Social Dimensions of Sexual Consent Among College Students:
Insights from ethnographic research
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Abstract:

Non-consensual sexual experiences on college campuses represent a serious public health problem, but there is relatively little research on students’ actual consent practices, and the preponderance of existing research is quantitative, lab-based, or focused on how single rather than multiple dimensions of social context shapes consent practices. Filling those gaps and exemplifying the potential of ethnographic research to generate innovative responses to public health problems, this paper draws on ethnographic research conducted with undergraduates on one campus to describe consent practices and to analyze multiple social dimensions of those practices. Data include in-depth interviews with over 150 college students; 15 months of participant observation; seventeen focus groups; and key informant interviews with administrators and others with insight into student life. After describing students’ actual practices, we present seven critical dimensions of the cultural and social context of sexual consent practices. They are: (1) drunk sex (2) sexual citizenship; (3) gendered heterosexual scripts; 4) intersectionality, or how student diversity intersects with negotiating consent; 5) men’s fears about the consequences of doing consent wrong; 6) the role of peer groups, and (7) the complex relations between space, time and assumptions about consent. We close with implications for new approaches to promoting consensual sex and preventing sexual assault.
**Introduction:**

Unwanted, non-consensual sexual experience represents a serious public health problem at US universities\(^1,2\) with surveys showing that up to 1 in 4 women are assaulted during their time on campus. Few effective evidence-based programs exist\(^3\) and prevention generally focuses on changing individual behaviors or on bystander interventions. One prevention approach, sometimes to comply with state or federal mandates\(^4\)\(^5\)\(^6\), involves teaching about affirmative consent (referred to as ‘yes means yes’). Prevention work, however, needs to be grounded in an understanding of actual behavior, with attention to the social forces shaping that behavior. The idea that context shapes sexual behavior is widely accepted in areas of public health such as HIV and family planning\(^7\)\(^8\), and yet a great deal of sexual assault prevention messaging remains stuck in ‘don’t be a rapist, don’t get raped, don’t let your friends get raped’, with no instructions on “how” and with limited efforts to reshape the context of student’s social and sexual lives.

In this paper we examine the social and cultural dimensions of cisgender heterosexual students’ consent practices and point to corresponding social and community-level strategies to promote consensual sex. (The consent practices of non-cisgender and lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or another non-heterosexual identified students were markedly distinct from those of cis, hetero-students, and sufficiently heterogeneous to require being addressed in a subsequent separate paper.)

The lack of funding for sexual assault research relative to the associated burden of suffering means that many critical questions remain unanswered\(^9\). As has been pointed out for over a decade\(^10\)\(^11\), more empirical work on how people actually practice sexual consent could contribute to more effective sexual assault prevention. The scant existing research on
consent practices—much of which is quantitative and draws on classroom or lab samples—among young adults and university students has emphasized differences between men’s and women’s practices, describing gendered sexual scripts in which men initiate sex and their pleasure is considered important, while women consent or refuse, with their pleasure being less prioritized. Despite shared definitions of consent, research has shown that men use more nonverbal means of conveying their own consent and interpreting women’s consent and women use more verbal strategies, and that some college men avoid a partner’s refusal by not asking for consent at all. Moreover, young women often do not consent explicitly to sex, but rather practice “implied sexual consent,” reflecting difficulty communicating with partners, alcohol use, and the normalization of such encounters as appropriate. Women who have previously been assaulted are more likely to be aware of consent as a distinct sexual practice.

Research on gender and consent practices has focused on a single dimensions of gender, such as sociostructural norms, sexual stereotypes, or gendered patterns of media consumption. Building on the foundation laid by these works, here we take a broader approach to how gendered power relations shape heterosexual sexual practices, drawing on Connell’s work on gender as comprised of multiple intertwining social institutions. As such, gender’s influence on consent is mediated through numerous social factors. In this paper, we articulate seven dimensions of the gendered social context that shape students’ consent practices, which then allows us to identify specific modifiable dimensions of the social context.
Methods:

This paper presents findings from the ethnographic component of a large mixed-methods study, the Sexual Health Initiative to Foster Transformation (SHIFT), which examined sexual health and sexual violence among undergraduates at Columbia University’s (CU) undergraduate schools and Barnard College (BC). Ethnographic data, summarized in Table 1, were collected via in-depth interviews, participant observation, focus groups, and key-informant interviews.

(Table 1)

Ethnographic data were collected between August 2015 and January 2017, including in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus groups with current students; table 1 provides information on sample characteristics of focus group and in-depth interview participants. The principle investigators developed the study’s research instruments; recruitment and data collection procedures were approved by the Columbia University Medical Center IRB.

