"Girl, you don't gotta do what you don't wanna do": Women's Constructions of Sexual Consent

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Abstract

The current understandings of sexual consent are limited and do not acknowledge the impact of overarching social norms and ideals on how sexual consent is constructed. This study looks at how women construct sexual consent, within a feminist framework that focuses on the use of discourses to analyze how power affects these understandings. The aim is to gain insight into how women talk about sexual consent and the forces they identified as influencing the ways in which they understand sexual consent. This study presents the findings of five focus groups conducted with students from the University of Cape Town, with a total of 25 participants. A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis has been conducted, using Willig's (2008) guidelines. The four main discourses that emerge from an analysis of the focus group discussions are *Discourses of Consent as a Woman's Call, Discourses of Consent Without Desire, Discourses of Women's Sexuality* and *Discourses of 'Willing' Consent.* The ways in which participants accept or reject these discourses indicate that participants are aware that broader social beliefs inform the way in which they talk about sexual consent. This study contributes to the literature on the context-specific nature of sexual consent and the impact of overarching power structures on the understandings and constructions of sexual consent.

Keywords: Heterosex; heterosexual negotiation; sexual consent; sexuality

Introduction

Sexual consent is currently understood, at face value, as a mutual agreement to participate in sexual activity, freely given without the presence of coercion or force (Beres, 2007). However, relationships between sexual partners are often multifaceted and informed by the broader context, making sexual consent more complex than the current understanding suggests (Beres, 2007). The impact of overarching social norms, such as the idea that women do not have sexual desire, and the negotiation of sex and intimacy between men and women affect comprehensions of sexual consent (Beres, 2007; Fine, 1988). Understandings of sexual consent, and where they fall short, need to be analyzed in order to create a comprehensive definition of sexual consent that accounts for context in order to prevent harmful sex (Beres, 2007). This study focuses on how women[1] students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) talk about sexual consent in relation to broader discourses around heterosexual sex (heterosex) and women's sexuality.

Current Understandings

Sexual encounters can be a manifestation of pre-existing beliefs and expectations and should be understood as taking place within broader social structures that inform and shape these beliefs and expectations (Shefer, Strebel, & Foster, 2000). The current literature identifies heterosexual negotiation and the ignorance of women's desire as important factors that affect understandings of sexual consent (Beres, 2007, 2017; Fine, 1988). Heterosexual negotiation refers to the ways in which gendered power imbalances manifest themselves in heterosex (Shefer et al., 2000). These factors influence how an individual constructs consent, as well as informing and producing ideas of sexual consent on the level of dominant social norms within which

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[1] "Women" is a term used in this project to refer to all individuals who identify as women, regardless of their sex.

individual constructs are built (Beres, 2007). Women's accounts of heterosex and perceptions of sexual consent can contribute to an understanding of how these broader social discourses affect sexual encounters (Beres, 2007) Sexual consent has been operationalized and studied through different methods. Quantitative measures are used to research certain aspects of sexual consent, such as prevalence, correlations between non-verbal and verbal indications of consent, the effects of mental health on sexual consent, defining sexual acts and predicting the presence of sexual coercion (Dawson, Shih, de Moor, & Shrier, 2008; Gute, Eshbaugh, & Wiersma, 2008; Jozkowski, Sanders, Peterson, Dennis, & Reece, 2014; Katz & Tirone, 2010; LaBrie, Hummer, Ghaidarov, Lac, & Kenney, 2014; Mark & Murray, 2012).

Qualitative research methods are used to gain insight into how sexual consent is constructed as a subjective social experience and accounts for the presence and effects of the context as well as the sensitive nature of the subject material (Beres, 2007, 2017). When combined with feminist research, sexual consent is studied as a social phenomenon that is constructed through gendered power dynamics and various other factors that exist in the overarching social structure within which individual interactions take place (Ackerly & True, 2008; Beres, 2007). Feminist research aims to explore these power dynamics. This is done by gaining a deeper understanding of how silence, oppression, and individual differences affect one's social experience (Ackerly & True, 2008). Within qualitative, feminist research, the use of discourse analysis is used to examine how sexuality and gender are understood and perceived through the medium of language (Thomas, Stelzl, & Lafrance, 2017). Many researchers have focused on understanding sexual consent using qualitative, feminist research designs in order to identify contextual considerations that affect sexual consent (Beres, 2007, 2017; Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2011).

The belief that women do not enjoy sex and the presence of heterosexual negotiation in the current sexual script are two of these important contextual considerations (Fine, 1988; Frith & Kitzinger, 2001; Shefer et al., 2000). The impact of these factors as well as a need to widen the scope of the definition of sexual consent will be looked at further in this project.

The Missing Discourse of Desire

There is a widely adopted belief that women do not enjoy sex, which has been labelled "the missing discourse of desire" (Fine, 1988, p. 29). One of the effects of this belief is the idea that consent is given by women to men (Beres, 2007). Consequently, women are cast as gatekeepers of consent, not as autonomous individuals who own and control their own sexual expression and experiences or actively desire sex (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999).

The prevailing discourses around women's relationships with sex lie in violence, victimization or morality and very little attention is paid to the pleasurable aspect of sex (Fine, 1988). The ignorance of the positive nature of sex is not due to a lack of attention but is rather indicative of social powers that maintain and construct this ignorance in order to maintain the status quo (Tuana, 2004). In this case, the ignorance of pleasure is manufactured to serve the purpose of silencing women and their sexual desire and autonomy (Fine, 1988). Removing sexual agency from women in this way perpetuates the physical and psychological power imbalances present in the patriarchy, which allows for the preservation of power and control in this oppressive structure (Shefer et al., 2000). Sexism and heterosex interact in a cycle of gendered power dynamics, which directly affect the way in which sexual consent is constructed and understood because one's gender affects the way in which one understands sexual experiences (Beres, 2007). The concept of heterosexual negotiation explores this relationship between sexual experiences and gender (Shefer & Ruiters, 1998).

