

The Role of the Intimacy Coordinator: New depictions of sex and consent in UK television culture

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Executive summary

This project explores the relatively new role of the intimacy coordinator, which came to the fore following the viral #MeToo movement in 2017. With a focus on UK television culture, the study examines the significance of the profession in ensuring that on-set production practices are safer for everyone involved, and that intimate scenes are handled with care. It looks closely at the connections between offscreen practices of care and onscreen depictions of intimacy and considers the extent to which intimacy coordination is helping to engender creative new ways of depicting sex, intimacy, and consent.

The project was organised around 4 research questions:

RQ1:

What does the role of intimacy coordinator entail?

Through this thematic coding, we explored the wider context in which intimacy coordination is emerging, how intimacy coordinators conceive of the role and understand their job, and how actors describe their experiences of working with intimacy coordinators.

RQ2:

What (if anything) is distinctive about working as an intimacy coordinator on television programmes?

The interviews with intimacy coordinators provided a detailed understanding of their processes, something that scholars have increasingly been calling for in contemporary work on the ethics of media production (Hjort, 2021; Torchin, 2022). Through these interviews, key areas were identified as integral to intimacy coordination: **care, communication, consent, choreography, collaboration, advocacy, activism, and education.**

RQ3:

To what extent does the intimacy coordinator role challenge traditional working cultures in the contemporary television industry?

The intimacy coordinators we interviewed came from a range of backgrounds and roles including: actor; dancer; lawyer; movement director; fight director; and theatre director. Our interviewees told us that intimacy coordination has tended to be dominated by cisgender white middle-class women, and this pattern was reflected in our sample. We interviewed nine female-identifying intimacy coordinators, eight of whom were white and one of whom was black. We also interviewed three white male-identifying intimacy coordinators, one of whom self-identified as trans. There are serious attempts afoot to diversify the profession, as exemplified by the [Intimacy Coordination Mentoring Scheme for Underrepresented Groups](#), organised by Yarit Dor. This scheme began in November 2020 and was funded by the Film and TV Charity BAME Community Grant with support from ScreenSkills and Moving Body Arts.

RQ4:

To what extent does the role of the intimacy coordinator engender new ways of depicting sexual relationships, consent, and sexual violence on television?

As a key part of the research, we conducted 20 semi-structured online interviews; 12 of these interviews were with intimacy coordinators and 8 were with people who work closely with, or have been involved in initiatives related to, intimacy coordinators including agents, actors, and representatives from the trade unions Equity and Bectu. The project design was subject to ethical review by the Ethics Committee at Anglia Ruskin University. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed and manually coded for relevant, recurring themes.

Key findings of the project

- 1** Intimacy coordinators are doing important work to expand cultural understandings of intimacy and professionalise the treatment of intimate scenes. While coordinating scenes involving simulated sex and nudity is one key aspect of their work, they are also educating the industry about different forms of intimacy through the choreography of a range of intimate scenes including parent-child relationships, childbirth, and gynecological exams.
- 2** A strong element of the intimacy coordinator role involves implementing new professional structures of care and communication on sets. These processes in turn shape the creation and choreography of new forms of intimacy onscreen. Just as stunt coordinators shape fight scenes, intimacy coordinators sculpt intimate expressions and movements onscreen.
- 3** The creative aspect of the intimacy coordinator role is significant and not to be underestimated. Against a view of intimacy coordinators as playing a censorship role or being the ‘fun police’, it is important to understand how safer sets enable greater creativity as actors are given space to develop their craft professionally.
- 4** While the media tends to focus on individual ‘star’ intimacy coordinators, many of the intimacy coordinators we spoke to want to mitigate against that understanding of the role. Through the Bectu union intimacy coordinator branch, as well as through more informal networks of support, a dedicated group of intimacy coordinators are working to establish a mutually supportive community of practitioners.
- 5** The intimacy coordinator’s priority to ensure that actors’ voices are heard, and their consensual boundaries are respected in the filming of intimate scenes, offers a potentially radical intervention in the industry’s traditional, hierarchical working cultures. These cultures and the freelance, competitive nature of the sector, have historically created an environment where it is difficult for cast and crew – particularly women and those from underrepresented groups – to speak out. While the profession is often associated with advocating for women on set, particularly post-#MeToo, intimacy coordinators play an important role in disrupting binary thinking, and ensuring that the consent of male actors and actors of diverse gender identities is also considered and upheld.
- 6** For many, though not all, intimacy coordinators, there is an activist aspect to their work, which is tied to sex education and the attempt to provide more diversified and realistic depictions of sex onscreen. This drive towards a more diverse, inclusive, and consent-focused way of choreographing intimacy is tied in interesting ways to cultural initiatives to reframe sexuality education in more open, ethical, and rights-based ways.

Introduction: Background and context

We conducted this study at a significant moment in the development of intimacy coordination in the UK in 2021-2022. The intimacy coordinators we spoke to were still navigating disruptions to training and production caused by the COVID-19 pandemic from early 2020 onwards. Further, the impact of the viral #MeToo movement from 2017, which built on Tarana Burke's earlier activism, continued to reverberate across the TV industry. Both these distinct moments were significant in highlighting pre-existing inequalities across the sector, and prompting a re-imagining of the industry's traditional working cultures in a way that embeds greater care for workers. In this context, the importance of intimacy coordination as a practice that fosters safer production processes, and prioritises consent, advocacy, and a duty of care for cast and crew came to the fore.

Noting the significance of both the pandemic and #MeToo on working practices, one intimacy coordinator stated:

"We've seen that we can change the way we live because of the pandemic; and because of the #MeToo movement we have also been able to see that we can change the way the industry works if we have enough people who believe in the same thing and support the same agenda. I think we are becoming more and more aware of how important health and safety is and that health and safety doesn't only mean physical health, it means psychological health and mental health as well."