Following principles of community-based participatory research, two advisory boards informed this study. The 15 students on the Undergraduate Advisory Board (UAB), all of whom were excluded from study participation, met with researchers weekly throughout planning and data collection phases, providing input on instrument development, recruitment, maximizing sample diversity, and other aspects of research implementation, and monthly thereafter to discuss and interpret findings. UAB members were paid $750 for each semester of participation. The Institutional Advisory Board, comprised of key institutional actors such as deans, student life professionals, and student
health providers, met with researchers approximately twice each semester during planning and data collection, then more frequently during data analysis.

The ethnographic research team, led by two faculty members (Hirsch and Khan), consisted of seven team members, with up to five researchers in the field at one time and at least two working full time as research assistants. The three men and four women represented a range of racial and class backgrounds, as well as sexualities and religions. With support from the University’s Office of General Counsel the researchers secured an exemption from mandated reporting requirements in their role as researchers on this project. The ethnography team met weekly for at least two hours to discuss fieldnotes, observations, and interviews. Hirsch and Khan also met regularly with the quantitative researchers to coordinate practices and integrate insights.

Responding to DeGue et al.’s call for research laying the groundwork for multi-level approaches to sexual assault prevention\(^3\), the project as a whole was grounded in Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model\(^24\). After interviews were transcribed, checked for quality, and stripped of identifying information, two research team members independently coded interviews for eleven themes: socializing, partner selection, relationships, sexual projects, stories of sexual assault, consent, disclosing sexual assault, mental health experiences, alcohol and substance use, other sexual experiences (not assault), and other notes.

Qualitative data analysis used an inductive approach; for this paper, that entailed describing the breadth of practices and identifying potentially modifiable social factors that shape consent practices. Analysis drew on the coding, team members’ fieldnotes and a document that included a lengthy description of one incident of non-assault sexual activity.
for each sexually active in-depth interview participant; this included accounts of sex that varied substantially in terms of consent practices, pleasure, relationship context, and other factors.

**Findings:**

**Consent practices**

The university instructs all incoming students in the need for affirmative consent. Accordingly, to reduce social desirability bias, in the IDIs, we asked students to describe a sexual interaction in detail and then afterwards asked them to describe if and how consent had worked in that interaction. As shown in table 2, practices that students described as eliciting or communicating consent varied widely, including texting to meet without mentioning sex, not rebuffing someone’s physical advances, using indirect language, or making assumptions based on time and place. Frequently, both men and women described what they perceived to be consensual sex as instances in which the woman had not said no. Some specifically evaluated their own practices as falling short of the ideal of affirmative consent, and others questioned it as an ideal. This same dynamic emerged in the focus groups; there was little explicit discussion of eliciting or granting consent in students’ collective descriptions of how sexual interactions develop, but when asked to describe how consent should work, students had clearly absorbed information about legal standards for consent.

**Social dimensions of consent**

Although studies have pointed to specific social factors (e.g. gendered scripts) that shape consent intentions or practices, we could not find published work that examined multiple
social dimensions of consensual sex. Here we present seven social dimensions of heterosexual consent: 1) “drunk sex”; 2) sexual citizenship; 3) gendered sexual scripts; 4) intersectionality; 5) men’s fear of “doing” consent wrong; 6) peer groups, and 7) spatial and temporal factors shaping when consent is assumed. By ‘social dimensions of consent’, we mean shared and potentially modifiable aspects of what is frequently approached as an individual or interpersonal practice.

(Table 3)

As required by New York State law, incoming students are taught that intoxicated people are legally unable to grant consent. Students in the focus groups, without exception, had absorbed this information. Not all students drink, have sex, or have drunk sex. The individual interviews and participant observation, however, underlined that for those who do engage in it, drunk sex is a normalized element of socially-organized leisure activities, with individual, interpersonal, and contextual drivers of alcohol use that are related to sex as well as broader social factors. Individually, some students (men and women) are acutely uncomfortable with their bodies and the landscape of the erotic. They are – like many adults – socially anxious and afraid of rejection. They are often stressed, drinking large amounts quickly (“pre-gaming”) to shift from their disciplined, achievement-oriented, sometimes socially awkward worker selves to their silly, spontaneous, socially-adept sexual selves. For many, stress reflects social context: integrating into college; demanding schoolwork; New York City’s opportunities for professional development through academic year internships on top of full course loads; a competitive post-graduation labor market and, for some, student debt. The broader context is both general and particular; college binge drinking is a serious problem nationally; many students described drinking as a
cheap and accessible way to have fun. For some, drunkenness serves to facilitate sexual encounters with new partners – so that not only are those involved drunk but their bodies are new to each other, with consequently no practice reading the other person’s physical cues. They may have gotten drunk for fun, but also because they were less than perfectly comfortable with what they are doing. In students’ descriptions of managing consent while drunk, the ad hoc nature of the guidelines they discussed following was striking. One man said that “you can tell, based on, if someone’s like slurring so much ... I never wanna have... sex with someone who’s... a lot more drunk than me”. Another considered himself “too drunk” if he was unable to get an erection.

