

Sexual Consent: Exploring the Perceptions of Heterosexual, Gay, and Bisexual Men

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Abstract : Issues surrounding sexual consent negotiation have become a major topic of societal concern. The majority of current research focuses on the complexities of sexual consent negotiations and the multitude of nuanced issues that surround the consent obtainment of heterosexual adults in post-secondary educational institutions. To date, the only study that has addressed sexual consent negotiation behaviour in same-sex relationships focused on the extent to which individuals used a variety of different verbal and nonverbal sexual consent behaviours to initiate or respond to sexual activity. The results were consistent with trends found within heterosexual individuals; thus, suggesting that the current understanding of sexual consent negotiation, which is grounded in heterosexual research, can serve as a strong foundation for further exploration of sexual consent negotiation within same-sex relationships populations. The current study quantitatively investigated the differences between heterosexual men and gay and bisexual men (GBM) in their understanding of sexual consent negotiation. Exploring how the perceptions of GBM differ from heterosexual males provides insight into some of the unique challenges faced by GBM. Data were collected from a sample of 252 heterosexual men and 314 GBM from Canada, the United States, and Western Europe. Participants responded to the question, 'do you think sexual consent and sex negotiation is different for heterosexual men compared to gay men? If so, how?' by completed an online survey. Responses were analysed following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six phase thematic analysis guidelines. Inter-rater coding was validated using Cohen's Kappa value and was calculated at ($\kappa = 0.84$), indicating a very strong level of agreement between raters. The final thematic structure yielded four major themes: understanding of sexual interaction, unique challenges, scripted role, and universal consent. Respondents spoke to their understanding of sexual interaction, believing GBM sexual consent negotiation to be faster and more immediate. This was linked to perceptions of emotional attachment and the idea that sexual interaction and emotional involvement were distinct and separate processes in GBM sexual consent negotiation, not believed to be the case in heterosexual interactions. Unique challenges such as different protection concerns, role declaration, and sexualization of spaces were understood to hold differing levels of consideration for heterosexual men and GBM. The perception of a clearly defined sexual script for GBM was suggested as a factor that may create ambiguity surrounding sexual consent negotiation, which in turn holds significant implications on unwanted sexual experiences for GBM. Broadening the scope of the current understanding of sexual consent negotiation by focusing on heterosexual and GBM population, the current study has revealed variations in perception of sexual consent negotiation between these two populations. These differences may be understood within the context of sexual scripting theory and masculinity gender role theory. We suggest that sexual consent negotiation is a health risk factor for GBM that has not yet been adequately understood and addressed. Awareness of the perceptions that surround the sexual consent negotiation of both GBM and heterosexual men holds implications on public knowledge, which in turn can better inform policy making, education, future research, and clinical treatment.

Keywords : sexual consent, negotiation, heterosexual men, GBM, sexual script

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