Defining Sexual Consent: The Role of Rape Myth Acceptance and Identification of Nonconsensual Sexual Experiences

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INTRODUCTION

- The complexities surrounding real-life sexual consent negotiations make it difficult for college students to have a clear understanding of how to conceptualize, communicate, and interpret sexual consent.
- The nuances of understanding consent are associated with the acceptance of myths about what counts as rape or a nonconsensual experience (e.g., it is not rape if the victim does not fight back).
- Due to the prevalence of rape myths, many individuals with nonconsensual sexual experience histories have been exposed to false beliefs and these ideas affect how survivors conceptualize and identify their own experiences.
- The relationship of rape myth acceptance with misconceptions about how consent should be negotiated may play a role in how people understand and define sexual consent and their own histories of nonconsensual sexual experiences.

AIMS

- To examine how undergraduate students define sexual consent.
- To determine the role of rape myth acceptance and nonconsensual sexual experience history and identification on definitions of sexual consent.
- To assess rape myth acceptance as a mediator of the relationship between nonconsensual sexual experience history/identification and consent definitions.

METHODS

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE
- Undergraduates (N = 1081) who were recruited to take part in an anonymous online study of “consensual and nonconsensual sexual experiences” through the introductory psychology pool (SONA).
- Participants completed surveys on their sexual experiences, rape myth acceptance, and responded to an open-ended question asking them to define “sexual consent.”

MATERIALS/MEASURES
- NSEI (Kilimnik & Meston, 2018)
- IRMAS-SF (Payne et al., 1999)
- In your own words, please describe what the term sexual consent means to you?

ANALYSES

- Quantitative text analysis procedures were applied to the consent definitions to derive themes of sexual consent.
- Multiple linear regression models with gender covariates were used to assess the relationships between rape myth acceptance (IRMAS-SF), the sexual consent themes, and identification and NSEI history.

CONCLUSION

- The negative relationship between rape myth acceptance and the Freely Given consent theme compared to the positive relationship with the Permission consent theme captures the more nuanced components of consent and coercion compared to more discrete definitions.
- These results support the rationale that college students with a narrow understanding of what sexual violence can resemble (i.e., higher rape myth acceptance) would be less likely to define consent in more nuanced terms such as “Freely Given.”
- College students with higher rape myth acceptance are also significantly less likely to identify their histories of nonconsensual sexual experiences with sexual violence labels.
- These findings provide evidence for the necessity of targeting rape myth acceptance in sexual violence prevention and consent education.

REFERENCES


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