NEGOTIATING SEXUAL CONSENT AMONG HETEROSEXUAL STUDENTS ON A UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

by

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Abstract

Sexual assault among university students is a well-documented and studied area of research. Sexual assault hinges on the lack of sexual consent, however, few studies have focused on investigating the normative negotiation of sexual consent particularly from the perspective of students themselves. This study explored in depth the meaning and the negotiation of sexual consent from the perspective of heterosexual university students. To acknowledge the exploratory and nascent area of study, a qualitative research design was employed incorporating the ethnographic interview. Two data sources were used in this study including; 10 individual interviews and a single all women’s focus group. Participants were heterosexually identified students between the ages of 18-24. How participants understood sexual consent was found to be shaped by a number of variables including participants’ (1) social world consisting of how they defined sexual consent, their sources of knowledge, their spatial location, their exposure to: media portrayals, gender roles and expectations and sexual messaging, (2) relationship type with role expectations varying if the partnership was new, long-term or casual, and (3) personal identity including their levels of self-confidence as well as their cultural identity. The negotiation of sexual consent was described as (1) a process occurring over time, (2) entailing the implementation of behavioural strategies to manage risks and fears, (3) involving both complex communication methods, and (4) after the fact justifications and explanations to make sense of transpired events. This study contributes a deeper and more nuanced understanding of sexual consent processes. Implications for future research are discussed.
Preface

This thesis was produced and conceived by author, Merike Bruen, who completed all work on the project, including design, participant recruitment, data collection, transcription analysis, as well as manuscript write-up.

This research received ethics approval from the University of British Columbia’s Behavioral Research Ethics Board. The project was entitled Consent on Campus. The certificate number of the ethics certification obtained for this study was, H14-00538.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research Problem

Sexual assault, a term used to describe all incidences of unwanted or non-consensual sexual activity, is a common problem in Canada (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). According to Statistics Canada’s General Social Survey (GSS), in 2004 half a million Canadians, with the vast majority being women, reported incidents of sexual assault (Brennan & Taylor Butts, 2008). Canadian women were five times more likely to be victims of sexual assault while men were most likely to be perpetrators. The majority of Canadian women who reported sexual assault to the police were between the ages of 15 and 24 (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008).

Due to the high concentration of young women on university campuses, female students are especially at risk of experiencing sexual assault (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). College women are most at risk of being assaulted by someone they know as 90% of perpetrators are previously known to victims (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Thus, perpetrators may consist of a myriad of individuals in a victim’s life including a dating partner, a classmate, a friend, a romantic partner or an acquaintance.

Sexual assault may have detrimental effects on women’s mental health contributing to depression, fear and anxiety, substance abuse, suicidal ideation among many others (Campbell, Dworkin & Cabral, 2009; Frank & Anderson, 1987). As counselling psychologists we are deeply vested in the health and well-being of our clients and this entails advocating for social justice (Lee & Walz, 1998). It is in our interest to contribute to the prevention of sexual assault as it negatively contributes to the mental health of our clients. To prevent sexual assault, however, requires a deeper understanding of why and how it may occur.
At the very heart of sexual assault is the notion of sexual consent as sexual assault hinges on the lack of consent. Yet, while there has been a plethora of research conducted on sexual assault there is a dearth of research focused specifically on sexual consent and non-consent, how it is perceived, expressed, negotiated and understood (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Understanding sexual consent processes may deepen our understanding of what sometimes may lead to sexual assault as well as broaden our understanding of human experiences rarely discussed beyond closed doors.

**Rationale**

Most studies that have been conducted on sexual consent have focused on how college students communicate consent to one another. A common finding is that college students communicate consent primarily through nonverbal cues (Hall, 1998; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999). Beres (2010) found that partners tend to use a variety of signals to indicate they are willing or unwilling to participate in casual sex such as nonverbal refusals, “active participation” (p.1), and contextual signals. Verbalization of consent depends on the type of sexual activity engaged in (Hall), and definitions of consent in research are rarely made explicit or agreed upon across studies (Beres, 2007). Beyond communication processes, some authors have delved into the meaning of consent, finding that for women, distinctions may exist between providing consent and *wanting* sexual activity (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007) and that consent may be both an internal (mental) and external (verbal and expressive) process (Muehlenhard, 1996).

While the literature is becoming more dense on the topic of sexual consent, important gaps still exist; the vast majority of studies have been based on researcher imposed definitions of consent (Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010), have reduced the notion of consent to the expression of a verbal statement or lack thereof (Hall, 1998), or have solely focused on the experiences of
women with regard to consent (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007). Perspectives from college students themselves may offer important insights regarding our understanding of sexual consent and non-consent that have thus far been largely ignored (Jozkowski, 2011).

Fortunately, recent research examined how college students conceptualize and communicate consent and non-consent from their perspective has been conducted, including a more focused exploration of gender differences in sexual consent (Jozkowski, 2011). This initial research suggests that differing expressions and interpretations of sexual consent may contribute to incidences of sexual assault. As noted by Jozkowski (2011) a possible contributing factor to the occurrence of sexual assault is a discrepancy in interpretations of sexual consent as perpetrators (mostly male) and victims (mostly female) may work off of different understandings of consent. Furthermore, perpetrators may assume consent is present when it is absent.

Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) found the prevalence of gendered themes throughout their investigation on consent when they surveyed past event sexual experiences of both heterosexual college men and women. Themes included a strong prevalence of “traditional sexual scripts” (p. 519) where men were perceived as sexual initiators and women were perceived as sexual gatekeepers, determining whether sexual activity took place. The study also found that men and women may interpret and indicate consent differently and that relationship status of partners may influence consent processes. This led the author to suggest that the role of context in sexual consent processes should be explored in greater depth.

As illustrated by Jozkowski and Peterson’s (2013) findings and Jozkowski’s (2011) research, gender expectations and cultural norms play a major role in the sexual expression of consent. In fact, as argued in Bogle’s (2008) ethnographic entitled Hooking Up, which explored the changing nature of sex, dating and relationships on university campuses, to fully understand
the sexual behavior of college students requires an understanding of the behavioral influences in the college environment (the role of peers, the campus environment and the chronological context). Students’ sexual behaviors are deeply intertwined in their surrounding environment, to isolate their behavior from the context in which it occurs may be limited and misleading (Bogle, 2008).

Recognizing the essential role social context plays in the sexual behavior of college students and considering that sexual consent is one important aspect of sexual behavior, I believe that exploring contextual factors will lead to a richer understanding of sexual consent processes. The purpose of my research is thus to address the gap in the literature that has largely excluded the voices of students by understanding how consent is negotiated from the perspective of students’ themselves and to consider contextual factors in this exploration.

**Research Question**

My overarching research question is: *How do heterosexual university students negotiate sexual consent in encounters that may involve sexual activity?* To properly address my larger research question(s), I have included a number of sub questions: What does sexual consent mean to university students? How do university students communicate sexual consent (and non-consent) to their sexual partners? How do students interpret the expression of sexual consent (and non-consent) in their sexual partners? Are there gender differences in communication and interpretation of consent? Does the expression and interpretation of consent vary as a matter of partners’ relationship status? For example, does a student in a long-term relationship express consent differently from a student who is in a causal sexual encounter? Does the expectation of sexual consent vary as a matter of situation? For example, is sexual consent expected to be negotiated in the same way at a party hook-up as it is on a fifth date? How do heterosexual
university students first learn about sexual consent (and non-consent)? How does alcohol consumption change the negotiation of consent if at all? What do students think about university sexual assault messaging regarding sexual consent and non-consent (is it relevant to their own experiences?)
Chapter 2: Literature Review

While there is a large amount of literature on sexual assault on university campuses, there is a dearth explicitly exploring sexual consent processes. Firstly, I briefly discuss sexual assault and why sexual consent may be an important area of study. Then I discuss sexual behavior more broadly including the role of social and cultural forces that shape the expression of sexual behavior and the different interpretations of gender. I then focus more directly on what has already been looked at in the sexual consent literature and the gaps that still exist. The inclusion criteria for articles are those published within the last 40 years, and those that focus on the experiences of heterosexual college or university students. I do not look at articles that focus on sexual encounters in the LGBTQ community because sample selected were heterosexual. While there is a plethora of articles looking at socialization processes, sexual assault and to a lesser extent, sexual consent, I chose to include what I perceive to be the most seminal articles available on the topics.

Defining Sexual Consent

Previous literature on sexual consent has been criticized for not explicitly defining what is meant by consent or by the practice of researchers to “spontaneously” generate common-sense definitions of the construct without any clear explanation or evidence of critical reflection (Beres, 2007, p.95). In the review of the articles that follow, I do my best to articulate how consent was defined by the researcher. Hall (1998) conceptualized sexual consent as giving permission and meaning it. He looked at college students’ previous sexual experiences and asked them to reflect on times when they both meant to say “yes” to engage in a sexual activity (an internal, cognitive process) and when they said “yes” to their partner (an external, or behavioral process) and how they behaved. Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) conceptualized
consent as a willingness to do something (that may be externally manifested but it may not be) and distinguished this from wanting (an internal process) which included desire. They found that members of their study conceptualized consent as existing on a continuum with some women equating a lack of resistance to offering their consent.

Recognizing that the intention of my study is to learn from students themselves about their understanding of consent, I am hesitant about providing my own definition of sexual consent. In the course of my study, my hope is to hear their voices and make sense of their own conceptualizations of the term.

**Sexual Assault: Some Facts**

Statistics Canada has defined sexual assault as “a term used to refer to all incidents of unwanted sexual activity, including sexual attacks and sexual touching” (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008, p.20). The definition is broad and includes a range of forced, or non-consensual sexual acts. The term rape is typically reserved to describe forced or unwanted sexual behavior that includes penetration. In the US, rape is defined by most jurisdictions as “non-consensual completed or attempted intercourse involving vaginal or anal penetration by a penis, hands, fingers, or foreign object or oral penetration by a penis with the use of force or threat of force or when the victim is unable to provide consent due to age, intoxication, or other factors” (Yuan & Koss, 2008, p. 584). This definition has evolved over a number of years yet remains somewhat problematic for victims involved in legal cases due to the onus placed on the victim to prove that intercourse was forced (Jozkowski, 2011; Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2004).

In 1983, Canada implemented Bill-C127 which “abolished the offences of rape, attempted rape and indecent assault and introduced a three-tiered structure for sexual assault
The criminal code defines these levels of sexual assault as the following:

“Sexual assault level 1 (s.271): An assault committed in circumstances of a sexual nature such that the sexual integrity of the victim is violated. Level 1 involves minor physical injuries or no injuries to the victim. Sexual assault level 2 (s.272): Sexual assault with a weapon, threats, or causing bodily harm. Aggravated sexual assault (level 3): Sexual assault that results in wounding, maiming, disfiguring or endangering the life of the victim” (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008).

As previously touched on in Chapter 1, sexual assault is a prevalent issue for Canadian women, especially for young women between the ages of 15 and 24 (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008). Women at university are most likely to be assaulted by someone they know and are unlikely to report their assault to the police (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Koss & Oros, 1982). Most women who are assaulted will confide in their friends, family or coworkers (Brennan & Taylor-Butts, 2008).

The potential health and mental health effects of sexual assault are vast including the development of anxiety, depression, PTSD among others (Campbell, Dworkin, & Cabral, 2009). General health outcomes as well as sexual health outcomes are also negatively impacted by instances of sexual assault (Jozkowski, 2012).

How a woman labels an experience of sexual assault is also of relevance as it may affect how she feels about the experience and comes to understand it (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2011). Women may be reluctant to use the word “rape” for a variety of reasons including because a) they may feel responsible for being the cause of the assault, b) they perceive “rape” as being violent or forceful (and their personal experience may not match this description), or c) the man
who assaulted them does not fit their typical idea of a rapist (as aforementioned, often, perpetrators are previously known to victims). Furthermore, for some women “labeling their experience as rape may be adaptive; for others, it may be unhelpful or even harmful” (p. 558). Thus, the authors cautioned clinicians and researchers to be wary of imposing their own labels on the experiences of these women.

**Sexual Behavior Intertwined in Social Context**

Bogle (2008) examined sex and dating practices of college students, arguing that it is impossible to separate college students’ behavior from the social context that surrounds them. To understand students’ sexual behavior requires an understanding of student culture; in Bogle’s case, the hookup culture. To demonstrate the inherent connectivity between context and culture Bogle discussed the way courtship and dating has changed over the last 100 years due to outside social forces. In the calling era, men courted women by visiting them and their mothers at their shared home. The dating era followed the calling era and was marked by men and women going on dates outside of the home no longer under the watchful eyes of parents. This era was heavily influenced by men’s increased access to cars as well as by women’s larger role in the public sphere. While sexual intimacy before marriage became increasingly common in the dating era, the sexual revolution in the 1960s marked by the second wave of feminism and women’s access to birth control further normalized sexual relations before marriage for both genders and expanded the available manifestations of sexual expression (d’Emilio and Freedman, 1988 as cited in Bogle, 2008). For example, oral sex became increasingly common among heterosexual couples during the 1960s (Rubin, 1990 as cited in Bogle, 2008). Another strong cultural influence at this time was the women’s movement that expanded the formerly limited roles available to both genders and challenged the social more that women should not enjoy sex and
that men should be the pursuers of women. Thus, as explained by Bogle (2008), sexual politics are influenced by gender politics and therefore deeply enmeshed in the time, place and perspective of the surrounding culture.

Sexual behavior is highly influenced by prevailing social norms and technological advancements. As sexual consent is one aspect of sexual behavior, it is necessary to understand the role of prevailing social norms on consent processes, including prescribed gender roles (Bem, 1993), traditional sexual scripts (Check & Malamuth, 1983; Gagnon & Simon, 1986) and sexual double standards (Crawford & Popp, 2003).

**Prescribed Gender Roles**

Prescribed gender roles speak to the societal assumptions and behavioral prescriptions placed on individuals based on natal sex (Bem, 1993). Bem argued that while there are biological differences between the sexes, the gender roles that emerge from these differences are socially constructed. Furthermore, the real biological differences between the sexes have been used to justify and normalize gender inequity for centuries. She refers to gender as a type of “lens” as it is largely invisible yet profoundly influences our perception of the world. Beyond merely influencing the behaviors and perceptions of individuals, these roles are deeply embedded in the social fabric of society, in cultural discourses and social institutions. Since gender assumptions are so prevalent and deeply hidden they are easily reproduced without conscious awareness. In terms of the gender roles applied to the behavior of men and women at the individual level, they are dichotomous and rigid and therefore limiting to both genders. In Western society, women’s role is characterized by nurturance and passivity. Men’s role, meanwhile, is characterized by directedness and aggression. The roles can be thought of as
existing on a continuum, with some individuals reflecting more extreme traditional role
socialization than others.

Since gender role socialization deeply influences the perceptions and behaviors of people
at multiple levels, including sexual behaviors, it seems essential to look at gender differences in
my study and to consider further the socially prescribed gender roles that may be at the root of
them. How the concept of gender has been understood over time has varied. Therefore, I briefly
address the notion of gender in a broader context and introduce its conceptualizations over the
years.

**A Brief History on Gender**

Conceptualizations of gender have varied across time. A brief history of the feminist
understandings of gender follows.

Gender was conceptualized to be culturally constructed by two early feminist thinkers,
Ann Oakley and Gayle Rubin (Oakley, 1992; Rubin, 1975 as cited in Jackson, 1998). However,
they both based the social construction of gender on biological foundations (Jackson, 1998).
Their arguments were critiqued for assuming that there is a certain essence found in sexual
anatomy that produces masculine or feminine behaviors (Jackson, 1998).

**Materialist feminists.** Materialist feminists conceived anatomical sex as being a
consequence of gender rather than the reverse. Because of the already existent hierarchy in
place, differences in anatomy (that do not inherently possess social relevancy) become an
appropriate basis for societal practices. Anatomical sex thus becomes meaningful through gender
relations. Therefore, as conceptualized by Christine Delphy, sex is conceived to be socially
constructed and its recognition to be a “social act.” (Jackson, 1998 p.136; Delphy, 1993). 
**Post-modernism.** Post-modern thinkers also contributed to the discussion on gender (Jackson, 1998). Rejecting essentialism, Judith Butler, pointed out in *Gender Trouble* that if the connection between the gender binary and anatomical sex was dismantled, there is no reason to assume only two genders (Butler, 2006). She conceived biological sex as well as gender to be socially constructed through scientific discourse (Jackson, 1998). She also conceptualized gender to be performative, something that is done when it is acted out rather than something that people inherently are. Gender is thus constructed and only becomes realized when it is performed. Gender performance is “citational” (Jackson, 1998 p.137; Butler, 2006; Derrida, 1988). That is to say, to enact gender, people draw upon past conventions and incorporate previous practices that have already been deemed gender appropriate or normative by relevant authorities. Identity and performance are therefore seen as distinct, gender is something that is *performed* rather than *what someone is*. Butler argues that (2006) “(t)here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (p. 34). Therefore, members of the category of men or women are united on shared performance rather than on their essence or identity (Jackson, 1998).

Butler also discussed gender in terms of its linkages to sexual desire (Butler, 2006; Jackson, 1998). She referenced Monique Wittig’s idea of an invisible heterosexual matrix in place that perpetuates social expectations and practices (Butler, 2006; Jackson, 1998). The heterosexual matrix consists of an expectation that a person’s gender will align with their natal sex and compel them to be sexually attracted to someone of the opposite gender (Jackson 1998). In our current culture, heterosexuality is assumed to be normative and deems those that fall outside of the matrix, such as those whose gender does not align with their natal sex or those
who are not attracted to the opposite gender (gays and lesbians) as abnormal. This in turn contributes to their societal oppression. Within the heterosexual matrix, sexual desire confirms gender, with masculinity requiring the sexual pursuit of women and femininity necessitating that one is found sexually attractive to men. Heterosexuality thus validates gender identity and vice versa. In fact, the links between heterosexuality and gender are so strong and their reliance on one another so great that people’s gender may very well be questioned if they are attracted to the same sex; not being seen as a “real man” if they identify as gay (Wilton 1996 as cited in Jackson 1998). This contributes to the policing of gender, to maintain one’s status as a true woman or true man one must conform to heterosexuality (Jackson, 1998).

**Queer theory:** Emerging from Butler’s post-modern thinking and the Gay Rights movement, Queer Theory highlights and focusses on the hegemonic status of heterosexuality in society (Jackson, 1998). Theorists seek to question and remove heterosexuality from its normative position and to question how gender contributes to and reinforces its dominant status.

**The body:** Queer theorists and postmodern theorists have been questioned for largely deemphasizing the importance of the physical body and a person’s embodied experience from their discussions on gender (Jackson, 1998). In fact, acknowledging the existence of the body and its unique interactions within the social environment may lead to more pragmatic and useful discussions on sex and gender. Allowing us to“. . . produce analyses which speak to the lived and varied actualities of gendered and sexual embodiment” (Jackson, 1998, p. 142).

**Transgender people and the body:** Literature on transgender people has also sparked much debate and discussion in regards to gender and sex (Jackson, 1998). It has highlighted that people identity their gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation in a multitude of ways. Crucially, it has also shown the importance of studying the individual embodied
experience because bodies, especially for transgender people, have significance and their experiences in their bodies are diverse (Prosser 1998 as cited in Shelley, 2008). This is especially emphasized when one considers the experiences of trans people in the arena of passing as both their inner world (how they feel inside) and outer world (how they are seen by others) become extremely relevant (Shelley, 2008). Both dimensions unavoidably need to be contended with.

**Studying gender expression in education research:** Post-structuralism accounts of gender have been applied to the study of gender in education research. To maintain the separation of gender expression from the physical anatomy of the body, Francis (2010) has proposed using different theoretical concepts to study gender. In particular, she has found using the terms ‘monoglossic’ and ‘heteroglossic’ to describe gender expression borrowing from Bakhtin’s (1981) work on language and it’s construction power relations (Francis, 2008 as cited in Francis, 2010) to be useful. A monoglossic understanding of gender would consist of “the dominant binary understandings of masculinity as rational, strong, active, and femininity emotional, weak, passive” (Francis, 2010 p. 479 para 7). However, within all monoglossic presentations, at the subjective individual level, heteroglossia is always present which is the contradiction or the exception to the dominant expression, the gender transgressions. While gender, like language, may appear to form a cohesive and united picture, in the details of the presentation one unearths contradictions and inconsistencies. To discover the heteroglossia, therefore, it is vital to study the context, the micro-expressions who is speaking and when and to consider the interpreter’s standpoint as well. Francis applied her conceptualization of the terms directly to educational research to the study of high achieving pupils (Francis, 2010). She spoke to the usefulness of using terms like heteroglossia to describe the transgressive gender
presentation of one of her subjects, Verda, a pupil who “adopted ‘tomboy’ or non-feminine aesthetics but did not necessarily behave in overtly ‘masculine’ ways” (p. 485). Interestingly, she also highlighted how some of these students were still able to transmit broader gender monoglossic accounts to their classmates despite the heteroglossic contradictions that were uncovered through focused individual study of their behavior. To do this, students incorporated “particular, resonant, signifies of gender (to) help mask or distract from other aspects of production which might otherwise disrupt the monoglossic façade.” (Francis, 2010 p. 486) For example, high achieving female students to neutralize the unfeminine aspects of their intelligence or scholastic success may present themselves as ditzy (Francis, 2010).

Being open to different interpretations of gender and critical of simplistic interpretations seems especially crucial moving forward with this research project. It seems especially crucial to consider the performativity of gender, the pervasive influence of the dominant gender binary and the heterosexual matrix while also acknowledging the lived, embodied experiences of my participants.

**Sexual Script Theory**

Traditional sexual scripts, conceptualized as cognitive frameworks, emerge out of traditional gender role expectations and refer to the learned sequence of sexual behavioral patterns that are assigned to men and women (Byers, 1996; Check & Malmuth, 1983). Scripting occurs on multiple levels including interpersonal, intra-psychic and cultural (Simon & Gagnon, 1973). Since these scripts are gendered, they result in placing different behavioral demands on the sexes that may be conflicting and contribute to instances of coercive sex. For example, women are socialized to be passive in sexual interactions as well as to reserve sexual activity for relationships involving love, commitment and romance (Warshaw & Parrot, 1991). An
extension of this role is that of sexual gatekeeper, as they are responsible for setting sexual behavioral limits (Check & Malamuth, 1983). Men, meanwhile are socialized to be sexually aggressive, and that their manhood depends on having a large number of sexual partners. Their role is that of the sexual expert, initiating sexual activity and pursuing sexual intimacy even if a woman offers initial refusals, as these refusals may be merely considered “token” (Check & Malamuth, 1983, p. 13).

