

Christina Akre, Jeanne-Marie Chabloz, Richard E. Belanger, Pierre-André Michaud and Joan-Carles Suris\*

# Unwanted sexual experiences among adolescents: shedding light on the gray zone between consensual and non-consensual sex

## Abstract

This study aimed at exploring adolescents' perceptions of unwanted sexual experiences (USE) in order to set up definitions, categories, and boundaries on the continuum between consensual and non-consensual sex.

**Methods:** We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of four focus group discussions gathering a total of 29 male and female adolescents aged 16–20 years.

**Results:** Analysis of participants' discourse revealed three main characteristics that define USE, namely, regret, as most situations discussed were said to be acceptable or not in terms of whether there were regrets after the fact; misperception of sexual intent; and lack of communication between partners.

**Conclusions:** Our findings revealed that health professionals should be aware of the subtle aspects identifying USE when screening for situations that can have adverse psychological consequences. Where prevention is concerned, it appears important to address these aspects of USE in sex education classes.

**Keywords:** adolescence; qualitative research; unwanted sexual experiences.

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\*Corresponding author: Joan-Carles Suris, MD, PhD, Research Group on Adolescent Health, University Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, Lausanne University Hospital, Route de la Corniche 10, 1010 Lausanne, Switzerland, E-mail: joan-carles.suris@chuv.ch

Christina Akre, Jeanne-Marie Chabloz, Richard E. Belanger and Pierre-André Michaud: Research Group on Adolescent Health, University Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, Lausanne University Hospital, Switzerland

## Introduction

Around the world, at least one woman in every three has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her

lifetime (1). There is empirical evidence indicating that partner violence tends to start early in many relationships, and many of these relationships begin during adolescence or young adulthood. However, while many works have considered sexual abuse and sexual violence against adolescents as being perpetrated by adults, less attention has been given to sexual intimidation and unwanted sexual experiences occurring among adolescents (2). Yet, sexual violence among adolescents is of crucial importance because they are the most at-risk population: they are at the cusp of their sexual life, they often lack self-confidence and do not dare to say no, they are setting up their own boundaries, and are learning to respect those of their peers. Adolescence is a period when dating behavior is first initiated and when the risk of abuse by or against a dating partner first emerges (3).

Moreover, although research has observed dating violence that implies physical, verbal or psychological violence, or a combination of the three categories, situations that do not necessarily encompass violence must still be investigated. Until now, very little research has focused on the less well-defined experiences, including the more “normative” forms of unwanted sexual attention and behavior, as diverse as verbal (unwelcome sexual jokes or remarks), non-verbal (standing too close to someone, confronting someone with pornographic images), or physically violent (assault) (2).

Therefore, there is a “gray zone” that remains to be explored between consensual sex and sexual assault made of many situations that can be considered as unwanted sexual experiences (USE). This gray zone can include many different categories, such as dating violence, unwanted sexual attention, sexual intimidation, sexual coercion, unwanted but willing sexual solicitation, emotional or verbal pressure, and so on. There is a need to focus on this broad continuum of USE, including those that may be considered as normative by teenagers (i.e. unwanted but willing sexual relations), because they are representative of this continuum and may be the cause of trouble for both partners, although in different ways. In coerced sexual relations, the male offender

uses nonphysical force, such as threats, trickery and false inducements, to gain sexual access; while in unwanted but willing sexual intercourse, the woman freely consents but does not really want to engage in sexual intercourse at that time. Furthermore, the literature indicates that there exists no clear definition of USE and that an accurate one is needed in order to plan future interventions (4).

Thus, this study aimed at exploring adolescents' actual perceptions of USE in order to set up definitions, categories, and boundaries on the continuum between consensual and non-consensual sex. Given that what can be considered as such from an adult perspective does not necessarily coincide with nowadays youth's view, we were interested in what adolescents themselves defined as coerced and unwanted but willing (normative) sexual relations.

## Methods

We chose to conduct a qualitative thematic analysis of the perceptions of female and male adolescents concerning USE, regardless of their own experience. A qualitative method facilitates the acquisition of precise accounts and in-depth descriptions (5). In particular, we selected the focus group discussion (FG) as our method of data collection. Group interviewing has been previously shown to be an effective and efficient method in accessing adolescent cultures particularly around sensitive issues (6). This method can facilitate the discussion of taboo topics, because less inhibited members of the group break the ice for shyer participants (7). Moreover, FGs offer the advantage of the interaction of the participants as they query and explain themselves to each other. Through consensus and diversity, discussions generate valuable data, that the participants would not have articulated on their own as individuals (7–9).

Female and male adolescents aged between 16 and 20 years old who spoke French fluently were eligible to participate. Recruitment took place by posting ads in the community. The advertisement invited female and male adolescents to participate in a study on "love relationships" offering them a US\$25 voucher to a department store. Contents of the research and questions to be discussed were explained

at the time of the recruitment on the phone or by e-mail and once again prior to beginning the FG. Each participant signed a consent form before starting the discussion. Approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Lausanne's School of Medicine.

