

The Verdict Is In: College Students' Perceptions on Consensual Sex

Caroline Wines, Department of Mass Communication, Shepherd University

This study examines male and female perceptions regarding various areas of sexual consent to understand if there is a difference between the two genders. A survey was conducted on a college campus asking questions in the areas of perceived behavioral control, attitude towards establishing consent, behavioral approach to consent, sexual consent norms, and awareness and discussion of sexual consent. The purpose of the study was to understand if previous research findings demonstrating different perspectives between males and females regarding sexual consent could be backed up with evidence. The results of the survey found that males and females differ significantly only in the area of awareness and discussion, with females being more aware of the topic of sexual consent. These findings can be beneficial for colleges and universities to better understand how to approach educating their students on the topic of sexual consent.

Introduction

In 2014, the White House created a task force to protect students from sexual assault and new awareness of sexual violence on college campuses occurred. Following the establishment of the Task Force, the Department of Education released a list of institutions that were under investigation for not properly handling cases of sexual violence on their campuses (Jozkowski, 2015). These combined events lead universities to begin looking more in depth at their policies concerning sexual assault and how prevalent their sexual violence cases were.

There are various, different acts that are included in the term sexual assault, but one that has found to be a major contributor is nonconsensual sex (Jozkowski, 2015). There is debate over the definition of consensual sex versus nonconsensual sex. An overarching agreement that can be made is that consensual sex is when both individuals have consciously agreed to be active members of a sexual act. Nonconsensual sex

would then mean that this agreement did not take place. However, many students do not realize when nonconsensual sex has happened to them or how prevalent it is.

Another problem that exists is the differences between males and females in their idea of how consent is communicated with one's partner. It has been found that males more often use nonverbal cues to show their desire to proceed in engaging in sexual activity (Jozkowski, 2015). Since males tend to communicate nonverbally, they expect the same from their female partners. However, females are more likely to use verbal cues to demonstrate their consent (Jozkowski, 2015). With the miscommunication between males and females, it is sometimes hard for universities to determine who is at fault in cases of nonconsensual sex (Potter, 2016).

Slowly, more research is being done on effective ways to inform students on sexual consent. However, before education on consent can take place, it is first important to understand student's current beliefs. The purpose of this research is to analyze the perceptions of male and female students at a

small liberal arts college on the topic of sexual consent to determine if there is a contrast in perceptions. The specific areas which will be examined include perceived behavioral control, attitude towards establishing consent, behavioral approach for obtaining consent, sexual consent norms, and awareness and discussion of consent. Understanding whether a student's gender is associated with their perceptions on sexual consent is important because it will help to serve as a baseline for education on the topic.

Literature Review

Sexual Consent

After the introduction of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault in 2014, it was found that every one in five women will be sexually assaulted in college (Johnson & Hoover, 2015). The perpetrator is usually someone who the woman knows and few decide to come forward and report the assault. The task force also worked to ensure that Title IX regulations were being met which ensure that all students are able to learn in an environment without harassment or unwanted sexual behavior (The MARGARET Fund of the National Women's Law Center, 2017). After the creation of the task force, many universities took it upon themselves to define what sexual consent meant on their campus. However, many of these statements are vague and widely different (Gruber, 2016).

Some schools have adopted the "affirmative consent" standard which requires a clear and concise "yes" to be stated to show desire for sexual activity (Bennett, 2016). This would mean that a lack of saying "yes" would mean no, and in some situations, yes might need to be said every step of the way. As of 2016, the states of California and New York as well as about 1,500 other colleges and universities adopted the

"affirmative consent" standard (Bennett, 2016). In California's Senate Bill 967, affirmative consent is defined as the:

affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity. Lack of protest or resistance does not mean consent, nor does silence mean consent. Affirmative consent must be ongoing throughout a sexual activity and can be revoked at any time. The existence of a dating relationship between the persons involved, or the fact of past sexual relations between them, should never by itself be assumed to be an indicator of consent (California Senate, 2014).