The results of these socialization processes may result in a “rape-supportive” culture that accepts and normalizes sexual coercion, a “logical extension” of prescribed gender roles (Check & Malamuth, 1983, p. 344). Furthermore, since cultural expectations about dating behavior are a product of sexual socialization, according to this theory, these processes may exert their influence on situations whereby men and women already know each other, such as in date rape or acquaintance rape situations. In my study on consent processes, it seems pertinent to consider what role, if any, traditional sexual scripts may play in consent negotiation.

What is especially pertinent to sexual consent in regards to traditional sexual scripts and socialization processes is the misalignment that exists for women with the expression of verbal consent and the expected role of submissiveness and passivity in the script (Gagnon, 1990; Humphreys, 2004; Jozkowski, 2011). Furthermore, expressions of sexual interest in general do not align with the sexual script due to women’s expected roles as passive, sexual gatekeepers on account of their socialization processes (Humphreys & Herold, 2003). This may translate into women being unlikely to initiate sexual consent processes.

Encompassed within traditional sexual scripts are sexual double standards, as men and women are expected to adhere to different social rules regarding their sexual conduct and behavior based on their gender. Women are stigmatized for being promiscuous whereas in men,
promiscuity is deemed normal and expected (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Furthermore, women are faced with the “Madonna-whore dichotomy” whereby they are either placed in one of two discrete categories based on their sexual behavior, promiscuous and “easy” or virginal and “pure” (Crawford & Popp, 2003, p. 13).

Violating one’s prescribed role may result in social rejection (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Muehlenhard, 1988). Furthermore, these standards may be internalized by women and used as a mechanism for self-evaluation. Inherently, these messages are conflicting, encouraging women on the one hand to be objects of sexual desire for male pleasure and yet, on the other hand, disconnected from their own sexual desires for fear of social retribution. Violating the traditional sexual script may be a risk factor for sexual assault (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). For example, women who initiate a date or who initiate sexual contact on a date, traditionally the role of men, may be perceived as more culpable if they are raped (Muehlenhard, 1988; Muehlenhard & MacNoughton, 1988).

There are real gender differences in the sexual behavior of heterosexual students that may reflect gender role socialization processes (Jozkowski & Satinsky, 2013). For example, in a large survey (N=1024) conducted at two American universities on heterosexual university students, men reported that they were most often the initiators of sexual activity (51.6%). Women meanwhile, reported that sexual activity was most often initiated mutually (41.2%), or by their partner (28.5%). Jozkowski and Satinsky (2013) suggested that these discrepancies may be the result of the genders abiding to their respective roles as sexual initiator (for men) and sexual gatekeeper (for women) respectively.

A result of the conflicting desires, to abide by social norms and to acknowledge their own desires, may result in women engaging in “token resistance”, saying no to sexual activity yet
intending for such sexual activity to take place (Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1998). Women who engage in token resistance have been found to expect their partners to believe and accept sexual double standards (Muehlenhard & McCoy, 1991). Reasons women may engage in token resistance may be practical, inhibition-related, and/or manipulative (Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988). However, token resistance is not an activity reserved solely for women; both men and women may engage in token resistance for a variety of reasons such as a desire for power, moral reasons, a desire to add interest to an ongoing relationship, among others (Muehlenhard & Rodgers, 1998).

In my examination of consent processes, I did not explicitly ask about the role these socialization processes played in sexual consent negotiation. However, I recorded any relevant emerging themes during the stage of data analysis.

**Sex Differences in Perception and Context**

In addition to differing attitudinal and behavioral patterns due to socialization processes, men and women may perceive situations differently. In her examination of perceptions of sexual interest, Abbey (1982) found that men often misperceive women’s expression of friendliness as that of sexual interest. The study employed a laboratory experiment whereby two participants, a male and female dyad, “the observers” covertly observed a 5-minute conversation between another male and female dyad, “the actors.” After witnessing the conversation, the observers completed an open-ended questionnaire about the actors’ personality characteristics and about their behavior. There were strong differences between male and female observers. In comparison to ratings by the female observers, male observers consistently rated the female actor as being more seductive and promiscuous and were also more likely to be attracted to her (than were female observers to male actors). In addition, male actors were consistently more sexually
attracted to their actor partner than the female partner was to them. Interestingly, male observers were also more likely to rate the female actor as being attracted to and interested in dating her partner. Furthermore, male observers were also more likely to describe the male actors in sexual terms, rating them as more attractive and sexually active than female observers. On reflecting on their own behavior, female actors said their intention when interacting with their partner was to be friendly, and not sexually provocative. This led Abbey (1982) to conclude that compared to women, men may be more likely to employ sexual judgments to ambiguous situations as well as to perceive the world in more sexual terms. Importantly, men may misperceive women’s benign displays of friendliness as indications of sexual interest.

It seems reasonable therefore speculate that these gender differences in perception may also translate to instances of sexual consent negotiation. Other researchers have also noted the tendency for men to overestimate women’s interest in sex (Fisher & Walters, 2003). Gender differences in sexual consent understanding has previously been hypothesized to contribute to the occurrence of sexual assault due to misunderstanding between partners (Crawford, 1995; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999).

Abbey (1987) conducted a large follow up survey on undergraduate students asking them about retrospective incidents where they felt that their own expression of friendliness had been misperceived as a sexual invitation to someone else. She found that both men and women had experienced such instances of misperception, but that these instances were especially common for women. Women were more likely to learn about a misperception through physical contact, such as through an unwanted touch or a kiss. Men, meanwhile, most often learned this information verbally and/or indirectly, for example, by being told by the woman’s friend.
In terms of reasons for the misperception, men were more likely to cite internal reasons such as their reputation or prior sexual experience as being the cause while women were more likely to cite external factors to explain the situation such as alcohol use or the misperceiver’s personality. For both genders, the situational context seemed to make a difference in terms of misperceptions. Both men and women were most likely to be misperceived in a party setting; this was especially common for women. In their qualitative review on sexual intent studies, Lindgren, Parkhill, George, and Hendershot (2008) conclude that there needs to be more research done and a deeper examination of situational factors such as alcohol consumption that play a role in sexual intent perception.

Considering the role context plays is sexual interest perception, it seems reasonable to investigate its influence in sexual consent negotiation as well. Do people negotiate sexual consent at a party the same way that they do at a quiet residence? The role of situational context is further investigated in this study.

**Situational Context and the Campus Party Scene**

Drinking on Canadian university campuses is common with the vast majority of students engaging in some type of alcohol use in the previous year (Kuo et al., 2002; Spence & Gauvin 1996). However, like sexual behavior, another double standard exists for alcohol use among men and women. Women who drink may be perceived more negatively compared to men who engage in the same behavior (Crowe & George, 1989).

A study conducted by George, Gournic, and McAfee (1989) had participants read a story of a heterosexual couple on a date whereby the woman on the date either drank soft drinks or consumed alcoholic beverages. Both men and women who read the story ranked the woman as more sexually promiscuous, more interested in being seduced and more willing to engage in
sexual intercourse if she consumed alcohol. A similar study varying alcohol consumption in heterosexual couple vignettes found that if the couple consumed alcohol together, they were perceived as more likely to initiate sexual activity (Corcoran & Thomas, 1991). Such studies indicate that drinking alcohol with a partner has the potential to be misperceived as sexual intent (Abbey & Harnish, 1995).

Unsurprisingly, alcohol is a present force in sexual assault on college campuses, on average; at least 50% of sexual assaults are associated with alcohol use (Abbey, McAuslan & Ross, 1998). In their review on college acquaintance sexual assault and alcohol use, Abbey et al (1998) noted that acquaintance assault is increased during social interactions via a variety of interrelated pathways including; beliefs, cognitive processing, group norms, and motor impairments.

Considering alcohol’s pervasive use by students, its role in perceptions of sexual intent, and its presence in acquaintance sexual assault among college students, it seems reasonable and important to explicitly enquire about its role in sexual consent processes.

**Party Culture**

In sexual assault research, there has been a greater shift to identify and examine sexually dangerous situational contexts rather than focus solely on individual characteristics of victims, or rape culture (Armstrong, Hamilton, & Sweeney; 2006; Boswell & Spade, 1996; Humphrey & Kahn, 2000). Noting the high prevalence of sexual assault at parties, Armstrong et al. conducted an ethnography on sexual assault on campus. They explicitly looked at factors in the campus party scene that contributed to sexual assault and found that sexual assault on campus was a logical extension of the intersection of processes operating at organizational, individual and interactional levels. Some of these processes were expectations that party attenders drink heavily
and that they place their trust in their party mates, the control of alcohol distribution by fraternity brothers, residential arrangements, and the “expectation that women be nice and defer to men” (Armstrong, et al., p. 65). In her examination of sexual behavior on college campuses, Bogle (2008) argued that the reemerging theme she uncovered of male control in sexual encounters is the result of disproportionate power dynamics between the genders. This again connects students’ sexual behaviors to gender role socialization processes while acknowledging the intersection of outside cultural forces.

Again, taking note of both situational context as well as the consumption of alcohol consumption were important factors to explore in my study on sexual consent.

**A Word on Rape Culture**

Feminist scholars have spoken about sexual assault being largely a product of a systematic cultural belief system that normalizes sexual violence and even celebrates it (Guckenheimer, 2008). Furthermore, “rape culture perpetuates norms of sexual aggression while lacking an understanding of consent; violence becomes sexy” (Guckenheimer, 2008, p.581). According to this theory, sexual violence is a result of gender socialization processes that instill aggression and violence through the continued enactment of gender roles. Underlying rape culture are the widespread acceptance and belief of rape myths (Burt, 1980). Rape myths include; “women ask for it”; “only bad girls get raped”; “rapists are sex, starved, insane, or both” (p. 217).

The widespread acceptance of rape myths help explain why women may be reluctant to come forward about their sexual assault due to discrepancies between their own experiences and the widely help rape myths. Furthermore, rape myths may help contribute to victim blaming, whereby a sexual assault victim may be held responsible for violence committed against her
(Burt, 1980). When a woman does not acknowledge her rape, she may internalize the experience and incorporate it as a typical script of sexual behavior (Kahn, Mathie, & Torgler, 1994 as cited in Jozkowski, 2011). In future instances, it may be difficult for her to distinguish between a consensual sexual experience and an instance of non-consent due to the incorporation of the assault experience as a typical script. The existence of victim blaming is demonstrated in North America through a number of different channels such as; the portrayal of rape in the media that scrutinizes the behavior of victims and the low number of sexual assault perpetrators who are charged with offenses (Jozkowski, 2011). It is further evidenced by the need of women to prove sexual assault has occurred with hard evidence.

**Social Norms**

Social norms theory speaks to the fact that individuals will behave in accordance with the perceived behavior of their peers (National Norms Institute, 2013). Social norms theory has been applied to college students’ sexual behavior revealing that their own risky sexual behavior is positively associated with the perception of their peers’ risky sexual behavior. It seems reasonable therefore to consider students’ own perceptions of sexual consent and to explore how they believe their peers might be negotiating consent. This type of social discussion emerged in the focus group.

I have briefly touched on some of the social and contextual factors that influence sexual behavior among young people. The following sections focus on sexual consent literature specifically; what has already been discovered, and what still calls for exploration.

**Communication Processes**

The first studies of sexual consent looked specifically at consent communication. Hall’s (1998) measure of sexual consent considered both internal and external aspects of consent
although he himself defined consent as “voluntary approval of what is done or proposed by another; permission; agreement in opinion or sentiment” (Hall, 1998, definitions). He administered a survey to college students focusing on heterosexual sexual experiences and asked students to focus on their most recent sexual encounters. Students were instructed to indicate if they had said yes (external) and meant yes (internal) to various sexual activities and how they had communicated this information to their partner.

Hall (1998) found that most sexual activity took place without the overt expression of consent, when consent was given it was most often expressed non-verbally; by moving closer, kissing, smiling and intimately touching. Non-verbal cues were used by college students as both an acceptable way of expressing as well as interpreting consent. Another means of expressing consent was via passive behaviors such as, allowing oneself to get undressed and offering no resistance. Hall found that consent communication was behaviorally dependent with more intimate behaviors, such as those involving penetration, more commonly employing verbal expressions of consent. This finding was echoed in previous research that has found that consent negotiation may be behaviorally dependent (Margolin, Miller, & Moran, 1989). Approximately 50% of individuals surveyed reported using verbal consent when sexual intercourse was involved. Interestingly, Hall noted that women who were part of a relationship engaged in more token resistant behaviors than women who were not. One shortcoming of this research was its survey format. Therefore, important explanations and interpretations from participants were missing that might have added further depth to the data. This study is relevant to my research due to its investigation of the actual sexual consent behavioral practices of students.

Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) sought to examine how college students expressed consent and interpreted consent in their partners prior to engaging in vaginal-penile intercourse.
Initially, a pilot study was conducted whereby a questionnaire was administered to male and female students asking them about previous sexual event experiences and the methods they themselves used to express consent; verbal or non-verbal and the methods their partners used to express consent; verbal or non-verbal. The pilot study was used to identify different types of behavioral and communication strategies commonly used by students.

The communication strategies used by students were then incorporated into a second questionnaire in the next phase of data collection. In this phase, students read hypothetical scenarios involving either the verbal initiations or non-verbal initiations of sexual activity that were generated in the pilot. Students were advised to imagine that they were the actor in the hypothetical scenarios provided and asked to rate whether various behaviors (34 in total were used) were indications of consent in their partner. Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) found that consent communication is complex, much more so than a simple expression of “yes.”

Students used a wide variety of signals and behaviors to indicate sexual consent, including; “direct verbal signals” (p. 264) (ex. “I want to have sex with you” p. 264), “direct nonverbal signals” (p. 264) (ex. nothing is said, intercourse begins), “indirect verbal signals” (p. 264) (ex. asking about getting a condom), “indirect nonverbal signals” (p. 264) (ex. hugging/caressing), intoxication signals (ex. “I’m really drunk”), “direct refusal signals” (p. 264) (ex. “No”), and finally, a category called “no response signals” (p. 264) (ex. no resistance being offered to sexual advances). The findings of this study echo many of Hall’s (1998) findings in terms of students using a wide variety of methods to indicate their consent as well as the use of not resisting as a means to indicate consent. However, one methodological weakness of this study is that hypothetical scenarios and predetermined responses to assess actual behaviors.
Responses in a hypothetical questionnaire may not be representative of responses and behaviors in vivo.

**A Word on Ambivalence**

While conducting a study on token resistance, Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) discovered that often the researcher imposed dichotomous model of wanting vs. not wanting sexual intercourse did not accurately fit actual women’s narrative experiences. Rather, there seemed to be a “discourse of ambivalence” that was existent in experiences not being accurately captured by the dichotomous yes or no model (p.15). Women wanted to engage in sex for some reasons but not others and this often came to the forefront through their qualitative descriptions.

This research is important to note for my current study because it acknowledges the shades of grey that exist between yes and no and the hidden nuances of seemingly straightforward behaviours. Importantly, it also speaks to the dangers of imposing a model on participants without hearing from their voices first. This paper further indicates the need for qualitative approaches to study sexual consent given its complexity and the multitude of perspectives that may contribute to our understanding.

**Further Nuances around Consent**

In a later study, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) further enriched the discussion on sexual consent by developing a model distinguishing wanting from consent. According to the authors, the internal act of wanting sexual activity is a distinct construct from consenting to it. The current dominant model implies that consenting and wanting necessarily overlap. However, as discussed by the authors, while wanting may influence whether an individual consents or not, wanting and consenting do not necessarily correspond. For example, a person may consent to
unwanted sex (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998) or want non-consensual sex (Satterfield & Muehlenhard, 1996).

Applying this model to a sample of female university students via a questionnaire, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) found that often consenting and wanting do correspond but not always. Furthermore, neither wanting nor consenting appear to be dichotomous constructs, they both exist on a continuum. The authors suggested that using their model may validate unacknowledged rape victims who may have wanted sexual intercourse but did not consent to it and thus refrained from labelling their experience as rape (as the previous dominant model did not acknowledge the existence of wanting in the absence of consent). This study again adds to the rich complexity of consent processes by acknowledging the internal process of wanting and by recognizing that both consenting and wanting appear to exist on continua. Unfortunately the study was limited in that it exclusively focused on the experiences of women.

Humphreys and Brousseau (2010) advocated for a more complex understanding of sexual consent, beyond the simple yes or no binary acknowledging both attitudes and behaviors towards consent. The authors developed a scale assessing both attitudes and behavior towards consent using the theoretical framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TBD) (Ajzen, 1991, 2001, 2005). This theory is often used to explain and predict behavior and incorporates the fundamental belief that intentions predict behavior. It consists of three components that include; attitudes towards the behavior, subjective norms as well as perceived behavioral control. The scale offers a more complex and nuanced understanding of consent reflecting that additional dimensions may influenced consent behaviors. Furthermore, this scale illustrates the complexities around our understanding of consent processes.
A Lack of Clarity and Consistency

Beres (2007) criticized previous research on consent by pointing out that most previous studies have used convenient, spontaneously generated definitions of sexual consent, common sense meanings that have failed to reflect the influence of historical, social, and cultural forces. Often, consent definitions are not explicitly defined in the consent literature and are therefore assumed to be equivalent to other definitions that may exist in the sexual assault or legal literature. Often researchers have generated definitions of consent without explaining their justification and rationale for selection. This failure to contextualize and explain definitions is problematic as it may result in readers misunderstanding studies or relying on personal interpretations of consent that may not be applicable to the study being reviewed. Importantly, Beres (2007) noted that there is rarely any reference given to normative sexual consent processes. After conducting a comprehensive literature review, Beres (2007) essentially concluded that a consistent definition of consent does not currently exist.

It is thus important to be aware that definitions in previous studies are rarely agreed upon or explicitly mentioned. Beres’s (2007) research lends further support to asking students themselves about their own understanding and perception of consent. Importantly, her research also stresses the importance of learning about “normative” sexual consent processes that are outside the context of sexual assault. My research seeks to learn about both the normative instances of sexual consent and those that may be considered less than ideal.

The Voices of Students

Recognizing the need to hear from the voices of students themselves about consent processes, Jozkowski, Peterson, Sanderson, Dennis and Reece (2013) administered a questionnaire to a sample of male and female university that included both close-ended and
open-ended questions. The questions asked men and women about their own definition of consent as well as how the communicated and interpreted consent in their partners. The researchers found important gender differences. Men were more likely to use nonverbal cues to indicate their own consent or non-consent, whereas women more frequently relied on verbal expression. In addition, some women reported they would offer consent passively via not offering resistance to their partners, example, “I wouldn’t stop his advances or say no” (p.7). In terms of interpreting consent in their partners, men more often tended to read their partners consent via non-verbal indicators exclusively, while women were more likely to interpret a partner’s consent by relying on verbal cues, for example, “If he said he was going to get a condom or asked me if I wanted to have sex” (p.7). A meager 10% of men said they would assess consent in their partners via the use of verbal cues.

In terms of interpreting non-consent in their partners, there were also gender differences. Men primarily assessed their partner’s non-consent by reading her non-verbal cues for example, “If she just did not seem into it” (p.8). This is important note as previous research conducted by Abbey, McAuslan and Ross (1998) has noted that men may misperceive women’s interest in them. It raises the possibility that men may inaccurately read their partner’s non-verbal behavior as an indication of consent when it is not indeed the case (Jozkowski et al., 2013). Women, in contrast, more often looked for a combination of both nonverbal cues and verbal behavior as an indication of non-consent from their partners (for example, “If he didn’t want to or was tired and got up and left” (p.8)).

Overall, consent was most frequently expressed by using verbal indicators, secondly by using nonverbal cues, thirdly via a combination of both nonverbal and verbal expressions and finally, through a lack of response. This differs from previous research already discussed by
Hall (1998) and Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) that found non-verbal cues to be most common. Jozkowski et al. (2013) hypothesized that this might be due to not imposing dichotomous criteria on participant respondents and allowing them more flexibility in generating their responses. While verbal cues were used most frequently to express sexual consent, when interpreting consent in partners, surprisingly, non-verbal cues were most often relied on. The authors concluded that their research suggests the very real possibility for sexual miscommunication to take place. Specifically, due to men’s reliance on reading women’s nonverbal cues as an indicator for consent.

Previous research has also found that even when women do not want to engage in sexual activity, they may not communicate this to their partner for fear of upsetting them among other reasons (Walker, 1997). Building off of this, Jozkowski et al (2013) suggested that women may choose to tolerate some sexual activity that passes their comfort threshold silently, expecting that their partner will pick up on their discomfort and end the behavior. Unfortunately, men may misconstrue this silence as an indication of consent and persist engaging in it, potentially resulting in sexual assault. Furthermore, even if the woman does say ‘no,’ there is a possibility that a man may misconstrue this refusal as an indication of token resistance and not as a ‘real no.’

Given the important gender differences in this research indicates that it was an important area to explore in my research especially in light of the miscommunication hypothesis as a potential contributor to sexual assault. Furthermore, it seems very much important to consider whether the results of this study and others conducted at American colleges apply to a Canadian university. There may be important cultural differences across the two nations in regards to sexual behavior and gender norms.
In another paper that examined exclusively the open-ended responses to the above mentioned questionnaire, Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) analyzed the qualitative responses looking for themes. Using Leavy’s (2007) inductive model they found the presence of four themes in responses including “a) endorsement of the traditional sexual script; b) women are responsible for performing oral sex; c) male aggression towards women; and d) male deception in obtaining consent” (p.519). Men were found to primarily act as initiators of sexual activity whereas women most frequently acted as gatekeepers. These traditional sexual scripts were endorsed by the students as normative, for example, “I would let my partner advance. He is the guy, he should make the first move” (p. 519) or, alternatively, “I would initiate foreplay; it’s expected since I’m the guy.” Furthermore, data analysis found that stereotypical gender roles were also endorsed by the participants, in that both male and female respondents worked under the assumption that men “always want” sex no matter what.