The profession garnered further attention during COVID-19 due to the popular and critical success of a number of UK television dramas, including, for example, *Sex Education* (Netflix, 2019-2023), *Normal People* (BBC Three/RTE One/Hulu, 2020), *I May Destroy You* (BBC One/HBO, 2020), *It's a Sin* (Channel 4, 2021), and *Bridgerton* (Netflix, 2020-continuing), which had employed intimacy coordinators and were lauded for their innovative depictions of sex and intimacy. These representations took on increased significance during periods of lockdown in the UK when many viewers were isolated and deprived of physical contact (see Ita O'Brien, cited in Nanu, 2020). In turn, they highlighted the power of television to open up important discussions about changing discourses of consent and sexual violence. In 2021, Michaela Coel's dedication of her BAFTA for Leading Actress on *I May Destroy You* to intimacy coordinator, Ita O'Brien, drew further attention to the role and prompted a flurry of media commentary.

While intimacy coordination pre-dates #MeToo, it is often closely associated with this movement due to the profession's emphasis on ensuring the consent of performers is carefully considered and upheld when filming intimate scenes (Sørensen, 2022). This association can lead to misconceptions of, and resistance to, the role as "policing" or constricting onscreen expressions of intimacy rather than promoting safer production practices that may expand creative possibilities. In turn, the employment of intimacy coordinators can sometimes be treated as "box ticking" exercises on set. The connection of intimacy coordination with #MeToo has also at times placed impossible pressure on intimacy coordinators to "fix" systemic inequities in the sector which require structural reform.

However, an important outcome of #MeToo has been greater awareness of the emotional and physical harms that can ensue when scenes involving simulated sex and nudity are not handled carefully and professionally, with women and those from marginalised groups deemed particularly vulnerable. Intimacy coordinators are commonly industry insiders, often with acting backgrounds, and are keenly aware of the potential for such harm. In our interviews, some former actors recounted past experiences of feeling vulnerable on set, and many noted the disparity between safety concerns for fight scenes – which have a much longer history – and the lack of equivalent attention to intimate scenes. Prior to the development of intimacy coordination, the treatment of intimate scenes was described as a "bit of a free for all" with no protocols, safety techniques or standards in place. Our interviewees told us that historically it was often left to hair and make-up departments to informally look out for actors without adequate recognition, training, or remuneration.

Practitioners had started to explore safer processes prior to #MeToo. Many of our interviewees highlighted the significance of US practitioner, Tonia Sina's (2006) Master's thesis titled "Intimate Encounters: Staging Intimacy and Sensuality" to this work. This thesis is often credited as invaluable for its groundbreaking investigation of approaches to the choreography of sexual and intimate scenes. Although it is exclusively about theatre, it was praised by the intimacy coordinators we spoke to for its strong value to the development of the craft in general. Interviewees also identified the American intimacy coordinator Alicia Rodis as playing a key role in the transatlantic development of the profession, citing her pioneering work on the US television series, *The Deuce* (HBO, 2017-19). In a UK context, our participants commonly mentioned certain practitioners as playing an important role in the training and development of the profession, including Lizzy Talbot and Yarit Dor, founders of Intimacy for Stage and Screen, and Ita O'Brien, founder of Intimacy on Set. Talbot told us of her research into safe intimacy practice:

"I put out a call on Facebook...in 2016 asking people what their experience was with intimate scenes. The responses were 95% had a negative to **extremely negative experience** of intimate scenes, and 90% had negative experience of intimate scenes. [This] was to a Facebook group that consisted predominantly of women."

Jennifer Ward-Lealand, intimacy coordinator and President of Equity New Zealand, similarly spoke of receiving feedback from Equity members in 2015 about traumatic experiences on productions. This led to Equity New Zealand putting together a panel of actors to share their experiences, and then developing "Guidelines to Performing Nudity and Simulated Sex on Stage and Screen,"¹ which were later shared with UK practitioners. In a UK context, intimacy coordinators have been instrumental in developing and contributing to industry-focused guidelines for shooting intimate content for film and television, which clarify the main priorities of the role and provide key definitions and recommendations to industry about when and how to engage with intimacy coordinators (see Burns et al., 2020; Bectu, 2020, 2022; Directors UK, 2019; Rickman and Taylor Hunt, 2023). The employment of intimacy coordinators has also been included as an example of "best practice" in reports that seek to address sexual harassment in the industry (Equity UK, n.d.; Bull, 2023, p. 50). For example, in their Agenda for Change report, developed as part of their "Safe Spaces" campaign, Equity UK highlights the role of intimacy coordination in developing safer production processes in the screen sector (Equity UK, n.d.).

¹ These guidelines have since been replaced by 'Intimacy Guidelines for Stage and Screen' https://equity.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/EquityNZ_Intimacy_Guidelines_2020_v0.3.pdf

1. Defining Intimacy Coordination

When asked to define intimacy coordination, several key words were repeated across the interviews we conducted, including: activism; advocacy; care; communication; consent; choreography; collaboration; coordination; community; listening; professionalism; watching; safety; liaison; and sex education:

“Intimacy coordination is about the facilitation and choreography of intimate content for screen...it is about bringing an intimate scene to its best creative realisation, while upholding the well-being of everyone involved.”

“It’s advocacy, liaison, and choreography.”

“The intimacy coordinator brings a professional process to the performing of intimate scenes.”

Collaboration and transparent communication were deemed particularly important for challenging the vague and informal way in which intimate scenes had often been handled in the past:

Intimacy coordinators are “creative collaborator[s]” akin to the stunt coordinator role, which works to stage fights in a “creative and efficient way, but also makes sure that those scenes are done safely.”

“It’s a collaborative role. I’m not there to tell anybody what to do...I’m there to work with the director and the actors and everyone on set to be an advocate, to listen. I think there is more listening involved than talking, and more understanding where people are coming from. So, it’s a lot about communication.”

“A key priority for me is open communication and transparency and...it’s not just about the actors, it’s also for the crew as well.”

The importance of the coordination side of the role was also emphasised:

“We also coordinate with Heads of Departments to ensure that every aspect of the intimacy is prepped ahead of time. Whether that’s costume, hair and makeup, stunts, VFX, all of that, that’s all done in the pre-production stage.”