The second social dimension of consent, ‘sexual citizenship’, reflects a person’s socially-produced understanding of her or his right to sexual self-determination. Many young women were uncertain if it was appropriate to deny others access to their bodies; one noted ‘it would have been rude’ to say no. In many interviews, women described their own consent practices as ‘not saying no’. This under-developed sense of sexual citizenship was not universal; some women were clear about their sexual boundaries and desires, and others much less so. This socially-produced sense of oneself as a sexual agent lays the foundation for meaningfully being able to grant consent.

Third, sexual citizenship must be understood in the context of gendered heterosexual scripts which, as others have found, shape heterosexual interactions. In the common script men seek consent and women give it. One young woman noted that her partner “always asks’ – and then added, quizzically, for him “it’s implied consent, I think....I don’t think I have ever asked for consent, I think guys ask you for consent, right?.” Implicit here is the man doing his gendered job, pursuing sex, and the woman doing hers, stopping
it or not. As one man said: “when, for example, I’m removing her clothes and she doesn’t stop me, then to me, that’s consent... I’m the one that takes the initiative ... consent is on her side”. For heterosexual women, these gendered sexual scripts reinforce the logic of ‘not saying no’ as a form of consent, reproducing a practice in which consensual and nonconsensual sex can manifest in externally similar ways; a woman could be frozen in fear and thus not say no, or could be actually consenting, and yet the verbal manifestation is the same. This is the point of affirmative consent laws, which emphasize that consent can never be just implied; our research, however, suggests that legislating consent practices may have changed students’ knowledge, but not their behavior.

These gendered scripts normalize men’s sexual aggression and make it hard for men to recognize their own experiences of non-consensual sex by equating normal masculinity with a constant desire for sex. For example, one man talked about a woman in a bar buying him drinks and encouraging him to drink. He was not interested in her, and yet they went back to his room and had sex. When he told a friend the next day, they spoke as if the encounter were humorous: “dude, she was trying so hard to get you drunk.” Neither labeled this as assault. The intensive focus on men’s responsibility to secure consent is part of what renders these experiences culturally illegible.

Gender intertwines with other axes of social inequality to shape consent practices, making intersectionality a fourth social dimension of consent. Students’ social backgrounds shaped their preparedness for sexual intimacy and their fears about it. Students hailing from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds or more privileged educational settings frequently found the interview’s question about sexuality education funny – as in, “of course everyone gets that.” But everyone does not get age-appropriate comprehensive sex
education, which can be an important social strategy to develop sexual citizenship\textsuperscript{27,29}. Race and ethnicity are also factors; for example, Black men described meticulous consent practices, and noted an intense awareness of the racialized risk of sexual assault accusations, particularly when partnered with White women. One described his rationale for always obtaining consent:

I have girls say to me like please stop asking so many questions... And like that's great but even then I'm like no, no, no, that doesn't work for me.... It doesn't matter what you say in this moment. It really doesn't matter, ... when you leave this room – in 24 hours, ... you could say something very different.

Fear might not be the only factor: the absence of racial privilege may better position Black men to respect other people’s bodies. Race and class do not exhaust questions about intersectionality; rather, they illustrate how multiple dimensions of social stratification inflect gendered heterosexual consent practices. Moreover, when students navigate consent, those interactions are shaped both by each student’s intersectional identity and personal history and by the power disparities reflected therein; being older, more sexually experienced, clearer on one’s sexual goals, or less drunk are additional situational factors that create an unequal social terrain.

Fear about the consent process, our fifth dimension of the social context of consent, was not limited to Black men; many men worried about the gap between their actual consent practices and those in which they had been instructed. The fear of false accusation is an important part of men’s college experience, although the notion that students encourage their peers to report, based on slim evidence, was not substantiated by our data. Both in the ethnography and the survey, as has been found elsewhere\textsuperscript{30}, only a very small proportion of sexual assault incidents result in formal report at all. But in a context where both men and women told us that accusations of sexual assault can “ruin your life,” the fear
is somewhat understandable: men learn they are responsible for eliciting consent, and such consent can not happen when people are drunk or does not count unless it is explicitly verbally affirmed, but people rarely verbally communicate consent, and often are drunk, during sex, with impaired memory.