Somewhat disturbing was the theme of male aggression in sexual encounters present in the data, which men demonstrated in a few ways. The use of aggression was sometimes used as a way to indicate consent, for example, “I would tell her-let’s have sex! Before she could say anything, I would just take off her pants” (p.520). Some men reported that they would be directive and simply inform their partner that sex was going to take place (27.1%). Lastly, and perhaps most disturbingly, was the use of deception some men reported using to indicate consent. As an example, when responding to the question how they would demonstrate consent for vaginal-penile intercourse, some men reported that they would “insert their penis into a woman’s vagina and pretend as though it occurred by mistake” (12.9%).

In their discussion, Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) talk about the importance of their findings specifically in regards to the continued prevalence of traditional roles in students’
responses despite contextual advances in sexual education and gender equality. Beyond the problems generated by the presence of conflicting sexual scripts, this research also highlighted the troublesome use of male aggression as a means to demonstrate consent. In using aggressive tactics men used their own indications of consent as of primary importance over that of their partners (Jozkowski & Peterson, 2013). Further troubling is the finding in rape justification literature that a woman’s engagement in some level of sexual activity may put her under obligation to engage in full on intercourse (Armstrong et al., 2006). A woman may thus feel compelled to engage in more sexual activity than she is comfortable with or may be expected to by her partner if some initial activity already took place.

Given the findings in this study, again, it appeared to be incredibly important to investigate gender differences in expression and interpretation of sexual consent in my study. Furthermore, considering the potential importance of gender role socialization processes in consent expression and interpretation, the incorporation of a focus group that reflects upon social processes seemed necessary.

**Casual Sex Partners as Fluent Communicators?**

Beres (2010) used open-ended interview questions to learn about the expression and interpretation of consent in casual sex partners attending a Canadian university. Three themes were indicated as consent and non-consent indicators including “tacit knowing” (p. 1) for ex. “you just know” (p. 5), “refusing sex”(p. 1) (via both non-verbal and verbal cues) as well as “active participation”(p.1) in the sexual encounter. Beres found that most communication was indirect and nonverbal, however, she argued that there was a shared understanding between partners to engage in casual sex and that therefore their communication tactics could be considered successful.
Similar to other researchers, Beres (2010) also found that consent communication is complex, while also noting that consent; unfolds as a process over time; beginning long before intimate contact is made. Furthermore, she noted that situational context and relationship status were relevant when expressing and interpreting consent. Beres also found that women in the study tended to say no to sex in the same way they would refuse other social invitations echoing previous research conducted by Kitzinger and Frith (1999). She reasoned that if partners are adept at reading social refusals in their regular lives, miscommunication during a sexual encounter was highly unlikely. Beres thus rejected the miscommunication hypothesis as being a possible reason for incidences of sexual assault.

Beres’s (2010) study was limited in that only half of the couple was interviewed and thus it would be difficult to determine whether successful communication had taken place after hearing from only one side. Nevertheless, Beres’s study offered some important insights regarding consent processes demonstrating the importance of explicitly exploring situational context as well as considering the relationship status of partners in sexual consent negotiation. In addition, the richness Beres’s study further lends support to exploring consent processes from a qualitative angle.

**Summary and Significance**

In sum, there is a lot of interesting and insightful literature that relates to the topic of sexual consent. However, a number of gaps still exist in the literature; most previous studies have employed limited types of methodology in studying consent (survey research has been the most common), the majority of previous studies have used definitions of consent that have been not explicitly mentioned or researcher-imposed (Beres, 2007), situational context has not been a focus of explicit investigation (Beres, 2010), consent has been conceptualized as an external,
dichotomous expression despite literature indicating this does not align with real sexual experiences (Hickman & Muehlenard, 1999) and experiences of women have often been the only perspective considered (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007).

I address the aforementioned gaps in my current study in a number of ways: by exploring the role of socialization processes on consent behavior by employing both interviews and a focus group and, by explicitly examining various situational factors that have been alluded to play a role in consent behavior; alcohol consumption and relationship status, by further exploring possible gender discrepancies in consent interpretation and expression and, most importantly, by hearing from the neglected voices of students whose explanations and perceptions have been largely excluded from previous research (Jozkowski, 2011). This study adds a richer and perhaps more holistic grasp of consent processes and how they are negotiated. Not only does it contribute to the literature on sexual consent and our knowledge of heterosexual students’ sexual behavior in general but it has the potential to contribute to sexual assault prevention efforts.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

This study sought to explore the meaning and the negotiation of sexual consent from the perspective of heterosexual university students. To better understand the scope and depth of consent processes, I conducted qualitative research. In terms of specific research methodology, I employed the ethnographic interview to acknowledge the unique worldview of my participants. Spradley defines culture as “the acquired knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behavior” (Spradley, p. 5, 1979). Due to the time restrictions imposed by a Master’s thesis and the limited scope of data collection methods employed, my project was not aptly considered a true ethnography, but more so a qualitative research project incorporating the ethnographic interview. Specifically, my project can best be described as a qualitative approach involving aspects of ethnography (the ethnographic interview) and grounded theory (the analysis).

Philosophical Assumptions or Worldview of Qualitative Research

I am situated in a contextualist and interpretivist epistemology. I understand meaning to be subjectively constructed and recognize that different people will construct meaning in different ways. I conceptualize truth to be a product of consensus among “co-constructors” (Scotland, 2012, p.12; Pring, 2000). Thus, knowledge is both “historically situated” and drawn from the culture in which it occurs (Scotland, 2012, p. 12).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the sexual behavior of university students is strongly tied to the cultural norms and expectations of the surrounding context. In fact, as concluded by Bogle’s (2008) study on hooking up, university students’ sexual behavior is a cultural phenomenon that is best understood by exploring the context in which it is intertwined.
It is both a physically and temporally located behavior that occurs in a unique social context; a cultural phenomenon that is most appropriately addressed using the ethnographic interview. My question(s) not only sought to learn about the behavior of university students, but also to understand their worldview, their beliefs and their value systems. Collectively offering me an *emic* understanding of sexual consent.

**Research Design**

Qualitative research was chosen for this project for a number of reasons. Firstly, sexual consent research is a relatively new area of study and qualitative research is well suited for exploratory research (Creswell, 2014). In addition, qualitative research nicely complements my worldview as it places participants’ meaning and understanding at the forefront of the research and builds analysis from the bottom up as opposed to the top down. Moreover, it allows and encourages researchers to have a voice in their studies, acknowledging the important and influential role that they have in constructing their participants’ meanings.

Beyond merely “a way of looking”, ethnography is conceptualized as a “way of seeing” (Wolcott, 2008 p.69). Ethnographers do not only observe culture but also *they look for it* making cultural descriptions explicit when they are observed (Wolcott, 1998). Therefore, these researchers employ a type of cultural lens as they observe and interview participants. Understanding the culture from the native’s or an insider’s perspective is the central tenet of ethnography (Spradley, 1979; Wolcott, 2008). This cultural understanding is inferred from observing a group through immersion in the group’s natural setting in the process of fieldwork and by then making cultural inferences (Spradley, 1979). Cultural inferences come from multiple sources, including the behaviors exhibited by members of the cultural group, what the members say and the artifacts that they use. While I did not conduct a full scale ethnography and
while I primarily used interviews to gather my data, I attempted to immerse myself in their worldview and understanding as much as I could.

I chose the ethnographic interview for practical and personal reasons. First of all because the ethnographic researcher sees participants as human beings and deeply values their unique perspectives (Spradley 1979; Wolcott, 2008). In addition, during the ethnographic interview, the researcher aims to immerse herself in the perspective of her participants seeking to understand the world from their standpoint (Spradley, 1979). This immersion requires a genuine relationship connection between participant and researcher to ensure that a deep understanding of the participant’s interpretive schemes is achieved (Rizzo, Corsaro, & Bates, 1992). A focus on genuineness and understanding closely aligns with my personal worldview and my professional role as an aspiring counsellor. Furthermore, the ethnographic interview relies on the strengths and personal skills of the researcher (Spradley, 1979; Wolcott, 1998) therefore making good use of my person-focused counselling skills.

**Participants**

To attain a holistic account of sexual consent while at the same time keeping my project manageable for the scope of a Master’s thesis, two different data sources were used including individual interviews and focus groups. In total, 11 individual interviews were conducted and recorded. Of the 11 interviews, seven women were interviewed and four men. Due to poor audio recording quality, one of the men’s interviews was not included in the study. One focus group was conducted with three women. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 24 years of age. The mean age of all 13 participants was 21 years. Researchers who use the ethnographic interview tend to refer to the participants in their studies as informants, and I will use these terms interchangeably throughout this document.
**Inclusion criteria.** In terms of inclusion criteria, I required individuals who were comfortable discussing personal details regarding their sex life with a stranger. I sought out participants between the ages of 18 and 24 years of age both to simplify informed consent procedures and to ensure that my participants’ ages were representative of heterosexual UBC students as a whole. Also, I reasoned that individuals within a time frame of six years were more likely to have shared the same type of socialization processes growing up and were thus more likely to see the world in similar ways. Undergraduate as well as graduate students were welcome to participate. Since I recognized that the vast majority of research thus far conducted on sexual consent focused on the heterosexual community and since I recognized that the LGBTQ community is different in many respects to the heterosexual community, I did not believe it would be appropriate or reasonable to include LGBTQ participants in my study. UBC has a large international student population; therefore, I recognized that English may not be the first language for all participants. Since my research required that my participants have a command of the English language as I conducted interviews, I required that my participants were at least minimally proficient in English. One participant, Sarah, had a first language other than English (Mandarin). This did not appear to pose a problem during the interview. I was interested in recruiting both self-identified men and self-identified women who were heterosexual in my study.

In addition to these inclusion criteria, Spradley (1979) suggested that good informants are (1) thoroughly enculturated in their cultural scene, (2) currently involved in their cultural scene, (3) are members of a cultural scene unfamiliar to the researcher, (4) have adequate time, and are (5) non-analytic. When selecting my informants, I was mindful of these characteristics. When administering the telephone screening, I asked how long participants had been at UBC. The
number of years spent at UBC varied from one to six years. Due to the fact that I was interviewing university students, I thought it would be unlikely that I would find many who were non-analytical. In fact, I would say that a number of students interviewed were indeed analytical. Additionally, since I was also a graduate student attending UBC at the time of the interviews, I was not completely alien or unfamiliar with the student culture.

**Participant recruitment.** After my research was approved by the Behavioural Research Ethics Review Board (H14-00538), I started recruiting participants. They were recruited via flyers posted throughout UBC campus. These advertisements included my contact information, the purpose of my research, inclusion criteria, the methods I planned on using as well as the role of participants that I required for my research (Appendix A; Appendix B). Posters were displayed on the free bulletin boards of various departments as well as in the Student Union Building and other campus locations such as IK Barber library and the Birdcoop gym. Due to the initial low response rate, with UBC ethics board approval, I started to recruit at coffee shops on the UBC campus and in the surrounding area. Flyers were posted in the neighbourhood of Point Grey and Kitsilano. Interviews were conducted from September 2014 until April 2015.

**Data Collection Procedures**

After I contacted interested participants, I conducted a brief telephone screening to ensure that they met my inclusion criteria and that they were comfortable discussing their sex life in a research setting (Appendix C; Appendix D). If they met the inclusion criteria and were interested in meeting, we arranged an interview date and time.

Interviews took place in a private room at the University of British Columbia’s Vancouver campus. To obtain consent, participants were invited to complete a consent (Appendix E) and demographics form (Appendix K) and to raise any concerns or potential
questions they might have before the recorded interview began. The pertinent demographics of the individual interview participants are summarized in Table 1.

The initial process was identical for both the individual interviews and the focus group. However, the consent form was slightly adapted to clarify the different format of the focus group (Appendix F). In addition, the consent form for the focus group noted the inherent limitations of confidentiality on account of having other participants present in the group. The demographics of focus group participants is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of Individual Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chosen Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country Born In</th>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Language Spoken at Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Jenny”</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>USA (3 years in Canada)</td>
<td>Irish/Danish/Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Willow”</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Spanish/Chinese/Canadian</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Sarah”</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Taiwan (2 years in Canada)</td>
<td>Taiwanese</td>
<td>Mandarin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mark”</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Canadian/Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Rachel”</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Dutch/Caucasian</td>
<td>English/Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Marie”</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>German/French/Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Terra”</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>China (grew up in USA)</td>
<td>Chinese/German</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Chloe”</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>UK (1 year in Canada)</td>
<td>Scottish/Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“John”</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Canadian/Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Arlet”</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Canadian/English/Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 1.2
Demographics of All Women’s Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chosen Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country Born In</th>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Language Spoken at Home</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Christie”</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Sri Lankan</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Alex”</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>USA (In Canada less than 1 year)</td>
<td>Welsh/Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“AC”</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>USA (3 years in Canada)</td>
<td>Canadian/American/Caucasian</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Individual interviews.** I conducted interviews with 10 individual participants (discounting one that was not analyzed). The interviews focused on expressions of sexual consent as well as past real event consent experiences including questions regarding ideal consent experiences and less ideal consent experiences and their differentiating characteristics. I used ethnographic interviewing as my guiding methodology.

Ethnographic interviewing recognizes that beyond communication, language also serves to express and create our cultural reality (Spradley, 1979). Through listening to cultural descriptions of members of a culture in their native language, one is better able to gain access to their cultural reality. The ethnographic interview is a means to describe a cultural scene and to tap into the cultural reality of those who experience it. An ethnographic interview entails inviting an informant to share their insider knowledge of a cultural scene with the researcher through the use of descriptive, contrast and structural questions as well as by incorporating probes and explanations. Other characteristics of ethnographic interviews include expressing interest, demonstrating ignorance, pausing and taking turns.
Considering that ethnographic interview is dynamic and may require that questions build off of each other, a rigid interview protocol was not constructed. Furthermore, the ethnographic interview protocol may vary as responses from initial participants may shape some of the questions asked during later interviews. That said, in this study, I departed from the traditional ethnographic interview format in that my interviews did not build off of each other since I chose not to conduct ethnographic data analysis on my data. Therefore, while I initially considered using structural and contrast questions (Appendix H; Appendix I) that tend to be used when combining the data from multiple interviews, I found them to have minimal utility.

I have included the outline of descriptive questions I inquired about as well as the ethnographic rationale for incorporating those types of questions (Appendix G). I did not strictly follow the protocol as I recognized the dynamic nature of ethnographic interviewing, however, this document provided me with important guidance and direction. Broadly speaking, most interviewees were asked every question contained on the protocol although the order of questions at times varied. In addition, at times, the interviews took unexpected turns and additional questions and avenues were explored that were not anticipated. I also began to weave some of the focus group questions (Appendix J) into the individual interviews once I recognized the additional insights these questions might offer. Interviews varied in length from 30 to 60 minutes each. I recorded all of my interviews and in addition, I made some occasional “scratch notes” as I engaged in the process to help guide me in subsequent analysis (Sanjek, 2002).

Once recording was completed, I thanked participants for their time and I pointed out the available paper resources that I had available. I had a number of pamphlets from the Sexual Assault Resource Centre that I offered participants as well as a map to the University of British Columbia’s Counselling Services (Appendix L). I also gave all participants a $10.00 gift
certificate to the coffee shop Starbucks. Lastly, I encouraged participants to pass on the study’s information to any people they knew who might want to participate.

**Focus Groups:** My second data source was an all-women’s focus group that was conducted with three participants. Four participants were expected but one dropped out at the last minute. I included the focus group due to my belief that the group’s interactive experiences offer rich information that cannot be accessed through individual interviews. Additionally, focus groups have been used successfully with sensitive topics related to sexuality and sexual behavior (Frith, 2000). Due to the personal nature of my topic, the questions I posed in the focus group pertained more to the shared social and cultural aspects of my research questions. In the focus group, I concentrated on how participants learned about consent, contextual factors that influenced consent processes and whether the sexual consent messaging that is targeted towards the university group is relevant to their experiences. The introduction to the focus group as well as the interview guide is included in Appendix J.

**Contextualizing this Project**

This research project took place during a particularly eventful time at the University of British Columbia’s (UBC) Vancouver campus. Data collection for this study began in September 2014 and continued until April 2015. From April to October of the previous year (2013), random sexual assaults by an unknown assailant had been occurring on campus. No one was arrested for these assaults and six incidents in total were reported. In addition, in September 2013 during frosh week activities at UBC’s Sauder School of Business, business students were criticized for reciting a chant endorsing non-consensual sexual activity with underage women (“UBC Investigates”, 2013). In recent months, UBC has faced criticism in regards to the handling of sexual assault complaints specifically in regards to a lack of transparency and
responsiveness in investigation procedures (Kelley, 2015). Perhaps in light of all of this national attention, UBC has recently launched new sexual assault initiatives including the formation of a Sexual Assault Prevention Team tasked with among other items, reducing the incidents of sexual assault on campus via the promotion of bystander intervention, as well as the promotion of healthy relationships (Sexual Assault Prevention Team, 2015). One of the 2015/2016 healthy relationship subcomponent initiatives has been the endorsement of a new sexual consent messaging campaign promoting “three key concepts: Consent is clear, consent is a conversation, and consent is needed” (Sexual Assault Prevention Team, 2015, p. 4). Given that this initiative was not implemented until September 2015, the participants in the current study were not impacted by these changes or new initiatives and were basing their responses on UBC’s previous sexual consent campaign.

**Data Management and Analysis Procedures**

**Transcription and member checking:** All individual interviews except one were transcribed verbatim and subsequently analyzed. Participants’ chosen pseudonyms were used in the transcription documents to ensure the maintenance of confidentiality. One of the individual interviews conducted was not transcribed or analyzed due to poor recording quality.

After transcription, password protected transcriptions were sent to participants for member checking. Participants were told that if they did not send a response to the email within a specified period of time (approximately 1 week), the transcript was assumed to be an accurate reflection of their experiences. No corrections or clarifications were requested by any of the participants. Three participants responded to the email.

**Data analysis.** To analyze both my individual interview data and my focus group data I used Charmaz Grounded Theory Coding Techniques (2006). To clarify, I did not conduct a full
grounded theory, rather, I incorporated some of the initial coding techniques described by Charmaz in *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2006). The guiding purpose of my analysis was to be able to describe in detail the meaning students had of sexual consent as well as their negotiation of it.

After member-checking my interviews, I coded my data using initial line-by-line coding (Charmaz, 2006). I then compared transcripts with one another, taking note of reoccurring codes and condensing and clarifying them during the stage of focused coding. Focused codes were compared to one another and qualitative dimensions of similarity were pulled out to generate theoretical codes. Data were then organized by initial research questions, specifically by meaning of sexual consent, and negotiation of sexual consent. Theoretical codes were simplified and reduced. I consulted with my supervisor throughout this process. Please refer to Appendix M to see a list of all focused codes discovered in the data. Codes that are bolded will be further discussed in the Findings Chapter. Bolded codes were selected due to their salience and recurrence across transcripts.

Data analysis of focus group data was identical to the analysis of the individual interviews. However, I was mindful that the unit of analysis in focus group data is centered on the group rather than the individual (Morgan, 1988). Thus I realized that analysis should focus on emergent group themes rather than individual participants. In my findings and discussion, I acknowledged whether my findings came from individual interviews or from focus groups.

Transcription documents were secured in password protected computer documents on a password protected personal computer. Paper documents, including consent forms, were stored in a locked UBC cabinet in the Education Building at the University of British Columbia’s Vancouver campus.
Researcher’s Subjective Stance

I identify myself as a heterosexual woman who has been interested in sexual development and sexual behavior for some time. Furthermore, I have also been very interested in the role that outside cultural forces play on the development of our beliefs, behaviors and values. As a girl growing up in the late 1980s and early 1990s, I remember being bombarded with sexual images and messages in the television shows I watched and the magazines that I read. I remember watching Britney Spears on MTV bear her midriff as a seductive schoolgirl singing “Hit me Baby One more Time” and hearing Salt n’ Peppa rap “Let’s Talk about Sex” on the radio. Yet, sex was not openly discussed at the school I attended or in my family home. Sex was plastered everywhere in halftime shows and on Covergirl commercials but at the same time, it was nowhere, a taboo topic that was usually accompanied by red-faced adults and excessive throat clearing. The mandatory sex education class put on by my elementary school was marked by an awkward physical education teacher who was even less happy teaching sex ed than we were learning about it. What I did learn about sex, I learned from my peer group, television, movies, the Internet and music. These experienced have reinforced my belief and commitment to the study of social contextual factors as I remember the crucial influence they had on the development of my own sexuality.

At the University of Victoria, the sex talk was broached again and this time it was brought up in a dorm presentation focused on sexual assault prevention. Students were separated by gender and escorted to different rooms where we were both fed different messages regarding preventing assault, specifically the importance of sexual consent. I remember wondering what types of messages the men were receiving regarding sexual consent and finding it very strange that an activity that we presumably engaged in together was segregated and veiled in secrecy. I
also remember finding the messages I received in the meeting to be largely disconnected from my own experiences and therefore not taking them that seriously; no one had ever asked me for a kiss, it had just *happened*.

These experiences have collectively made me wonder how current students perceive sexual consent, specifically how they relate to the concept of sexual consent and what it means to them. I am particularly interested in the shades of grey that characterize sexual experiences, how they are interpreted and reconciled within the individuals who live them. Recognizing how my own experiences have shaped my perspective and making those experiences explicit may perhaps allow me to be more mindful and sensitive to biases that may negatively impact my research.

**Rigour**

In her paper on how best to conduct credible and trustworthy qualitative research in counselling psychology, Morrow (2005) advises to adhere to general standards universal to all qualitative methodology as well as to adhere to specific standards unique to the researcher’s selected theoretical paradigm. I have decided to incorporate Morrow’s general guidelines and to apply them to my own research. I will touch on some of the qualities general to all good qualitative research and then I will integrate ways that I adhered to Morrow’s guidelines in my description.

In terms of universal concerns, Morrow speaks to the importance of holding *social validity* as a standard of trustworthiness. This means that the larger social impact of research should be considered, and research that contributes to a greater social good should be pursued. In the case of my research, I believe I have contributed to the limited knowledge base on normative sexual behavior processes among heterosexual university students.
Recognizing the inherent subjective nature of research is another tenet Morrow (2005) endorses. If a researcher is aware of her own subjective stance throughout the research process, she is able to notice hidden biases and assumptions that may be covertly influencing her data collection processes as well as her interpretations of the data. To facilitate awareness of one’s own subjective stance can be done by making one’s own life experiences and perspectives explicit. In addition, practicing reflexivity throughout the data collection process may also be helpful. Reflexivity refers to actively engaging in self-reflection, noticing the impact of experiences on the self and the reactions that may come up on account of them. I recognized my subjective stance in this research by openly discussing and writing about my own experiences and how they have shaped me in this document. I also engaged in reflexivity during the research process by keeping a research journal detailing my reactions to the interviews and any new insights that emerged. I would refer and reflect on this journal often. I also continuously consulted with my colleagues and my supervisor where I noted and explored my own personal reactions to my research findings.