Four FGs gathering a total of 29 adolescents were conducted separately according to age and gender. Group size ranged from five to eight participants. The first two authors moderated the group discussions. FGs lasted approximately one hour and a half each and were audio-taped.

During the FGs, discussions were triggered through the presentation of four scenarios that corresponded to questions posted by female and male adolescents aged 16–20 years on [www.ciao.ch](http://www.ciao.ch) and [www.comeva.ch](http://www.comeva.ch) during the 2 years preceding the study (websites consulted in October 2009) (Table 1). These websites are designed for adolescents; the first one focuses, among others, on health issues and the second gives out information on violence within love relationships. Participants were asked their opinions on each scenario. Borrowing scenarios from the web ensured that the discussions dealt with the realistic concerns of adolescents. Moreover, they allowed participants to debate on their opinions on the subject without having to talk about their own experiences, which could be a potential source of embarrassment.

The selection criteria for the scenarios were to include the different factors already known to play a role in sexual coercion and to explore new ones. Scenario 1 aimed at comprising the stakes of the first sexual experience (10–12). Scenario 2 was selected in order to discuss cannabis consumption (13), age difference between partners (14), and petting, as we wanted the discussions to address all types of sexual relations and not just sexual intercourse. The aim of scenario 3 was to take into account blackmail as a way of putting pressure on someone to have sex. The objectives of scenario 4 were to examine alcohol consumption, the night life context, oral sex, and lack of condom use. Finally, while the first three scenarios aimed at examining the context of steady relationships, scenario 4 addressed the circumstances within an occasional one.

## Data analysis

The recordings were anonymously transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were read several times and coded according to the grounded theory process; this required the extraction of categories from participants' discourse, avoiding the application of predetermined ones. This

**Table 1** Four scenarios presented to the focus group participants.

Number	Sex	Age	Scenarios
1	Female	16	"I am scared of being alone at my boyfriend's because he is surely waiting to have sex with me... but it's still too early for me. If I don't go, he is certainly going to dump me... What should I do?"
2	Female	16	"Last time my boyfriend offered me some pot before petting me. Is that normal? I have the impression that he took advantage of me because I had less strength to resist and I regret what happened. We've been going out for 3 months. He is 19. Does he respect me?"
3	Female	19	"My first boyfriend was very insisting and always wanted to have sex. I didn't feel free to say no. He wasn't violent but he was blackmailing me: 'if you say no, that means you don't love me' etc. So, unless I had an excuse (for example my period), I would give in. I loved him and found him attractive."
4	Female	17	"In a nightclub, I met a tourist who was a few years older than me. We drank quite a bit of alcohol... I found him attractive, we kissed and then, in a dark corner, he forced me to do a fallatio [oral sex]. He was holding my head and I was a little drunk... Of course he didn't wear a condom."

Note: Scenarios were taken from [www.ciao.ch](http://www.ciao.ch) and [www.comeva.ch](http://www.comeva.ch) in October 2009.

analysis method ensured to stay as close as possible to the adolescents' insights by creating explanatory schemes based on the perceptions of those involved with the subject of interest (15, 16). The codes were then synthesized, classified, and analyzed in order to determine the elements that define the gray zone between consensual sex and sexual assault. Citations used in this text were translated into English by the main author.

## Results

Grounded theory analysis of participants' discourse revealed three main characteristics that define USE, namely, regret, misperception of sexual intent, and lack of communication between partners.

### Regret

The notion of regret was significant in the definition of USE in the sense that most situations discussed were said to be acceptable or not as regards whether there were regrets after the fact. For example, in the case of steady relationships, several participants – independently of gender – claimed that it was normal for a female to sometimes make the effort to have sexual relations with her boyfriend to please him, as long as there were no regrets after the fact: “She didn't have much hold of the relationship. She let herself easily taken in because she... it was love that made her blind. [...] now she realizes it, [...] we can see that there is a little regret” (Male, 20y, Scenario 3). This was also considered as being the case in the context of an occasional relationship, when a situation becomes a problem after the fact when regrets hit in, as illustrated by scenario 4: “I don't know how it took place in the [online] forum but if I would have been there, I would have told her: ‘press charges for rape’. If she really regrets and she can't sleep at night...” (M, 17y, S2). Finally, regret was closely linked to substance use as substances could have “positive” effects on the moment, but entail risks of regret after the fact: “Afterwards, [...] she regretted, we agree on that, but maybe on the spot, when he offered her some pot, hum, she didn't feel forced or anything” (M, 16y, S2).

### Misperception of sexual intent

Misperception of sexual intent raised debate and contradictory opinions among the different groups, within the different groups, and even among the same persons.