Heterosexual Negotiation

The impact of gender on sexual consent is analyzed by looking at experiences of heterosex, namely the different ways in which men and women experience sexual encounters (Shefer & Ruiters, 1998). A key component of this is the power difference between men and women, brought about the patriarchal structure of society (Fine, 1988; Shefer et al., 2000). Crawford, Kippax and Waldby, (1994), note that due to the gendered nature of the current society, men and women "inhabit somewhat different worlds" (p. 572). Thus, negotiation is needed in heterosexual encounters because the parties involved do not share the same understanding (Crawford et al., 1994). Furthermore, given the patriarchal context, the power is not evenly split between partners in heterosex and this power difference needs to be negotiated as well (Crawford et al., 1994).

Heteronormativity plays a role here, as it not only prioritizes male-female sex, it also treats heterosex as a space in which to produce and reproduce ideas around what it means to be a man or a woman (Beres, 2017). Heteronormativity is the term given to the way in which heterosexuality is socially desired and understood as the default and queer sexuality is consequently constructed as deviating from the norm (Avila-Saavedra, 2009). According to Shefer et al., (2000), some men view sex as a space where they are able to construct and reinforce masculinity. Given this, some women may engage in heterosex they do not want to have in order to protect their partner's pride (Frith, 2017). In addition to this, the depiction of women as supportive partners is part of conventional gender roles (Impett & Peplau, 2003). Impett and Peplau (2003) find that some women participate in sex they do not desire in order to fulfil the perceived responsibility of being a partner in a heterosexual intimate relationship. This phenomenon, known as sexual compliance, is more common in women than men (Vannier &

O'Sullivan, 2011). Consequently, women's individual choices around sexual consent are limited by the presence of heteronormativity (Beres, 2017).

These widespread social ideas are manifestations of overarching power structures, all of which influence the way in which heterosex is scripted (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Sexual script theory is used to critically analyze these effects and the methodical nature of heterosex (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Frith and Kitzinger (2001) note that sexual compliance comes has developed because rejection is not a part of the normalized sexual script upon which sexual encounters are based. If any form of rejection is present in the script, it is understood as token resistance (Bruen, 2016; Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). This refers to situations where women say no to sex when they want to have sex as a means of maintaining the image of women not finding pleasure in sex (Bruen, 2016). According to the sexual script, women say no when they really mean yes, creating an understanding that no does not mean no, it means try harder (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). The practice of token refusal is detrimental to a comprehensive, shared understanding of sex because it creates ambiguity when women refuse sex (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Token resistance is one example of how widespread social ideas affect understandings of sexual consent and why a broader view of sexual consent is needed (Beres, 2017).

A Broader View

Understandings of sexual consent are a product of the discourses that dominate the social context (Tiefer, 2010). The presence of prescribed gender roles and heteronormative ideals can act as a kind of coercion, which threatens to invalidate consent in the same way that coercion between individual partners can (Gavey, 1997). Whilst the effects of societal expectations impact on both men and women, women are more at risk for negative psychological consequences of sex, such as guilt, shame and damage to their image (Fine, 1988; Shefer et al., 2000).

Furthermore, women are seldomly viewed as sexually autonomous individuals (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Therefore it is important to conduct research that allows for the narratives of women as sexual agents.

Conducting research around sexual consent with groups of women addresses a number of gaps in the current research. Beres (2007, 2017) reviews sexual consent research and notes that the primary focus of this research is sexual assault. A meta-analysis conducted twenty years ago notes that research done into sexual consent is often conducted on a one-to-one basis, meaning that data is based on individual understandings and does not account for broader social influences (Walker, 1997). Although the move toward research into sexual consent that incorporates these influences has begun, the area of group understandings of sexual consent and the influence of widespread social norms on these understandings is still under-researched (Beres, 2017).

This project aims to address this limitation and contribute to an understanding of how social norms, and the power structures that define them, affect how sexual consent is constructed. This will be done by looking at how groups of women collectively understand and negotiate sexual consent.

Aims and Objectives

Aims

The primary aim of this project is to gain insight into women's understandings of sexual consent and the role gendered power dynamics play in informing these understandings. The desired outcome for the project is to gain an in-depth understanding of collective perceptions of sexual consent and the influence of the context in which they are created. The hope is that a

group understanding of consent can provide insight into how the current, individualized understandings are informed by broader social ideas.

Main Research Question

How do women students collectively construct and make meaning of sexual consent?

Sub-questions.

- How do women talk about and co-construct their understandings of sexual consent in group discussions?

- How do the dominant discourses around heterosex and the sexual script influence how women in group discussions understand the role of men and women in consensual sex?

- What discourses do women draw on in group discussions to explain how they understand the difference between wanted sex and consensual sex?

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within a feminist framework because feminist theory focuses on the link between gender and power (Flax, 1987). Whilst feminist research can be both quantitative and qualitative, the latter is better when aiming to investigate subjective understandings, as is the case with the current study (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1995).

Feminism, which aims to establish and deconstruct inequality between individuals, looks at depictions of female sexuality and how these fit into broader social conventions (Flax, 1987). The representation of women as sexual objects that exist for men's sexual gratification is commonly criticized in feminist discourse as it robs women of their sexual autonomy (Flax, 1987). Removing women's sexual agency plays an integral role in understandings of sexual

consent and is important for this study (Attwood, 2011). When sexual agency is restricted by

social norms, individuals do not have access to control over the ways in which they are

constructed in sexual encounters (Attwood, 2011). In turn, this limits their access to action in

sexual encounters (Attwood, 2011).