The ways in which peer groups shape students’ consent experiences further illustrates the utility of examining consent in relation to the social context beyond the sexual dyad. Peer groups create sexual opportunities for group members, and then afterwards play a critical role in interpreting and labeling what happened. One student described sitting in a room with 14 other people, talking intently with a man, when suddenly those 14 others left without saying a thing. Without any action on the woman’s or man’s part, the situation had shifted to a potentially intimate one. Student organizations, teams, and Greek life create sexual situations and delineate acceptable and desirable partners for their members. Consent often – though not universally – begins with peer groups or student organization activities that create the shared understanding that sex is likely.

Consent or its absence, as students experience it, also emerges after, in consultation with the peer group – which balances authentic care for their members with concern for the group’s reputation and social stability. We heard many stories in which students described experiences that met the definition of sexual assault and were not sure how to think about what happened. We heard no stories of friends encouraging someone to interpret an encounter as nonconsensual based on slim evidence. Rather, there was a great deal of downgrading – by men and women – in which what the research team understood to be sexual assault was labeled as something else: weird, creepy, awkward, regrettable
sex, but not assault. Sometimes this collective interpretive work reflects a commitment to harmony within a friendship group or student organization, or protecting the group’s reputation, while in other instances the primary concern was the student’s well-being.

Finally, in ways that are troubling but critical to address, students understand space and time to create implied consent. A young woman who has experienced multiple sexual assaults explained that, for better or worse, the prevailing understanding is still "you give consent when you walk in the room". We argue here for the importance of listening to her – not to change legal standards of consent, but to acknowledge the distance between that standard and students’ actual lived experience, as well as the ways in which her emphasis on space points to opportunities for spatial approaches to prevention. When a student in a bar says to another, “do you want to go back to my room”, he or she is asking if the other person is interested in continuing the encounter more intimately. Answering that you do want to go back to someone’s room falls far short of the standard of affirmative consent. And yet that is frequently what students refer to as the moment they elicited or gave consent. Students’ stories suggested that many experience a moment beyond which it feels too awkward to try to change the course of a sexual interaction.

Times of the day and the week, calendar time, and relationship duration also produce sexual expectations. Stopping by someone’s room at noon on a Tuesday is different than texting to see if you can stop by after the bars close in the wee hours of Sunday morning; sexual geographies are shaped by social temporalities. For example, major parties or events shape students’ expectations about sex and consent. As one man said, “I put on a tie [for a formal dance], so I knew we were going to have sex”. For ‘relationship time’, most students communicate more explicitly at first than they do as the
relationship – whatever kind it is – develops. Sexual geography and social and relationship time shape students’ understandings of what is likely to happen and the socially appropriate possibilities for creating alternative outcomes.

Limitations and recommendations for further research

One major limitation is the focus on heterosexual behaviors; the high rates of assault among LGBT students measured by the AAU cross-campus survey30 underline the urgency of research focused on LGBT experiences of consent and specific prevention needs. Work on intersectionality and consent should also look at other social drivers of vulnerability, such as disability; as noted above our intention was to indicate the importance of intersectional research, rather than to enumerate every possible axis of difference. Moreover, students with histories of perpetrating sexual and other types of violence may have been unlikely to volunteer to participate in research on sexual assault; the preponderance of assault stories that we heard from the point of view of the perpetrator were from students who were either unaware that their behavior met criteria for assault or who realized it in the moment of telling the story (no ethnography participants, for example, admitted to having penetrative sex with a stranger who was intoxicated to the point of unconsciousness, suggesting that those who committed that type of assault may be underrepresented in our research). Our findings therefore may be more useful in preventing sexual assault among students who know each other or where there is an element of miscommunication, and not the violent rape of someone who is passed out. (As we discuss elsewhere, the very term ‘sexual assault’ collapses together many diverse experiences33).
**Discussion and Conclusion:**

Recalling Connell’s emphasis on gendered as comprised of multiple social institutions, we point here to consent education itself as well as peer groups, the social organization of alcohol, and students’ pre-college family and educational experiences as part of the gendered social context of consent. One-time instruction in affirmative consent doubtless has normative value, but effective promotion of consensual sex must also address the underlying social drivers of individual and interpersonal behavior. As DeGue and others\(^{34}\) have noted, it is urgent to consider community-level approaches to prevention. Our findings on the social dimensions of consent points to nine strategies (see Table 4 for full list of policy recommendations), falling into five general groups, that could be layered together to promote consensual sex: comprehensive sexuality education; a more participatory and skills-based approach to consent education; alcohol policy changes to reduce the harms of drunk sex; incorporating restorative justice as an element of disciplinary policies, and using space-planning as a way to build safer campuses.