I was also mindful of concerns around adequacy of data and I addressed these concerns through a couple of methods. I used two data sources in my study to generate a richer, more holistic snapshot of the process I studied. I also made my interview questions and the procedure I followed explicit to ensure the types of questions I asked were purposeful as well as flexible. Interviews were lengthy and exhaustive. There was also a wide and varied range of responses from participants. Lastly, I strove to find both disconfirming evidence and discrepant case examples by using relatively open questions when conducting my interviews.

Morrow addresses the need to tailor one’s credibility checks to the paradigm the researcher ascribes to. For constructivists/interpretivists, Morrow advises being mindful of
concerns around authenticity including the concepts of fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, and catalytic authenticity. Fairness refers to honoring and soliciting diverse constructions. To do this, I recruited a varied range of participants to ensure a range of voices were heard and incorporated into my research. Ontological authenticity refers to elaborating on, expanding and improving participant’s individual constructions. To incorporate this into my research, I conducted member checks with my participants to ensure that I was accurately capturing their intended meaning. Educative authenticity speaks to enhancing the appreciation participants have for the constructions of others. I incorporated this into my research through the implementation of a respectful focus group that was encouraging of diverse opinions and experiences. Finally, catalytic authenticity refers to how research may spur those participants involved to engage in some sort of social action. To do this, I offered participants the contacts of community resources providing them with the opportunity to use the resources themselves or to become involved with social action through volunteerism.

Finally, I ensured that my participants’ meaning was both understood deeply as well as co-constructed by both me, the researcher, and the participants in my study (Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). To deeply understand participant meaning, I strove to build rapport with them as individuals and I used the active listening skills I have learned in my counselling training. I also tried my best to ensure that I was mindful of my boundaries as a researcher and that I did not overstep them (Haverkamp, 2005). In addition, I examined not only the words spoken by my participants but I was also aware of how the context and interpersonal variables may play in the interviews I conducted (Morrow, 2005). I ensured that I communicated to my participants what I was particularly interested in studying and to make the lens I am adopting transparently known to them. To ensure that meaning was co-constructed, I conducted member checks, asking the
participants themselves whether I properly captured the meaning they had intended to transmit.

**Ethical and Diversity Issues Pertinent to Research Question**

There are a variety of ethical and diversity issues to consider when conducting this research. Firstly, to ensure that my study was ethically sound, I submitted my proposal to the Behavioral Research Ethics Review Board (BRERB) and did not begin my research until full board approval was granted. In addition to this standard procedure, there were a variety of specific ethical considerations that applied uniquely to my topic that should be explored and addressed.

The research question(s) I was investigating was personal in nature and therefore I was aware that participants may feel reluctant to openly talk about their experiences. It was therefore absolutely necessary that I was mindful of creating a climate of trust and safety. To create this climate, I communicated to my participants about my commitment to confidentiality throughout the research process. In regards to my data management and analysis techniques, I used password protections to secure all data stored on my computer and I secured paper transcripts and data in a locked UBC filing cabinet.

I also let my participants know that they only needed to share what they felt comfortable in sharing and that they were free to withdraw from the project at any time. I also offered a stance of openness and transparency, encouraging my participants to ask me any questions about my research throughout the process (both in and out of the interview).

There was a small chance that discussing past sexual experiences could have been re-traumatizing for some individuals (as some individuals may have experienced previous sexual assault as victims or as perpetrators) therefore it was absolutely essential that I made explicit that individuals should only share what they feel comfortable in sharing. I emphasized this point
often. I also continually remained vigilant and alert to monitor for signs of distress in my participants. In fact, one participant in particular abstained from answering a couple of questions when given the option to do so. I briefly normalized and validated her decision to abstain from answering and we continued on with other questions. Fortunately, despite the sensitive subject matter discussed, none of my participants became visibly distressed during our interviews and most were able to answer the questions I provided. I believe this is partly because I proceeded with caution with my participants’ well-being and safety continuously at the forefront of my mind. That said, I encouraged all participants to take a referral page with contacts for the crisis line as well as UBC’s Counselling Services at Brock Hall (Appendix L) just in case.

There is no single specific action that ensures conducted research is culturally sensitive and the word “culture” carries different meanings to different people (Tillman, 2002). However, in terms of general guidelines, I exercised personal reflexivity throughout my research (Morrow, 2005). This helped remind me of the particular social and demographic position that I hold and the influence this lens might have on my role as researcher. Inevitably though, I recognize that all research is subject to bias (Morrow, 2005). I am appreciative that my sample appeared to be particularly diverse in terms of possessing a range of cultural backgrounds and educational interests. However, I recognize that students at a university may have a particular worldview and lens not shared by members of the community. I discuss these matters further in Chapter 5.
Chapter 4: Findings

Emergent themes found in the 10 interviews and single focus group will be highlighted and examined. The findings are best organized in terms of the two initial core research questions:

1. What does sexual consent mean to university students?
2. How do students negotiate sexual consent?

While organizing the data in this way proved to be a useful way to make sense of emergent themes, the categories and themes discovered are not necessarily considered to be mutually exclusive or discrete. Additionally, meaning was found to influence process and process was found to influence meaning in various dynamic ways. Categories discussed have been chosen due to the fact that they were common across multiple interviews and deemed to be salient within them. Please refer to Appendix M to see prominent codes discovered in the interviews, the ones that are discussed are in bolded typeface.

The meaning of sexual consent referred to participants’ understanding of sexual consent and what factors influenced this understanding. A number of variables shaped and contributed to their understanding including both internal and external influences.

The students’ understanding of sexual consent was shown to be influenced by their social world consisting of how they defined sexual consent and how they learned about it. Participants defined sexual consent on three different levels; a social shared understanding of the term, a legal definition and a personalized definition. They spoke to learning about sexual consent via a variety of sources of knowledge and that their understanding of the term was characterized by continual learning. The manner in which they initially learned about sexual consent affected how they defined it currently. Other facets of the social world that factored into participants’
understanding of sexual consent included *spatial location*. Meaning of physical action and behavioral expectations varied in specific *special places* such as parties or nightclubs. *TV and film portrayals* were also mentioned as contributing to the sexualisation of specific places possibly influencing people’s expectations in the real world. *Gender differences and expectations* were found to factor into sexual consent in a number of areas including how consent was initially taught to participants, expected sexual actions and behaviors and the experience of rejection. Participants also spoke about the meaning they have gathered from their social environment at the University of British Columbia. They spoke about their impressions of *UBC’s sexual consent messaging* and suggested changes. Finally, the participants spoke about the relevant *gaps in experience and knowledge* in their social world and their longing for *social change*.

The meaning of sexual consent was also found to be dependent on the participants’ *relationship type*, whether the partnership was new, long-term or casual. Participant spoke of the changing nature of sexual consent expression, and how it is dependent on the relationship stage as well as the *hidden role expectations* that accompany the status of partner, girlfriend or boyfriend.

*Personal identity* was also found to be a prominent factor in student’s understanding of sexual consent. Personal identity was mentioned in reference to participants’ level of *self-confidence* as well as their cultural upbringing and identity. In addition, the importance of *listening to one’s self* or one’s own internal knowing was found to be a prevalent guiding system when making sexual consent decisions.

The negotiation of sexual consent included the process of consent itself, how it was communicated in the moment and after-the-fact justifications. Participants described sexual
consent as a *process occurring over time* characterized by a number of affective states that may be either well-defined or ambiguous. The consent process at times provoked *risks and fears* in participants leading them to adopt certain behavioral *strategies*. Strategies were also adopted prior to the consent process. *Strategies* exercised during the course of negotiation included such examples as preserving the mood and using direct communication. Participants interpreted their partner’s consent and non-consent using such signs as the presence of *reciprocating action* and *active participation*. Participants expressed sexual consent and non-consent in a number of ways often using a combination of non-verbal signs and signals such as eye contact and playful hitting. The negotiation of sexual consent was also explained in terms of *after the fact justifications* and *explanations*. The *impact of alcohol* on sexual consent behavior was found to be influential in consent processes and will be discussed. Finally, specific positive and negative sexual consent experiences were explored with salient themes pulled out and analyzed to shed further light on ideal and less than ideal consent negotiation processes.

**The Meaning of Sexual Consent**

In this study, how students understood sexual consent was dependent on their social world, the relationship they were in, and their personal identity.

**Social world:** Participants’ social world was illustrated by how they defined sexual consent, their sources of knowledge and was characterized by the experience of continual learning. They spoke to the influence of situational context, as well as the depictions of sexual consent in TV and media. Other salient components of the social world were: gender roles and expectations, gaps in knowledge and experience, UBC sexual consent messaging and the experience of wanting social change.
**Defining sexual consent.** Most participants defined the term sexual consent on three different levels; a *social shared understanding* of the term, a *legal definition* and a *personalized definition* entailing their personal preferences for how it is expressed and understood. This personalized definition will be discussed more in-depth in a further section.

Most participants defined social or shared understanding of sexual consent as getting permission from their partner before engaging in sexual activity as well as generating a sense of agreement. Explained Alex in the focus group, “I think it would . . . mean getting like a clear answer, like clear permission from your partner what they are and aren’t comfortable with . . . before engaging in sexual activity.”

In terms of what acts they thought were relevant to sexual consent, upon initial questioning, many of the participants only thought of sexual intercourse as being immediately relevant. As explained by Chloe, “I guess it applies to other sexual activities as well, but mainly when you say that, I do think of sex.” However, when probed explicitly about the applicability of sexual consent to other scenarios besides sexual intercourse, the majority of participants said that sexual consent is applicable in most or all scenarios involving sexual activity. However, they specified that this requirement does not entail that verbal expression or exchanges need to take place. Explained Sarah, “I guess a nod actually means yes too, so it’s not just the spoken yes, so both actions and words count.”

Two participants made it clear that consent requires *wanting* sexual activity to take place and not just agreeing to it and that this may be expressed in terms of enthusiasm and excitement. That said, not everyone in this study, cited this to be a crucial component. Arlet stressed the importance of considering one’s future self and ensuring that one will “have positive feelings after.”
In sum, even while describing the social or shared definition of sexual consent, there was some variability in students’ definitions.

Participants had a tendency to note and bring awareness to the legal definition of sexual consent which they explained as sexual consent not holding legitimacy if a person is intoxicated. As explained by Jenny in reference to a story, “. . . I guess in the legal aspect of consent it doesn’t really count if one person is intoxicated…” However, most participants did not consistently apply this legal definition to their own behaviors and experiences. For example, when the same participant was asked about whether people can consent under the influence of drugs/alcohol she responded, “um, I would say yes, but to an extent.”

Despite not necessarily applying the legal definition of consent to their own behavior, some participants expressed a sense of safety knowing that a legal definition of consent does exist and that they are familiar with it. Sarah explained that she was grateful that she understood how “consent actually works” and it gave her a sense of security. She explained, “I guess it gives protection to girls so we feel more safe when we’re with guys . . . if they actually do anything to you, you can just like sue them [laughs].”

There was often a marked difference in terms of the legal and the social and shared understanding of sexual consent and the personalized version of sexual consent that most participants applied to their own behavior. This personalized version entailed students’ consent preferences and what behaviors they tended to use to express and interpret consent. Terra explained:

For me, honestly . . . I very rarely, if ever . . . like to receive . . . verbal consent. . . . [F]or me, it’s, it’s all about the body language, you know, the mood, and that feeling quote unquote. . .
She compared her own preferences with her perception of other sexually active couples, “. . . I feel like with, the majority or, a lot, other . . . sexual couples, there’s a lot more talking . . . verbally about it.” Participants’ sexual consent preferences will be further discussed further in the Negotiation portion of this chapter.

**Sources of knowledge.** The social world that participants found themselves in influenced their understanding of sexual consent. In terms of their initial understanding of the phrase, the participants cited a variety of *sources of knowledge*. Many participants recollected their initial understanding of sexual consent and how it evolved over time. Often, these understandings were not based on explicit teaching from parents/caregivers or teachers but gathered from other sources. As articulated by Terra:

> You know I don’t think there was ever a specific class that told me, hey, you know, sexual consent, you need to, acknowledge or, you need to, you know . . . I’m not sure how to word it, but-. . . . There was never anything ever black and white. . . . I pretty much learned through it with . . . news, you know, stories of, off-shore, of prostitution rings . . . and, you know, social media definitely a big one . . . . TV and movies . . . I feel like I always had a secondary, not . . . a primary, source of knowledge.

Others mentioned learning about sexual consent in elementary and/or high school but recalled the focus was mostly on the practice of safe sex. Chloe recalled learning about sexual consent in high school, “. . . I remember being taught about safe sex primarily and then went on to the idea of, you know, it’s your choice . . . and that, you get to make the decision in it . . .”

Surprisingly, a couple of participants interviewed did not learn anything about sexual consent until they actually entered university. Sarah recalled first learning about sexual consent:
I think it’s after I came to North America and that’s when . . . I think I was like, maybe the first or second year of university. . . . And they were like, oh, you need to get consent before having sex and that was like basically posted through a lot of different walls and like posters, that’s how I kind of got to know more.

A few participants recalled learning about sexual consent from family members at home. AC recalled, “. . . well, like me personally, my mom taught me about it . . . . I mean, I’d like to think that everyone’s parents or guardians teaches them about it.” Marie remembered first discussing sexual consent with her older sister, “[m]y older sister was one of those people who’s just like very into women like, their bodies, like specifically, women’s bodies being respected. Like, doing things in your own time.”

**Continual learning.** Regardless of their initial introduction to sexual consent, participants’ understanding of the concept was marked by *continual learning*. Their initial understanding was subject to change over time and experience.

Willow who attended Catholic school growing up noted a transformation since coming to university “[m]y idea about it has changed since I came to university and I, I’ve questioned a bit of the beliefs and the traditions that I was taught. . . . In terms of sex and . . . sexual consent.”

John recollected that his initial understanding of what acts were relevant to sexual consent was changed after coming across a social media post on the Facebook site UBC Confessions where a woman recounted being kissed against her will: He explained:

I saw a post about someone who is kind of upset about . . . they were a first year student going to . . . I guess like, Imagine Day or whatever like that . . . [a]nd they had a group leader and at the party I think, the group leader was kind of like forcibly kissing . . . . this
girl and she was like pissed off about that. So, you know, with, thinking about that. . . . I think it’s important to kind of keep . . . sexual consent can apply to any situation . . .

Participants spoke about continually learning about sexual consent as they grew up and accumulated real life experience. They also differentiated this real life experience from other teachings as being more nuanced and multifaceted. As elaborated on by Christie:

Yeah, a lot of implicit learning. . . . I have parents that taught me about it, but, you also, when you get into like the nitty gritty stuff about like . . . anything that is less than a yes is a no, that sort of stuff? Like I learned that pretty much by the end high school, beginning of college, that sort of thing. . . . So, like, when you’re getting to that… that’s kind of like, ‘oh, this is exactly where the sexual consent is [emphasis added]. . . . As opposed to like, maybe, parents will teach you like, kind of more general things. . .

**The influence of the situation.** How consent was expected to be expressed and how it was understood was greatly influenced by the situation in which participants found themselves in. Certain *special places* such as bars and nightclubs appeared to have special rules in terms of expected sexual behavior and in turn, sexual consent expression. Some participants perceived sexual consent expression as being less necessary in terms of explicit verbal expression as the situation itself was indicative of a type of consent. Marie elaborated on this perception:

So like, if you’re in a club situation . . . Single people go there ‘cause they want some kind of like satisfaction or whatever. If you don’t want that to happen, then don’t go to the club. Um, so for me, it’s very much, if you’re putting yourself in that situation by showing up and like, dancing provocatively and all of these things whether you’re like a man or a woman. . . . [I]t is kind of like your body language is definitely showing that this is something that you’re interested in, and obviously you can change your mind
midway through and be like okay, stop dancing with me, like I’m uncomfortable. . . .

[B]ut I don’t think the person needs to necessarily ask and be like ‘can I grind with you’
or, ‘can we make out?’ . . . I think those are situations kind of where, yeah. Like, in my
opinion I wouldn’t have an issue . . . if somebody started trying to kiss me or whatever . . .
. . . Um, I wouldn’t have an issue being like hey! Not down [emphasis added] afterwards
but I don’t think it needs to be asked like, prior to.

In sum, Marie perceives that club goers have specific expectations regarding one
another’s attendance specifically in regards to sexual intent, that body language displayed may
reveal sexual intent to others and that these factors combined alter sexual consent
communication. She perceives the norms or rules of consent communication to be flexible and
that in a club setting they may be altered or loosened. In addition, these altered rules were both
perceived as normal and expected by other club goers in attendance.

In addition to nightclubs, parties were also perceived to accompany certain expectations,
specifically in regards to the likelihood that sexual activity will transpire. As explained by Mark,
“when people are . . . drinking, at a party or something like that. . . . They’re usually . . . more
open to the idea ‘cause it’s just sort of that social situation where… they’re more willing…”
Mark thus acknowledges that these specific situations usually accompany the consumption of
alcohol.

**Influence of TV and the media:** During the focus group, the influence of TV and media
was introduced in terms of the *sexualisation of places*. The portrayal of the aforementioned
special situations was discussed.

AC: Well, I also think the media . . . sexualizes places if that makes sense? . . . I feel like
a, like a lot of people, like when they’re younger and they watch . . . movies about
university; like, frat parties, bars, clubs, like that, people just kind of, consent goes to the wayside . . . and that’s like how the media paints it, right? . . . They sexualize places where everyone’s good to go. . . .

The focus group elaborated on the portrayal of special situations, the prevalence of the sexualisation of these places in films and the possibility that they may influence people’s expectations in real life. Christie and AC elaborated on these observations in the focus group:

Okay, like . . . you’re sitting down at a bar . . . having a drink. That’s kind of . . . automatically like, you’re here for a reason kind of thing . . . even if you’re out with your girlfriends, you know, it’s not like you’re just there to have fun like, in the movies. Like, you’re also there to maybe find like a sexual partner. . . .

AC: And like, you don’t just dance with your girlfriends when you’re out and about. You like, try and find a guy to dance with, and all that kind of stuff but kind of just says, I’m here to say yes to sex, sexual activity [emphasis added]. . . . I feel like that also plays a big role in like people’s understanding of sex here. . . . Because they probably bring that knowledge with them. . . . You know, like, if I wanna partake in sexual activity, then these places are probably a little easier to get it going [laughs].

While these situations were noted by most, expectations of acceptable behavior by people in these situations appeared to vary from person to person. The awareness of the unique rules of these special situations in tandem with the awareness of the differing socialization processes experienced by men and women may result in the opportunity for manipulation and exploitation.

This was further discussed in the focus group by Christie:

. . . a lot of guys will know that oh this is the way we’re socialized, this is the way things are. So, they might want to take advantage of it. Like, for example, the whole dancing
up on a girl, like, the thing is, in that situation, he know that if he like talks to her and like asked her, oh do you want to like dance or whatever, that she has the opportunity to say no. . . . Like they can get what they want. . . . [e]specially because girls are socialized not to. . . . [H]ow often do you see like, a girl do what a guy would do in that situation, it’s like push him away or like, be like, what the fuck are you doing!

**Gender differences and expectations.** Every participant noted the existence of gender differences and expectations in terms of sexual behavior and in turn in sexual consent expression and interpretation. Differences in how sexual consent was taught or presented to them in the past was noted by many participants. Many women noticed that the most salient lesson they took away was to remain safe and cautious in their sexual expression. During the focus group, AC spoke about noticing this emphasis on safety when she recollected how she was taught about sexual consent by her mother:

. . . I also feel like it’s because I’m female. . . . It was more of . . . a cautionary measure. . . . Just to be like, make your intent known. . . . Um… For your safety and for your enjoyment of the future . . . I don’t, like, if I had a brother, like, if my mom would say the same thing.

In addition to noticing gender differences in how sexual consent was taught, participants noted the prevalence of gender expectations influencing everything from who is expected to ask about sexual consent, how people relate to their own sexuality and how sexual consent is manifested.

Most participants explained that they expected men to be the ones to ask about whether consent is present. Participants were not necessarily consciously aware of this expectation (or they did not verbally acknowledge the expectation if so) but it was found to be prevalent in the
description of their experiences. One participant appeared to notice this expectation for the first
time during our interview and subsequently linked this behavioral expectation to the norms of heterosexuality. Jenny further explained:

I guess I have always thought of as like n-, actually interesting how it kinda of like in
terms of like, heterosexuality, how . . . it seems like more common for women to have, men have to get consent from women, as it does women getting consent from men. . . .

[J]t just seems to be, kind of like a norm . . . where, I don’t know, it’s so focused around
men needing to ask permission from women in order to do things when you know, the
exact same goes for women um, needing to ask permission from men as well.

Jenny thus seems to become aware of the behavioral norm in place and links it to heterosexuality, she also questions why the same norm is not applied to women. Some participants, however, were very much aware of this behavioral norm and had some specific reasons for why it was in place. As articulated by Marie:

So that’s why I feel like . . . it’s definitely on the men to ask because at the end of the
day, they kind of have that, whether they. . . should or not, they have that control over the situation. Whether it’s by force or just because of the dominance that they kind of like, emit, because they’re men. . . . Um, so, yeah, again, I don’t know if it’s necessarily fair. But I think, just, it’s just kind of in the back of your mind, where like, yeah, I would always expect the guy to ask first.

The expectation that men are the initiators of sexual consent in terms of the ones who ask and are, in general, the initiators of sexual activity came up multiple time during the interviews. During the focus group, Alex reflected on this expectation that is placed on men and described it in terms of a hidden feeling or duty.
And I think that sometimes there can be this sort of feeling. Um, that like, it’s sort of the duty of like, of a male partner to be like. . . .you know, *man up* [emphasis added], and like, make the move. . . . And just like go for it, that chick’s really hot and stuff like that.