In defining their role, many intimacy coordinators said that they often must explain what their role is *not* in order to counter misconceptions of them as constricting representations of intimacy, and raise the importance of other roles on set such as well-being practitioners:

“In the last job I did I said, “It’s really important that you know that I’m not here to spoil fun and to shut things down or to police anything. I’m here to offer options which can really open things out”.”

“It’s intimacy choreography for the camera... we are not well-being practitioners. We are not therapists...The role itself is more process than product... what you see in the edit is a collaborative approach of absolutely everyone.”

Misunderstandings of the role’s primary functions were often attributed to mainstream media coverage, which has tended to sensationalise stories of resistance to the profession. Some of our interviewees noted that a motivating factor in agreeing to be interviewed was a desire to correct these misconceptions.

Differing views on how they see their role in relation to the industry

There were interesting differences of opinion regarding how intimacy coordinators see their role in relation to the screen industry. According to one intimacy coordinator:

“You need to have an understanding of on-set hierarchy...The director is still the director, in my view at least, and we’re there to support that vision... Yes, it is hierarchical, and it has to be hierarchical, it’s a good thing in a lot of ways. What I often say is: power is not a bad thing, abuse of power is.”

Intimacy coordinators by and large agreed that they are there to support the director’s vision, but there were different schools of thought regarding how far they felt they could – or should – push at the parameters of that. On the one hand, some intimacy coordinators pointed to the practicalities of the job:

“The director’s notes {on a scene} have to come first. The intimacy coordinator notes are given only if there’s time... if you take too much time on set, you lose the job.”

On the other hand, there are intimacy coordinators who stressed the more subversive aspects of the role:

“{I think} we need to make waves because it’s not been dealt with properly. It’s how you go about doing that in order to action that change that is needed. Because we’ve come up against so many brick walls, and quite a lot of stress because it’s such a difficult industry to penetrate and to change.”

The same intimacy coordinator clarified that “making waves” is about disrupting “things, in a really positive, collaborative way. It’s not about coming in and ruining everything. It’s just about conversation”.

Even intimacy coordinators who subscribed more to the approach of slipping in and being “part of the machine,” agreed on the importance of communication:

“I’m not entirely outside of the system, I can’t be because that’s who’s paying my salary at the end of the day. However, I am very upfront with the production, with the producers, and I say ‘my role is’ or this is how I perceive my role, that I’m coming in to help the performers with this particular scene and to help the director bring this scene to life. If there are any issues with any of that, I will of course come back to you. Again, it comes down to that open communication point, I suppose.”

For other intimacy coordinators, what was seen as most exciting about the job was the possibility of staging a creative – and political – intervention:

“A lot of my fellow ICs are very deferential to directors, which is our job...in a way. But I come from a directing background so there’s a part of me that’s like, I do whatever job needs me on the day and I’m quite happy to serve the vision and yes, I respect directors because I am one and also just because I do...But I certainly find my motivation and the appeal of this profession for me is tied to... diversifying and revolutionising the way that we portray intimacy onscreen and on stage.”

This potential tension between serving the director’s vision and transforming the portrayal of intimacy was a theme that ran across many of our interviews.

Maintaining personal and professional boundaries

Recognising the potential for harm when personal and professional boundaries become blurred, intimacy coordinators are developing processes and guidelines for the industry to shift intimate content into the professional realm. The importance of language is crucial in this respect and part of the role of the intimacy coordinator is “to define, name and provide clarity in terminology on set” (Sørensen, 2022, p. 6). Using technical terms “without any degree of embarrassment” was seen as crucial to the professional treatment of sex scenes:

“When we talk about body parts, we use anatomically correct words. So we don’t say, ‘Right, then you’re going to grab her tit and you’ll squeeze his arse.’ We don’t say that. We’ll talk about buttocks and the quality of the tension in the hand. So... it becomes more like a dance for them, more like a stunt...we will generally use penis or vulva or buttocks or whatever.”

In maintaining these professional boundaries, the intimacy coordinators we interviewed were emphatic that the personal experience of the actors – and intimacy coordinators – should not be brought to bear on the shooting of intimate scenes. This was often tied to a recognition of the high percentages of women, and those from sexual and gender minorities, who have experienced gender-based violence in their lifetimes, and the potential for trauma if intimate scenes are not handled with care:

“We want a distinguishing between the personal and the professional when people approach intimacy so that people are not being made to bring their personal lives into the representation of the intimacy, which then makes it very hard to detach emotionally, which is when people get triggered or trauma-based responses or get super uncomfortable.”

Determining clear boundaries in this way is essential to the professionalisation of performing and shooting intimacy and mitigates against expectations being placed on performers – particularly those from marginalised groups – to educate other cast and crew members on specific aspects of intimacy.

However, at the same time, many intimacy coordinators pointed to the importance of having intimacy coordinators from diverse and under-represented groups, and how those different forms of experience can enrich productions:

“I do think there are certain stories being told from particular cultural groups and racial groups that would benefit from having people from particular backgrounds. If there were more ICs from different background and races, that could work with these productions and work with these stories, ...that can draw from different experiences and really accentuate that story of that intimacy in whatever context it is, it helps.”

Diversifying the profession was deemed vital for expanding onscreen representations of sex and intimacy. This view was with the caveat that there needs to be similar diversification of people writing, directing, and commissioning this content. Intimacy coordinators from marginalised groups in particular stressed the importance of creating more diverse stories onscreen, acknowledging the dominance of heteronormative perspectives and the power of media representations to shape attitudes and understandings about sex. This is echoed in audience research, which has found that television plays a significant role in the formation of sexual identities for people who identify as queer (Wheatley, 2016, p. 202). A trans intimacy coordinator told us that:

“It doesn’t mean that just because I’m trans I’m going to trans everything up that I’m working on. I just bring some different experience, which is an experience of growing up watching ‘this is sex and this is how it should be and anything outside of that is abnormal or queer or wrong’. Also, I just feel completely scarred by the things that I saw growing up because I didn’t see myself, I never saw my stories being told. And I feel, I feel, that it was also cis male led, white cis male led sex scenarios. I just thought, ‘I don’t see myself there. How am I supposed to fit into that?’ And I feel, yes, that just having more diversity of input is going to give a more equal spread across the work that’s being produced.”