(Table 4)

**Sexual citizenship**’ underlines that schools, families, and other community institutions should help students grow to adulthood with an understanding of themselves as sexual citizens, masters of their own sexual lives; the policy objective would be expanded funding for evidence-based age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education. In the meantime, institutions of higher education must address the many deficits in students’ preparedness for the sexual opportunities they encounter upon leaving home. In addition, to help students think critically about gendered sexual scripts, conversations about consent must examine gender, sexuality, and power and, emphasizing mutual
consent, take apart the script in which men are aggressors and women blockers. Those conversations must take seriously students’ diverse life experiences and prior sexual experiences; this implies recognizing how that diversity shapes students’ individual approaches to consent and the multiplicity of power inequalities – gender, racial and ethnic, ease of adjustment to college social life, and others – that exist when any two students come together for intimacy. Additionally, consent education programs should move from a ‘banking’ model of education to a Freirian participatory approach, helping students build the skills to deal with the real awkwardness of changing course fairly far into a potentially sexual interaction, rather than pretending that the awkwardness does not exist.

A harm reduction approach to drunk sex would mean talking about it openly, with more nuance: a conversation about how drunk is too drunk would improve upon students’ ad hoc rules about when consent can be sought or given. Evidence-based harm reduction approaches to underage alcohol use have broader value, as sexual assault is one of many adverse outcomes associated with binge-drinking.

Incorporating restorative justice into disciplinary policies may help address men’s fears about consent; we know that fear-based approaches to prevention have limits and unintended consequences, and fear of accusation is not the same as having the skills to engage in consensual sex. Interventions to shape how students care for one another must take into account the complexity of peer groups’ simultaneous promotion of sexual encounters and desire to protect each other, as well as the collective interests at play in labeling and processing experiences that students find confusing, sometimes embarrassing, and frequently only hazily remembered.
Finally, the feeling that 'you give consent when you walk in the door' suggests spatial strategies to promote consent; other doors through which drunk students could stumble together, leading to lounges, all-night cafes, and other more sexually-neutral spaces, might provide non-verbal alternatives to going back to a bedroom together once parties shut down. Different kinds of social spaces, in combination with role-playing, other educational best practices, and other modifications to the social context, can create conditions in which -- even if students put on a tie, or high heels – they check themselves, and check in with each other.
References cited:


33. Mellins, C. A. *et al.* Sexual Assault Incidents among college undergraduates: Prevalence and factors associated with risk. (n.d. (manuscript in preparation)).


35. Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (Continuum, 2000).