Another common gender expectation articulated by both men and women participants was the idea that men are always consenting and are always interested in sexual activity. This expectation was articulated by both men and women. This belief is so prevalent that according to Arlet that it can lead to instances where men’s expression of non-consent is not taken seriously:

. . . [W]ith men expressing consent, I feel like it’s often not taken seriously by society. . . . [L]et’s say, uh, a woman wants to have sex with a man if that man were to say that he’s being um, approached by this woman he’s not interested in. . . . Probably a lot of guys would say, oh, you, you poor thing, it’s so hard for you having this woman try to have sex with you [mocking tone]

Another fairly common theme was the necessity or the expectation that women *play hard to get* to be desirable and/or that they require men to *jump through a few hoops* to gain intimacy. This observation was further expanded upon in the focus group by AC:

. . . I feel like the culture almost teaches women like it’s attractive to be a little bit resistant, like, playing hard to get. . . . Type deal. Like, that’s sexy, it makes him, makes you sexier, it makes him work harder for it. . . . And in the end it’ll be better.

Noting this behavioral expectation, a couple of participants added that this can lead men to *expect boundaries* to be in place and to potentially behave in aggressive ways to move passed them. As Arlet explained:
But . . . I don’t like that . . . the boundaries. . . . [T]hat women oft-- sometimes put up because it causes that um, question of sexual consent, that’s what, I feel like that’s why men are so aggressive sometimes. . . . Because they feel like these are token boundaries [emphasis added], they don’t actually mean anything. . . . They want you to push through and that’s where the confusion comes from.

Sarah also acknowledged the existence of this communication tendency and the possibility that due to its existence, non-consent signals have a risk of not being taken seriously or sincerely by sexual partners. As she pointed out . . .

And for girls… sometimes, you know, you’re just like a yes and a no . . . . You’re somewhere in between . . . and… maybe you’re saying a no [emphasis added] but the guy would be like, oh you’re just trying to play around with me . . .

It is of interest to note that Arlet did not cite any personal examples with token resistance, more so, he appeared to speculate about its occurrence. Sarah also did not speak about her personal experience with token resistance, more so she acknowledged that the belief of its existence could result in situations where a woman’s expression of no is not listened to.

A few participants also brought up women’s tendency to exhibit mixed messages to men in terms of their sexual desires and/or sexual interest: As explained by Terra:

From my experience . . . women um... some, unless it’s . . . flat out saying it. . . . They can give pretty mixed body signals. . . . I’ve got this one friend that, she just likes to toy around with, with giving off those signals because . . . it makes her feel powerful, wanted, you know, because it’s part about the chase . . . . And that’s wrong because then it kind of like . . . it kind of throws the whole concept of sexual consent out the window. . . . which is unfair and, kind of . . . hurting the whole feminist empowerment, you know?
In terms of communication style, most participants agreed that men seem to have less trouble being direct about expressing their sexual wants and needs and that women may take a more subtle or indirect approach especially in terms of expressing non-consent. This difference in style of communication and the reasons for why it may be in place was further elaborated on by Marie:

I feel like, um... if a guy doesn’t want, like something being done he would have no problem... pushing the girl off, or kind of being like, no. Whereas, women will tend to... wait and just keep being like, no... or, please stop or whatever, just very... it’s more of a gentle approach. . . . As opposed to... any of the close guy friends I have. . . . If a woman’s doing something to them that they’re not down for... it’s very simple, you just... take the person and be like no... or you... move their hand, or you... push them off, or whatever. . . . Whereas I think women express it kind of in this, again, I guess the fear of maybe saying something the wrong way [emphasis added]. . . I don’t think men are afraid necessarily, or have been put in situations where they have to be afraid. . .

In addition to the idea that the experience of fear may encourage women to adopt a gentle or indirect communication style when rejecting sexual advances, many women spoke about other social pressures that may influence their communication. A number of participants spoke about the avoidance of rejecting partners especially while in serious relationships due to a felt pressure to maintain harmony in relationships and/or to be nice. Rachel recollected previous relationships where she had engaged in sexual acts to please her partners despite not wanting to herself. She reflected:
Those aren’t like, the good times. . . . Like the happy ones. . . . I just . . . when . . . think about specific times where I’ve been like, this is because you’re like really being adamant about it and I’m . . . not really interested. . . . But it will like get rid of the situation [emphasis added]. . . . Of like, you, like, you aggressively [emphasis added] trying to have sex with me.

Mark contrasted men’s and women’s expression of non-consent and related the differing styles to women’s desire not to appear rude and their concern for other people’s feelings.

I think . . . men if we didn’t give consent. . . . Um, definitely, just leave and not be involved. . . . Whereas . . . I was thinking about some examples of some female friends of mine. . . . They like, don’t want to be rude but at the same time, don’t really wanna get involved in that. . . . And it’s kind of a difficult situation. Whereas, I find that guys generally don’t mind as much [slight laughter].

R: Okay, they’re not so concerned with people’s feelings maybe? Or…

MARK: Yeah, to put it bluntly.

Fear of hurting people’s feelings was another reason cited by participants as making the expression of non-consent more difficult and at times, preventing honest feelings from being expressed, explained Rachel, “[y]ou don’t want to like, hurt someone else’s feelings. You try to do it in a more subtle manner.” The act of sexual rejection was also pointed out to be incongruent with the social role of woman. Explained Rachel, “[a]nd it’s like. . . . [E]specially for women, it’s like a thing when you’re not supposed to like disappoint people or shoot people down.”

**Gender differences in message transmission.** Participants were asked how they would describe sexual consent and non-consent to a little cousin and whether their teaching style would
be different depending on whether the cousin was a girl or a boy. While three participants said they would describe sexual consent in the exact same manner, regardless of gender, most participants said they would describe consent in a different manner depending on the gender of the child.

All of the men explained that they would encourage their female cousin to be more direct and assertive. John explained that while he would describe sexual consent in a similar manner to both boys and girls if he were elaborating on sexual consent and focusing on its consequences, differences would emerge, “if I was talking to a female cousin . . . be like be forceful and assertive” When asked to elaborate on this answer, John explained, “stereotypically . . . females are portrayed as weaker . . . and they’re kind of . . . like they don’t say anything. . . so I, I guess like . . . be very clear, concise and assertive.” Arlet also agreed he would teach consent differently, he explained:

I would encourage the girl to put up, more boundaries . . . I would probably tell the girl that younger boys . . . are only thinking about sex and they’re not thinking straight. . . And really be aware of that and take that into consideration when you’re giving uh, sex, sexual consent. . . . That, often they’ll lie or, do, manipulative things to get sexual consent. . . . [w]ith a boy I would, uh, tell him . . . . Make sure you’re, uh, comfortable with the situation . . . . And, pay attention to the, the consent of the other partner. . . . Um, and, make sure you’re making wise decisions. . . . And don’t let the, don’t let your reasoning be compromised by, by anything.

Mark believed that he would transmit different messaging to the genders particularly based on the expression of non-consent. After he explained that men have less trouble leaving a situation when they are not interested in sexual activity while women’s concern with not
appearing rude may keep them in undesirable situations, he elaborated, “I would recommend to a girl to just kind of take the . . . stereotypical . . . guy’s route and just kinda leave if you don’t want to.” He continued, “[y]ou might hurt the person’s feelings but if you’re in a situation that you’re not comfortable with. . . . I mean, then, what can you do?”

In addition to differences in the content of the description, some participants believed they would use a different tone in their approach depending on who they were speaking with, as Sarah described, “for a litt- for a guy cousin, I would be like don’t do it, like, you’re going to suffer from the law consequences. . . . Watch yourself [emphasis added]” Whereas for a girl cousin she explained that she would use a more soft approach, “and just tell them . . . you just need to speak out, and it’s not your fault and . . . be clever about it.” Interestingly, it appears that Sarah’s language is anticipatory of a sexual assault. Seemingly, she warns the male cousin of legal consequences of his behavior and she encourages the girl not to blame herself (anticipating victimhood and self-blame) while also advising her to be clever about her sexual behavior. Broadly speaking, boy cousins were warned about the consequences of their behavior and to be sure of what they were doing. There was some emphasis placed on them accurately interpreting their partners’ consent signs as well.

**Gaps in knowledge and experience.** While a number of participants identified themselves as sexually competent and knowledgeable in terms of the understanding of sexual consent, a number of gaps in knowledge and experience emerged during the interviews.

A few participants mentioned wishing they had been taught about sexual consent at a different time in their lives when it was more relevant to their life experiences. As explained by Chloe:
I wish I’d been taught more when it was more applicable to me. But when I was taught sex Ed I was like 13, 14. And, for me I hadn’t even kissed anyone, so. But like when I actually got to the stage where I was 16 or 17 and I was like, the consent part was more of an issue. I don’t really think I got much information about that and I wish I had because… I knew how to have safe sex. but the actual consent of safe sex. the actual consent part, I really don’t feel like I was taught very well.

A few participants also mentioned a lack of awareness in terms of resources available at UBC campus for sexual health related matters. A couple spoke about incidents that they did not identify as sexual assault or rape but that they did not identify as consensual either. These in between experiences left the participants nonetheless troubled and in need of support. Chloe recalled having sexual intercourse while she was extremely intoxicated and unable to consent. She did not know where to turn to for assistance at the time. She explained that if a similar incident were to unfold today, she still wouldn’t know where to turn:

And then you’re fine but like, emotionally like, it’s kind of weird and because the only thing the only place I’d know to go, is the place where if I felt like I’d been raped. But apart from that, I actually still, I don’t even know where I’d go. Apart from my friends I don’t know professionally where I’d go. I don’t know of that service.

As Chloe went more into the story, she explained “[a]nd I mean, if I had taken that to the police or, whatever, it could have been conceived as rape um, but for some reason, I, I didn’t like do that.” Chloe also discussed the lack of validation she received from the people around her when coming to terms with the experience, “people around me were just like, ‘oh, you were so drunk last night, you got with this guy!’ nobody was like, ‘are you okay?’” She also explained the experience in terms of “the biggest mistake I’ve ever made”
**UBC sexual consent messaging.** Many participants were appreciative of UBC’s sexual consent messaging campaign and said that UBC had done a good job of raising awareness on issues. That said, a number of participants suggested changes and refinements to current sexual consent messaging. As elaborated on by Rachel:

> I feel like UBC needs to revamp their like sexual awareness and consent program. . . . [T]hey need something new. Because there is like a lot of grey areas . . . I think that people need to be better educated on . . . What consent is and then this approach isn’t working . . . and people are just like walking by it and it’s like, not even there.

In addition to addressing grey areas and changing UBC’s approach to sexual consent, other ideas mentioned included diversifying representation in consent posters to target multiple groups. As explained by Arlet in regards to consent posters around campus, “for me, it’s like very traditional . . . It might be nice to have like, two guys, or two girls or, whatever… else.” John pointed to the fact that UBC is an “international community” and that the relevancy of sexual consent messaging and one’s familiarity with messages may vary based on a person’s cultural background. He pointed to the fact that in some East Asian cultures, particularly Japanese, “. . . sex . . . is more . . . considered taboo to talk about.” Sexual consent as a concept may be more or less openly discussed depending on one’s cultural background.

Some participants suggested addressing other forms of sexual consent expression beyond verbal communication to be more reflective of real world negotiation. Terra explained:

> . . . I do get a . . . very strong sense of . . . that whole like ask and response. Like that whole very blatant; *do you want to have sex, yes or no.* [emphasis added] . . . I would think maybe that I would change that and focus a little more on that whole . . . the way,
A couple of participants spoke about the tone of UBC’s messaging and how the one currently in place may alienate certain groups. John suggested toning down the aggressiveness of UBC’s messaging to ensure that heterosexual men remain receptive:

. . . [S]ome of these ad messages are like pretty aggressive. . . I think some people could dismiss those as like, ‘oh, this is just a bunch of like, stupid feminists’ or something like that. . . I think sometimes, these messages are dismissed as being like, ‘this is like really stupid, super aggressive and like, just a bunch of fucking like people who wanna get attention and’. . . so, I don’t know. If somehow [sighs], they weren’t as aggressive maybe?

John’s strong response is noteworthy as it demonstrates that messaging may be dismissed based on tone and that it may unintentionally elicit anger in targeted groups. Acknowledging that heterosexual men may be adverse or alienated from sexual consent discussions at UBC, the focus group discussed how to include heterosexual men in the consent discussion in an inclusive, non-threatening way. AC included her thoughts on UBC’s messaging:

Um, so, it needs to… be inclusive and understanding and also . . . I don’t know what the word is, like, open [emphasis added] enough for them to feel comfortable talking about it, especially heterosexual men . . . I feel they’re the ones that are, in my personal opinion, the most offended by the conversation even though it’s not supposed to be offensive [laughs] to them.

Ideas generated by the focus group included asking men to lead sexual assault and sexual consent discussions and promoting conversation amongst one another.
Some participants felt that more could be done to promote awareness and education efforts on the topic of consent and sexual assault. Referencing the sexual assaults that took place at UBC in 2013, Marie suggested using the incidences as a way to promote further dialogue on the topic of sexual consent:

I think the university- not just UBC but universities in general, should be . . . promoting that as well and being like look, like if any of you guys like, given everything that happening in the news, if anybody’s been like, here’s where you can go [emphasis added] and just kind of blasting that out there. . . . Um, and kind of using- I mean the rapes that happened last year were just like . . . a backboard to kind of be like; this is something that happened so it’s even in our local community . . . and then, yeah, just . . . promote the discussion on it. I think is really important.

Lastly, some students felt as though UBC’s messaging was not applicable to them at all. Mark believed that due to his good judgment, consent messaging from UBC was less relevant or applicable to his experiences.

Um, yeah. Definitely. I mean, in my experiences . . . I don’t, I haven’t been in… or I don’t know any of my friends who’ve been in a situation where consent was not given and, maybe still like…sexual acts or something like that. . . . [A]s far as I know it doesn’t seem like that huge of an issue. . . . Because, people have good judgement for that kind of thing. . . . But, I can imagine definitely um, for some people it’s more of an issue because their judgement isn’t as good, or…

The focus group expressed the concern that UBC’s messaging was not reaching the right targets, Alex explained that it could be a matter of “preaching to the choir” in terms of who is listening to the messaging.
Wanting social change. In addition to ideas in terms of changing UBC’s messaging on consent, many participants spoke about a longing for social change.

A couple of participants said they wished that they had been taught about consent earlier in their lives, one person spoke about wishing they had the messaging later. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction for the way social norms currently were but also felt confined by them as explained by Rachel:

And it would be great if you could just turn around to someone and be like you know, I’m not interested. I’d really appreciate if you would step away but social norms and cues, I think, prevent people from doing that.

A number of participants expressed a desire to change how sexual consent was taught to them and what aspects of sexual consent were focused on. For example, Chloe stressed how she wished she learned more about the emotional aspects of sexual consent rather than just primarily being taught about the physical side of safe sex and its importance.

Your parents, my par-, my family didn’t really teach me about it. . . .[W]e were . . . kind of just beaten with, well, we know you’re going to have sex, so, use a condom . . . .Like, your actual emotional health was less thought about as opposed to your physical like; don’t get pregnant, don’t get an STI, aspect as well. Which I think is equal, very important as well.

Thus, it appears as though a crucial dimension of sexual health education was left out of Chloe’s sexual education. It also illustrates that people’s sexual education backgrounds coming to university may be diverse.
Relationship. In addition to the ways in which participants’ social world shaped their understanding of sexual consent, they also spoke about the importance of different relationship variables and the potential for making assumptions about sexual consent while in relationship.

**Relationship factors:** One of the most influential factors for participants in their perception and expression of sexual consent was the relationship that they were in. Sexual consent in new relationships was negotiated and perceived differently compared to long term relationships and one night stands or hookups. Each type of relationship had a specific set of behavioral norms and expectations.

Many participants spoke about the importance of relationship stage in determining their sexual consent expression. New relationships tended to develop with a *testing the waters* phase that was characterized by people exercising caution regarding reading their partner’s body signals as well as emphasizing the importance of assessing for the presence of sexual consent even through the use of euphemistic language. As people became more comfortable with each other, consent expression tended to change. Rachel summarized this transformation in consent expression in the following excerpt:

> ... I think in the beginning, there’s always a lot of that ... do you want to do this? Like, is this good? ... Should I put a condom on? Kind of stuff. ... There’s more asking, and ... confirming and ... testing the waters and... Seeing, kind of learning, like what’s okay for your partner and what isn’t... And when you’re farther on, and you’ve ... learned those thing and you know more about each other, and you know where your comfort lies. ... Then it’s easier to go without asking all the time.
All the men interviewed for this study also very much emphasized the importance of ensuring sexual consent was present especially while engaged in a new relationship or in a one-night stand or hookup. John elaborated on the reasoning behind this difference:

... [I]n a fling or a hook-up . . . you’ve just met this person . . . So, I think it’s super important to . . . get that consent ‘cause you don’t know this person. You don’t know how they’re going to react . . . [W]hat they’re actually thinking . . . you know, moods or reactions so... definitely. Very different.

As relationships progress, shifting from shorter term to longer term, expression and interpretation of sexual consent tends to change as does its meaning and its emphasis. Some participants explained this difference in sexual consent expression as a product of increased trust and understanding in the developing relationship as mentioned by Willow:

... [W]hen you’re in a long term relationship, again, you’ve . . . created a more stable emotional connection with your partner so you understand them more. . . . Versus at the beginning . . . you’re still looking, you’re trying to understand them. You’re trying to feel how they feel, think how they think so, it’s very different.

Long term relationships were characterized by comfort and the establishment of trust and safety. For many participants this led to easier expression of preferences and wants. As expressed by Alex during the focus group:

... [W]hen you’re in a relationship and it’s sort of become like . . . part of the routine or something that you’re used to doing, usually . . . you know your partner’s comfortable enough with you to say like no, I don’t, I’m not comfortable with this right now . . . or like yay, let’s do this! [laughter]
For some participants, the progression of a relationship may lead to a deeper understanding of their partner’s subtle sexual consent signals and an expectation that their own subtle signals are in turn focused on and understood. As explained by Marie:

...[I]f you’re in a long term relationship, you should be kind of focusing on . . . the details of the person’s personality and . . . what they’re comfortable with and stuff. . . . I definitely think it’s more on . . . what’s unsaid versus what’s said in a long term relationship that makes a difference for consent.

Assumption making: Long term relationships were also characterized by the potential for making assumptions. Specifically, the potential for making assumptions about one’s partner’s future behaviors and their willingness to engage in sexual activity. At times, simply being in a long term relationship seemed to result in assuming consent was present at all times regardless of whether it had been specifically discussed in the moment at hand. In the focus group, AC recalled a story where she was surprised by her partner’s sexual rejection as she just “assumed” that he would be in the mood. John spoke candidly about the danger of assumption making in long term relationships and its potential consequences. He related a story of having intoxicated sex with a previous long-term partner who later claimed that the act was non-consensual.

I think it can get mixed up and that’s where like, in my previous experience that I was talking about earlier, that was in a long term relationship. . . . Uh, so, those things tend to happen more where . . . you assume because you’ve been together so long. . . . Consent is kind of like applied almost all the time, or you think you know this person well enough to know what consent is.
This assumption that consent is applied almost all the time based on the mere fact that a relationship is in place was illustrated by Mark when asked about the differences in consent expression in a hookup situation versus a long term relationship:

Like, at a party hookup . . . you probably don’t know the person as well. . . . So you have to be more careful and make sure that they want to [laughs]. . . . Whereas like in a long term relationship, it’s pretty clear that the person does or would because um, they’re still with you.

**Relationship role expectations:** Along with the different manifestations of sexual consent, many of the participants spoke of the unique *role expectations* that may accompany being in a long term relationship. Many of the women interviewed mentioned noticing a pressure or an expectation to have sexual relations with their partner based on their status as partner or girlfriend. At times this expectation led participants to experience a split between their personal wants and desires and their expression of sexual consent. Rachel explained this divergence between wanting and consent:

. . . [I]t can become somewhat of an issue sometimes in relationships where I know I was saying that you can like roll over and shrug it off, but there’s also been people who are like less kind in that way and they’re kind of like, awwww like, I want to do it [pleading tone]. And they will just like, you’ll be like aw, fine because they can, the boyfriend will get annoying, and you’re like *I’ll just do it because you want to, not because I want to* [emphasis added] and that can be a grey area . . .

In the focus group, participants discussed at length the pressure some women experience to engage in sexual activity to maintain a relationship despite it going against their own internal wants or needs. As explained by Christie during the focus group:
...[T]he non-consent of... a long term relationship is a little more murky, I feel as well. . . . Because, I mean, you’re also like pressured just to like, okay, well, I’m... their partner... [S]ome people are worried that if I don’t do whatever to them, they might break up with me, and, that’s their thing. You don’t want that. So, there’s a lot of people like trying to hold to their significant others... through sex, or... sexual acts... As a way to stay in the relationship... .

Thus, while a number of participants noted that while in longer term relationships they felt more comfortable expressing their wants and needs, a sense of obligation or role expectation was also present. This sense was especially present for some of the participants. Chloe commented that despite feeling a sense of comfort with her current partner, she believed that saying no to him sexually could feel more difficult than refusing a random stranger:

I actually notice that a lot more now that I... have a boyfriend. Like, obviously he totally understands when I don’t want to have sex with him... but, I guess it kind of expected that... we’re supposed to have sex and then sometimes I’m not really in the mood or I don’t really want to and then I don’t... say no very often, I, whereas I guess, if it’s a random stranger or like a one night thing, I’d, I’m a lot more prone to be very verbal if ever, if I say no, which is a bit bizarre, I guess... I don’t know why, it seems silly ‘cause like, if anything, my boyfriend would be more understanding...

This sense of obligation or role expectation producing a split between the experience of wanting and consenting also resulted at times in complex feelings for participants. Chloe explained that despite feeling as though her sexual decisions were her own, at times she experiences a lingering feeling of guilt for refusing her partner. She pointed to the paradox that
though she identifies as sexually agentic, or is expected to be, lingering feelings of guilt remain when she refuses sexual activity:

. . . I kind of feel bad . . . for not saying yes, which is silly ‘cause at the end of the day it’s my, it should be my choice and I should want to do it. . . . But if I say no, I do kind of feel bad about it.

Interestingly, none of the men interviewed spoke about personal experiences of splits between wanting and consenting, when asked explicitly about whether he had noticed any differences between the two, Mark replied, “[u]m… No, not really. ‘Cause I think, if somebody doesn’t want to, they won’t give their consent.”

