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**ABSTRACT**

In late 2017 and early 2018 the #MeToo movement brought awareness to the issues of sexual assault and sexual harassment. With this attention came an additional focus on the meaning and application of consent in U.S. society. While many people understand consent as a concept, some use the term in various contexts without fully understanding its implications. The purpose of this article is to examine the memorable messages individuals have received from various authorities concerning consent, abstinence, and purity. The author creates a new conceptual framework to help the public better understand the complex sociocultural meanings of these words.

**CONSENT**

Recently, the #MeToo movement has inspired a broader conversation on what constitutes sexual harassment/assault and sexual consent. The empirical literature on sexual consent, however, is lacking. Beres (2007; Jozkowski et al., 2014; Ossman 2003). Warren et al. (2015) found that lacking an understanding of sexual consent was associated with sexual aggressive behavior among heterosexual college men and was associated with higher acceptance of rape myths and conformity to masculine gender role norms (i.e., cognitive predictors). The cognitive predictors, as well as peer support of abuse were both fully mediated by understanding sexual consent; the better one understood sexual consent, the less likely they were to be sexually aggressive. Beres (2007) has pointed out that the definition of consent used by the legal system and researchers/scholars is inconsistent. The use of consent language is inconsistent, creating a gap in how consent is understood and studied. Inconsistencies in the definitions, understanding of sexual consent appear to be reflected in real world interactions. Jozkowski et al. (2014) found that among a sample of 185 college students, the majority believed that explicit sexual consent (e.g., saying “yes” to sexual activity) defined sexual consent. However, when asked open ended questions regarding their own behaviors in indicating and interpreting sexual consent, inconsistencies arose. Most students reported using verbal cues to indicate consent but relied on nonverbal cues to interpret consent in their partner(s). Similarly, female students typically indicated non-consent verbally, while male students used nonverbal cues to recognize non-consent. Additionally, male students reported that they tend to indicate non-consent verbally, but most women reported looking for a combination of both verbal and nonverbal cues to indicate non-consent from a mating partner; communicating sexual consent appears to be gendered.

**ABSTINENCE**

Purity pledges place heavy emphasis on abstinence. Abstinence-only education has received more attention within the news in the beginning part of 2018. Earlier this year, the Department of Health and Human Services proposed sweeping cuts to comprehensive sex education programs (i.e., programs designed to teach adolescents about safe sex, birth control, sexual health, etc.; Kodjak, 2018). Additionally, the current presidential administration proposed $75 million be put towards abstinence only sex education programs. Research, however, tends to suggest that abstinence only education does not significantly reduce risky teenage sexual behavior (e.g., Kohler et al., 2008, Stranger-Hall & Hall, 2011). For example, states that teach abstinence only sex education programs have higher teenage pregnancy rates compared to states that teach comprehensive sex education which includes information on abstinence (Stranger-Hall & Hall, 2011).

Comprehensive sex education does not appear to be associated with an increase in the likelihood that adolescents (ages 15-19) will engage in sexual activity (Kohler et al., 2008). Moreover, comprehensive sex education appears to lower the risk of pregnancy compared to abstinence-only sex education programs.

**PURITY**

Another concept that is reflective of Beres (2007), finding that the #MeToo consent rally culture. Manning (2014) conducted multidisciplinary interviews with 13 families (total n = 57] who enacted purity culture. Beres (2007) noted that most of the research on consent assumes that men seek consent (i.e., initiate sex) while women give consent. This assumption is limiting because it assumes men always want to engage in sexual activity. This implies that men cannot be sexually assaulted, which is untrue. Additionally, this dichotomous manner of conceptualizing consent excludes the sexual interactions of LGBTQ individuals who do not always conform to traditional gender roles in their casual/romantic relationships.

Correspondingly, Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz (2016) have suggested that the manner in which society describes sexual interactions conform to a traditional script, wherein men are assertive and women are passive (i.e., a man "halts" a woman) but has suggested that token resistance may explain some of the complexity in understanding and defining sexual consent. Token resistance means when a woman says "No", to sex, she actually wants to engage in sexual activity; she initially refuses to appear less eager, thereby prescribing to a passive or feminine gender role. Ossman found that participants with higher token resistance had weaker perceptions of rape when a woman said "No" compared to those with low token resistance. Additionally, high token resistant participants had lower perceptions of rape when nothing was said by the woman. Furthermore, Warren (2015) said that male participants who reported sexually aggressive behavior typically conformed to a traditionally masculine gender role supporting sexual assertiveness/dominance; Wood and Fixmer-Oraiz (2016) suggested that sexual assertiveness/dominance is a contemporary theme of masculinity in the U.S.

**REFERENCES**