Looking beyond colleges and universities, high schools have begun to address the problem of sexual consent as well. In California, not only did their legislation address higher education, but it also required high school students to be educated on consent. After sexual consent became more prevalent in college freshman orientations, many felt that the topic needed to be talked about at a younger age. Advocates for talking about consent with high school students see it as a chance to make asking for consent an instinctual part of sexual activity (Curriculum Review, 2016). However, the opponents caution that with each state having different laws on consent, students could become more confused depending on where they go to college (Curriculum Review, 2016).

Gender Differences Regarding Sexual Consent

With sexual consent becoming a more prevalent issue after the formation of the White House task force, more research has begun to look further into current opinions on the topic. Once research was

started, many sources found there to be gender differences in the areas surrounding the issues of consent. Various studies have found that in general, young adults tend to rely on nonverbal cues when it comes showing their desire for sexual activity (Johnson & Hoover, 2015). However, when looking at the use of verbal and nonverbal consent in this age group, gender differences were found between males and females. Males were more likely to use nonverbal cues such as kissing or genital touching to show their desire to continue with sexual intercourse (Jozkowski, 2015). Females on the other hand were more likely to use a combination of both verbal and nonverbal cues (Jozkowski, 2015).

The sexual script, or the normal progression of events and behaviors, also differs for males and females. The assumed male gender role is that of imposing confidence and independence while females should exhibit self-control and behavioral restraint (Johnson & Hoover, 2015). Males are also seen as the gender who should make sexual advances on females and initiate the activity while females are socialized to be the guardians of their sexuality and set the limits (Humphreys, 2007). It has also been found through these sexual scripts that there is the general attitude of prioritizing a male's pleasure over female's pleasure (Johnson & Hoover, 2015). This could create implications of females feeling coerced and not being able to stop sexual activity once they have started.

These gender roles would suggest that males are less concerned about sexual consent and it is the female's responsibility to tell the male "yes" and to proceed with sexual activity (Humphreys, 2007). It was found that males would much rather assume consent until a female feels uncomfortable in the situation and decides to verbally say "no" (Humphreys, 2007). Some females also might not want to appear "easy" and for this reason they might not always give a direct "yes" answer to their male partner. Males are

aware of this and will then interpret a vague answer as a female's desire to have sex and not wanting to appear sexually "easy" (Jozkowski, 2015). As a result, in cases of sexual assault and rape, females will often feel they were not assertive enough in attempting to prevent the assault and will live with self-blame and not wanting to report the incident (Jozkowski, 2015).

Sexual Consent Variables

Five areas of sexual consent will be examined in this study. These areas include perceived behavioral control, attitude towards establishing consent, behavioral approach to consent, sexual consent norms, and awareness and discussion.

Perceived behavioral control:

Perceived behavioral control refers to the ease or difficulty one might have in performing a behavior (Ajzen, 2002). In the situation of consensual sex, it could be how easy or difficult an individual believes it is to verbally give consent in a sexual encounter. If an individual believes it would be hard due to factors such as being shy or making the situation awkward, they are less likely to give verbal consent. On the other hand, if they are confident in their ability to give verbal consent and do not believe it would make the situation awkward, they are more likely to give verbal consent. Often, college students avoid giving verbal consent by approaching consent in an indirect and nonverbal way (Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010).

Perceived behavioral control can be directly measured by asking an individual questions about their capacity to perform a specific behavior (Ajzen, 2002). In asking for consent in a sexual situation a direct statement could be: "I think that verbally asking for consent is awkward." The individual would then either agree or disagree with the statement to determine their perceived behavioral control in the situation.

Perceived behavioral control can also be indirectly measured by asking how certain factors could have an influence on their capacity to perform a behavior (Ajzen, 2002). In a sexual situation asking for consent, an indirect statement could be: "Asking for verbal consent while fully clothed would make it..." and the individual would state whether it is easier or harder to perform the behavior.

RQ 1: Will males and females differ in their perceived behavior control in asking for sexual consent?

Attitude toward establishing consent:

It has been found that individuals might not feel it is easy to ask for sexual consent but that does not explain if they think consent is necessary. At various college campuses across the United States, incidents have occurred which indicate a lack of consideration for the importance of consent, and instead an endorsement of rape. For example, at Yale University in 2010 a fraternity on campus was chanting "No means yes and yes means anal" (Jozkowski, 2015). This speech affirms that despite the awareness of the "yes means yes" effort to support sexual consent, it was being changed to fit a rape culture.