**Identity factors:** In addition to social world, and relationship factors, participants also spoke about how their personal identity influenced their understanding of sexual consent. In particular, their level of self-confidence as well as their cultural upbringing and identity. They also spoke about the importance of listening to their inner selves when making sexual consent decisions.

**Consent and self-confidence.** A number of participants linked their expression of sexual consent to their level of self-confidence and their level of self-development. Terra highlighted the struggle young women may experience in identifying their own wants and needs during their late teens:

. . . I think sometimes it’s harder for women because um… or especially my age because we’re still kind of… figuring it out . . . who we are in life. . . . [A]nd it’s hard to know what exactly we want. . . .

A number of women linked their sexual consent expression and their ability to assert their wants and needs to their level of development and level of self-confidence. Upon reflecting on how her
sexual behavior has changed over the last few years, Rachel elaborated on the root of these differences and how they have been facilitated by her current relationship:

And I think that helps with your consent. Like you kinda . . . know what you want. And . . . how to . . . stand up for yourself kind of, and like, just like, when you’re like is this going to be good this is gonna to be bad and it can just be both then move around. . . .

And now, we’ve met each other, we both, we know what we want and how we want it and like… So, it’s really easy to communicate and that makes a big difference I think. Versus like 15 year old me versus 24 year old me being like what do I want? How much am I willing to accept? Like, how much will I take? Will I feel like how I’m uncomfortable I’m willing to feel. That kind of stuff.

Rachel thus links how she communicates sexual consent to her level of self-awareness, knowledge of personal boundaries and level of confidence. Sexual communication is facilitated due to her partner’s similar level of development

**Cultural influencers.** A few participants spoke about their cultural backgrounds and how these backgrounds impacted both their relationship to sex and sexuality and their expression of sexual consent. Sarah spoke about her personal cultural norms and how these cultural norms restricted her ability to express verbal consent. She explains that in her culture, saying yes to sexual activity directly may be considered to be a bit strange or abnormal:

. . . for girls to really directly say yes. It would be, it would be a weird move. Most of the time, you’re just like oh, *um, I don’t know maybe* [emphasis added], instead of… Yeah, totally! [*laughs*]

R: So, there’s kind of a cultural expectation to be not as…

Sarah: Forward, straightforward.
Rachel spoke about being raised by Dutch parents and how her parents’ more liberally minded view of sex and sexuality influenced her views and behaviors.

I think I grew up with really liberal parents in that way, where, they weren’t impressed with the sex education system here, they’re from Holland and they told me that like, everyone is more liberal and open about sexuality there. . . . You can just like talk about it, it doesn’t matter. And I really been in imparted with that sense of like freeness with sexuality and like, or like openness with talking about it.

Chloe spoke about finding Canada to be more conservative in regards to sexuality in comparison to the UK specifically in terms of the occurrence of sexual activity being more common among both genders, “girls and guys are actually quite equal. . . Whereas here, I feel like it’s not as big of a deal. I still think it still happens but I, I haven’t noticed the culture as, nearly as sexual . . .”

**Listening to self.** Many participants spoke about the importance of listening to themselves and being true to themselves when making sexual consent decisions. Participants appeared to be guided by an inner knowing or voice that they could choose to listen to or choose to ignore. There was repeated mention of fear of betraying themselves in the moment.

Sometimes their internal voice seemed to be split telling them different messages, giving rise to confusion. When talking about being in long term relationships and not feeling in the mood, Marie talked about her inner monologue:

[S]o you kind of end up letting yourself get into it a little bit but you’re not 100% in there because you’re just confused about like, what’s going on and like what part of you is telling you yes [emphasis added], and what part of you is telling you no [emphasis added]
This inner voice or inner knowing can be thrown off course by the opinions or pressures of other people. Marie talked about the experience of social pressure and how it can cause people to question themselves or to question previously strongly held sexual boundaries.

You start to be like, okay, but why am I saying no? Or, is it really fair for me to be? Or, like, you know. . . . You start to like, question um, like all those things that you were very firm. . . about before. So, I think it just kind of creates that whole, where then it’s like, oh, this is kind of blurry, like it’s a grey area. *I don’t know if I want to do this anymore* [emphasis added]

Many women insinuated a struggle between listening to their own wants and needs and honouring what society (or their partner) expected them to be. Terra illustrated a split between listening to oneself vs. societal expectations when discussing why women may exhibit mixed messages.

And we even try to convince ourselves sometimes that this is what we want or personality wise you know, *you don’t want to be mean* [emphasis added]. . . you, want to *give a nice guy a chance* [emphasis added]. . . But, in the end, you know that, you don’t want to go there sexually.

Wanting to give *a nice guy a chance* and *not wanting to appear mean* at times seemed to be at odds with a woman’s own sexual desires.

**The Negotiation of Sexual Consent**

How students negotiated sexual consent was best explained by the process itself; the strategies students employed, how communication took place in the moment as well as after the fact justifications.
**Process of consent:** There was a distinction in terms of how participants conceptualized and defined sexual consent and how the consent process was described to actually unfold in real life. Most participants described sexual consent as a *process unfolding over time* rather than as a in the moment decision. As explained further by Rachel:

... If you’re like talking to someone a lot and like you have like that spark with them... You can kind of feel it building up to that... You know, you’ll like make excuses to spend time together and like spend time alone and maybe like start with the like, the brush on a knee and then they don’t, like, pull their leg away... So, it’s like this, like, subtle, non-verbal conversation that will grow into the like, the whole thing usually...

While engaged in the consent process, participants mentioned experiencing a variety of affective states including: *feeling vulnerable, feeling present* and physiological states such as arousal or *being turned on* among many others. Sometimes these affective states were not clear cut and were difficult for participants to pinpoint. Participants spoke about the experience of feeling *mixed emotions* and/or *uncertainty* while engaged in the consent process. As explained by Sarah, “And for girls... sometimes, you know, you’re just like a yes and a no... You’re somewhere in between.”

**Consent strategies:** In addition to describing sexual consent as a process unfolding over time, participants also spoke about the adoption of certain behavioural strategies in the process of sexual consent negotiation. These sexual consent strategies were used to initiate or halt the process of sexual activity as well as to manage individual risks and fears.

**Using consent strategies.** When negotiating sexual consent, students tend to employ a variety of strategies to navigate their way through a sexual interaction. Participants used these strategies intentionally to achieve a certain aim.
Many different strategies were discussed by participants. One such strategy was discussed by Arlet. Recognizing how potentially “unsexy” talking about consent can be, he spoke about the importance of emitting confidence to a partner by using direct and forward language.

... [I]f I was to ask a lady... like, can you sleep with me? ... Like, please! [pleading voice] That’s uh, that’s not a positive way to ask. Um, uh... A better way to ask would be more, more forward with what you want. ... And, and see her reaction from there. ...

Direct. ...

R: less like a question and more like a,

Arelt: Statement.

Participants also spoke about using last resort strategies often as a way to stop sexual action when it had escalated beyond a certain point. Chloe spoke about how she usually expresses her non-consent by disengaging from her partner or by showing no via her body language first, “it might take me a while before I actually verbally say no... whereas my body’s saying no earlier...” She further explained that “when it’s physical, I’d say guys ignore it... until... you say verbally no.” If these signals are ignored, she talked about using words as a type of last resort strategy to stop sexual action. This is explained in terms of a previous sexual encounter:

... He wasn’t pushing me but I let him do stuff, we didn’t have sex, but I let him do stuff with me. And I really, like, the whole time was like not wanting it... I didn’t say no [emphasis added] but the only reason I said no in the end was because he kept working it towards sex where I was like, that was when it kind of got to the stage.
Similarly, Mark noted that when people use no it’s usually as a last resort as primarily ‘no’ will be expressed non-verbally, when discussing non-consent, “[t]hat’s more of a body language thing, if someone has to explicitly say no, then you’re being a little pushy, clearly [laughs].”

**Managing risks and fears.** In addition to various affective states, participants also spoke about the risks and fears that may come up for them while engaged in the consent process. Similarly, they may employ behavioural strategies to manage these risks and fears. One fear centered on the reluctance to ask for consent at all for fear of killing the mood. As explained by Arlet:

> I find words usually de-escalate the sexual situation. . . . I find, well . . . I’m . . . a heterosexual so when it comes to women I find that uh, if you are asking permission. . . . It’s, it’s not a turn on.

A number of participants reiterated the idea that being direct and asking about consent is not considered to be a turn on or sexy. The risk of breaking the mood may result in no sexual relations taking place at all as explained by Sarah, “. . . you know, if the girl is feeling it and you suddenly break out the question [emphasis added], she might not be feeling it.”

The importance of preserving the mood may lead participants to adopt certain behaviors and expect these behaviors to be manifested in their partners. For example, Terra emphasized the importance of being smooth and subtle when addressing consent in verbal communication.

> I think you’re a lot more likely to be engaged with it . . . if it’s in a very smooth and, you know, underlining . . . question but . . . when it’s all of a sudden just kind of like hey, do you want to have sex with me? [emphasis added] . . . Then it’s kind of being put in the
spotlight where you don’t want to be put in the spotlight. . . . I just, I think that kind of ruins the mood, you know.

This concern about preserving the mood, may lead people to use euphemisms to ask for consent or not be explicit in terms of what behavior they expect to take place. Alternatively, it may lead to people to not address consent at all and to act without asking as described by Christie in the following excerpt,

> When people say *oh, let’s see where this goes, or see how the night’s going to end* [emphasis added] that sort of thing, it’s more of like, we’ll be doing stuff and hopefully, if she or if he is not into it, they’ll tell me to stop, as opposed to like, starting to like talk about it first and then doing it.

This concern about preserving the mood appeared to be greatly linked to the importance of sexual partners needing to appear knowledgeable and confident in their sexual interactions at all times. This point was emphasized by Terra where she spoke about the risks that can arise when partners appear awkward or unsure:

> . . . [T]here’s nothing that kills the mood more than just awkward, unsure . . . . Because when you feel awkward then you start to feel self-conscious and when you feel self-conscious you don’t feel confident and then when you don’t feel confident then . . . the whole like sexiness kinda goes away . . . and you start to question things and you overthink it and it just becomes a hassle.

In addition to fear of ruining the mood, another prevalent risk and fear arising during the process of sexual consent was the fear of rejection. The fear of rejection and how it can impact men and women differently is articulated by Arlet.
Guys have the fear of rejection that you feel like as a man, since, often men . . . take the initiative when it comes to sex. You have to leave a fear of rejection, out the door. But women also have . . . I think even greater fears of rejection. . . . So, it’s so when you meet . . . with that fear of rejection, when you meet someone who isn’t giving consent. . . . That can be a huge . . . it can be a very hurtful. . . . And people react to the hurt differently. . . . And that’s very difficult for women because there’s still the physical fear that women are often less able to handle themselves if it physically escalates. Like, if a man were to attack her, she can’t protect herself as well as a man could, so. . . . The fear is . . . a big part.

In addition to fear of rejection and the possible threat of physical violence that may result from rejecting your partner, the focus group discussed other common risks and fears that may arise during the process of sexual consent. The group discussed the consequences of engaging in sexual behavior in general and looked at the physical consequences such as STIs and pregnancy as well as social retribution. AC felt as though these consequences weighed more heavily on women:

. . . Whereas men like, you know, can walk away from it, without having as much, I guess, circumstances, consequences. . . . Um, pregnancy is a big one. . . . I feel like reputation’s a big one. . . . I feel like we’re moving away from that as a culture but you know it’s still there. . . . [T]he stigmatizing and like slut shaming and things like that. . . . Whereas you know like it’s pretty much the total opposite with most heterosexual men,

Other participants also highlighted the social consequences of rejection and the differences in meaning this rejection may provoke for men and women. Marie elaborated that men and women may contend with different fears around consent refusal that centre around
social status and reputation. She pointed out that for women social retribution may be a consequence for saying no but for men, their sexual refusal may call into question their very gender identity:

. . . . I think there’s a kind of a fear to it to saying no [emphasis added] on both parties. Because the woman obviously doesn’t want to seem like . . . a prude and there’s that kind of thing that comes off, like, well, you’re no fun [emphasis added]. . . . But then the guy as well. If he’s genuinely not un[comfortable] then that kind of . . . diminishes his masculinity where . . . they . . . feel that that’s . . . kind of downplays their masculinity because . . . men are supposed to like, love sex and be sex gods and . . . all these kinds of things.

Marie is articulating a linkage that may exist between men’s sexual behavior as well as their gender identity.

**Communicating sexual consent:** Participants expressed and interpreted sexual consent in a variety of ways. As already discussed, this expression varied on relationship type. Participants explained the various ways by which they read their partner’s consent, non-consent as well as how they personally expressed consent and non-consent.

**Reading sexual consent:** In terms of reading their partner’s consent, participants used a variety of cues and signals. A common indication cited was noticing their partner’s active participation in the process including physical cues such as touching and rubbing back. As described by Rachel, “usually it’s not a spoken thing. . . he’ll be like, rubbing your hands down you or like touching you on your back or like something, or . . . all those things like. . .” Rachel and Sarah also drew attention to the importance of the manner in which an action was done could be indicative of consent. As described by Rachel, “the way that he’s like, kissing me or
something like that, would be like, this is what you want now and I’m not like, pressuring you into it. . .”

Many women spoke about just an implicit knowing or just being able to tell based on physical cues. Explained Chloe, “usually . . . you can just kind of like tell in the moment.” In addition to active participation, she mentioned excited breathing. Jenny noticed the tendency for her partners to become more aggressive in their actions. Sarah commented that since “Most of the time, the partner is making the action, so. . . . I wouldn’t really think about getting their consent because if they’re doing it, they want to do it more than I do [laughs]”

Arlet and John spoke about the importance of focusing on their partners’ body language. Arlet spoke about paying attention to his partner’s physical cues and physiological signs. “So, the best way is to really pay attention to . . . how . . . she’s feeling or . . . can you tell she’s turned on. . . . Is she wet. . . . Is there other signs that . . . she’s into the situation.” He also commented that often women may not say anything if they are uncomfortable with a situation and it is, therefore, especially important to pay attention to their body cues. John spoke about observing whether his partner is reciprocating actions and paying attention to whether she’s initiating activity. He also mentioned paying attention to his partner’s presence.

Mark said that he can tell when a woman is expressing consent if she agrees to go somewhere private or back to yours, he explained, “that’s definitely a form of consent, I think. . . . Like, they, they know what’s involved.”

**Reading sexual non-consent:** In terms of reading their partner’s non-consent, a couple of the women participants said that they had never had male short term partners express non-consent so they were not sure what that might look like. Some common answers included physically backing away, or disengaging, vocalizing phrases such as; not being in the mood, not
feeling well, not feeling it, or feeling sad. Terra spoke about noticing unreciprocated smiles, or an abrupt change in topic of conversation. Overall, she noted that a sense of awkwardness or a lack of flow in conversation could be interpreted as a negative sign. Other participants noticed an abrupt change in physical action such as a partner going from kissing to hugging.

John and Arlet spoke about noticing if their partner has turned cold or less responsive. John commented that in addition to noticing a lack of physical engagement he may notice whether she’s “mentally there as well.” In addition, he mentioned paying attention to vocal sounds and talkativeness. “Like . . . not speaking. . . . or not speaking very much. . . Um, I would consider that . . . a sign of something is not right. . .” He also mentioned verbal indicators such as “don’t” or “stop” as being clear indicators of non-consent. Mark noticed cues such as breaking or lacking eye contact, pulling away or ditching you. He commented that most women will only verbalize the word “no” as a last resort and that body language usually suffices in providing enough information.

Expressing sexual consent: In terms of expressing their own sexual consent common answers included eye contact, bodily contact such as shoulder and knee touches. Terra mentioned playful hitting and other “contact with the body briefly but not like, intimately” and giggling or laughter to display ease and comfort. Jenny and Terra mentioned flirting. Many participants personalized their answer, explaining their unique preferences for expression, explained Chloe, “if they’re initiating. . . To be honest I don’t really verbalize it. . . I mean, most people don’t ask when you’re kind of doing stuff.” She also reflected that she has not always considered in the moment if she is consenting or not. Rachel talked about using positive body language entailing being open, suggestive, and touching back. If there is not rejection at play, it is her way of saying yes. Chloe spoke about consent generally being non-verbal and usually
looking like her *going along with it* unless it’s a rejection. Sarah agreed with this answer and clarified that for kissing, the verbal expression of consent does not often come up, for sexual intercourse however “most of the guys would actually pause, and be like ‘are you sure?’ or just . ‘. . you want to do this?’ Or, ‘you don’t want to do this?’ . . .” In terms of how she says yes if they have asked her, she explained, “you know, you’re just like ‘ha ha ha’ and that basically means ‘okay, sure’ [laughs].” Willow explained that she is typically asked by her partner, “would you like to?” or, “are you ready?” and will respond with a verbal “yes.”

Marie distinguished her consent behaviors from previous short term relationship experiences whereby she was more likely to be *point blank, direct* and *verbal* “okay, we’re going to have sex or, we’re going to do this or we’re going to whatever” in comparison to her current more serious relationship, whereby she incorporates more body language cues. John spoke about expressing consent with a *mix of body language, physical contact* and “I guess . . . words and ideas associated with, you know, sexual actions.” He also stressed the importance of *tone of voice* as indicative of consent rather than just the content of words. Arlet and Mark spoke about *moving forward* with sexual action or *escalating action* as a sign of their consent.

**Expressing sexual non-consent:** Personal expressions of non-consent included physical expressions such as *backing away, pushing partner away, not reciprocating physical actions, physically distancing yourself, shaking your head, withdrawing, physical rigidity, being passive* and *avoiding eye contact* and *not engaging*. In addition to physically disengaging, Chloe explained that at times she may mentally check out as well, “. . . It’s kind of like I disassociate myself from the situation and I zone out which is silly again ‘cause I, I shouldn’t be there . . . if I don’t want to be there.” Chloe explained that the first way she expresses non-consent is through her body but that she has noticed men usually ignore this physical no and she therefore may need
to verbally say it. Willow spoke about a nervous eye twitch she gets that expresses uncertainty that her partner picks up on, “a fidget means I’m uncertain so . . . He knows me so he knows that what that means.”

Common phrases used to express non-consent: “I don’t feel like it”, “I’m not feeling it”, “I’m feeling sick”, “not tonight”, “let’s do something else” and “no.”

Broadly speaking, most consent communication reported by participants relied heavily on non-verbal cues and some of these cues appeared to be uniquely personal. Noticing this tendency, Rachel commented, “[y]eah, I would think that probably something that helps . . . if you and your partner cue things the same way. You can . . . read each other better and you understand each other better than with someone who is not that way.”

The final way that participants negotiated sexual consent was through after the fact justifications and explanations of their behavior and actions. This final section is focused on how participants explained the impact of alcohol on sexual consent and after the fact positive and negative sexual consent experiences.

**Explanations and justifications:** In addition to describing sexual consent as a process unfolding over time that incorporated various behavioural strategies and communication methods, participants also described sexual consent in terms of after the fact explanations and justifications. In particular they spoke about the impacts of how alcohol use impacted the process of consent and what made a sexual consent experience positive or negative.

**Drug and Alcohol use:** The majority of participants interviewed said that they believed alcohol could influence the expression and interpretation of sexual consent a great deal. While participants were also asked about drug usage, a number did not have any previous experience taking drugs. Most explained that they thought drugs would impact sexual consent in a similar
manner to alcohol. In general, participants spoke about alcohol increasing levels of sexual desire, facilitating sexual expression and altering state of consciousness and levels of awareness. As explained by Arlet:

... I think people make a lot of decisions that they wouldn’t otherwise do ... under the influence of alcohol. And, yeah ... there’s a lot of sex ... that happens at UBC that wouldn’t be there without ... alcohol.

The focus group also mentioned the facilitation of sexual expression due to alcohol consumption as well as the inhibition of non-consent expression due to the effects of intoxication. As explained by Alex:

I think typically people are going to be like a lot more open to doing something that they otherwise wouldn’t do. Or, like, maybe they just aren’t articulate enough to really say no [emphasis added] at the time. ... So, it might be harder for them to give consent when they’re really not all there.

In addition to facilitating sexual expression and inhibiting the articulation of non-consent, a number of participants spoke about the useful purpose alcohol serves students. Specifically participants referenced an increase in personal self-confidence and the lessening experience of social anxiety that accompanies alcohol consumption. This point was elaborated on by Chloe:

[S]ex itself is quite nerve-wracking especially in the short term ... because you don’t know what they like, they don’t know what you like and sometimes to get confidence ... I’d have very little confidence if I went to a club sober ... to get with someone. And if I want to get with someone, I’d still, I still really struggle, I get nervous ... because I’m attracted to them so sometimes a couple of drink actually calms me down and I’m actually more like, like okay, I know what to do.
During the focus group, the prevalence of the socially sanctioned practice of using alcohol to facilitate sexual relations and to use alcohol as a confidence booster was further highlighted by Christie,

... [Y]ou know what people say about, like, oh, at the end of the night, like if you’re at a bar, you’ll take anyone home [emphasis added], that sort of saying. Like, people think the more drunk you get, the more people turn . . . . I think it’s like something from twos to tens [emphasis added], or something like that. But, yeah, so, that’s what a lot people think and so . . . there’s the whole issue of plying people with drugs or, with alcohol, in order to get what you want from them. . . . I don’t know, I just feel like, it’s . . . something that’s commonly accepted, that that’s what people do . . . you know, girls will like, um, I’m going to . . . do another shot so that I get the courage to go talk to this guy [emphasis added]

In addition to providing confidence, one of three male participants, Arlet spoke about the freedom alcohol provides people, women especially, to express their sexuality in a culture that shames women for having multiple sexual partners or for expressing sexual desire.

... I can’t really speak for a woman but . . . perhaps they want to have sex and it, it’s more socially acceptable to, to have sex where that social pressure isn’t as much there. . . . Which might make them more willing. . . . There’s an odd social pressure . . . the whole slut phenomenon is . . . I don’t like at all. If girls have multiple partners . . . Then they’re labeled as having the lower social value. [A]lmost like their worth is tied somehow to their sex. . . .