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of Research</th>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Total Materials Collected</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Question Addressed</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>In-Depth Interviews</strong></td>
<td>Subjects chose if they would like a male or female interviewer and/or a faculty member</td>
<td>151 in-depth interviews, 26 follow-up interviews</td>
<td>Private Offices on Columbia Campus</td>
<td>Participant’s precollege life, orientation experiences, sexual intimacy, and social relationships, in order to answer questions about the individual, interpersonal, and institutional level factors shaping sexual health and vulnerability to sexual assault.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Most subjects were interviewed by the person who first made contact with them about participating in the study</td>
<td>Purposively sampled for variation in relation to year in school, gender, race, sexual identity, Columbia University and Barnard College school of enrollment, and how students pay for schools (as a measure of socioeconomic status).</td>
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<td><strong>Focus Groups</strong></td>
<td>Focus groups were conducted by faculty member at Columbia, with assistance from either a doctoral student at Columbia or a professional school student at Columbia</td>
<td>17 focus groups; averaging 10 students in size. Focus group demographics: general co-ed (3); men only (2); women only (3); Barnard students only (1); first year general (freshman) (2); first year (freshman) minority students (1); international students (1); minority students (1); first generation students (1); religiously-engaged students (1); LGBT-identified students (1)</td>
<td>Private Offices on Columbia Campus</td>
<td>The normative contexts for sexuality, sexual relationships, socializing, and student behavior on campus.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Participant Observation</strong></td>
<td>Participant observation conducted by six researchers</td>
<td>Topic codes covered in fieldnotes: Academic, Activism, Athletics, Barnard, Bars, Bodies/Health, Class/Money/Work, Columbia Community, Dating, Dorms, Elite/Networks, Event, Food, Fraternity and Sororities, Gender, Institution, International Students, Mental Health, Orientation, Partying, Race, Religion, Sex, Sexual Assault, Sexual Orientation, SHIFT specific, Social Life, Student Life, Student Groups, Space, Substance Use</td>
<td>Dorms 160.4 hours Special interest houses (residential) 9.5 hours Fraternity/sorority 18.75 hours Dining halls 8.5 hours Religious spaces 19 hours Ethnic and cultural spaces 27 hours Outdoor spaces 54.5 hours Campus spaces (including outdoor campus spaces) 185.5 hours Off-campus spaces 111.25 hours</td>
<td>Spatial dimensions of socializing, unarticulated but widely shared norms, and student interpersonal dynamics.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Columbia faculty members only conducted participation observation at public events (e.g. sports games)</td>
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<td>Doctoral student and unaffiliated researchers conducted all participant observation in student-controlled spaces</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key Informant Interviews</strong></td>
<td>Interviews conducted with student leaders and faculty/staff at Columbia University about their professional responsibilities and expertise.</td>
<td>8 student interviews, 11 non-student interviews</td>
<td>Private Offices on Columbia Campus</td>
<td>Collected information from subjects on professional duties, institutional policies, and professional expertise related to student life, university administration, and/or sexual assault.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Most subjects were interviewed by the person who first made contact with them about participating in the study</td>
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**Table 1: Ethnographic Research Methods**
### Table 2: The range of students’ consent practices, with illustrative quotes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consent Practices</th>
<th>In Students’ Words</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where You Are</strong></td>
<td>Woman: “Um, usually beforehand we'd be texting and I would just say like hey like well, sometimes with one guy I was like sometimes I'm horny. Like he's, ‘Sometimes I'm horny. Like we should hang out.’ That's how it happened with - and that was like okay, I'm coming over to have sex with you.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Texting to meet up</td>
<td>Man: “I don't remember what she was saying, but there were probably a lot of oh yeahs in there, or whatever, so that sounds pretty consensual.”</td>
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<td>Being in a space</td>
<td>Man: “Because I was very cognizant of what was going on. And she, I like looked at her, I was like, her behavior didn't seem like she was insanely intoxicated. She just seemed definitely disinhibited.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What the Other Person Does (or Does Not) Do</strong></td>
<td>Woman: “Um, like he like touched me I guess... And so I just like kind of go with it I guess.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Absence of no</td>
<td>Woman: “I honestly just like think that he thought that because I was staying over in his apartment, it was consent to get involved in something.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessing if the other person is too intoxicated to consent</td>
<td>Man: “Making out in someone's room and taking clothes off, like, at any point during that if there is no, like, negative signs happening, then, like, I don't think that it needs to be explicitly stated.”</td>
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<td>Noticing physical actions or lack thereof</td>
<td>Man: “Like, her, I would take her shirt off, she would take my shirt off, like, it was kind of like a tit for tat type situation.”</td>
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<td>Noticing verbal cues</td>
<td>Man: “I don't remember what she was saying, but there were probably a lot of oh yeahs in there, or whatever, so that sounds pretty consensual.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initiating Sex</td>
<td>Man: “I mean there's a difference in the way you communicate it I think. Because the better you know someone the easier it is to like read their signs and signals. So like for my current girlfriend, if she's like feeling sick or has had a bad day, I know better than to even ask a lot of the time because I understand that like this isn't a place where you want to have sex and that's fine.”</td>
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<td><strong>Indirect Language</strong></td>
<td>Woman: “In most cases, I have not been the one to like initiate sex, so like when someone else initiates it, that's kind of just like me who would have to consent? Like I haven't really been in a situation where like I'm the one who like gets a condom out or like tries to have sex with someone first just because, yeah, I think that's kind of weird. Um, like just for me, like I'm not that like-I'm not that assertive.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Directly Seeking Consent</strong></td>
<td>Man: “Do you want to go back to my room?” Man: “Should I get a condom?”</td>
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<td>Asking to engage in a particular sexual activity (notably in our sample, anal sex or anal stimulation)</td>
<td>Man: “[S]he'll, she asks me a question, like, 'Well, what things do you have in mind?' I’ll tell her what things I have in mind, and she’ll either, like, say, ‘That's all fine,’ or, 'Maybe I don't like this.' And then, you know, you keep asking questions, and stuff like that, until you have, like, a firm control of what can or can't happen during.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Checking in verbally over the course of a sexual interaction</td>
<td>Woman: “And even if you’re not sure, you can always just ask, like, ‘You know, do you wanna do this?’ And if they say, ‘Yeah,’ then, you know, yeah, but if no, then, no.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Absence of no</strong></td>
<td>Man: “Yeah I definitely ask her a bunch of questions. Like does this feel good, why does that feel good, what does that feel like? We've gotten down to the point where I ask her about her orgasm she describes them as a waterfall or a meandering river. She usually doesn't verbalize it very well but like she tries.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessing if the other person is too intoxicated to consent</strong></td>
<td>Man: “We're usually very explicit... Yeah, like, 'Do you, do you wanna have sex now?' and yeah.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Noticing physical actions or lack thereof</strong></td>
<td>Man: “Because, yeah, I think that's kind of weird. Um, like just for me, like I'm not that like-I'm not that assertive.”</td>
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<td><strong>Noticing verbal cues</strong></td>
<td>Man: “I honestly just like think that he thought that because I was staying over in his apartment, it was consent to get involved in something.”</td>
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<td><strong>Initiating Sex</strong></td>
<td>Woman: “In most cases, I have not been the one to like initiate sex, so like when someone else initiates it, that's kind of just like me who would have to consent? Like I haven't really been in a situation where like I'm the one who like gets a condom out or like tries to have sex with someone first just because, yeah, I think that's kind of weird. Um, like just for me, like I'm not that like-I'm not that assertive.”</td>
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### Table 3: Seven social dimensions of consensual sex, with illustrative quotes