Other intimacy coordinators spoke of the importance of detailed research, and collaboration with specialist consultants when working on certain scenes.

The politics of gender – and the complexity of navigating gendered assumptions – was another key point of discussion for intimacy coordinators. The extent to which the intimacy coordinator role has become associated with women was viewed as a problem by many of our participants because it was seen to reinforce essentialised understandings of gender and gender roles. However, given pervasive gendered inequalities in the sector where senior, creative, and technical roles are male dominated, there was acknowledgement that there may be legitimate times when an intimacy coordinator of a particular gender may be called upon:

“Especially within the crew that will be there, you’ve got your camera op, they’re all male. 90% of directors are male. It’s all male and I think just having a coordinator who is female just balances out a little bit...”

Along with a consideration of gender, the racial dynamics of particular scenes was also discussed:

"I think sometimes there are situations where you maybe wouldn't take a job where you felt that it was really inappropriate for you to do it. If, for example,...there was a scene with black performers and it was about slavery and there were potential scenes of sexual harassment between a white man and a black woman who was representing a slave, ... Then, to have a white intimacy coordinator come in there could be just a bit inappropriate for having to orchestrate that sex act, and if there is a black intimacy coordinator available to do that, then you'd try and pass it to them."

At the same time, some intimacy coordinators suggested that hiring decisions were often less rooted in sensitivities about the requirements of specific scenes, and attributed more to essentialised, and fundamentally discriminatory, assumptions about gender:

"I think what's interesting in this work is the ways in which gender identity intersects with people's perceptions of who's best to do this job. I know male intimacy co-ordinators who have a very hard time because they'll go up for a job and then people will be like, "Oh, actually, we don't want a man for this." It's like, "well, okay, why?" Sometimes that's coming from the actors, in which case fair enough, it's what will help the actors do their best job, but sometimes I find its productions making assumptions based on gender."

Several intimacy coordinators also noted the gendered dimensions of establishing consensual boundaries around sex scenes, whereby male actors will often defer to female actors' boundaries rather than stating their own upfront:

"in the culture in which we live the male always feels that they have to protect and support the female. That's often the rhetoric, "I'll do whatever she's comfortable with doing." It's like okay, that's fine, but you will have boundaries. You will have things that make you feel uncomfortable, and we need to make sure that you're looked after just as much. That is absolutely the case and more so the case in violent scenes"

Ultimately, industry thought processes around gender and the hiring of intimacy coordinators are often "grounded in binary thinking", which intimacy coordinators are keen to disrupt.

2. The impact of COVID

The impact of COVID-19 on shooting intimacy emerged as a salient theme in our interviews.

Intimacy coordinators played a central role in considering how to safely choreograph intimate scenes at a time when anxieties over potential transmission were high in 2020-2021:

“When everything else was shut down, the film and TV industry continued to thrive. We needed to come up with very quick solutions and quick ways of making the workplace safe for us to be able to continue working.”

This led to intimacy coordinators finding innovative ways to express intimacy in a way that minimised kissing, such as using more hugs, a “nuzzle to the neck”, a “nose-to-nose touch” or a “forehead-to-forehead” touch. There were also conversations about “COVID choreography” and different sexual positions which minimised face to face contact, as well as discussions of how to alleviate actors’ anxieties, and navigate new protocols on set for PCR testing and N95 mask and visor use.

Intimacy coordinators also made important contributions to recovery plans, as evidenced in two reports: the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Communications and Theatre Union (Bectu) Report on Scripted Film & TV Recovery Plan, published online in May 2020, and the Directors UK Intimacy in the Time of COVID-19 report, published in August 2020. Both reports provided industry guidance on how to enhance safety during the production of intimate content, recommended reconsidering whether intimacy was required, and provided imaginative solutions for depicting non-contact based intimacy, such as insinuated action, reduced nudity, and the use of camera tricks and masking techniques.

For intimacy coordinators, what was valuable about navigating this tricky moment for the industry, was that it led to more open conversations around the function and significance of intimate scenes:

“I think with COVID, there has just been [more] conversation around do we need this scene? If we do, great. Let’s just limit the amount of face-to-face contact. Whether that’s having sex ...from behind, or just engaging in those sorts of conversations so it is not all having the woman on top and exposing her nudity. Why don’t we shift it so that they’re both on their sides, or whatever? So, it has created interesting conversation, but people still want to shoot sex scenes.”

Furthermore, there was newfound attention paid to issues of consent, which was viewed as a “silver lining” to the COVID lockdowns.

“The impact that it did have is that people’s sense of personal space was heightened... People have got a far better awareness of consent and boundaries because of COVID that I don’t think we could ever have changed naturally. So that’s been, honestly, a little bit of a benefit of COVID for us, because people are far more aware than they’ve ever been now of this.”

While the intimacy coordinators and actors we spoke to emphasised growing awareness of the importance of consent, there was simultaneously often reticence about to what extent the lessons of COVID-19 would remain:

“Ask before you touch. That has become a norm, now, but we very quickly forget these learnings if we just let them go. I think it’s really important to keep what we have learned and keep developing them, and not just wash them away as the pandemic clears out.”

Finally, it is important to note that, for many of the intimacy coordinators we spoke to, there was a feeling that COVID would ultimately not have “a huge impact on intimacy coordination” or the industry in the long term.

3. A community of practitioners

In a competitive industry, the emphasis on community in our interviews was striking. Intimacy coordinators stressed the importance of organisations such as the Intimacy Practitioners Guild and the Bectu intimacy coordinator subbranch as being important in this regard. Such groups help to share best practice, set guidelines, standardise processes and establish rates for intimacy coordination work, which is vital given the relative infancy of the profession. As one intimacy coordinator said, the significance of such groups is that they are working to:

“pool one another’s knowledge on how each other are doing risk assessments, what closed set protocols we’re each working to and how we can standardise some of those, and have a conversation about [things such as], “Oh God, I’ve got a pool scene coming up and none of the tape is sticking, what are your thoughts on how we get around this for our modesty garments?” We need to be able to be having those conversations with each other so that we can learn from one another’s practices.”