In addition to experiencing increased sexual attraction, confidence, and lessening the experience of social anxiety, many participants also used negative connotations to describe the
impact of sexual consent under intoxicated states. Participants used language such as *messy*, *complicate things* and the concept of *lowering one’s standards* when referencing the impacts of drugs and alcohol. They frequently spoke about making sexual decisions they would not have made while sober. In reference to drugs and alcohol, a reemerging theme appeared to be *betraying their sober identity* and experiencing *regret*. Terra further elaborated on the impact of alcohol use and the experience of lowering one’s standards.

. . . [I]t takes all of that and kinda just throws it away and, and says; this is what you got, this is what you’re feeling; go on it . . . you know? [I]t kinda tears down those, those walls those checkmarks. . . . When you meet someone you got to check all the certain aspects of . . . what you perceive that they’re going to be like? . . . [A]t the, at the right level, or, I mean at the wrong level, it, there can be no, no questions like, there won’t be any second guessing and . . .that’s bad. . . . That’s really bad.

Many participants spoke about the physical impacts of intoxication and the loss of control that may result. Marie elaborated on how alcohol may *complicate things* due to initial physiological effects and the loss of physical control:

So, I think it just, alcohol complicates things. Like it kind of sets that spark where you end up getting really turned on. Um, but I think when alcohol really comes into play or recreational drugs is more like, when you’re midway through the act and suddenly you’re just like, *okay, horniness gone, I don’t actually want to be here*, like. . . . And then, that’s when the alcohol, because you actually can’t control the situation as much. Especially if the other person’s sober.

In additional to inhibiting the expression of non-consent or being less physically capable of changing the situation, participants also spoke about the prevalence of pushing sexual consent
to the wayside entirely or misinterpreting or misreading situations and consent expression. John explained that due to physical effects, people may be less likely to look for the signs of sexual consent, “it dulls your mind so you might not ask, you might just kind of jump into it and see what happens” [emphasis added].” He further explained the absence of checking for consent under the influence of alcohol and the additional complications alcohol consumption may bring to situations:

... Oftentimes, uh, you won’t ask, in, you know, half of like, no, not even half, I feel like more than that. A lot of these rape cases you see, I feel like, I think the fact like alcohol’s a big factor. ... Or like group thought ... but like [sighs], stereotypically you’ll hear oh he raped me, we were both drunk [emphasis added] and then things get blurred, like, Oh well, you’re drunk, too [emphasis added] and I thought you said this [emphasis added] and ... so, huge factor I think, it completely changes like, even if someone implicitly says, or explicitly says, like, um, yes, like, I will have sex with you and there’s alcohol involved, things can still get messy I think.

Many participants spoke about not being in tune to their partner’s signals or not focusing on the subtle nuances as much as they usually would. Arlet spoke the lack of clarity alcohol consumption may produce in reading sexual consent signals:

Yeah, there’s just a lot. It blurs it, it blurs it. You’re not as able to be in tune as, in tune with your partner to see if they’re actually consenting or not. ... Under those substances. ... especially when a lot of signals are physical.

In addition to the challenge of reading and interpreting other people’s consent signals, some participants emphasized the additional challenge of listening to one’s own internal signs and tuning in to one’s own internal needs and wants. Rachel stressed the importance and power
of tuning into yourself when inebriated and asking yourself honest questions regarding your consent decisions.

. . . I think that’s the time where you, like that tiny bit of you needs to pull together and be like, is this what I want? [emphasis added] and like- . . . and this the person I want around me? [emphasis added] So, that’s like the, actually, they say everyone’s like, got consent [former sexual messaging slogan at UBC], like, you’re drinking, like, do you have consent, yes or no but, it’s like, that should be the time. . . I think, it’s one of the most powerful times when you’re . . . the more inebriated you are, the more you need to be like is this what we want to do? [emphasis added] . . . And that’s . . . obviously the hardest time to have that conversation.

Despite these acknowledged risks, nearly all participants agreed that consent was still possible under the influence of alcohol but only to a certain extent of intoxication. Where that line was drawn was agreed to be difficult to determine and seemed to vary from person to person. Participants appeared to want to balance the utility that alcohol provided them in terms of increasing their self-confidence but to also be mindful of the consequence of excess. Terra spoke about finding the ideal golden hour between drunk and tipsy.

. . . [Y]ou want that, that golden time between drunk… before drunk and after tipsy. . . that golden hour where you’re confident enough . . . that you know what’s going on but . . . you’re comfortable enough to like, let it happen the way you want it to without second guessing yourself.

**Sexual consent experiences.** Participants were asked to describe both positive and negative experiences of sexual consent. These experiences will not be discussed in great detail but common themes identified in the two categories will be pointed out and fleshed out.
Positive sexual consent experiences (PSCE). A number of the experiences identified by participants as Positive Sexual Consent Experiences (PSCE) were not necessarily selected due to what transpired but due to the avoidance of potential negative consequences that might have arisen. Three of the women identified positive sexual consent experiences (PSCE) as times where they were able to express non-consent and where their decision was respected.

After meeting someone at a night club and being asked if she wanted to go back to the person’s house, Rachel said no and her decision felt respected. She described what she appreciated about the encounter in the following excerpt:

‘Cause it wasn’t . . . all like awww like, c’mon, like, let’s do it! [pleading voice]. There’s no pressure. . . And he was just like, I’m okay, yeah and he like totally respected it and I think that that was like so nice, ‘cause a lot of people would be like, you led me on... like, dadada [emphasis added]. . . . But it’s like, he was just like, totally cool about it. And I think that was a standout moment. ‘cause you don’t usually get that,

Sarah remembered spending time with someone she liked very much and being asked beforehand whether she wanted to proceed with sexual intercourse. She appreciated being asked and having her feelings considered prior to engaging in sexual activity especially as she comes from a more sexually conservative cultural background. She recalled, “And I was like, ‘let’s not do it, then’. . . . it was really nice of him that he actually asked before having sex instead of afterwards he’s like you know, we’re still friends, right?”

Jenny recollected an experience where she was asked to engage in oral sex and said ‘no’ and also felt comfortable doing so, “he and I are good friends so it was a . . . trusting relationship and the fact that . . . he felt comfortable enough asking me and then I felt comfortable enough
saying no.” The fact that these experiences were selected possibly indicates that it is unusual for people to experience positive feelings after rejecting their partners.

John’s PSCE also seemed to be selected based on the avoidance of negative repercussions. He recalled having group sex with himself, his girlfriend at the time and a friend of theirs. Extensive discussion and planning went into this experience. What he found to be particularly positive was that unlike the depictions of threesomes on TV and in movies, he found the experience to be pleasurable and not resulting in any hurt feelings for everybody involved. “Yeah, it was enjoyable and nobody’s feelings were hurt in the end.” He also agreed that what may have contributed to this positive outcome may have been the extensive discussion that took place before the sexual experience.

Other participants recollected PSCE that were identified as such not because of what they had potentially avoided but because of the manner in which the experience had unfolded. A couple of the participants found the component of emotional intimacy being salient in their PSCE. Willow recollected a sexual experience with her current partner where they were mutually enthusiastic about the experience due to the deep emotional connection they shared:

> It was not like one person was reluctant and one person was dragging the other one. We were both mutually agreeing upon . . . this activity or this thing that we wanted to act out because we felt really emotionally connected to each other

Marie also mentioned the importance of emotional connection in her PSCE. She relayed the story of the first time she had sexual intercourse as particularly positive due to her partner’s constant checking in with her feelings and her overall level of comfort. She recalled feeling, “[k]ind of like, looked after, like guided through the process. . . as opposed to kind of being left alone to like, do whatever I was supposed to do, and, vice versa.” She commented on the
increased intimacy she felt with her partner due to the constant communication and the impact the experience had on future relationships:

... I think it, that... event ended up reflecting how I viewed my other sexual relationships and... the confidence I had. ... Because it... showed me that I was able to expect that. ... nurturing or that kind of care. ... I’m allowed to expect that this goes at my pace. ... there’s that kind of mutual understanding that we’re not rushing things... or doing things the other person just isn’t comfortable with.

The defining characteristics of other PSCEs discussed included sexually pleasurable experiences, and feelings of effortlessness and built up desire. Terra recollected a casual encounter where she agreed to go home with someone and then the whole sexual experience had an effortless flow about it “it was really easy I think, that’s the big thing is, if it’s really easy and everything, it just kind of flows through the night...” Arlet recalled waiting to have sexual relations with his current partner and holding out on her in a playful way until she initiated relations. He appreciated that she initiated the interaction despite him wanting to have sex with her early on into the relationship, “... I didn’t... tell her and... tried to keep her... at a distance. ... More as a playful thing. ... I got her really excited...” He continued, “sexual consent was there on my part, I know that for sure. And on her part because she initiated.”

Negative sexual consent experiences (NSCE). In terms NSCE, participants mentioned experiences where their expression of non-consent was ignored, where they felt misinterpreted, where they experienced a disconnect between wanting and consenting and where consent was deemed not to be present after the fact.

A number of women spoke about instances where their non-consent was blatantly ignored. Rachel recalled an incident at a night club where a “friend” who she had been dancing
with followed her home, uninvited, and refused to leave despite her repeated requests that he do so. She recalled feeling “shocked that someone would go that far and he was like my friend and in my group of friends. . . I just thought that was so horrible and pushy and I was like really uncomfortable with him. . .” Sarah also recalled an incident where her non-consent was blatantly ignored or violated. She spoke about waking up in bed with someone she was seeing and him wanting to have sex with her in the morning. Despite explicitly telling him no, “he kind of like still came up and had me from behind.” She recalled feeling really uncomfortable and that she “pushed him away . . . like really hard, and I was like it’s time for me to leave. [emphasis added].” To note, Sarah did not identify this experience as sexual assault more so as non-consensual sexual experience.

Two women, Willow and Terra, spoke about NSCE where no physical contact actually transpired but where they felt misinterpreted and caught off guard by men they were familiar with. An older man said something to Willow that made her re-think all of their previous interactions and illustrated that they had been misunderstanding each other up to that point. Upon bringing this into her awareness she felt “[v]ery uncomfortable . . . [L]ike I just want to get out of the situation [emphasis added] but . . . I saw really no way of getting around it.” She continued, “I . . . felt a little backed into a corner at that point. . .” Terra recalled being tutored by a friend of a friend one on one. One day, while studying, he asked her if he could kiss her. She recalled finding the experience negative as she was not attracted to him and that she “. . . never gave off any signs” that she wanted sexual interaction to take place. In addition she felt as though his proposal came out of the blue. Lastly, she felt “frustrated that he put me into. . . this position because . . . he would’ve known if he could kiss me, because I would have obviously
given off those signs which I hadn’t, so it made me angry.” Despite saying no, he was persistent in pursuing her resulting in her experiencing extreme feelings of discomfort and awkwardness.

Chloe and Marie recalled incidents where they experienced a disconnection between wanting and consenting. Chloe recalled being at a nightclub and seeing the person she was semi involved with getting with someone else. She went home with another man although she was not actually interested in him “. . . I let him do stuff, we didn’t have sex, but I let him do stuff with me. And I really, like, the whole time was like not wanting it, I just wanted to go home, right.”

Marie’s NSCE illustrates the multiple factors that can impact a sexual consent episode and the ambiguity that sometimes accompanies an experience. She recalled an incident where she met a flight attendant on a flight to Paris, had dinner with him and invited him to spend the night at her hotel. He left extremely early for a flight but before leaving wanted her to perform oral sex on him to which she acquiesced. He left and afterwards, Marie recalled feeling troubled about the incident. Marie elaborated on her cognitive process, her continued difficulty in making sense of what took place and the various feelings that came up for her:

. . . I had given him one the night before so it wasn’t even like it was something that I was uncomfortable with. . . this person but it was more just like- I wasn’t awake enough. . . So I wasn’t a hundred percent being like, yeah, this is something I want to do [emphasis added] . . . and it was like over fast then he left. . . so, all these things. So, for me, that’s like, definitely has like, will forever stand out as. . . I still to this day kind of, when I’m thinking back on it. . . I don’t know what to think of it. . . it was just like I had never after having sex with somebody, just been like lying in bed feeling like, just like, sick. It was just like, oh my God like what have I done? . . . And yeah, I think, I mean, for me, that is definitely an event um, that has to do with consent because, like I had given
blowjobs before, things like that, right. . . so it wasn’t associated with the actual act and more just the circumstances under which it happened.

Marie explained that part of what she found unsettling about the incident was the disconnect she experienced between wanting and consenting in that she did not believe she was in the right frame of mind to fully consent to sexual activity yet she wanted to partake in it, “I feel like I definitely wanted to do it because I wanted the repercussions to be really positive.” When asked to elaborate on the repercussions she foresaw, she explained “there’s that part in the back of your mind where you want the person to leave and be like [a]h! I had the best hookup of my life.” In her decision making process she also seems to have considered her future self and how she’d be talked about by her partner, “how is he going to talk about this experience?” In addition to the split between wanting and consenting, Marie insinuated that part of what was unsettling about the experience was the ambiguity and lack of clarity the experience contained.

One participant spoke about an incident in the previous year where there was a disconnect between her sober identity decision making and her intoxicated decision making. Jenny spoke about an incident where she was extremely intoxicated and ended up having sex with someone. She elaborated “I was obviously really drunk and at the time, like, not, I wouldn’t say consented to it but said yes [emphasis added] to that and looking back on it now really regret doing so.” She added that “had I been not drunk, I probably would have said no [emphasis added].”

Mark identified NSCE as those times where his expectations have not been fulfilled such as when sexual action is stopped or abruptly changed by partners. He explained “like when you suggest going somewhere more private or something like that. . . . And they suddenly stop the . . . body interactions . . . that form the yes part of consent…”
Arlet and John both related NSCE where after sexual relations had already taken place with their partners, the incidents were deemed non-consensual. John spoke about having intoxicated sex with his girlfriend and speaking about it with her a couple of weeks afterwards:

She didn’t like, come out and say like you raped me[emphasis added] or anything but she was like, I didn’t, like, we were both drunk, we shouldn’t have done like, I didn’t-, like, why did you do this? Why did we do this? Blah blah blah. You should’ve, you know, ‘not been drunk [emphasis added] etcetera, stuff like that. So, I would consider that negative because during that . . . during that instance . . . as I was slightly intoxicated, I didn’t really think about sexual consent,

R: Okay, okay. So, it sounds like it was kind of… disturbing for you or…

John: Yes, slightly. . . . I mean, uh, I don’t think anyone wants to be accused of rape. . . .

[O]r, you know, sexual assault [chuckles], so…

Interestingly, although John begins the quote by explaining that his girlfriend did not explicitly accuse him of rape, by the end of the quote he seems to identify himself as accused. Arlet spoke about being in a relationship with a woman who found sexual intercourse extremely painful due to a medical condition. He believed on a few occasions during the relationship that “consent wasn’t present because . . . it was in fact painful for her. She wasn’t looking forward to, to having sex, so. . . .” He recalled that “she did vocalize but it was afterwards because she wanted, she wanted the act to happen.” When probed deeper about this distinction between wanting and consenting Arlet spoke about his partner’s possible motivations “I think, the fear of disappointing your partner. . . can override. . . your consenting to a sexual, like to sex. . . I think. . . . a lot of fears can override that.”
Chapter 5: Discussion

This study sought to explore sexual consent from a new qualitative angle focusing on the meaning of sexual consent and how it is negotiated from the perspective of university students. To address previous gaps in the research, the voices of students were incorporated directly into the study using interviews and students were explicitly asked about the role that certain contextual factors (such as relationships status and alcohol usage) play in consent negotiation. Data was organized by framing findings by the two leading research questions:

1. What does sexual consent mean to university students?
2. How do students negotiate sexual consent?

Summary of Findings

The meaning of sexual consent referred to participants’ understanding of sexual consent and what factors influenced this understanding. A number of variables shaped and contributed to their understanding including the participants’ social world consisting of how they defined sexual consent and how they learned about it. Participants defined sexual consent on three different levels; a social shared understanding of the term, a legal definition and a personalized definition. They spoke to learning about sexual consent via a variety of sources of knowledge and that their understanding of the term was characterized by continual learning. Other aspects of the social world contributing to the meaning of consent included spatial location with meaning and expectations varying in specific special places such as parties or nightclubs. Meaning was also thought to be influenced by television and film portrayals especially in regards to the sexualisation of places. Other aspects of the social world found to be influential included: gender roles and expectations, and the University of British Columbia’s messaging campaign.
Participants also spoke about gaps in experience and knowledge in their social world and longing for social change.

Meaning was also influenced by participants’ relationship type with expected role expectations varying if the partnership was new, long-term or just expected to be casual. Personal identity was found to be a prominent factor in student’s understanding of sexual consent in reference to participants’ level of self-confidence and development of self as well as their cultural upbringing and identity. The importance of self-knowledge and listening to one’s self or one’s internal knowing was also emphasized.

The negotiation of sexual consent referred to the actual process of consent itself, how sexual consent was communicated in the moment and after the fact justifications. Participants described sexual consent as a process occurring over time characterized at times by a number of affective states that may be well defined or more ambiguous. The consent process at times provoked risks in fears in participants that led them to adopt certain behavioral strategies. Strategies were used at different times during the course of negotiation and included such examples as preserving the mood and using direct communication. Participants interpreted their partner’s consent and non-consent using such signs as the presence of reciprocating action and active participation. Participants expressed sexual consent and non-consent in a number of ways often using a combination of non-verbal signs and signals such as eye contact, touching and playful hitting. The negotiation of sexual consent was also explained in terms of after the fact justifications and explanations. How alcohol impacted negotiation was explored. Lastly, specific positive and negative sexual consent experiences were investigated. Reoccurring themes in the positive category included being listened to and having boundaries respected. In the
negative category emerging themes were having consent signals ignored as well as experiencing a split between the experience of wanting and consenting.

In total, 11 individual interviews were conducted and recorded. Of the 11 interviews, seven women were interviewed and four men. One focus group was conducted with three women. All individual interviews except one were transcribed and analyzed. One of the individual interviews conducted with a man was not transcribed or analyzed due to poor recording quality.

The findings of this study offer the literature a richer and more profound illustration of sexual consent processes. Broadly, a number of this study’s findings was reflected in previous literature with a few important exceptions. Findings are compared to previous studies and newfound discoveries are articulated and elaborated on.

**Explaining sexual consent.** While a number of studies have investigated the modes of expression of sexual consent behavior (Hall, 1998; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Humphreys, 2004), this is one of the few to explicitly inquire about students’ understanding of the phrase. Being mindful of researcher-imposed definitions on sexual consent in consent related research (Beres, 2007), I aimed to be open to participants’ definitions and understandings of consent. That said, in my interview script, I did state my own understanding of sexual consent when broaching how participants might locate their own. Interestingly, in my findings, consent was conceptualized by students on a number of levels. I have described these levels in terms of a social or shared understanding, a personalized definition or set of preferences and a legal definition. In addition, there were slight variances within these understandings, for example, some participants specified that feelings after the sexual encounter needed to be considered. This discovery emphasises that the meaning of sexual consent may vary as a matter of context
Participants’ understanding of the legal definition of consent could essentially be reduced to *consent doesn’t count under the influence* although it appeared as though this understanding did not very much influence participants’ real behavior; most still practiced sexual relations under the influence of alcohol. When explicitly probed about whether people are capable of consenting under the influence of alcohol, most said yes, but to an extent. Where that line was drawn was agreed to be difficult to determine. That said, knowing the legal definition of consent also appeared to give comfort for some. This split in definitions also perhaps demonstrates the lag of social practice to catch up with legislation. Other researchers have noted a discrepancy in the social and legal understandings of sexual assault specifically and have concluded that “[w]idespread compliance with the law is unlikely to come about until the social and legal definitions converge in public and professional legal consciousness” (Vandervort, 2012, p.142; Vandervort, 1985). This convergence may be facilitated by allowing more “public scrutiny and academic critique” (p.142) of court decisions and judge’s decision making processes (Vandervort, 2012). Similarly, perhaps encouraging public discussion of sexual consent and how it is understood will begin to bridge the gap between the current discrepant definitions.

Although categorized and interpreted differently, the ways in which students described sexual consent was in alignment with Jozkowski’s 2011 research that investigated students’ definitions and conceptualizations of sexual consent. The two most common ways that participants in her study defined sexual consent was described either by agreement, as “[t]wo people being willing to and agreeing to have sex with one another” (p. 111) or by giving permission “[w]hen someone gives permission to another person to have sex with them” (p.
Similar to the current study, “saying yes to sex” (p. 111) was rarely cited as a common definition of sexual consent.

**Is sexual consent relevant?** In terms of the relevancy of the term of sexual consent, while many participants initially associated sexual consent with only instances of sexual intercourse, when explicitly asked about the relevancy of sexual consent, most agreed that sexual consent was always relevant and that it came up in a variety of circumstances though it was not always expressed verbally. Broadly speaking, most participants appeared to agree that the more intimate an activity, the more likely it was to be expressed verbally. This echoes findings by Hall (1998) who surveyed college students and found that consent communication was behaviorally dependent.

**Relevancy of relationship.** The current study found that consent communication varied as a matter of relationship status. Specific consent expression appeared to change throughout the course of relationships with new relationships characterized by more caution in regards to reading a partner’s sexual consent signals. More established relationships were broadly characterized by the establishment of trust between partners, and the ability to read subtle cues and incorporate personalized expressions of consent. A number of participants explained that verbal cues were less likely to be used as relationships progressed.

**Unwanted sex in relationships.** This lack of verbal communication in long term relationships was also expressed in regards to the dangers of assumption making that can take place in established relationships. On account of being in a relationship, some may assume consent is always present. This belief appears to be articulated by Shotland and Goodstein’s (1992) *precedence theory* that argues that people assume as well as expect sexual activity to take place as relationship become better developed and established.
A particularly salient finding in this study was the amount of unwanted sexual activity that appears to take place within participants’ established relationships. A number of women spoke about engaging in sexual behaviors when they did not desire to do so. In fact, a number of studies have found that compliant sexual behavior which is defined as willingness to engage in unwanted sexual behavior may be common especially among young women (O’Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Sprecher, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova, & Levitskaya, 1994) and especially those in dating relationships (O’Sullivan & Allgeier). Some of the reasons women may engage in compliant sexual behavior while in a relationship is to maintain their relationship or for fear that their partner may break up with them (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988) or leave them (Shotland & Hunter, 1995). Other reasons include to lessen relationship tension, to increase relationship intimacy and to meet their partner’s need (O’Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). Similarly, in the current study some of the reasons proposed for engaging in unwanted sexual behavior was to hold on to significant others or due to their expected role as partner. In addition, some women spoke about engaging in compliant sexual behavior to cease their partner’s incessant demands for sexual activity.

