

To curb sexual assault, help people better understand consent

April 7 2020, by Tess Eyrich



Credit: Giang Vu via Unsplash

Sexual assault is a persistent problem on college campuses. Women are at greater risk of experiencing sexual assault while in college compared to women in the general population, with about a quarter of all undergraduate women in the U.S. estimated to experience sexual assault by their senior year.

In response, campuses across the country have developed sexual assault education and prevention initiatives that go hand in hand with a suite of other undergraduate orientation activities.

But one area in which those programs fall short is their approach to teaching about [sexual consent](#), said Logan Marg, a doctoral candidate in sociology at the University of California, Riverside.

Marg spent about a year interviewing heterosexual undergraduate men at one Southern California research university to get a better idea of how they define and understand the concept of [consent](#).

He published his findings in March in an article in the *American Journal of Sexuality Education*.

Beginning in winter 2018, Marg recruited 40 participants for interviews that lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. The discussions touched on topics including interviewees' romantic relationships, sexual history, and interpretations of sexual consent.

From transcripts of the interviews Marg conducted, five dominant themes emerged of how interviewees conceptualized consent.

Perhaps most surprising to Marg was the discrepancy between interviewees' intellectual understandings of consent and how they viewed the concept through the lens of their own relationships, he said.

"Many of the men seemed to lack a practical understanding of the concept that could be applied to their everyday relationships," he added.

More specifically, Marg observed that when it came to their intimate relationships, many of the interviewees assumed consent was implied unless it was otherwise stated—a trend that became more deeply rooted the longer a relationship went on.

"The perception of consent as nonverbal and primarily involving reciprocation and/or the lack of verbal or physical resistance most often

emerged when participants discussed their understanding of consent in their actual sexual experiences," he wrote.

Other dominant themes outlined by Marg included:

- All participants indicated that consent meant some form of communicating willingness or lack of willingness to engage in sexual activity.
- Most participants' understanding of consent at least partially reflected their university's affirmative consent policy.
- Many participants understood sexual consent as complicated by [alcohol consumption](#), showing varying levels of confusion regarding consent when it came to situations involving alcohol.
- Discussion of consent often provoked anxiety about perceived ramifications from a sexual assault accusation and fears of being "falsely" accused of sexual assault.

Marg said he came to study the topic of sexual consent after first attempting to do research on sexual assault but realizing the existing literature on the subject was expansive.

"In reading about sexual assault, I discovered sexual consent literature," he said. "I realized it was a relatively small body of research, and therefore rife with opportunities to make a novel contribution."

He said his research adds to the existing literature on sexual consent in several ways. First, his work focuses on men—the primary perpetrators of sexual assault, which makes understanding their comprehension of consent critical, he noted.

Marg's data comes from a more racially and ethnically diverse sample than those of most past studies, whose samples were typically more homogeneous and whiter. Of the 40 men Marg interviewed, most were

Latino or non-Latino Asian. Additionally, he said, his research is qualitative rather than quantitative, incorporating semi-structured interviews that led to more nuanced data than had previously been collected.

"This research indicates that right now, there's not a uniform understanding of what sexual consent is among many college-age men," Marg said. "Practitioners and educators who are trying to help curb the issue of sexual [assault](#) should be especially aware of this."

In particular, Marg said [sexual assault](#) education and prevention initiatives should approach teaching about consent by prompting people to think about their actual lived experiences and relationships when they explore what can seem like an abstract concept.

"Rather than relying on a shared sexual history and the lack of their partners' resistance, men should be taught to look for consent cues from their partner throughout sexual experiences," he wrote.

Likewise, practitioners and educators should emphasize consent as a sex-positive concept, he said, with the aim of ensuring both parties have healthier, more pleasurable, better sex.

"There should be more research on this topic at other college campuses to gather more robust data," Marg added. "The goal is to inform educational programs to effectively teach people about sexual consent and ultimately help them change their behaviors."

More information: Logan Z. Marg. College Men's Conceptualization of Sexual Consent at a Large, Racially/Ethnically Diverse Southern California University, *American Journal of Sexuality Education* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/15546128.2020.1737291](https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2020.1737291)

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