A feminist approach to understanding heterosex needs to be intersectional in order to

accommodate for the influence that class, 'race' and other factors have on sexism and the

oppression this sexism entails (Carby, 1985; Davis, 2008). Furthermore, black feminism widens

the scope of feminism to include depictions of men not only as oppressors but also as partners

(Carby, 1985). Representing men as partners is needed to understand what constitutes sexual

consent in healthy and communicative sexual relationships, as this study aims to do (Carby,

1985). If there is coercion within a sexual encounter that is not a product of the individual

interaction, then there must be an external force acting as coercion. Thus, only when men are

constructed as partners, not oppressors, who do not intentionally manipulate or coerce in sexual

encounters can the influence of broader social coercion be seen.

Social phenomena, such as sexual consent, are communicated through, and constructed

within, discourses and the use of language (Fairclough, 2013). This project is situated within a

discourse analysis framework which highlights this importance of context when analysing the

written and spoken word (Fairclough, 2013). The framework draws attention to power relations

and the effects they have on the construction of sexual consent (Life, 1994). The discourses

drawn on to talk about sex, sexual consent and womanhood place participants in specific subject

positions that inform them about their own power, abilities and limitations (Willig, 2008). These

subject positions provide the researcher with information about how women's understandings of

sexual consent, autonomy and access to sex are influenced by the overarching social ideas that define how much power is allotted to women in sexual encounters.

Method

Research Design

This study requires a research design that is sensitive to the complex nature of gender because gendered power dynamics are part of the focus of this study. Feminist research is best suited for this as it requires an approach that accounts for the presence of gender and power (Beetham & Demetriades, 2007). Given the constructionist nature of the current study, a qualitative approach is used to bring focus to the impact of context and subjective truths. Additionally, qualitative research does not aim to assess possible explanation but rather analyze understandings, which is helpful in exploratory studies such as this one.

Power imbalance between the researcher and the participants is important owing to the sensitive and personal nature of the material discussed. Feminist research is critical of these power dynamics and works toward adjusting them. (Hesse-Biber, 2013). Reflexivity is a requisite for feminist research because the researcher needs to be clear about her expectations, beliefs and values, as well as monitoring the effects these may have on the project (Hesse-Biber, 2013).

Focus groups. Focus group designs are well suited to sensitive topics because they allow for participants to remain silent should there be certain topics they do not feel comfortable discussing (Överlien, Aronsson, & Hydén, 2005). Additionally, the group environment allows for empathy and emotional support for participants and assists in navigating taboo topics (Kitzinger, 1994). For this reason, research in sex is often conducted through focus groups (Frith,

2000; Lenhart, 2009; Shannon et al., 2008). Discussions around sexual consent and sexual experiences may be emotional and taboo for participants in this study, therefore focus groups are a suitable method of data collection.

An important component of this study is the creation of a co-constructed understanding that provides insight into how groups of women talk about sexual consent. The use of focus groups can provide collective perceptions of social phenomena through the interpersonal nature of the interaction (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008; Kitzinger, 1994).

Additionally, the feminist framework in which this project is situated requires an awareness of the importance of not disempowering participants (Wilkinson, 1998). Focus groups can shift the power to lessen the power imbalance between researcher and participants (Kitzinger, 1994).

Participants

The participants for this study were all students over the age of 18 who have experienced romantic heterosexual relationships. Purposive sampling was employed as it is effective when wanting to gain an understanding of a select population (Robinson, 2014). The participants were accessed through the Student Research Participation Program (SRPP) as well as through the researcher's own social circles.

The sample consisted of 25 participants who willingly consented to take part in the focus group discussion. Eight of the participants were recruited through social connections and the remainder through the SRPP. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 38, with 24 women and one non-binary individual. All focus groups were heterogeneous in terms of sexual orientation, 'race' and religion.

Data Collection and Procedure

The study consisted of five focus groups which ranged form three to eight participants in a group. Each focus group lasted an hour and revolved around five open-ended questions that aimed to initiate discussions about how participants understood sexual consent (see Appendix A). The first two questions focused on their understandings of sexual consent and how they felt their gender influenced these understandings. There was a question exploring how participants felt about initiating sex. Sexual compliance and the difference between desired sex and consensual sex was explored through a further question. The final question acted as a summing up of these questions, where the broader relationship between consensual sex and women was discussed.

The researcher moderated these groups, ensuring the conversation revolved around the topic of sexual consent but the direction of the conversation remained in the hands of the participants. The focus groups were recorded and later transcribed by the researcher (transcription key information can be seen in Appendix B).

Ethical Considerations

The Research Committee of the UCT Department of Psychology and Department of Student Affairs of UCT both granted this study ethical approval (See Appendix C). The ethical treatment of human subjects is important in all research (Orb, Eisenhauer, & Wynaden, 2001). Ensuring the wellbeing of the participants is a researcher's most important role (Orb et al., 2001). The wellbeing of participants is protected through informed consent, confidentiality and active steps taken to avoid emotional and physical distress (Orb et al., 2001).

Informed consent. The participants in this study were asked to sign consent forms that explained the purpose and procedure of the focus group, including risks, benefits and

confidentiality matters (Appendix D). The presence of the form meant participants were given

the autonomy to accept or deny participating in the study, even though they were recruited

through the SRPP. A form was attached to the consent form that included questions about

personal and demographic information (Appendix E).

      Incentives. Participants were awarded 2 SRPP points if they participated in the study,

which is the standard number of points given for a focus group of an hour.

