matter, meaning studies aiming to determine how sexuality presents and appear for women in for them desired,
wanted and consensual sexual situations. We believe that research about this could benefit the process of facing out the somewhat obsolete background knowledge in society about heteronormative sexual relations, and contribute to the resistance work towards current stigmas around sex.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Sample in alphabetical order (authors last name), followed by title, journal, publishing year:


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