Participants defended alternately the perpetrator's standpoint and the victim's perspective.

On the one hand, both female and male participants often presented the adolescent female as guilty of inducing a USE situation due to a provocative attitude, which contributed to misperception on the part of the adolescent male. A female's behavior can be misperceived for instance when alcohol is involved: “Right away for them [boys], if a girl, she comes, and she drinks a bit and she starts to turn them on, it automatically means that she wants more” (Female, 20y, S4). Misperception can also be induced by dressing in a certain way: “I don't think there is any excuse for this situation, but it's just that if she was dressed in a vulgar way, it would have still provoked the situation” (F, 18y, S4). Moreover, a night life setting, as presented in scenario 4, was seen as a context where a female should expect flirting: “He has a completely normal behavior, it is entirely normal in a disco to find a girl, to flirt...” (M, 17y, S4). Finally, it was also considered as the female's responsibility as misperception can be avoided by expressing disapproval either verbally: “Because there, they are in a disco, so if she doesn't like the guy or she doesn't feel like it or if he did something wrong, she sends him off right away” (M, 17y, S4), or physically: “If you don't want that [to perform fellatio] you can bite directly and then, I assure you that it doesn't go up anymore...” (M, 17y, S4).

On the other hand, participants also presented the adolescent female as a potential victim of USE due to a male's misperception and misinterpretation of her intentions. In that sense, if a female adolescent turned on a male adolescent, she might have felt obliged to have sex with him, for instance, oral sex as in scenario 4: “Because she had started kissing him, maybe she felt... not guilty but a little forced in the sense that she thought that maybe from his point of view I turned him on and now if I refuse he will maybe become violent [...]” (F, 16y, S4). Moreover, a female's attitude was said not to be an excuse to force her to have sex: “It's not an excuse, we agree. [...] For me, it's typical, even if she drank, it could still possibly be an abuse” (F, 19y, S4).

Therefore, whether the act was the victim's or the perpetrator's fault, misperception of sexual intent was presented as a major characteristic of USE.

### Lack of communication between partners

Whether in a steady or occasional relationship, all participants were unanimous in stating that communication was the base for a good-quality sexual relation, where each

partner could talk freely about sexuality and personal desires: “I think it [communication] is essential in a... it’s the base for everything...” (F, 17y, S3). Whether expressed physically or verbally, it was the only way for each partner to know what the other one was expecting and, therefore, served as a protective factor to avoid USE situations to occur: “Both are supposed to know what the other is expecting” (F, 17y, S3).

However, participants did state that communication is an ideal situation, but sometimes difficult to attain in reality: “It’s something... it’s hard to talk about it. But it shouldn’t be hard, precisely” (M, 17y, S1). Similarly, communication was seen as a sign of maturity as in scenario 2: “It’s also maybe a little... I mean as she is 16, she is relatively young to... not necessarily to have sex but it’s not necessarily very easy to talk about this type of things with her boyfriend...” (F, 18y, S2). A barrier to communication was said to be fear, as it was implied in scenario 4: “She could have very well said no and push him away but, I think it was a little fear which took over...” (M, 20y, S4). In contrast, self-confidence and trust in one’s partner were raised as grounds for communication as they helped overcome shyness to express desires: “For me, the main thing in a relationship, if one is really in love, is trust and one should be able to talk about everything with one’s boyfriend, well of one’s feelings...” (F, 18y, S1).

Consequently, in relation to misperception of sexual intent, lack of communication between partners was perceived as a defining characteristic of USE.

## Discussion

This study presents the different characteristics that define the gray zone between consensual sex and sexual abuse: it occurs when a partner feels regret after the fact due to a negative turn of events, in the case of misperception of sexual intent by one of them, and/or lack of communication between them.

Participants first presented the defining characteristic of regret. This result is especially interesting in terms of time frame. It enables us to stress the fact that USE is not only defined when a situation occurs, but it can become one after the fact – when regret hits. Furthermore, it can be associated to substance use as a behavior can be qualified as acceptable under the effect of a substance, but becomes regrettable after the fact; or to first sexual experience as it can be consensual on the spur of the moment, but becomes regrettable later on if the partner breaks up.

This can be related to the findings of Skinner et al. which underline how the feeling of regret emerges among adolescent females concerning their first sexual intercourse either by being drunk at the time of sexual debut, feeling peer pressure to have sex, or feeling coerced into sex to maintain their relationship and avoid conflict with their partner (11). While research has put forward the feeling of regret among women in the context of sexual debut (11, 12, 17), none, to our knowledge, has explored regret in later sexual experiences.