      Confidentiality. Protecting the identities of participants is a further concern when trying

to facilitate the wellbeing of the participants in studies that deal with sensitive topics (Orb et al.,

2001). The confidentiality in focus group studies is limited and the consent form included a

section addressing this limitation and asking participants to not discuss the contents of the focus

group with other people (Appendix D). The focus groups were recorded on two recording

devices and participants were informed of this and asked for consent to be recorded (Appendix

D). The researcher was the only person who had access to these recordings throughout the

research process. The transcription of the meetings was conducted by the researcher and only

seen by her and her supervisor. Pseudonyms were used in the final write up of the project to as

this further protects confidentiality (Orb et al., 2001).

      Emotional and physical harm. The focus groups were conducted on UCT campus in a

private, secure location to ensure the participants' safety. The use of focus groups was intended

to give participants control to disclose only information they felt comfortable sharing, thereby

limiting emotional distress (Wilkinson, 1998). Additionally, the presence of ongoing consent

aimed to minimize the risk of emotional distress. A clear explanation of the participants' right to

leave at any point without explanation was given before every focus group to ensure ongoing

consent was present. A short debriefing was conducted after the recording devices had been turned off at the end of the session.

Debriefing. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, a debriefing was given after each focus group. In this time, participants were encouraged to ask any questions they may have had. Referral forms were provided in hard copy and via email. The referral form (Appendix F) included organizations participants could contact if they felt the focus group has caused them any distress.

Data Analysis

The current study is situated within a discourse analysis framework. Within this framework, discourses are understood as social resources that can be used to gain insight into what people believe, think and do (Miles, 1992). Foucault, (1990), argues that in the realm of sexuality, discourses act as forces that regulate sexual behaviour and the ways in which people perceive sex.

Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) was used to analyze the data. FDA accounts for the power structures within which discourses lie (Willig, 2008). This is an important element of this study because it helps identify the role gendered power imbalances have on women's understandings of sexual consent. The recognition of power includes attention to the social and political context of the talk being analyzed and the relationship between participants' talk and the dominant discourses around the topic (Willig, 2008). The ways in which participants' understandings of sexual consent uphold or reject dominant social ideas is a vital part of comprehending how women construct sexual consent, making FDA a good data analysis tool.

Willig (2008) provides a six-step approach to FDA, which has been used as a guideline for the data analysis in this project. The first step was to establish discursive objects: recurring

concepts in the data that were strongly related to the aim of the research (Willig, 2008). Four discursive objects emerged from the data, namely *present consent, women's sexuality, sexual compliance* and *women's consent*. Direct and indirect references to these four objects were identified and compiled. Secondly, these references are situated within broader discourses (Willig, 2008). The third step was to assess the action orientation of constructions of the discursive objects, analyzing what these constructions could do and why they were chosen to determine the action orientation of the discourses at play (Willig, 2008). Fourthly, the subject positions of the participants were assessed in relation to the action orientation (Willig, 2008). The penultimate step looked at how action orientation and discourse interacted to see how participants actions were limited or permitted by the ways in which they talk (Willig, 2008). Finally, in the sixth step, the relationship between discursive objects and personal experiences was analyzed to establish the subject positionings of the participants (Willig, 2008).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is necessary when conducting qualitative research because it requires the researcher to remain in constant conversation with herself to ensure her position does not affect the integrity of the research (Berger, 2015). Gender, age, 'race', sexual orientation and personal experiences all contribute to the researcher's position (Berger, 2015).

The participants in the focus groups were comfortable with leading the discussions and I, as the researcher, had very little input in the conversation outside of posing the five questions that created the loose structure. Although I emphasized at the start of each focus group that participants need not answer any questions or tell stories they were not comfortable sharing, at times participants shared information that appeared to be distressing to them. There was no explicit pressure for them to do so, but my presence, as the researcher, may have caused them to

open up as a means of appeasing me. Two participants became distressed whilst sharing with the group and were reminded they were under no obligation to continue. In both cases, participants chose to continue and expressed feeling comfortable and willing to finish the discussion.

Being a 'white', English-speaking, cisgender woman may have affected how participants interacted with me. Participants who shared these identity factors with me where quicker to open up whereas participants who differed from me on these accounts often took longer to speak up and direct the conversation. Furthermore, participants spoke about the impacts of culture, religion and 'race' on their understandings of sexual consent and the ways in which sex is perceived in their social groups. This study is limited by the exclusion of the impact of 'race', religion and culture on women's understandings of sexual consent.

My intention was to place myself within the focus group discussion as opposed to being an outside observer. This was done to help participants feel comfortable to talk freely. I received positive feedback from participants, who commented on the unique space and security provided to them by an anonymous study. They said they found the discussions to be both thought-provoking and enjoyable.

Analysis and Discussion

Participants of this study are university students, who are more aware of the presence and nature of sexual assault than many other populations (Muehlenhard, Humphreys, Jozkowski, & Peterson, 2016). The discourses that emerge from the analysis of the participants' group discussions have been named *Discourses of Consent as a Woman's Call, Discourses of Consent Without Desire, Discourses of Women's Sexuality* and *Discourses of Willing Consent.* These

discourses cover how participants construct sexual consent in relation to roles of gender, social ideals and power.

Discourses of Consent as a Woman's Call

Participants identify their gender as a key contributor to their understandings of sexual consent and their role in heterosex. The perception of consent as a woman's call is developed from the idea that women are gatekeepers of consent and men are initiators of sex, due to their hypersexual nature (Allen, 2003).