Many intimacy coordinators spoke of the joyful moments when they collaborated with other intimacy coordinators and with other departments and crew:

“I think this work can be really, really isolating because you are a lone wolf, and you’re having to hold a lot. So, when you get an opportunity to work with a fellow co-ordinator [...] it’s really fun.”

“I was so happy...that the producer called me and was like, “I don’t know how we handle this scene.” And I was like, “Well let’s figure it out.” Then as a collective we found the way that ensured it was created with the actor’s consent. It was something that they were really proud of, it’s something [that] the art department were really proud of, then of course they wanted photos of it because it was so brilliant and that was what the actor thought as well.”

Important bonds were also developed with other intimacy coordinators during the training experience, which in turn led to job opportunities:

“I think pods of people that have trained together just naturally form a team...and we seem to put work each other’s way. I got a call about this, “I can’t do it, can you do it?”...All of my work has come through either somebody not being able to make a shoot day and they’ve done all the prep and I’ve jumped in or somebody saying, “This has popped up, I can’t do it.””

This kind of community cannot be underestimated in a competitive, freelance industry where risk is often borne by individuals and where intimacy coordinators are often a “department of one” on set. In addition to providing opportunities to discuss best practice in the profession, the support offered by this community helps to mitigate against some of the lonelier and more isolating aspects of the job.

4. Conceptualising consent

Consent is the cornerstone of intimacy coordination practice, and it emerged as a central theme in our interviews. The development of the intimacy coordinator role is part of a wider cultural turn towards building a consent culture, and implementing new practices that ward against abusive, unreflective, and unethical production processes. A significant development brought about by #MeToo is a reevaluation of TV shows and films, not only for their onscreen depictions of sex and sexual violence but also for their treatment of women actors in particular (Atkinson, 2023). Intimacy coordinators are a key part of the industry's attempt to foster safer sets.

An important intervention that intimacy coordinators make in the choreography and filming of intimate scenes is the transparent negotiation of informed consent from actors. The FRIES acronym from Planned Parenthood, a US non-profit organisation established to provide education and information about sexual and reproductive health, was mentioned by two interviewees, with consent defined as being “freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific” (Planned Parenthood, n.d.).

This definition emphasises the importance of consent being given without pressure (“freely given”), with enthusiasm and with full and clear information about what is being consented to at each stage (“informed” and “specific”). Importantly, it also stresses consent as a continual process, that can be retracted at any time (“reversible”), as reflected in the following quotation:

“I also say [to performers] that consent is something that can be retracted – ‘I’ve changed my mind’ – and that’s fine because we can work around that. So, it’s about getting consent and getting consent each new time when there is a new day or new scene or a new session. Or even during the session, that consent can be fluid and changeable.”

It is important to note that some of our interviewees acknowledged the limitations of the FRIES definition when it comes to the notion of “enthusiastic” consent. There are conversations within intimacy coordination circles about whether “engaged” is better than “enthusiastic” because “people might not always be enthusiastic but still might be consenting.” A recent report on the role of intimacy coordination in Higher Education discusses the acronym CRISP, used by a US intimacy direction training company, to refer to consent as “considered, reversible, informed, specific and participatory”. This is seen to better reflect the professional realm of intimacy practice (Rickman and Taylor Hunt, 2023).

Negotiating “freely given” consent is a potential point of tension in the context of a largely freelance sector marked by stark gendered and racialised power hierarchies, fears of reputational damage, and often tight time constraints. It is essential then that intimacy coordinators do not have the power to hire or fire anyone, enabling actors to speak more openly about their levels of comfort. An intimacy coordinator explained of the process that:

“At the beginning of every scene, we’ll do an agreement in consent of touch. It’s an icebreaker on the body, whether that’s a hug or holding hands and looking at each other so you already get the sense of that touch. Then, we go through a whole-body scan, depending on what the scene requires.”

The seriousness and importance of this exercise for the well-being of actors was emphasised throughout the interviews:

“I think people can underestimate or undermine just how triggering some form of touch can be for some people. I think the statistic is 60% of women have been sexually harassed or assaulted. If you think about the number of that, you might be coming onto set working with an actor who has that experience, and we’re not mental health providers. We are not people that can help actors through their trauma. That is something that we’re not qualified to do. But what we can do is make sure that the areas of touch on the body are consented, that is consensual, and people have consented to that.”

Consent is not just seen as verbal; keen attention is paid also to body language and moments of hesitation:

“I think there’s something about having a level of emotional intelligence to listen [...] to the physical as well as the literal – the words, the sound of the words, how people are saying them and also the physicality that goes with that.”

Against the view that boundaries are impediments to creativity, intimacy coordinators were emphatic that when actors feel safe, it often leads to more interesting and nuanced work:

“Sometimes boundaries create more interesting work. Obstacles are always great to work with because somebody has a cold sore, you might want to kiss on the neck or a kiss on the wrist, or a kiss on wherever, the collar bone. There’s something more interesting potentially in that scene if you’ve got an obstacle in the way”.

“One of the most beautiful things I heard back from actors was they felt they had autonomy, that they had... [gone] further than they thought they could because they were safely held”.

Many intimacy coordinators spoke of the importance of changing the way in which performers are trained in drama schools and normalising a discussion of consent in the wider industry. Several teach intimacy practice in drama schools, taking their role as educators of future generations seriously and ensuring that young actors understand their rights and how to assert their boundaries. Two of our interviewees have since developed [Equity/Bectu Higher Education Intimacy Coordination and Direction Guidelines](#) (Rickman and Taylor Hunt, 2023).

Traditional approaches to performance often privilege saying yes to all requests, making it difficult for actors – particularly those who are young and inexperienced, and those from underrepresented groups – to say no. A female-identifying actor explained,

“We are taught we are at the bottom of the food chain and you have to say yes to everything in order to earn your stripes. [Intimacy coordination] can give people the confidence to say, ‘No, these are my rights and that doesn’t make you difficult.’ If everybody does it, it’s just the norm, but unfortunately at the moment there are a few of us saying, ‘No, no, I want this.’ But then there are fifteen actors behind me who will say, ‘I’ll do it with my clothes off.’

