

Education and the Communication of Consent

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ABSTRACT

In late 2017 and early 2018 the #MeToo movement brought attention 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, there still seems to be a lack of knowledge concerning the strategies individuals might use to ensure they are obtaining clear and enthusiastic consent for sex. This literature review will enhance understanding of consent, abstinence, and purity. The knowledge gained will be used to design a future study examining the memorable messages individuals have received from various authorities concerning consent, abstinence, and purity.



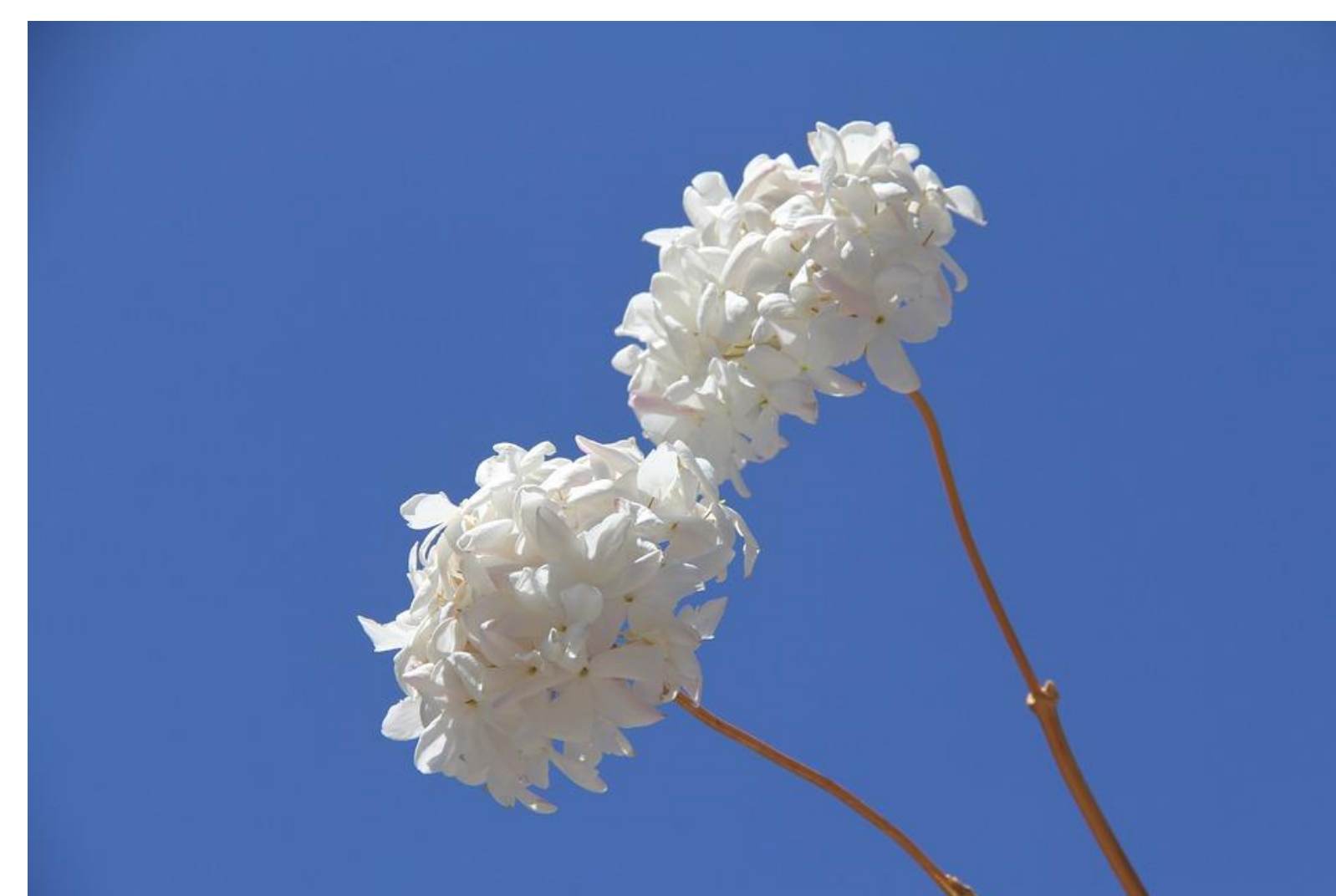
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CONSENT

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; Osmman, 2003). Warren et al. (2015) found that lacking an understanding of sexual consent was associated with sexually 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. However, Beres (2007) has pointed out that the definition of consent used by the legal system and researchers/scholars is inconsistent, creating a gap in how consent is understood and studied. Inconsistencies in the definition/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 verbal agreement (i.e., explicitly 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, but 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 male partner; communicating sexual consent appears to be gendered.

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 LGBT+ individuals who do not necessarily prescribe to traditional gender roles in their casual/romantic relationships. Correspondingly, Wood and Fixmer-Oriaz (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 "nails" a woman). Osmman (2003) 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. Osmman 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-Oriaz (2016) suggested that sexual assertiveness/dominance is a contemporary theme of masculinity in the U.S.