Women as gatekeepers. "Maybe this goes without saying but I made a point of realizing that I thought of it only as a woman's thing" (Gemma, FG1). Gemma's answer to the question of how participants each understand consent paints a clear picture of the idea that women are gatekeepers of sexual consent (Meek, 2016). Her use of the phrases "maybe this goes without saying" and "I made a point of realizing" (FG1) speaks to this idea being widespread. Simphiwe reiterates this point, noting "when it comes to consent, it's like put all on to a woman" (FG2). The language in this extract talks about consent as more of a burden than Gemma's language does and refers to the social idea that consent being restricted to women is both a right and a responsibility (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Constructing sexual consent in this way appears to benefit women at face value, but when further explored can be harmful to all parties involved (Beres, 2007). It restricts the participants to perceiving themselves in a way deemed socially desirable and acceptable and in turn restricts their actions to those which fit societal expectations. Depicting women as gatekeepers draws on the idea that women need to be asked for sex because it is not a desire they have for themselves. This inhibits participants' actions when it comes to initiating sex and constructing themselves as sexual beings.

A different facet of talking about women as gatekeepers is the perception of consent as a

social tool given to women to counteract the physical advantage men have in sexual encounters.

> Like in a way, consent is almost like mercy… for a guy, if he wanted it to stop he could
>
> just push you off. Whereas for a girl, you have to say no… and just hope the guy is going
>
> to be decent. (Elise, FG1)

The reference to the physical power differences speaks to how men are constructed as having

more power in the realm of brute strength and from this stems a fear that keeps social power

dynamics unequal (Millett, 2016). Here, women being gatekeepers of consent is talked about as a

kind of fail-safe. Elise talks about sexual consent being the tool she can use to end sexual

encounters with men because men can physically prevent sex in a way women cannot owing to

the difference in physical strength (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Talking about consent in this

way allows Elise to maintain her understanding of consent as a woman's call. This draws on the

idea that men do not participate in sex in which they do not want to participate.

Men as initiators. Participants across focus groups talk about men as initiators in

heterosex. Men initiating sex is part of the sexual script and is in line with the idea of

heterosexual masculinity forming part of the hegemonic masculinity (Allen, 2003; Frith &

Kitzinger, 2001). Lara responds to a question asking how she feels about initiating sex as a

woman with "if there was ever a time at which I myself wanted to have sex, the guy would

always be willing" (FG3). Emily notes "the guy could be in no mood" (FG5) but would still

engage in sex if the opportunity is presented. All three of these participants make use of non-

specific subjects in their accounts, referring to "the guy" or "they", implying that this is talk

about not just their sexual partners but men in general. The subscription to the dominant

discourse of the hypersexual male leads them to construct sexual consent as primarily, or

exclusively, a woman's to give and male consent as "never contested and ever-present" (Beres, 2007, p. 97).

This idea is challenged by other participants: Gemma notes she did not take responsibility for ensuring her partner gave consent and comments that she "feels a bit sick" in hindsight (FG1). She goes on to comment on how, if the roles had been reversed, she would have "owned the right to consent" as a woman (Gemma, FG1).

The lack of conversation around men's consent is explained through the effects of cultural expectations present in social surroundings. Participants talk about how these expectations prevent men from being aware of their ability to say no, to withdraw consent or to speak up when they feel their consent has been violated.

> Nonto: Women can rape too… like if the man doesn't want it… they are perceived as sexual being that you should take it forcefully.
>
> Anathi: We won't know about men when it comes to consent because they don't say much about it… even if they were raped, they're going to feel ashamed due to cultural expectations. (FG4)

The interaction between Nonto and Anathi produces co-constructed talk of sexual consent as necessary from all parties, rejecting the dominant discourse of the hypersexual male. This in turn denies that consent is a woman's call and helps to remove the limitations of these discourses. However, when consent is constructed as a woman's choice it links to ideas of sex being something given by women to men which can result in consensual sex that is not mutually desired.

Discourses of Consent Without Desire

This set of discourses consists of how participants make sense of their reasons for consenting to sex they do not desire. The main ideas present here are sex as a chore and the impact of gendered power dynamics on sexual encounters. Consent without desire is situated within the broader context of heterosexual negotiation, where sex is perceived as something women do for men, not themselves (Shefer & Ruiters, 1998). Placing themselves in these discourses limits participants' sexual autonomy and encourages them to act in ways that fit heteronormative standards that perpetuate unequal gendered power dynamics.

Gendered power dynamics. The presence of the power imbalance is noted not only in the implicit nature of the sex but is also overtly acknowledged by participants. This power imbalance is constructed as both physical and social by one participant.

> Raisa: I'm verbally telling him no, no, no… in my mind I was like "Okay, maybe I should just give him what he wants, and I get out of this situation and I'll be fine." At least I'm consenting, to an extent, where I won't be physically harmed… I eventually gave in… because I was fearful… he was very aggressive. (FG3)

The presence of the difference in physical strength between Raisa and the man she is talking about is addressed directly here, where her concern is her physical safety. This is a different aspect of the role physical power plays to the one that Elise describes when referring to consent as a kind of mercy. Raisa's use of the phrase "to an extent" speaks to the idea that consenting as a means of avoiding physical harm is not genuine consent as it is not freely given (Remick, 1992). This idea forms part of the feminist criticism of the black-and-white legal approach to sexual consent (Remick, 1992). Raisa's account addresses how the presence of verbal consent does not mean sexual consent is categorically present and in doing so, highlights the importance

of accounting for context (Remick, 1992). Although this extract refers to a sexual encounter that was not positive, it still provides insight into how constructions of sexual consent are informed by context.

Furthermore, later in the discussion Raisa speaks about the power dynamics present in heterosex and places the responsibility of equalizing them on the man in this situation.