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Dynamic</th>
<th>How it Figures in Consent</th>
<th>Students’ Words</th>
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<td><strong>Drunk Sex</strong></td>
<td>Drunk sex is a frequent feature of college student life, and students’ knowledge about incapacitation and consent is reflected in linguistic and interpersonal ‘work-arounds’ to make drunk sex seem okay.</td>
<td>A man, describing how he ascertains someone’s capacity to give consent: “[If somebody can fucking walk in, like, swipe their ID, get into the room fine and without like stumbling all over, like that’s fine”</td>
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<td>• Drinking to have sex is widely perceived to be socially appropriate recreation</td>
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<td>• Intoxication helps students manage sexual shame</td>
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<td><strong>Sexual Citizenship</strong></td>
<td>Consent is predicated on the assumption that an individual understands his or her sexual desires and preferences and feels entitled to enact them; students who feel uncertain about their right to say no or who have been socialized to value others’ desires over their own may consent to sex that neither want nor desire.</td>
<td>A woman, describing her decision to not stop unwanted sex: “[I was ] just kind of like, laying there... Well, I mean, it just was like he was... kissing me and I was, like, not wanting to. And I knew that he..., wanted to... get off. So I was like, okay... I’ll give you a blow job so I can... get out of here. ...I just wanted to, like, not be there anymore and I just wanted to get it over with. So that’s... what happened.”</td>
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<td>• A person’s understanding of his or right to sexual self-determination.</td>
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<td>• In the US, there is a lack of social consensus around adolescents’ sexual citizenship, pre-university (see Fields).</td>
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<td><strong>Gendered Heterosexual Scripts</strong></td>
<td>Within the logic of gendered sexual scripts, a woman’s lack of resistance is read as consent. Despite being educated in affirmative consent as the legal standard, it was rare to hear students talk about a sexual interaction in which consent was sought and obtained from both people. For women, a behavior that is read by a man as consenting (not resisting) might actually be consent but might also be assault. For men, these scripts render their own experiences of unwanted sex culturally illegible.</td>
<td>A woman, explaining why she does not ask her boyfriend for consent: “he thinks it’s dumb that I ask.”</td>
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<td>• Widely-held shared assumptions that men are generally the initiators of sex, and that women’s primary role is to regulate men’s access to their bodies.</td>
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<td>A man, describing how he generally understands his own sexual consent: “no one’s ever asked me, like, let’s kiss now. Like, that’s weird.”</td>
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<td>• Also involves a gendered assumption about sexual desire, which is that men always want sex, so that if women do make sexual advances, men’s consent is assumed rather than sought.</td>
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<td><strong>Intersectionality</strong></td>
<td>Students’ navigation of this social terrain is shaped by multiple forms of social inequality, and consent practices are shaped both by unequal exposure to resources (such as comprehensive sexuality education) and by unequally distributed feelings of social vulnerability.</td>
<td>A man, explaining why his concern about how his gender and race impact his experience of eliciting: “I just always feel that it’s good to make sure that they want to have it, and also just the... entire stigma of being a black male. And I know that a lot of times if situations were to happen, then if one person says something, that I did something, even if I know it’s not true, because I’m black, they’re probably going to believe, like, if it was a white girl or if it was somebody that just wasn’t black.”</td>
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<td>• Race and class provide examples of how students’ background socially pattern their consent practices, via students’ previous access sexual education and experiences of others’ valuing and respecting their agency.</td>
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<td><strong>Men’s Fears of the consequences of doing consent wrong</strong></td>
<td>Gendered consent scripts make men the obtainers (not givers) of consent, which is often demonstrated in ways that do not match legal standards for consent. As such, men worry that consent they obtain might be revoked afterwards and that they be ‘falsely’ accused for sex that was consensual.</td>
<td>A man, describing his anger when a woman he had had sex with contacted him to say that she had been to afraid during the encounter to stop him: “Yeah, because she was like saying she didn’t like – she thought I was being too rough and stuff, but she didn’t say anything during. I’m just like, I don’t know what you want me to do with this and she didn’t say anything.”</td>
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<td>• Knowing the ‘rules’ of consent, men realize that their own (and others’) consent practices often fall short of this standard and many are acutely afraid of being accused of assault.</td>
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<td><strong>Spatial and temporal factors that affect assumptions about consent</strong></td>
<td>In some cases, students perceive consent as having been given either by virtue their participation in an event or by being in a particular place at a particular time.</td>
<td>A woman explaining how she had implicitly consented to a recent sexual encounter: “I think if it’s 1:00 a.m. at night and you invite someone to your room, there is like this like, nonverbal agreement that there is something that you want sexually.”</td>
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<td>• Students’ shared symbolic cues about space and time create implicit understanding that sex is likely or of shared intention</td>
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<td>A man explaining implicit consent in his relationship: “I think consent was – I mean, maybe I guess uh, what’s the word, precedence. ... And if you were, like, going to go for something new, you’d be like, ‘Hey, you wanna go for this new thing?’ And then that would be like a yes or a no.”</td>
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**Table 4: multi-sectoral approaches to promoting consensual sex on college campuses**

