

# Introduction to the special issue on sexual consent

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Sexual consent is a timely topic across the globe. People – media, laws, society – are actively thinking about sexual consent and what it means. The past decade has witnessed an exponential increase in empirical articles on sexual consent (Willis et al., 2019). *Psychology and Sexuality* aimed to continue this momentum with a special issue of peer-reviewed research on sexual consent. Addressing the continued need for more complex conceptualisations of consent and more varied samples in this area of research (Muehlenhard et al., 2016), the seven papers that compose this special issue consider novel nuances of sexual consent and demonstrate diversity in several ways.

First, much of the past academic literature on sexual consent focused on individual consent behaviours and paid little attention to the contexts in which they occur (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Now, one of the trends in recent consent research is an emphasis on how sexual consent varies by context (Beres, 2014; Jozkowski et al., 2018; Willis & Jozkowski, 2019). The researchers represented in this special issue used diverse methodologies to ask complex questions about sexual consent and to provide nuanced insights. Specific approaches included experimental vignettes, focus groups, content analysis, and semi-structured interviews.

Second, with few exceptions, studies on sexual consent have relied on samples primarily comprising White heterosexual cisgender college students in North America (Muehlenhard et al., 2016; Willis et al., 2019). Continuing *Psychology and Sexuality's* tradition of publishing international research, the studies included in this special issue spanned Africa, Europe, and North America. And only two of the studies exclusively relied on data from college students. In addition to providing diverse samples regarding geographic region and age, the teams that conducted the present research on sexual consent were themselves diverse in career stage (i.e. student, postdoctoral, early career, and established) and discipline (i.e. psychology, sexology, public health, social work, women's studies, and informatics).

This special issue advances our understanding of sexual consent – each study in its own way. Some authors conceptualised consent as an internal experience of willingness, others as an external communication of agreement, and still others as perceptions of an interaction. Even though definitions of sexual consent varied across studies, all authors aimed to elucidate key aspects of consent in unique contexts.

## Present collection of sexual consent research

Piemonte et al. (2020, this issue) examined whether people perceive explicit verbal consent communication to be sexy. Using written erotica, these researchers manipulated the way fictional characters communicated their willingness to engage in sexual behaviours verbally or nonverbally. Across two studies, Piemonte et al. (2020) found that adults in the United States generally rated the erotica as similarly sexy disregarding the type of consent communication – indicating the potential

for consent education tactics to be situated in a sex-positive approach that emphasises the sexiness of open sexual communication. Because these vignettes followed heterosexual scripts, it was not surprising that lesbian and gay participants rated them as less sexy than did bisexual and heterosexual participants.

Dawson et al. (2020, this issue) also considered sexual consent within the context of written erotica. These researchers investigated people's comfort with consensual and nonconsensual pornographic content. Using structural equation modelling and vignettes they had developed in a three-round Delphi study, Dawson et al. (2020) found that young adults studying at an Irish university were relatively less tolerant of written accounts of nonconsensual sexual encounters if they had more positive attitudes and perceived norms toward establishing sexual consent. While the initial set of

written erotica included sexual interactions between two female or two male characters, the final set used for analysis only depicted heterosexual encounters.

Mark and Vowels (2020, this issue) more directly assessed the relationship between consent and non-consent by interviewing women who had been sexually victimised but were in a healthy sexual relationship at the time of the study. In a sample of adult women primarily from the United States (but also Canada, Australia, England, and New Zealand), Mark and Vowels found that sexual consent post-sexual trauma was ever-evolving and could be explicit or implicit. Participants in this study also discussed the complexities associated with feeling empowered to voice their sexual wants and

needs. While more than a third of this sample identified as bisexual, lesbian, pansexual, queer, or questioning, almost all participants were partnered with men at the time of the study and primarily referenced sexual consent in the context of heterosexual relationships.