> There's obviously that power dynamic where you, you feel uncomfortable to say no… as a man a lot of times, when you have the upper hand with regards to certain stuff and you have to be cognizant of how that plays out with a girl. (Raisa, FG3)

Raisa's choice of words in this extract allows her to place herself outside the dominant discourse of risk-avoidance. This discourse revolves around the idea that the onus is on women to verbally decline sex when they do not want it and if they fail to do so, it is not the man's fault if sexual assault takes place (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). Rejecting this discourse positions Raisa as a subject who is in control of her own sexual choices and can help level out the power imbalances she may experience in sexual encounters. However, even in cases where consent is not directly influenced by the difference in physical power between partners, participants talk about consenting to sex they do not desire.

Sex as a chore. Participants who are currently in, or have been in, long term heterosexual relationships describe cases where sex with their partners has been a chore - something done to appease their partners, not because they themselves had desired sex.

> Regina: Like just having sex so they can stop asking you for sex… it was totally consensual, I consented so that I could read my book… but um, I did not want to have sex with him at all.

Raisa: I feel like that happens a lot if you speak to female in general… yes you love him

and everything but you just don't want it in that moment and "you know", to satisfy him.

(FG3)

Sexual compliance like this is talked about as a kind of requirement in romantic heterosexual

relationships, where part of the women's role in the relationship is to "give" her partner sex

regularly (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012).

Frankie talks about a similar experience, where she engaged in sex with her previous

partner as a chore, which is followed by Lelethu challenging the idea of sexual compliance.

Lelethu: Can I just ask, why did you stay in a three-year relationship and not say "I don't

enjoy it when you do this?"

Frankie: Dude I loved him so much [laughter]

Ella: I understand it with love, love muddles everything. You're just like "I'll do this

because I love you." (FG5)

The co-construction of sexual compliance as an act of love created by Frankie and Ella places

them both within the popular idea that women have sex as an act of love. The links between

femininity and emotional attachment to sex lead to ideas of women engaging in sex for intimacy

and not sexual gratification (Allen, 2003). This kind of heterosexual negotiation is an example of

how women understand their own sexual identities as something constructed by and for their

partners (Shefer et al., 2000). Engaging in sex with a long-term partner is depicted as a favor for

a loved one, thus consenting to sex one does not want is described positively and not an

infringement on sexual autonomy (Lim & Roloff, 1999). This normalizes sex without desire and

prevents participants from perceiving sex as something they do for themselves as part of their

understanding of women's sexual autonomy. When this happens, notions of women's sexuality are largely ignored.

Discourses of Women's Sexuality

Participants acknowledge the existing conversations around women's sexuality, namely the missing discourse of desire and traditional discourses of slut shaming (Armstrong, Hamilton, Armstrong, & Seeley, 2014; Fine, 1988). Many choose to deny the dominant ideas of women as non-sexual and in doing so, place themselves in subject positions that allow for them to see themselves as agents of their own sexuality. This is done with a conscious awareness of the consequences of being a sexual woman in a social context where this is not the ideal and the consequent ramifications.

Ramifications of being sexual. The dominant heterosexist discourse that dictates that women should only have sex to please men, not themselves, in seen in participants' discussions (Allen, 2003). Anathi notes she does not feel comfortable initiating sex because "that means you've been sleeping around… you are this kind of person… you're not the wife material type" (FG4). Emily recognizes this as well, and comments on the role her gender plays in the interaction. "Being slut shamed by someone you've slept with… you're also the slut in this situation. But it's very different 'cause like he's a guy." (FG5)

The positioning of participants in the slut-shaming discourse affects their access to action, where sexual activity is limited as a means of maintaining social status (Farvid, Braun, & Rowney, 2017). The ways in which participants talk about their sexual consent as a decision that has an effect on their social standing shows how this discourse affects their understandings of sexual consent. Other participants speak against the idea of restraining their sexual activity and

in turn perceive themselves as sexually active women, consequently addressing the missing discourse of desire through their talk of sexual desire.

Women's pleasure. Participants across focus groups openly discuss enjoying, desiring and initiating sex. The depiction of women as non-sexual is directly addressed:

Zoe: The idea that we aren't meant to enjoy sex or not meant to want sex.

Simphiwe: It's weird.

Zoe: Bullshit.

Both Zoe and Simphiwe's use of language distances them from the idea of non-sexual women, where it is brushed off as an "idea" or "weird". Sharing the dismissal of this discourse puts Zoe and Simphiwe's subject positions where enjoying sex is not only allowed but encouraged as an act of empowerment (Farvid et al., 2017). This opens up access to action and participants are able to see themselves as sexually empowered and autonomous. "I find it quite empowering and I personally feel sexy if I initiate sex" (Lucy, FG5). These conversations show participants do not see themselves according to the depictions they have received from others in response to their sexual activity. In doing so, participants have space to construct themselves as individuals with sexual desire, giving them access to act on enjoying, desiring and initiating sex (Allen, 2003). This can shift toward an understanding of heterosex as mutually desired and beneficial, leading to talk about sexual consent as willing, mutual and ongoing.

Discourses of 'Willing' Consent

Participants' recognize the role of gendered power differences and ideas of non-sexual women on the current understandings of sexual consent. Doing so allows them to deconstruct the effects of these ideas and move toward talking about sexual consent as mutual and ongoing. This is done in two ways: one which constructs sexual consent by establishing what factors violate

consent and define consent as scenarios where none of the factors are present; and the other which constructs sexual consent in a more positive fashion, where a series of necessary requirements are presented.