Misperception of sexual intent by males was also presented by the FG participants as a strong element leading to USE. Similarly, a review study (18) showed that compared with women, men consistently perceived a greater degree of sexual intent in women’s behavior. Misperception has been shown to be often constructed after an assault for the perpetrator to absolve himself of guilt (19). On the one hand, some evidence suggest that this gender effect may be driven largely by a sub-group of males who are particularly prone to perceive sexual intent in females’ behavior, such as sexually coercive males and males who endorse sex-role stereotypes (18). On the other hand, research on first sexual intercourse suggests gender differences in perception among adolescents as more males than females reported that they and their partner were equally willing to engage in sex (12). Nonetheless, many participants in our study, both male and female, presented the female as guilty of inducing USE by dressing or acting in a provocative way. Although mostly stated by participants as unacceptable, both adolescent females and males should be aware of the non-verbal cues females send, which can be misinterpreted by males and can possibly lead to unwanted sexual experiences.

Moreover, misperception of sexual intent brought up ambivalent opinions. Both gender participants themselves shifted easily from considering the point of view of the perpetrator, hence as something an adolescent female could expect, consequently “excusing” the adolescent male for his act and laying responsibility on the victim, and considering it from the victim’s position. This double-opinion characteristic brings up a crucial aspect when considering USE situations: if a female partner herself believes she is guilty of inducing a situation, it raises the question of whether or not a victim would dare complaining and report such situations despite the possible underlying suffering. Being so ambivalent, misperception of sexual intent emphasizes the fact that whether situations are recognized as USE is very strongly dependent on the context, in which they take place and the perception each one has of them, thus they are most probably under-reported.

Other aspects of our findings reinforce this aspect of recognition. For instance, when both female and male participants claim that, within a steady relationship, it is normal for the female partner to sometimes force herself to have sex to please her boyfriend. This was not said to be the case for a male partner as they were considered to be led by sexual drive. Another example is the one of a female adolescent who might feel forced to have sex with someone because she turned him on. These situations were, therefore, perceived as normative, namely unwanted but willing, placing them in this zone rather than in the category of sexual abuse per se. Similarly, research has shown that both men and women identified “keeping the man happy” as the main reason for women to engage in sexual intercourse when they do not want to and when there is no force or coercion involved (20). Gender socialization might play a part in explaining this behavior: it influences the decisions of females to willingly consent and the expectations of males for willing participation by women in unwanted sexual intercourse. Based on a study of university students in Australia, Patton and Mannison (21) found that sexually coercive behaviors are culturally accepted as part of “normal” heterosexuality, and thus, are consistent with gender-role expectations. These are subtle and normative cases that greatly define and maintain the color of the gray zone. Thus, the question emerges in the recognition of these examples of USE by victims themselves, by their partners, by their entourage, or by health professionals who should screen for USE.

Our data finally suggest the importance of communication between partners, whether in a steady or an occasional relationship. This result reveals a certain awareness and maturity among the interviewed adolescents concerning the importance of communication between partners. Likewise, in the case of first sexual experience of females, open communication and mutual negotiation has been shown to ensure a shared responsibility between partners about the decision to have sex and the possibility for each one to maintain control over sexual debut (11). However, in relation to misperception of sexual intent, miscommunication between partners seems to be one of the major problems in attaining wanted and willing sexual relations, as some studies have already suggested, concerning the desired level of sexual intimacy (20, 22, 23).

## Limitations

There are some limitations to our study. First, the use of scenarios is a very useful methodological procedure to

have a group talk about topics, which would be difficult to bring up spontaneously such as sexual behavior. However, this could induce some answers as the participants can think of these situations as examples of USE directly, thereby influencing the definition they give of them. Nonetheless, many new aspects that were not present in the scenarios appeared throughout the discussions. Second, none of the scenarios presented to the participants involved an adolescent male as a victim because the only ones found concerned men having sex with men, which was not the subject of our research. During the FGs, the moderators asked the question whether they thought that an adolescent male could be a victim and an adolescent female a perpetrator, but participants always answered that it was impossible or too rare. A scenario presenting a male as a victim of USE might have opened the discussion to other possible situations. Future studies should, therefore, examine experiences in the context of males as victims, of men having sex with men, as well as of women having sex with women. Third, our study merely focused on perceptions and not on behaviors as such. However, it appears methodologically difficult to conduct a qualitative study on this type of personal experiences.

## Implications

Despite these limitations, this study offers several implications from a clinical and prevention perspective. Health professionals should be aware of these subtle aspects in identifying USE when screening for situations that are not named abuse per se and not necessarily recognized as such by the victim, but which can have adverse psychological consequences both on the short and the long term. Moreover, given that a USE could be defined as such due to regret after the fact, it is important that health professionals, when screening, not only ask about the experience on the spur of the moment but how it was interpreted later on. Where prevention is concerned, it appears important to address the issue concerning communication between partners and that of misperception of sexual intent in sex education classes. It is also important to encourage adolescents to be as explicit as possible concerning their sexual desires.

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