Other situations have been found where the school itself does not do enough to prevent sexual assault. At the University of Kansas in 2013, a student was found to have perpetrated an incident of sexual assault and admitted that he knew sexual consent was not present in the situation (Jozkowski, 2015). He received a minor punishment of being ejected from university housing and having to write a four-page paper (Jozkowski, 2015). The university defined the situation as one of "nonconsensual sex" instead of sexual assault which gained them national media attention for the way the situation was handled (Jozkowski, 2015). Cases have also been found where star athletes or leaders on campus instigated

multiple incidents of sexual assault, but the schools were hesitant to impose severe punishments (Potter, 2016). If schools do not take the topic of sexual consent seriously it is probably less likely for the students to take it seriously, especially if they believe there will be no consequences.

RQ2: Will males and females differ in their attitude towards establishing consent?

Indirect behavioral approach to consent:

As a result of the push for "affirmative consent" where students must give a clear and concise "yes" to show desire for sexual activity, it is important to understand how students are giving consent. It has been found that college students are more likely to use nonverbal cues to give permission to engage in sexual behaviors (Hall, 1998). When comparing males and females, males more frequently use nonverbal cues to communicate consent to their partner as well as interpreting if their partner is giving consent (Jozkowski, 2015). Females more frequently use verbal cues to communicate their consent but use both verbal and nonverbal cues to interpret their partner's consent (Jozkowski, 2015). However, females often prefer a more direct and verbal approach to consent (Johnson & Hoover, 2015). With the differences in male and female preferences and interpretations for determining sexual consent, the opportunity for miscommunication arises of how consent is given.

RQ 3: Will males and females differ in their behavioral approach to establishing consent?

Sexual consent norms:

Social norms can have an influence on an individual by making them feel that they need to act and behave in accordance with the rest of society. In terms of gender norms, males will often adopt standards of dominance and independence, attempting to control the world around them (Wood,

Christensen, Hebl, & Rothgerber, 1997). Females tend to be more associated with intimacy and connection where their self-esteem is based on their relationship with others (Wood et al., 1997). These gender norms play a part in sexual consent norms.

When it comes to sex, males believe it is their role to persuade females into having sex and females are supposed to refuse the male if they do not want to take part in the activity (Loh, Gidycz, Lobo, & Luthra, 2005). This concept also ties into females as gatekeepers in sexual situations. A lack of resistance or refusal can often be interpreted by the male partner as a willingness to continue with the sexual activity (Johnson & Hoover, 2015). There is also the notion that the longer a couple has been in a relationship, the need for sexual consent decreases (Humphreys & Herold, 2007). Nonverbal cues tend to become more accepted as a way to give consent to one's partner when a couple has been together for a longer period of time (Johnson & Hoover, 2015). This situation is problematic since the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault discovered 75% to 80% of sexual assault cases have been perpetrated by an acquaintance of the victim (White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014).

RQ 4: Will males and females differ in their sexual consent norms?

Awareness and discussion:

Since the establishment of the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault in 2014, more awareness has been brought to the topic of sexual consent. More responsibility was put on colleges and universities to ensure they are working to prevent sexual assault on their campuses. This was done by providing tools to better understand student's view points through campus climate surveys and effectively responding to cases of sexual assault (White House Task Force to Protect Students from

Sexual Assault, 2014). In addition, stronger enforcement efforts were made, as well as a website where students could report if they feel their school was not correctly handling a situation of sexual assault (White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014).

As these changes were made, schools might have become more aware of the topic, but not necessarily the students. It has been found the more an individual is aware of the topic of sexual consent, there is a greater chance the individual will understand the significance of establishing consent (Humphreys & Herold, 2007). It is important to understand students' knowledge and awareness of sexual consent as it might have an influence on their attitude towards establishing consent.

RQ5: Will males and females differ in their awareness of sexual consent?