Consent as not assault. Much of the conversation around the understandings of sexual consent between participants makes use of instances where sexual consent is not present as a kind of measuring stick. This is indicative of the current lack of a concrete definition of sexual consent in positive sexual encounters (Beres, 2007). A recurring idea in the focus groups is that when one gives in to consistent pressure to have sex, this is not sexual consent. The "persistence beats resistance" (Lucy, FG5) narrative is linked to the presence of token resistance in the sexual script (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001). Socially speaking, the current understandings of sexual consent do not follow the idea that "no means no" (Ashlyn, FG4) but rather understand rejection as a step in a standard sexual encounter (Frith & Kitzinger, 2001).

A further factor affecting consent is the presence of alcohol and drugs in sexual encounters. The importance of "being in a sound state of mind" (Regina, FG3) is highlighted and consent is questioned if such substances have been used. "If you're drunk or whatever, is it really consent?" (Ivy, FG4). Ivy's question, posed in response to the researcher asking how participants understand sexual consent, points to the impact substance use can have on people's ability to consent (Lim & Roloff, 1999; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Furthermore, Ivy's phrasing of this idea as a question speaks to confusion around sexual consent and fits into broader discourses of women's understandings of sexual assault as non-concrete. This leaves room for the validity of sexual assault claims to be questioned.

Defining sexual consent as not assault can help participants work toward an understanding of consent that accommodates for some of the external forces at play. However, a

definition based on a lack of factors leaves room for confusion and doubts around validity

(Randall, 2010). Understandings of sexual consent based on the presence of certain factors, as

opposed to the absence of others, produces a definition that is more helpful in restricting harmful

sex (Beres, 2007). Participants identify mutuality and continuity as important factors of sexual

consent.

Consent as mutual and ongoing.

> I think of it as a two-way street, because it shouldn't be just one person asking for
>
> Consent to do something to another person, it should be a participatory act between two
>
> people, or more, um, who are asking each other for consent. (Toni, FG2)

Toni's use of the phrases "two-way street" and "participatory act" refer to consent as mutual and

ongoing. This description of sexual consent defies conventional understandings of men and

women's roles in heterosex (Meek, 2016). Participants contribute different elements to co-

construct consent in this way:

> Laura: A mutual kind of agreement or respect toward each other. Sort of…
>
> Ashlyn: Ya, agreement is the first word that comes in my mind.
>
> Nonto: Respect, mutual agreement.
>
> Anathi: Similar, like agreeing to be, being on the same page with regards to being
>
> intimate. (FG4)

These co-constructed ideas draw on the discourse of consent as willingness (Muehlenhard et al.,

2016). Participants speak about consent in a way that is directly opposed to widespread social

ideas of slut shaming, consent as a woman's choice and sexual compliance. Placing themselves

within the consent as willingness discourse allows for participants to talk about combating the

gendered power imbalance in heterosex. The sexual encounter is now constructed as mutually wanted and equally desired (Beres & Farvid, 2010).

The different ways in which *Discourses of Willing Consent* are used by participants encourages them to adopt a "girl, you don't gotta do what you don't wanna do" attitude toward their sexual encounters (Zoe, FG2). Ideas of consent as not assault and consent as mutual and ongoing lead to a collectively constructed idea of sexual consent as a willing agreement given by all parties that accounts for the impact of social expectations on individual sexual encounters (Beres, 2007).

Conclusion

Most of the research conducted in heterosex does not address how overarching social ideas influence individual understandings of sexual consent (Beres, 2007). A more comprehensive understanding of sexual consent is needed to better inform all people involved in sexual encounters about the effects of social context on consent and in turn, prevent different kinds of harmful sex (Beres, 2007). The current study aims to provide insight into how women construct sexual consent and the ways in which social expectations and beliefs both explicitly and implicitly influence these constructions.

Discussions between participants about shared experiences and mutual beliefs create the ability to form co-constructed understandings of sexual consent. These interactions allow for participants to agree with, challenge or expand on comments made by others in the focus groups. This provides insight into which ideas around heterosex are widespread and what happens when individuals choose to accept or reject these ideas.

The use of FDA helps to situate the participants' perceptions of consent into broader conversations and power structures because discourses both construct and are constructed by social realities (Willig, 2008). The four discourses drawn on by participants show how the acceptance or rejection of dominant discourses informs how they understand sexual consent as well as how they perceive themselves in heterosex. When participants situate themselves within *Discourses of Consent as a Woman's Choice* or *Discourses of Consent Without Desire,* they acknowledge how broader social ideas and ideals influence how they talk about sexual consent. Notions of sexual compliance and the gendered nature of heterosex limit participants who align themselves in these discourses, hindering their ability to construct themselves as sexually desiring or autonomous.

Contrastingly, *Discourses of Consent as 'Willing'* and *Discourses of Women's Sexuality* are drawn on and constructed by participants as a means of addressing the silence around women's sexual desire as well as moving toward an understanding of mutual sexual consent. The participants who construct sexual consent as mutual note the importance of receiving consent from male partners and the importance of only partaking in sex they desire. Both of these ideas are in conflict with the dominant discourses of sexual compliance and heterosex. This study shows how situating themselves in these discourses allows participants to acknowledge the influences of heteronormativity and other social expectations in heterosex and then reject these ideas.

The current study is limited by the omission of the analysis of the impact of 'race' and religion on constructions of sexual consent. Some participants explicitly refer to the ways in which their perceptions of consent are affected by their 'race' as well as their religious upbringing. Further research should investigate how 'race' and religion influence the way

individuals understand and talk about sexual consent. Although it is important to do research that depicts women as sexually autonomous, men's understandings of sexual consent can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how overarching social ideas affect perceptions of consent. Furthermore, research into how sexual consent is understood in queer sexual experiences is limited and is imperative for a deeper understanding.

