

TITLE: “She would have said please stop”: The Complexity of Consent

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Introduction:

Consensual sex is often painted a black-and-white situation where an individual says “Yes,” but there is also a construction of consensual sex as the absence of “No.” If there is no discussion of consent, one individual may view the encounter as non-consensual, potentially labeling it rape. These encounters differ from a typical understanding rape in which a woman fights a stranger while verbally asserting “No.” Constructing consent as the absence of a blatant “No” oversimplifies the meaning of consensual sex and overlooks the myriad of ways to establish consent.

Methods:

We explored ideas of consent by examining 78 first-hand accounts, posted on Reddit.com, of sexual assault from the perspective of perpetrators. These accounts provided a unique opportunity to examine the perpetrator’s understanding of sexual assault without the bias of police reports or research questions. Our team collectively created a coding scheme that we used to identify themes that emerged from the accounts. Several stories lacked a discussion of consent between the individuals involved.

Discussion:

Our findings suggest that perpetrators assumed consent by the absence of a direct “No.” The victims utilized verbal cues such as “I haven’t done this sober in a long time” along with nonverbal cues like clamping their legs shut to indicate a lack of consent. When the perpetrators ignored these cues, sexual interactions often met the legal definition of sexual assault. Perpetrators recognized these cues but failed to use them when determining sexual boundaries and consent. Reliance on an explicit denial underemphasizes a wide range of cues utilized to convey consent.

Limiting non-consensual activity to situations when consent is blatantly denied oversimplifies how consent works in reality. For example, one woman admits to giving consent due to fear of her partner reacting violently, and she describes the encounter as non-consensual despite never using “No.” Instead of focusing on a one-word response, prevention programs can facilitate discussions on how to talk about sexual boundaries and convey where those boundaries lie. These discussions can expand the meaning of consensual sex beyond the absence of a “No” and facilitate a broader understanding of consent beyond the word “Yes.”