Methods

The researcher conducted a survey of college students at a small liberal arts college in the Mid-Atlantic region. Every student enrolled at the university had an assigned email address. An invitation from student affairs was sent to each individual student's email address. A follow up email was sent the week following the first email. The survey completion rate was 10.25 percent with 392 responses from an enrollment of 3826 students. Two respondents, who were not 18, were directed to the end of the survey as they were unable to participate. Seven respondents were not students at the university where the research was being conducted so their responses were removed. There were 45 respondents who started the survey but then did not answer any of the questions. The resulting sample size was 337.

Measures

Participants completed Likert-type scale items ranging from 1 to 5. The measure of sexual consent was derived from previous research (Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010). Using the framework from the previous research, this study examines five areas of sexual consent: perceived behavioral control, attitude towards establishing consent, indirect behavioral approach to establishing consent, sexual consent norms, and awareness and discussion of sexual consent. An open-ended question was also asked of the respondent to define their definition of sexual consent.

Perceived behavioral control:

Perceived behavioral control was measured by four items using a five point Likert type scale with *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree* as anchors. Respondents were asked the following statements: (1) "I am worried that my partner might think I am weird or strange if I asked for sexual consent before starting any sexual activity," (2) "I would have a hard time verbalizing my consent in a sexual encounter because I am too shy," (3) "I think that verbally asking for consent is awkward," (4) "I would have difficulty asking for consent because it would spoil the mood." These items were combined into an additive index ($\alpha = .807$) with a lower score indicating that a respondent perceives it would be less difficult to ask for consent.

Attitude towards establishing consent:

Attitude towards establishing consent was measured by five items using a five point Likert type scale with *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree* as anchors. Respondents were asked the following statements: (1) "I feel that sexual consent should always be obtained before the start of any sexual activity," (2) "I believe that asking for sexual consent is in my best interest because it reduces any misinterpretations that might arise," (3) "I think it is equally important to obtain sexual consent in all relationships regardless of

whether or not they have had sex before," (4) "Before making sexual advances, I think that one should assume 'no' until there is clear indication to proceed," (5) "Not asking for sexual consent some of the time is okay." Question number five was reverse coded as to fit in line with the sentiment of the previous questions (1=5). These items were combined into an additive index ($\alpha = .807$) with a lower score indicating that a respondent perceived a more positive attitude towards establishing consent.

Indirect behavioral approach to establishing consent:

Indirect behavior approach to establishing consent was measured by three items using a five point Likert type scale with *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree* as anchors. Respondents were asked the following statements: (1) "Typically I communicate sexual consent to my partner using nonverbal signals and body language," (2) "I don't have to ask or give my partner sexual consent because my partner knows me well enough," (3) "I don't have to ask or give my partner sexual consent because I have a lot of trust in my partner to 'do the right thing.'" These items were combined into an additive index ($\alpha = .772$) with a lower score meaning they were more likely to establish consent indirectly.

Sexual consent norms:

Sexual consent norms were measured by three items using a five point Likert type scale with *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree* as anchors. Respondents were asked the following statements: (1) "I think that obtaining sexual consent is more necessary in a new relationship than in a committed relationship," (2) "I believe that the need for asking for sexual consent decreases as the length of the intimate relationship increases," (3) "I believe that sexual intercourse is the only sexual activity that requires explicit verbal consent." These items were combined into an additive index ($\alpha = .607$) with a lower

score meaning they are more conforming to sexual consent norms.

Awareness and discussion:

Awareness and discussion was measured by four items using a five point Likert type scale with *strongly agree* and *strongly disagree* as anchors. Respondents were asked the following statements: (1) "I have discussed sexual consent issues with friends," (2) "I have heard sexual consent being discussed by other students on campus," (3) "I have discussed sexual consent issues with my current (or most recent) partner at times other than during sexual encounters," (4) "I have not given much thought to the topic of sexual consent." These items were combined into an additive index ($\alpha = .710$) with a lower score meaning

Table 1 shows a Mann-Whitney U test comparing males and females in the areas of perceived behavioral control, attitude towards establishing consent, indirect behavioral approach to establishing consent, sexual consent norms and awareness and discussion of sexual consent. The comparison in the area of awareness between males, where $n = 46$, and females, where $n = 168$, was significant ($U = 3076.50$, $p = .032$) with the sum of the ranks equal to 17263.50 for females and 5741.50 for males. This comparison shows females being more aware and discussion the topic of sexual consent than males. In the areas of perceived behavioral control, attitude towards establishing consent, indirect behavioral approach to establishing consent and sexual consent norms there was not a significant