Importantly, the intimacy coordination profession challenges the idea of “no” as an obstacle and instead embraces its empowering and creative possibilities in terms of finding other ways to work that ensure performers feel safe:

“We’re setting boundaries but not strict boundaries where we feel like there’s a wall being put up and we can’t pass it because I’ve put up my boundaries, I’ve set these boundaries, and no-one can pass it. We want to keep it nice and flexible in the sense that you’re being empowered by your ‘nos’ rather than saying, ‘I’m saying no. Sorry that I said no.’ You want to have power behind you so that your yeses, wherever your yeses are, can feel even more powerful.”

“Again, you build trust and then you get these incredible scenes that are just full because of the trust. Knowing that consent is a priority and that you’re not going to be pushed beyond feeling comfortable, means that you can just breathe and do your work and it can be joyful, even if it’s really difficult.”

Intimacy coordinators also recognise the need for after care when filming intimate scenes, particularly those involving sexual violence. Noting the potential for harm if actors’ professional and personal lives become blurred, they spoke of the importance of “closure practices” defined as “a ritual/action/exercise that aids the Performer to de-role (come out of character) and acknowledge that the intimate situation performed was not real” (Burns et al., 2020, p.13).

A recurring interview theme was the pervasiveness of poor mental health across the sector (see Wilkes et al., 2020). While our interviewees were emphatic that they are not therapists and that wider industrial reform is needed, they simultaneously recognised the important role that intimacy coordination can play in expanding definitions of health and safety to encompass considerations of the emotional well-beings of not only performers, but crew too:

“What I’ve found very interesting is that actually, the work that we do, suddenly makes actors realise how bad it was before. They might not necessarily have had a visceral reaction to something but they’re having the reaction now because it’s being safely coordinated. They’re like, “Oh god. That was bad. It was wrong when we did this before.” So, you’re managing past experiences as well.”

“Crews can find things quite triggering as well. Sometimes they’re asked to watch scenes, to be present in a scene, that is really potentially difficult for them to be a part of. Cameramen and boom operators are so intensely there with what is going on and I don’t think they’ve ever been asked if they’re okay or how they’re feeling. Even if it’s just a disclaimer, “This is what we’re doing in the scene, this is the choreography, this is the movement of it.” Yes, I think people undermine that – that sometimes being an observer can be just as difficult as being a participant.”

By normalising the asking of consent and listening carefully to responses, intimacy coordinators respond to wider calls for there to be greater levels of care and communication in the media industries, presenting an alternative to traditional hierarchal working conditions.

5. An ethical gaze

Much has been written about the “gaze” in relation to cinematic representations, spectatorial positions, and actual audiences. In Laura Mulvey’s classic 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” she wrote of the “three famous looks associated with the cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product and that of the characters at each other within the screen allusion” (1975, p. 843).

A key finding of this research project is that intimacy coordinators bring another “look” on the scene when overseeing the production of intimate content. Intimacy coordinators spoke of their role as observers, and of how important their watchful gaze was to fostering safer sets, ensuring consent is upheld, and maintaining a professional environment:

“You’re just this outside eye making sure that things are done correctly and safely and professionally.”

“You’ve got to have eyes like a hawk, frankly. Even, for instance, when you’ve got a closed set, you’ve got make sure that suddenly you haven’t got some lone crew just standing there watching the action. I might whisper to the 1st AD, ‘Is that person required for a closed set? I don’t think so.’ Then [they’ll] get them out.”

“You’ve got someone that’s looking. When we watch the monitors, I’m looking...have they showed too much there because that actor didn’t consent to that. If that actor then sees that in a trailer and is like, ‘I didn’t consent to that.’ You’re in trouble. Whereas I’m literally there...watching that monitor, making sure...that everything that is being consented to is being shown on camera.”

This idea of a watchful, caring gaze is to be distinguished from the notion of intimacy coordinators as the “#MeToo police,” who are there “to stand in a corner and keep an eye on all the men in the room.” While there is a safety element to the role, the intimacy coordinators we spoke to stressed the creative aspects of their job, and emphasised that they are not there to stifle artistic processes:

“I think probably coming off the back of Weinstein and #MeToo and TIME’S UP and everything that was happening in 2017, people saw the intimacy coordinator role as a policing role. We were very much there to keep an eye on the performers and make sure performers felt safe on set. Over time, I think that perception and the role itself has changed so that it’s now not just about keeping performers safe... the role has really moved to one of narrative and how we tell these stories naturalistically or beautifully or whatever is actually called for.”

Some intimacy coordinators told us that, when they are brought in from the earliest point possible in a production and given the space and time for rehearsal and workshops with actors, they are able to help transform the atmosphere on sets which can then translate into representations and reception of intimacy onscreen too. Further, while the specific input of an intimacy coordinator is not necessarily detectable in onscreen representations in any simplistic way, the knowledge of safer productions where the consent of cast and crew has been carefully upheld, can produce a different kind of viewing experience.

6. Re-imagining and expanding representations of intimacy onscreen

Many of the intimacy coordinators we spoke to expressed a desire to expand and re-imagine what representations of intimacy might look like onscreen, yet with a key caveat that they do not consistently have creative control over the intimate scenes they help to choreograph:

“I think that there’s been a perception that we have more control over the narrative than we actually do – we are not in the writers’ room.”

While this view was echoed across the interviews, a key finding is that, when fully embraced on sets, intimacy coordinators can play a significant creative role in reshaping what intimate content might look like onscreen:

“Sometimes you’re there as health and safety police and they’re frankly not very interested in your creative input in the slightest. [Other times], they’re like, “I don’t want to have to deal with the sex scene. I’m scared. Please can you just do it?” and then you get a lot more creative rein and there is a real creative story-telling aspect to it.”

This re-imagination can take the form of scrutiny of the narrative function of intimate scenes, challenging the “vagueness” by which sex scenes have historically been treated, and a push towards realism with more detailed choreography of intimate moments and scenes:

“It’s really great when we have space to talk through [...] why the sex scene is there, how it serves the storytelling, how it serves the character, where the character is coming from, what this physical, sexual expression says about the character.”