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PURITY

Another concept which is reflective of Beres' (2007) finding that women give and men seek consent is purity culture. Manning (2014) conducted multiadic interviews with 13 families (total $n = 57$) who enacted purity pledges with their adolescent/teenage daughters (ages 14 – 17). A common theme in the discourse among the fathers was that hypersexualized media representations of both men and women caused teenage males to become more sexually aggressive towards their female peers. Purity rings provide a recognizable symbol that a female is not sexually available. In other words, the fathers assumed that men seek consent, and they hoped that the purity ring would symbolize their daughter's unwillingness to give consent.

Again, there appears to be a gendered divide when it comes to expectations related to sexual activity, or

"purity." Klement and Sagarin (2017) conducted a thematic analysis of eight evangelical Christian dating books that were specifically targeted to women. Common throughout the eight books was the importance of abstinence and how a woman's worth was correlated to the amount of sexual behavior she was engaged in (i.e., the less sex, or "purer" a woman was, the more she was worth and vice versa). Additionally, the researchers found that rape culture was reinforced in the dating books with text/chapters that normalized sexual harassment and objectification (i.e., it's normal for men to sexually harass and objectify women), and blamed sexual violence on the victim (e.g., the books encouraged women not to dress in an immodest manner). Wood and Fixmer-Oriaz (2016) noted that one aspect of a feminine identity in the 21st century U.S. is to expect negative treatment from others. Indeed, the conclusions of Manning (2014) and Klement and Sagarin (2017) suggest that this theme of femininity is poignant when it comes to sexual interactions and the discourse surrounding purity pledges.

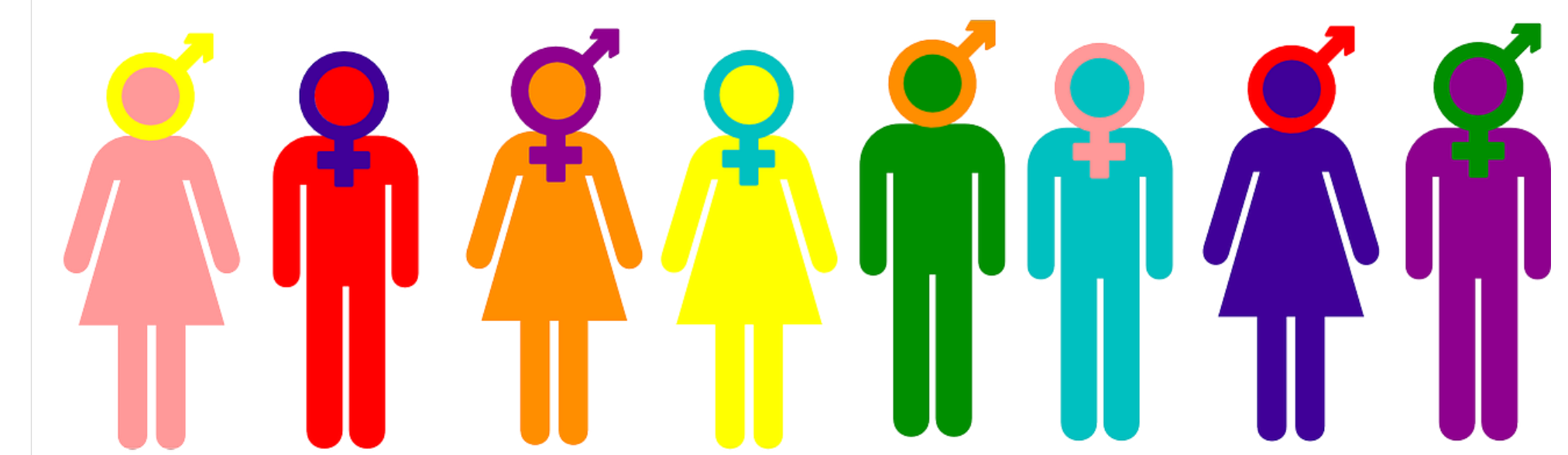


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ABSTINENCE

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 tend to 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 (Koher et al., 2008). Moreover, comprehensive sex education appears to lower the risk of pregnancy compared to abstinence-only or no sex education. Purity/virginity pledges, which advocate for abstinence, appear to delay first sex in adolescents (Brückner & Berman, 2005; Martino et al., 2008). However, individuals

who take a purity pledge are less likely to be aware of their STD status (Brückner & Berman, 2005). They are also less likely to talk to their doctors if they think they have contracted an STD. These behaviors pose public health concerns. Additionally, individuals who take purity pledges, who eventually have premarital sex, tend not to use a condom the first time they have sex. Individuals who have taken a pledge who do not engage in premarital intercourse (i.e., penial/vaginal intercourse) are more likely to substitute activities like oral and/or anal sex, which also have associated health risks (i.e., STD transmission). Many scholars suggest abstinence only education may not significantly reduce risk of pregnancy upon first sexual encounter because these programs do not adequately prepare adolescents with the knowledge of how to have safe sex (i.e., condom use; Brückner & Berman, 2005; Manning, 2014; Martino et al., 2008). Interestingly, however, Martino et al. (2008) found that adolescents who willing partake in purity pledges, which advocate for abstinence, are slightly more likely to consistently use condoms than non-pledgers.



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