Beare and Boonzaier (2020, this issue) focused on sexual consent from women's perspectives as well and provided some insight regarding sexuality. These researchers facilitated focus group discussions with female university students in South Africa. Participants discussed sexual consent as willingness that is distinct from desire. And in a sample in which more than a quarter of participants identified as gay, queer, or bisexual, sexual orientation was discussed as being relevant to consent: identifying as a sexual minority can empower women to more readily refuse unwanted sexual advances from men than identifying as heterosexual.

Holmström et al. (2020, this issue) sought to understand the complexities of sexual consent in Sweden—a country that recently introduced new sexual assault legislation that prioritises the need for evidence from the defence that a person communicated their willingness to engage in sexual activity. Specifically, they conducted focus groups with young people who varied regarding their post-secondary educational pathways. Their participants discussed understanding the many nuances regarding sexual consent but voiced that challenging sexual scripts is difficult. Using vignettes to facilitate conversations, Holmström et al. manipulated the gender of the fictional characters to prompt discussions of consent in same-sex relationships; however, participants tended to reference their own heterosexual interactions. One theme that young people in this study emphasised was that transitioning from a public to a private setting is an indicator of sexual consent.

Jozkowski and Willis (2020, this issue) focused on this specific transition in their study. These researchers developed a staggered vignette protocol that presented a consensual heterosexual sexual encounter over the course of 11 segments. After each segment, participants reported whether they thought the characters were willing to engage in various sexual behaviours. Jozkowski and Willis found that the consent cue most strongly associated with increases in consent perceptions was the transition from a social to a private setting. A nuance of this effect was that male participants were particularly likely to think that the female character was willing to engage in sexual behaviour if she was the one to invite the male character home in the vignette.

Finally, Kaufman (2020, this issue) shed light on the vast intellectual frontier that may lie before contemporary sexual consent researchers in her application of consent to digisexuality, which involves technology-enhanced sexual interactions. Using content analysis, this study examined data from online forum discussions wherein users described their interactions with 'Harmony,' an artificially intelligent smartphone application that supports sex robot technology. Kaufman found

that 'Harmony' users approached sexual interactions – including consent negotiations – as if they were a game. This gamification might promote flawed internal ethics regarding how people perceive others' willingness to engage in sexual activity; the extent that these beliefs extend to sexual interactions with other humans remains unknown.

## Directions for future sexual consent research

Even after this collection of articles, there remains a need for more complex conceptualisations of consent and more varied samples. Going forward, researchers should continue being creative in their study designs to assess how sexual consent varies across contexts. For example, experience sampling methodology might be employed to investigate how consent varies within a person from one sexual encounter to the next. And while the samples included in this special issue began to address the lack of diversity regarding geographic region and age inherent to previous sexual consent research, there are several other individual differences for researchers to investigate going forward: race/ethnicity, social class, ability, spirituality, and so on. We also encourage research on sexual consent regarding modern trends in sexuality, such as online dating, sexting, hooking up, or consensual nonmonogamy.

Of particular relevance to *Psychology and Sexuality*, the existing academic literature on sexual consent continues to be sorely limited on matters of sexual orientation and gender identity. Even though a few studies in this special issue provided data regarding consent and sexuality, these insights were consistently secondary to the primarily heterosexual and cisgender framework underlying the research questions and study designs. Going forward, scholars should more critically consider how to incorporate sexual or gender diversity in their research.

## Concluding remarks

I am excited for the future of sexual consent research and am eager to keep pushing the field forward with you. If you are examining sexual consent within the context of sexualities or plan to, please consider submitting your work to *Psychology & Sexuality*. I thoroughly enjoyed guest editing this special issue on sexual consent, and I am overwhelmingly grateful to everyone who made it possible.

- To Drs. Daragh McDermott and Todd Morrison, thank you for leading *Psychology and Sexuality* as co-editors and for entrusting me to deliver a rigorous and engaging special issue.
- To my amazing anonymous reviewers, thank you for dedicating your time and energy to providing comprehensive and helpful feedback to the authors.
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- To Dr. Kristen Jozkowski, thank you for the last several years of mentorship and for the many years of collaborating on sexual consent research to come.
- To the readers of this special issue, enjoy!

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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