This sense of the subtle, yet deeply significant, gestures that intimacy coordinators can bring to a scene was echoed across many of the interviews:

“I think ICs really can shape things in the most subtle way. It doesn’t need to be a great big maneuver or action. Just by saying, “If you put your knee there instead of there, you’ll be able to roll over easier”, for example. It’s all about telling stories, again that is my bottom line. If it’s not serving the story then there’s no point. [...] there’s so much that an IC can...feed in, and it will transform how you’re reading that character’s journey, for example, or how the narrative is being rolled out.”

A recurring aim was to make the choreography of intimate scenes “more believable” and realistic. There was an interest in “trying to get more of the visceral realities of sex” onscreen. This was attributed to a wider cultural “revolt” against Hollywood romance:

“People are fed up of seeing that...So what’s happening now is people are trying to recreate on the big screen what actually happens in real lives and what makes excellent intimate relationships. So, we’ve actually seen a complete flip. People are not trying to emulate the steamy Hollywood romances; what Hollywood are now trying to do is emulate successful personal intimate relationships, which is really interesting.”

For some, a key motivating factor in training to become an intimacy coordinator was underpinned by a recognition of the power that media can play in shaping understandings and attitudes about sexuality and consent and providing sexual information. Some intimacy coordinators spoke of an activist dimension to their work in this respect:

“There’s a bit of activism in there as well, being aware that until sex education is prolific and thorough and comprehensive, that a lot of young people or people in general get information about human sexuality from movies and TV. If that’s not portrayed, I guess, with the ring of truth to it, given whatever genre or whatever purpose the intimacy is serving, then it doesn’t really help enrich our society in the ways that I think it could.”

A push towards finding ways to better represent diverse sexual perspectives onscreen was deemed especially important for the intimacy coordinators we spoke to from underrepresented groups:

“Having those queer intimacy coordinators in a queer scene, for example, or an intimacy coordinator who’s worked with their queer colleagues and is really aware, who’s made it their job to make sure they can represent those scenes realistically...means that those scenes are going to look better and be [more] realistic.”

“I think the bottom line is the work is going to be richer for having our experience because our experience is slightly different maybe, and we have a different kind of angle on things and different experience of navigating a world. If you’re only flooding our platforms with depictions of ‘this is the right way for sex to happen and this is weird or wrong’, then you’re hetero-normalising things and erasing a whole spectrum of people of colour, of gender, of sexuality.”

Significantly, while mainstream media coverage of the profession emphasises sex scenes, intimacy coordinators work on a range of other intimate content, including scenes involving childbirth, defecation, menstruation, intimate medical procedures, and non-sexual relationships between parents and children:

“For young people, it’s representations of family intimacy. Like, to turn up on set and be like, ‘Okay, this person’s your dad. Anyway, get into bed and cuddle them and they’re going to read you a bedtime story.’ It’s insanely intimate for a young person to have to do. So, yes, having an intimacy professional for that. [...] Even with representations of urination and using toilets in any capacity, representations of menstruation, [...] or medical exams on intimate parts of the body. You know, it can be very invasive and potentially also will trigger real responses from people and medical things in their own lives. So there’s just such a breadth... and you never know what someone is going to be uncomfortable with.”

As one interviewee explained, “we’re educating the industry to understand all levels intimacy”, rather than making assumptions about what a performer may or may not be comfortable with. In addition to clear communication and discussion of consent with actors, often these scenes involve intimacy coordinators collaborating with other specialist roles, including midwives, wellbeing practitioners, and child chaperones.

7. The possibilities and challenges of working as an intimacy coordinator on TV productions

Most of the intimacy coordinators we interviewed identified some distinctive differences to working on a TV set, compared to working in theatre or film. These differences related both to offscreen environments and onscreen representations. For some intimacy coordinators, the longer running, ongoing nature of TV series enabled them to “set down roots,” and to take more time with the development of intimacy between characters over the run of a series. This was especially true for intimacy coordinators who worked on long-running Netflix series and had established good working relationships with actors, crew, and the various departments:

“It’s such a gift to be able to go back on a TV production because usually you’ll have a similar team. Usually you’d come back to the same director. At least one of them. So already you don’t have to graft to explain what the role is or reconnect regarding we’re going to collaborate together. So...you can just get on with the job rather than having to prove yourself.”

However, others spoke of the difficulty of not knowing how a character may develop across seasons due to the open-ended nature of long-running series:

“The problem with long-running TV, you have the full narrative up to that point but you don’t know where it’s going to go, whereas for a film it’s finite. You absolutely know where the characters are going to get to at the finish so that you can map out exactly what this sexual moment means for the characters within the overall journey. Whereas when you’re talking to two actors about their sex scene in a long-running series, it’s about this particular moment and what we’re trying to tell given everything that’s happened to them so far and what we know is going to happen in the series, but not what might be around the corner for them in the next.”

A further challenge related to the shifting roster of directors on a multi-episodic television series, which required new relationships to be built each time, and to the lack of rehearsal time, with some speaking of experiences of coming on set for just one day:

“... The big differences [to working in theatre] are the fact that you don’t have any time to rehearse when you’re working for TV. It’s very much about being an advocate for the actor. Being present, being supportive...Because for TV, you just turn up. You come on the day, you work for one specific day on one or two scenes. In terms of being part of the overall process, you don’t get that experience.”

The lack of rehearsal time in television was often linked to tight time constraints and high financial stakes. These working conditions were identified as antithetical at times to the careful discussion of consent with actors:

“The time pressure in TV and film is obviously much greater because it costs more money per minute to shoot. So, completing the day is of great importance but coupled with that you’ve got the complication of, you know, urgency as a form of coercion: “Come on, we’ve only got five more minutes, let’s go, let’s go, let’s go, hurry up, hurry up, you know, this costs so much money blah blah blah.” So, managing that is a slightly different skill.”

There were diverging opinions on whether the craft of the intimacy coordinator was shaped differently depending on specific channels or platforms. Some felt there were no fundamental differences, while others noted that certain organisations had specific protocols for working with intimate content, which had led to shifts in their working practices. Intimacy coordinators who had experience of working in the US, the UK, and other countries also noted the stark differences in national intimacy coordination practices.