TABLE 1

Comparison of Males and Females Perceptions on Sexual Consent

<u>Factors of Consent</u>	<u>U Values</u>	<u>Significance</u>
Perceived Behavioral Control	5794.5	.098
Attitude Towards Establishing Consent	4906.5	.986
Indirect Behavioral Approach to Establishing Consent	5287.5	.132
Sexual Consent Norms	6072.0	.593
Awareness and Discussion	3067.5	.032*

Notes. * $p < .05$

Table 1: Mann-Whitney U Test analyzing perceptions on sexual consent

they are more aware and more likely to discuss sexual consent.

To determine if there were differences in perceptions of sexual consent between males and females, Mann-Whitney U tests were run on each additive index. The Mann-Whitney U test was used due to the unequal population sizes between male and female respondents. There were 219 females, 68 males, and 33 respondents choosing not to report their sex. Those who did not report their sex were not used for the male and female comparisons.

Results

difference between the perceptions of males and females. To answer the proposed research questions, based on the study males and females only have a significant difference in their perceptions of sexual consent in the area of awareness and discussion.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether males and females had different perceptions in various areas of sexual consent. These areas included perceived behavioral control, attitude towards establishing consent, indirect

behavioral approach to establishing consent, sexual consent norms, and awareness and discussion of sexual consent. The study involved a survey of college students and analyzed the differences in the responses between males and females in each area. The results of the survey showed that there was no significant differences in each gender's opinion except in the area of awareness and discussion. Females are more aware of sexual consent and talk about it more often than males.

The findings of this study show that males and females might not differ as much on perceptions of sexual consent as previously thought. Most of the previous research predates the creation of the White House Task Force by a year or two. More focus on the topic following the task force's creation could have resulted in education of students, resulting in males and females having a more equal understanding of sexual consent. It is important to take notice of these findings in terms the effectiveness of current education, as well as concerns for future education.

Limitations

Most of the previous research found differences between the perceptions of males and females concerning the topic of sexual consent. The difference in results yielded in this study could be attributed to unequal population sizes of the two genders. There were over three times the number of female respondents in comparison to male respondents. As a result, a Mann-Whitney U test had to be used to analyze the data instead of a T-test, which could have provided more accurate results. The survey completion rate was 10.25 percent of the population size, but many respondents did not complete the survey or were ineligible. The resulting respondents were about 9 percent of the population, making the sample size relatively small.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research would benefit from a larger sample size to obtain more accurate results. More respondents may have produced different results that could have supported previous research on the topic. Steps should also be taken to have equal size groups if examining differences between males and females. This could be done by collecting data until a fixed number of respondents are reached to ensure the groups are equal. In each area of focus regarding sexual consent, more questions could have been added to provide a more comprehensive understanding of respondents' perceptions. This survey was limited to three to five questions for each area.

Conclusion

This study provided new insights into the perceptions of college students in the areas of perceived behavioral control, attitude towards establishing consent, indirect behavioral approach to establishing consent, sexual consent norms, and awareness and discussion of sexual consent. Previous research has shown that males and females differ in their perceptions towards sexual consent. Males have been found to be the instigators of sexual activity, whereas females are the gatekeepers of their sexuality and the partner responsible for saying "yes" or "no." Previous research also found that males are more likely to establish sexual consent through nonverbal cues, whereas females prefer verbal consent.

In this study, no significant difference was found between male and female perceptions in the examined areas. The only significant difference was in their awareness of the topic of sexual consent. When educating students about sexual consent, it is important to not separate the two genders and create a division between them. Even before sexual assault has occurred, males are often

seen as the gender to be cautious of, and females as the victims. Instead, males and females should be equally involved in the effort to prevent sexual assault and look out for one another. By putting each gender on an equal plane, there is the potential for progress in educating students regarding consent and preventing sexual assault on college campuses.

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Legislation

An act to add Section 67386 to the Education Code, relating to student safety, California SB-967, Chaptered by Secretary of State. Chapter 748, Statutes of 2014. (9/28/2014)