**Sex Education (reflects findings on drunk sex, sexual citizenship, gendered sexual scripts, intersectionality)**

1. States and municipalities: expand funding for K-12 evidence-based, age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education to promote pre-college sexual literacy & preparedness for college socializing
2. Institutions of higher education: address deficits in students pre-college sex education, sexual literacy
   - In that work, include sex-positive programming to mitigate sexual shame and help students have the kinds of sexual experiences they desire;
   - More research is needed on whether sex-positive programming can reduce engagement in drunk sex

**Consent education: from institutional compliance to sexual transformation (reflects findings on all seven social dimensions of consent)**

3. Shift from a ‘banking’ model of education to a participatory, Freirian approach;
   - Go beyond conveying information about a legal standard to actually transform behavior by engaging students in critical reflection and providing a space for them to discuss their own practices, rather than teaching them the right answer
   - Using trained moderators, address men’s fears about navigating consent; surfacing and discussing those fears may help students draw connections between ideal “yes means yes” practices and their own in ways that can help them do better
   - Include role-playing in extricating oneself from a sexual situation, particularly one that has already progressed to a space where a student could feel that consent was implied
   - Use of gender-neutral pronouns, intended to be inclusive, can inadvertently limit conversation about gender, sexuality and power; training should use a variety of pronouns so that it is inclusive of gender-queer students and also facilitates critical reflection about gendered sexual scripts and broader issues of gender inequality
   - Consent education should address other dimensions of power that shape consent interactions (age, race, control over space)
4. For all organized student groups, make discussion (led by professional staff or trained peer-moderators) about consent and shared standards of behavior a condition of receiving university funding

**Policies related to alcohol (reflects findings on drunk sex, sexual citizenship)**

5. University-level harm reduction approaches to binge drinking and drunk sex
   - ensure actual provision of food and water in spaces where students drink
   - facilitate explicit peer-led harm reduction conversations about drunk sex, helping students who engage in it learn to be safer and keep others safer
   - Institutional efforts to address distal drivers of binge-drinking, including stress (financial, academic, other)
6. Community-level, evidence-based policies to reduce under-age drinking, such as alcohol taxes and enforcement of existing laws

**Disciplinary Policies (reflects findings on men’s fear of false accusation)**

7. Explore restorative justice approaches to improve consent practices among students whose sexual interactions suggest lack of understanding about what consensual sex is and how to practice it.

**Space-planning (findings on drunk sex, peer groups’ role in organizing sexual situations, spatial and temporal dimensions of consent)**

8. Provide spaces that create opportunities for students to socialize without alcohol
9. Provide lounges and other social spaces open late at night to provide an option for drunk students who want to continue an interaction with a prospective partner but prefer to do so in a less sexually-charged location