The future of intimacy coordination

When asked about their hopes for the future of the profession, many intimacy coordinators expressed a desire for greater acceptance of the role, and that their involvement becomes standard practice for any production involving intimate content:

“I hope that it [becomes] an everyday thing...a budget line, like the stunt coordinator is. 50 plus years ago, we didn’t have stunt coordinators and now you wouldn’t dream of doing a fight scene without a stunt coordinator [...] I hope it just becomes an everyday role as part of our industry. I think it’s better for everybody.”

Mainstream media coverage of intimacy coordination often centers the importance of advocacy in the context of the gendered power imbalances foregrounded by #MeToo. While our interviewees agreed that advocacy remains an important aspect of their work, many expressed a desire that their skills in creative choreography will increasingly be recognised and embraced as the role becomes better understood by the media industry:

“I would like to see much more collaboration as people get to know what we can help with, what we can provide, what we can feed in with. I would like there to be more confidence in us, maybe, a bit more trust. That’s for us to help cultivate.”

“I guess it’s once you’ve...come through a crack in the wall, you can then stretch out. I think we’re in that kind of process and [I would hope] that people [can see] the benefits and not assum[e] that we’re there to make things harder but [know] that we’re there to improve things. Hopefully, we’ll always be met with that positive attitude on set.”

Across all the interviews, there was a strong desire for an expansion of the intimacy coordinator role. This included expansion into pre-production stages such as auditions and casting and into different media forms such as gaming and music videos, as well as expansion of the kinds of intimacies depicted onscreen as writers feel more supported in realising their creative visions, knowing that the safety of cast and crew will be prioritised. Key to this is a recognition of the need for diversification of the role:

“It definitely needs to diversify, needs to broaden. I think me being a black woman is a bit, for some people, like, “Ooh.” Which I guess is a good thing but also it makes me feel like, “Okay, right, you’re going to think of me because I’m ticking the box.”

“The other thing that I’m really, really hoping for and looking forward to with this work, especially in the UK, is the industry diversifying... it’s cisgendered white women from upper middle-class backgrounds. We are much more diverse now than we were a few years ago. The work will only get better the more people who are coming to it and using their backgrounds and their identities and their experiences to enrich and inform it.”

It was recognised that innovation in representation needs to come not just from intimacy coordinators but from other roles too, with one participant noting the importance of diversifying whose stories we hear/see and who commissions them.

Intimacy coordinators were also careful to note that changing working conditions and fostering safer sets was not a job for them alone. Rather, the hope was that everyone in the industry would work to push for change, rooted in a genuine recognition of the importance of embedding care for workers’ well-beings:

“A bigger dream would be that the mental health of people would not be seen as this necessary harm that we have to deal with, but that it would be actually understood that it helps the production that people are taken care of. And that’s my wish: that it would be authentic and it would be truthful and it will be something that people actually believe in so in that way we would be creating a better world.”

This structural reform would then enable intimacy coordinators to focus on the creative aspects of choreography:

“I don’t believe that we should be the only ones seen to be advocating on sets. The widespread advocacy needs to rise, and then everyone’s safer. Whereas if it’s seen as the intimacy coordinator charging in and being like, “Hello, the advocate’s here”, we’ve failed, that’s wrong. The standards need to rise as a whole and we should be doing what we were originally designed to do, which is choreographing the intimate scenes.”

While intimacy coordinators cannot be expected to solve power imbalances in the sector, the profession nevertheless plays a crucial role in disrupting aspects of the industry’s traditional working cultures that produce and reinforce these inequities in the first place.

Closing thoughts

In centring the voices and experiences of intimacy coordinators themselves, the aim of this report and the wider study it emerges from is to contribute to more nuanced understandings of this relatively new profession. In the wake of #MeToo and growing awareness of production-related harms, the ethics of media production has become a pressing area of enquiry (Hjort, 2021; Torchin, 2022). In this context, intimacy coordinators are one of a number of relatively new roles that have emerged to address harmful working practices and explore alternative processes that embed care for the well-being of cast and crew. Yet, as Leshu Torchin (2022) argues, it remains vital to recognise the power imbalances that may constrain the ability of intimacy coordinators to offer this care, as well as the potential tensions between their work and the television industry's capitalist logics.

It is important to stress that one individual role cannot fix the systemic and structural issues exposed by movements such as #MeToo. Ultimately, this framing lets the industry off the hook, overlooks the collaborative ethos underpinning intimacy coordination, and ignores the fact that sexual harassment in the sector may take place off set or on productions with no intimate content (Bull, 2023, p.39). As one interviewee told us, while intimacy coordinators can promise to try to foster *safer* processes, they cannot promise 100% safety on set – they are just one of many roles. Building safer sets, underpinned by an ethos of care for cast and crew, needs to be a collective endeavour and requires structural change.

It remains difficult to trace clear connections between intimacy practice offscreen and representations of intimacy onscreen given the collaborative nature of the role and the inherent power imbalances in the sector. However, a key innovation of the profession is the greater scrutiny of the narrative purpose of intimate scenes and careful attention to the ways in which intimacy is expressed. Intimacy coordinators can bring greater levels of realism to these scenes, often underpinned by a desire to complicate the dominance of heteronormative representations of sex which reinforce traditional gendered power dynamics as well as myths about gendered sexuality. Given the power of television to shape social and cultural understandings and attitudes of consent and sex, and provide sexual information, the importance of expanding intimate representations onscreen should not be underestimated.

Key to this expansion is diversification of the intimacy coordinator role itself. Funded training opportunities such as the Intimacy Coordination Mentoring Scheme for Underrepresented Groups are vital in this regard, as training has traditionally been costly. However, diversification of the profession will not necessarily diversify screen representations unless there is greater awareness of, and trust in, the creative skillsets of intimacy coordinators. Against a view of intimacy coordinators as surveilling production and constricting the expression of intimate content, their attention to professional processes, transparent communication, and to upholding the consent of cast and crews instead fosters a safer and more equitable context for creative innovation and exploration.

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