Despite the limitations of the current study, the different ways in which the focus groups construct sexual consent provides some insight into the shared understandings of consent and the influence of widespread social ideas on these understandings. This helps develop a definition of sexual consent that contradicts ideas of heteronormativity and sexual compliance. Doing so will make space for a construction of heterosex that is mutually desired and mutually beneficial. This study suggests that although women's understandings of sexual consent are still informed by patriarchal ideals, there is a movement toward a construction of sexual consent that not only acknowledges such social influences, but actively fights against them.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Floretta Boonzaier, for her valuable insight, extensive knowledge and ongoing enthusiasm in this work as well her faith in me to run this project.

A big thank you to my participants, all of whom trusted me with their personal stories and beliefs and acted as co-researchers in this project.

A final thank you to my family and friends, who have engaged with me on this topic time and time again and committed themselves to more than one proof-read. A special thank you to my peers in qualitative research, for ongoing understanding and support.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Outline

1. What kinds of things come to mind when you think about sexual consent?

2. How do you think being a woman affects your understanding of sexual consent?

3. Explain the difference between consensual sex and wanted sex

4. How do you feel about initiating sex, as a woman?

5. What is your role, as a woman, in consensual sex?

Appendix B: Transcription Key

FG1: Extract taken from focus group one

FG2: Extract taken from focus group two

FG3: Extract taken from focus group three

FG4: Extract taken from focus group four

FG5: Extract taken from focus group five

[ ]: Additional information is placed in square brackets, such as laughter, gestures or other

participants' input

… : Ellipsis are placed when part of the participant's original statement has been omitted.

Appendix C: Ethical Approval

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

Department of Psychology

University of Cape Town Rondebosch 7701 South Africa
Telephone (021) 650 3417
Fax No. (021) 650 4104

23 May 2018

Kayla Beare
Department of Psychology
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch 7701

Dear Kayla

I am pleased to inform you that ethical clearance has been given by an Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Humanities for your study, *Understandings of Sexual Consent in Heterosexual Contexts: a narrative inquiry*. The reference number is PSY2018 -020.

I wish you all the best for your study.

Yours sincerely

University of Cape Town
ΨPSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT
Upper Campus
Rondebosch

Lauren Wild (PhD)
Associate Professor
Chair: Ethics Review Committee

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

Women's subjective understandings of sexual consent

1. **Invitation and Purpose**

You are invited to take part in this study, which explores women's understandings of sexual consent. I am a student from the University of Cape Town, doing research within the Psychology department.

2. Procedure

➔ If you consent to partaking in this study, you will be a participant in a focus group discussion where you will talk about your understandings of sexual consent from your own personal experience.

➔ The focus group will last an hour, more or less.

➔ Participation is voluntary, you do not have to discuss anything you are not comfortable talking about and you may leave at any point.

3. Risks

➔ This study poses low risk of harm to you

➔ Speaking about sexual consent, and sexual activity, may be emotionally distressing for you. What you choose to speak about is entirely up to you, you will not have to talk about anything you are not comfortable talking about.

➔ A referral list will be made available to you so that you may contact a counsellor if you find this necessary after taking part in the study,

➔ You may be inconvenienced by having to give up an hour of your time.

4. Benefits

Partaking in the focus group gives you an opportunity to voice your opinions and share your understandings of sexual consent.

5. Confidentiality

➜ The focus groups will take place in a private room.

➜ A tape recorder will be used to record the interview, and you may request for the recorder to be turned off at any point.

➜ The only individuals who will have access to these recordings will be myself and my university supervisor.

➜ All information you share is confidential, and you may request for any information you have shared to be removed from the study.

➜ Pseudonyms will be used in the reporting of the study.

➜ You, and other participants, are expected to protect the confidentiality of this focus group, the information shared and the identity of the participants.

6. Compensation

If you are a psychology undergraduate student, you will receive two SRPP points for taking part in this study.

7. Contact details

If you have any concerns, questions or suggestions for the study, please contact Kayla Beare at BRXKAY001@myuct.ac.za, or Dr Floretta Boonzaier at the Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town at floretta.boonzaier@uct.ac.za

8. Signatures

(Participant's name)   . has been informed of the purpose and proceedings of the study, described above, as well as the risks involved in participation. They have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and these questions have been answered by the researcher, as best as she can. A signed copy of the consent form will be made available to the subject.

                                                                                 .

                                          Researcher's Signature   Date

I have been informed about the research study in question and understand its purpose, procedure, risks and benefits. I agree to take part in this research. I know that I am free to withdraw this consent at any point, and doing so will not cause me any penalty. I agree to protect the confidentiality of the other participants who will be in the focus group with me.

.
Participant's signature   Date

I am aware that the focus group I am taking part in will be recorded, and these recordings will be accessible to only the researcher and her supervisor. I consent to being recorded.

.
Participant's signature   Date

My name:

My student number:

My age:

The gender I identify as:

The race I identify as:

The religion I identify as:

The socio-economic class I identify as:

The sexual orientation I identify as:

The number of heterosexual relationships I have had:

I am/am not currently in an intimate relationship

Referral List

Should you feel that you require additional support or counselling after taking part in this study, the following organisations can be contacted.

LIFE LINE:

24 hour counselling service, via telephone

Face to face counselling

Trauma counselling

Rape counselling

HIV/AIDS counselling

Contact:

Crisis: (+27) 729336885

Office: (+27) 214611111

Email: info.lifelinewc.org.za

Payment:

Services are free of charge

RAPE CRISIS:

24 hour crisis counselling, via telephone

Individual face-to-face counselling

Legal consultation in preparation for court cases if one wishes to charge a perpetrator

Contact:

Address: 23 Trill Road, Observatory

Telephone: (+27) 21 4479762

Email: www.rapecrisis.org.za

Payment:

Services are free of charge