Compliant sexual activity, gender and attachment: Some researchers have linked the manifestation of compliant sexual behavior to gender roles and social expectations (Walker, 1997), with some finding that sexually compliant women may be more deeply “invest[ed] in ideal womanhood” in comparison to other women (Katz & Tirone, 2009, p. 353). Research has also uncovered that for young women, following femininity ideology, such as not being authentic to one’s own desires and wants in relationships, may be harmful to their sexual health. Specifically in terms of being less likely to insist on condom use, less likely to enjoy sex or to pursue their own sexual desires (Impett, Schooler, & Tolman, 2006). In the current study, Chloe...
spoke of the experience of refusing sexual activity with her partner at times to honour her own needs but at the same time experiencing lingering feelings of guilt afterwards. This possibly reflects an internalized struggle with the messages from femininity ideology and her own wants and desires.

Interestingly, some researchers have applied attachment theory to incidences of compliant sexual behavior in relationships finding that anxiously attached women may be more willing to consensually engage in unwanted sex than their less anxiously attached counterparts for reasons such as maintaining a partner’s interest and avoiding relationship conflict (Impett & Peplau, 2002).

In sum, considering the number of times the topic of unwanted sex in relationships was raised, it seems like an important topic to explore. The experience of the split between wanting sexual activity and sexually consenting to it will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

**Cultural background and sexual consent expression.** In the current study, the influence of cultural background was mentioned a number of times in regards to sexual consent expression. Perhaps unsurprisingly, people from different countries may have very different attitudes about sex and sexuality which was reflected in this study. For example, among 24 countries, attitudes towards premarital sex varies in distinct patterns (Widmer, Treas, & Newcomb, 1998). A number of studies have investigated East Asian sexuality, in particular, which was raised in the current study. East Asian women in comparison to Euro-Canadian women may differ in terms of their sexual experience and sexual knowledge as well as their attitudes towards sex (Brotto, Chik, Ryder, Gorzalka, & Seal, 2005). Furthermore, they may differ from Euro-Canadian women in regards to levels of sexual desire and this may in part be due to differing levels of sex guilt (Woo, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2011). While neither of these
studies explicitly focused on sexual communication patterns, it seems reasonable to speculate that these differences may indeed be present.

In the current study, it was pointed out that in regards to sexual consent messaging, some cultures may vary in their levels of familiarity with the topic of consent based on that culture’s relationship to discussing sexual matters as a whole. It may be prudent to consider the differing relationships cultures may have to the topics of sex and sexuality on such a diverse campus.

**Sexual consent communication.** Participants in this study used a variety of consent signals to indicate their sexual consent and consent refusal and often appeared to apply a number of these cues and signals at once. These findings are in alignment with previous sexual consent research such as Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) that found consent communication is complex and is much more than a simple expression of yes or no. Hickman and Muehlenhard found students may indicate their own consent by using “direct verbal signals” (p. 264), “direct nonverbal signals” (p.264), “indirect nonverbal signals” (p.264), “intoxication signals” (p.264) and “no response signals” (p.264). The findings of the current study found all of these signals to be present except “intoxication signals” (p.264) as none of the participants in the current study mentioned their level of intoxication such as using terms like, “I’m really drunk” (p.264), as indicative of their consent. Hickman and Muehlenhard study used predetermined consent responses and hypothetical scenarios whereas the current study incorporated user generated responses from real life scenarios. Our finding were also in accordance with Hall’s (1998) survey study that found that students use a variety of signals to indicate consent including non-resistance.

**Gender differences and miscommunication?** In their questionnaire on consent process, Jokowski, Peterson, Sanderson, Dennis and Reece (2013) found marked gender difference in
how men and women interpreted and expressed sexual consent and non-consent. Particularly, men were found more likely to both express and interpret sexual consent using non-verbal indicators whereas women indicated that they would use a combination of verbal and nonverbal. In the current study, there did appear to be slight differences, however, both men and women explained that they used both verbal and non-verbal indicators to express and interpret consent. Also, this study did not closely quantify responses or explicitly seek out to measure specific consent behaviors in rank order. In addition, there were only three men included in the study so it is difficult to determine whether important differences were indeed present.

However, similar to the findings of Jozkowski and colleagues’ 2013 study, most of the men (two of the three men in the current study) used exclusively physical indicators to read their partner’s non-consent. Jozkowski et al. (2013) raised the concern that men’s reliance on interpreting their partner’s consent primarily through nonverbal cues and behaviors may be risky and potentially misconstrued especially if one considers previous research by Abbey, McAuslan and Ross (1998) that has found that men may misperceive women’s sexual interest in them. Jozkowski et al. (2013) raised the concern of the potential for sexual miscommunication to take place especially on account of men’s reliance on nonverbal cues to interpret consent. Jozkowski and colleagues also cited research by Walker (1997) who investigated young women’s tendency to not communicate when sexual activity is unwanted and the reasons why including not wanting to upset their partner. Jozkowski and colleagues (2013) suggested that women may “tolerate” (p.914), in silence, some sexual activity that passes their comfort threshold while hoping or expecting that their partner will pick up on their discomfort and cease the sexual advances. Men, meanwhile, may misconstrue the silence as indicative of sexual consent and persist in the physical action possibly resulting in unintentional sexual assault. The experience of having
physical signals ignored or not taken seriously was mentioned by a few participants in the current study.

Jozkowski et al. (2013) also mentioned that even if a “no” is articulated by a woman it may be misinterpreted as a token refusal (Muehlenhard & Hollabaugh, 1988) and not taken seriously. The presence of token refusal and the potential complications that can arise from its expression was articulated by two participants in the current study. That said, neither participant spoke of having personal experience with token resistance themselves but acknowledged the awareness of this behavior in the greater cultural context and the potential danger that may result from its assumed practice.

In the current study it is of relevance to note that passive behaviors (ie. being passive, dissociating) was used by women to both express non-consent as well as consent (ie. going along with it, not resisting). Therefore, from a speculative point of view, the potential risk of miscommunication, especially if one appears to rely solely on nonverbal cues to interpret non-consent and consent may be present. That said, most participants seemed to incorporate a variety of signals when expressing non-consent and consent perhaps ensuring that their point is clearly transmitted and listened to. In addition, considering the broad focus of the study and the fact that only one perspective is being heard, making any definitive conclusions about the likelihood of miscommunication in unexamined scenarios seems imprudent.

**Traditional sexual scripts and gender roles.** In an additional paper that examined the opened-ended qualitative responses to the aforementioned questionnaire (Jozkowski et al, 2013), Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) discovered four themes in their research including the “a) endorsement of the traditional sexual script; b) women are responsible for performing oral sex; c) male aggression towards women; and d) male deception for obtaining consent” (p. 519).
In the current study, the endorsement of the traditional sexual script was also found to be prevalent particularly in regards to women being perceived as passive sexual gatekeepers, determining whether sexual activity will take place and men being expected to initiate sexual activity (Check & Malamuth, 1983). Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) found the prevalence of stereotypical gender roles in their analysis, specifically, that men are always interested in the occurrence of sexual activity. This belief was found to be prevalent in the responses of the current study as well in the responses of both men and women. So much so that non-consent expressed by men may not be taken seriously by peers due to the privilege and value that is placed on sexual activity for men. This was further reinforced by some women in the study who spoke of being unsure what a man’s non-consent might even look like and/or who did not consider attaining consent from men as *men always want sex*. The expectation that men are sexual aggressors or initiators of activity came up several times during the interviews.

**Participants and gender roles:** Interviewees appeared to be very aware of expected gender roles and some consciously appeared to mold their behavior to fit into them. This raises the idea that gender roles are performative, something we put on rather than something we inherently are (Butler, 2006). As an example, aggressiveness and directedness was consciously put in place and used as a sexual strategy by Arlet when he explained the manipulation of language in obtaining consent. He explained that rather than come out and ask about sexual consent or plead for it, it is much more attractive to be direct and use statements. This possibly reflects the gender role expectation in Western society that men are direct and aggressive (Bem, 1993). Arlet is thus aware of how a man is expected to present himself and realizes he risks sexual rejection unless he behaves in accordance to that conceptualization. The link between Arlet’s display of sexual behavior and his gender identity is also made implicitly clear. This
linkage is also illustrated when other participants discussed the consequences of sexual rejection for men. They spoke of sexual rejection as diminishing men’s *masculinity* as men are expected to be sex gods/sexual experts. Again illustrating the intertwinement between gender identity and sexual expression. This is perhaps indicative of Monique Wittig’s heterosexual matrix as discussed by Butler (2006). In a sense, a man needs to be behave in sexually aggressive ways, towards women in particular, to maintain his gender identity of man.

Paradoxically, despite in some ways appearing to be in control of their gender role presentation, participants also appeared to be confined by the expectations of the gender binary as well. This reflects Bem’s understanding that gender roles are restrictive and limiting to both genders (1993). Moreover, participants’ confinement to rigid roles and restricted behavior was known to not only themselves but to the people around them as well: Some participants spoke of the manipulation and exploitation of people using their gender norms. For example, knowing that women are socialized to be nice or not to reject men in a forceful way may result in men aggressively dancing against them at a club without asking first and allowing them the opportunity to say no. Thus, the socially accepted behavioral patterns and their specific boundaries appear to be known by the genders.

Interestingly, having knowledge of expected behavioral patterns based on gender roles also allowed participants to at times to transgress them. For example, Arlet’s PSCE centered on the first time he had sexual intercourse with his current partner and how he *held out on her* despite wanting to have sex with her earlier on in the relationship. In this scenario, Arlet seemed to have reversed the traditional gender role expectation with his partner in terms of placing her in the role of sexual initiator. Transgressing his expected gender role is what may have contributed to his excitement.
In terms of their own gender presentations a number of other participants appeared to wrestle with appearing monoglossic in their gender presentation to others but heteroglossic in some of the finer points of their narratives (Bakhtin, 1981; Francis, 2010). For example, when meeting John I was struck by his soft spoken voice, politeness, and smaller stature possibly reflecting more feminine characteristics. However, during the interview his answers were curt, his tone at times intense and his language harsh thus molding his presentation to appear more monoglossic, wholly masculine. To some degree then, it appears as though participants in the study were able to consciously manipulate and shape their gender identity presentation. That said, participants also spoke to the unique lived experience they had on account of their physical bodies. For example, a number of the women spoke of being afraid at times when sexually rejecting men and the real threat of physical violence that may result on account of physical differences in sexual scenarios.

Many participants appeared to struggle with the gender binary in terms of conforming to it and/or pushing it away. At times, participants seemed to possess a resentment of the gender role expectations and sexual scripts that they had been ascribed, for example, commenting that they were unfair or silly. However, ultimately they felt compelled to follow these gender norms rather than step beyond them. For example, despite many participants commenting that they did not appreciate the different gendered messaging they received during their sexual educations, many said they would teach a young cousin about sexual consent in a similar manner.

Participants in the current study also articulated that they were aware of the existence of sexual double standards as well, particularly, that while men are praised for having many sexual conquests women are shamed for the same behavior (Crawford & Popp, 2003). They explained that these double standards caused women to possibly experience additional fears in regards to
sexual activity and to be more concerned about their reputations prior to or after engaging in sexual activity.

The other themes found by Jozkowski and Peterson (2013) were not found to be salient enough to warrant much examination in the current study, namely, the responsibility of women to perform oral sex as well as the use of male deception to obtain sexual consent.

**Alcohol consumption.** In the current study, participants used alcohol to facilitate sexual expression, to lessen social anxiety and to project an aura of confidence to potential partners. Alcohol use was viewed as a pervasive and socially sanctioned activity. This finding is echoed in other research (Kuo et al., 2002; Spence & Gauvin, 1996). However, despite the perceived usefulness of alcohol, a number of negative stories shared by participants also involved alcohol consumption. Alcohol use contributed to feelings of regret, complicating situations and the experience of lacking congruency to one’s sober self.

In terms of how alcohol impacted sexual consent processes specifically, participants spoke of not being able to read consent cues as easily as they would sober, especially when those cues were physical, as well as not bothering to ask about consent. One of the most salient stories in regards to alcohol use was shared by one of the men when he related to having intoxicated sexual intercourse with his partner and later on, hearing that she did not perceive the act as being consensual. This perhaps affirms the findings that sexual intent may be misperceived when drinking with a partner and that men may be especially prone to this misperception (Abbey & Harnish, 1995).

**Special situations:** Participants spoke about certain situations such as nightclubs and parties that indicated a greater likelihood of sexual activity transpiring. For example, Marie perceived that club goers have specific expectations regarding one another’s attendance
specifically regarding sexual intent, that body language displayed via dancing may reveal sexual intent to others and that these factors combined alter sexual consent communication. Being present at a party was also indicative of more willingness to engage in sexual activity. In Beres’ (2010) research on sexual consent communication among casual dating partners she found that location helped some of her participants interpret sexual partner’s sexual intents. Other research examining how normative sexual consent communication varies as a matter of situational context was difficult to find outside of the sexual assault literature, although it has been called for (Beres, 2007).

The current study also found that people’s behavioral expectations in special situations might be influenced by media portrayals. Media portrayals may provide an “important context for adolescents’ sexual behavior” (L’Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2006, p.186). Thus it may be helpful to consider how sexual consent negotiation is portrayed in mass media and to encourage critical thinking on these depictions. Interestingly, previous survey research examining magazine reading and college students’ sexual consent intentions found that exposure to men’s magazines in particular was “significantly associated with lower intentions to seek sexual consent and lower intentions to adhere to decisions about sexual consent” (Hust et al., 2014, p.280).

Sexual assault? While listening to the accounts of some of the participants, I was struck by their honesty as well as by how some of their experiences sounded like they fit the legal definition of sexual assault. That said, the women interviewed did not use the term sexual assault to label their experiences. For example, when she described waking up after being “taken advantage” of by an acquaintance, Chloe did not use the word sexual assault. Further on in the interview she explained that had she taken her story to the police, she believes they would have
conceived the incident as rape. However, she chose not to report it and she was unsure of the reason why. Thus, while she recognized that the police might label her experience as rape, she herself chose not to use that terminology.

According to Peterson and Muehlenard (2011) there may be a variety of reasons why women are reluctant to use the word ‘rape’ such as; their experience may not fit their perception of rape (such as due to lacking in violence or force), the man responsible for the assault may not fit their idea of a rapist and/or they may feel responsible for the cause of the assault. After the incident took place she recalled not feeling supported by the people around her as well as the lighthearted way they described the incident. She recalled lacking understanding and validation from her peers in regards to the troubling experience. Thus, the gravity she experienced was not reflected in the responses of her peers perhaps contributing to her own understanding of the event. She also recalled needing to work with the man who “took advantage” of her for the next few months. Considering he was a colleague and friend who she had described as someone she probably would have had sex with while sober, the possibility that he did not fit the description of a typical rapist is worth considering. Furthermore, it is interesting to note further along in the interview whereby Chloe identifies this experience as “the biggest mistake” she’s ever made perhaps demonstrating that she feels responsible for what happened to her. However, it should also be noted that taking this responsibility may ultimately feel empowering for Chloe and that whatever her labelling of the experience, it is for her to decide how to describe it.

**Miscommunication or communication fluency?** A study conducted by Beres (2010) on casual sex partners yielded similar findings to the current study in terms of consent communication especially in regards to discovered themes, the presence of complex
communication, the conceptualization of consent and the usage of indirect and non-verbal strategies.

Beres (2010) used open-ended interview questions to learn about the expression and interpretation of sexual consent amongst casual sex partners at a Canadian University. She found the presence of three themes that were indicative of willingness to engage in sexual activity including “active participation”, “refusing sex” (p.1) (via both verbal and non-verbal cues) as well as “tacit knowing”(p.1) described as “you just know” p.5. Often, some combination of these three themes was used to interpret behavior and Beres found sexual consent communication to be complex. The presence of these three themes was found to be present in the current study as was the complexity of communication. Beres (2010) also found that consent behavior was a process that appeared to unfold over time, another finding that is echoed in the current study. Broadly, she found her subjects to be successful communicators despite employing indirect and nonverbal tactics. She argued against the miscommunication theory (Kitzinger & Frith, 1997; Tannen, 1990) that posits that sexual assault is often the result of miscommunication as both men and women in her study seeking casual sex appeared to be adept communicators. Beres’ findings aligned with research by Kitzinger and Frith (1999) who discovered via conversation analysis that women tend to refuse sex in a similar way to which they might refuse other social invitations as well as research by O’Byrne, Rapley and Hansen that found men are able to hear and understand these sexual refusals (2006) however subtle they might be (2008).

Unlike the current study, Beres was specifically looking at the experiences of casual sex partners who might already have a shared understanding of what may unfold when entering in an encounter. In the current study, the negotiation of sexual consent appeared to be unique amongst
casual sex partners and new relationships, with people taking extra precautions to read and interpret one another’s body language in signals. In addition, similar to the current study, she was only interviewing half of the couple engaging in casual sex and getting one perspective on what transpired. It seems difficult to draw any definitive conclusions on how accurately an encounter was communicated when half of the party is absent.

**Being polite.** Similar to the discoveries of Beres’s study (2010), in the current study, women’s expressions of non-consent appeared to follow the social conventions for rejecting or refusing other social invites (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). Throughout the current study, participants described women as having an especially gentle, indirect approach (or, at times “mixed messaged” approach) when refusing sex or expressing disinterest. In addition, women were found to be especially concerned about not appearing rude in comparison to men when they voiced sexual refusal.

Kitzinger and Frith (1999) drew on conversation analysis of refusals to other types of (non-sexual) invitations and explained that people tend to incorporate the following into their interactions when expressing refusal: a) “delays” (p.301) (pauses), b) “palliatives” (p.301) (apologies, compliments, delaying acceptance and coming up with an alternative to the current offer as well as “token agreements etc. which serve to alleviate the pain caused by the refusal;” (p. 301) c) “prefaces” (p.301) (hedges ex. “uh” p.301) and lastly, d) “accounts”(p.301) (“i.e. explanations/justifications/excuses for why the invitation is not being accepted such as a prior engagement or commitment”(p.301)). Therefore, the overall normative manner by which people tend to refuse non-sexual invitations is classified as indirect, as well as delayed (p.302). The authors argued that when making social refusals, women, like men, draw on rules that are “culturally accepted” though implicit (p.302). In their study, through focus group discussion on
the topic of refusal (p = 58), young women were able to articulate normative conversational refusal rules demonstrating an awareness, savvy and sophisticated understanding of them. The authors argued that women refuse sexual activity in a similar manner to which they would refuse other social invitations drawing on the same culturally appropriate conventions. Furthermore the just say no approach advocated by sexual education programs that prescribe assertive behaviors and specific aggressive manners of speech such as blatantly saying no to sex actually violate “basic cultural norms and social etiquette”(p.305). In other words, saying no to sex (or any other type of invitation) in an explicit and aggressive manner is conversationally inappropriate and rude. Saying no to sex in a seemingly indirect manner is adhering to the socially appropriate conversation patterns. Importantly, Kitzinger and Frith (1999) point out that in normal conversation where refusal takes place, saying no is not necessary for the message of refusal to be understood. People are able to pick up or interpret refusal even if “no” is not actually stated.

Ignoring her signs. Building off of this analysis, O’Byrne, Rapley and Hansen (2006) found men are able to hear and understand these sexual refusals. Analyzing the data from focus groups looking at men’s interpretations and experiences with refusal, like women, men were shown to be adept at using culturally sanctioned conversation tactics to express refusal as well as to interpret subtle, indirect refusal cues from others, including their sexual partners. This finding is reflected in the current study whereby many of the men articulated that they were able to understand no from subtle body language alone. For example, Mark explained that interpreting non-consent can be done through body language alone, adding that if a woman has to explicitly say no that you’re being a little “pushy.” Mark thus demonstrates that sophisticated communicators are able to pick up on refusal signals without the need for words. Furthermore, requiring a woman to articulate a “no” to stop the sexual action is perceived as being pushy or
possibly ignoring the initial cues that were already blatantly put in place. That said, we are unaware of the perspective of Mark’s sexual partners and are thus unable to draw any firm conclusions in regards to his interpretation skills.

The presence of men ignoring women’s non-consent signals was mentioned a number of times in the current study by both women and men. For example, Chloe explained that in previous sexual experiences, she has primarily expressed her non-consent through body language first but that this initial expression has been typically ignored by men. Therefore, it has not been a matter of men misunderstanding her body’s signals of refusal but that in her experience, her body signals have been ignored. Similarly, in the NCSEs mentioned by Rachel and Sarah, where the former had a man refuse to leave her room and where the latter explicitly told her partner that she was not interested in sexual relations but who physically confronted her nonetheless, both women recounted to having their requests blatantly ignored. There was no confusion in terms of what they were communicating, more so, their statements were ignored and their requests were not respected. Moreover, during the discussion on PSCEs, two of the women identified having their sexual consent refusals respected and their requests honoured by their partners as being singularly positive, perhaps indicating that this is not the behavioral norm.

**Women as deficient communicators?** In a follow-up study, O’Byrne, Rapley, and Hansen (2008) found that when asking the same participants who had previously been found to be fluent in reading and interpreting sexual partners’ refusal signs, they most often used the miscommunication model (Tannen, 1990) to account for incidences of rape. In particular their participants framed miscommunication in instances of rape as resulting from women’s poor and unclear signalling combined with men’s confusion and naiveté thus contributing to a framework where women were at least partially responsible for their victimization. Similarly in the current
study when Arlet explains that women’s tendency to put up token boundaries raises the “question of sexual consent . . . I feel like that’s why men are so aggressive sometimes. . . .” he puts the responsibility of men’s aggressiveness on women’s unclear signalling. He carries on that these token boundaries can lead to confusion, thus in a sense implicitly invoking the miscommunication model, that lack of clarity in consent signalling leads to confusion and to the display of men’s aggressiveness.

The idea that miscommunication among partners likely exists and is a result, in particular, of women’s poor signalling, or poor communication abilities is reflected in the responses to how participants would teach a young cousin about sexual consent, with John encouraging her to be more “clear and assertive”, Arlet telling her to put up more “boundaries” and lastly Mark telling her to follow the “stereotypical guy’s route and to leave situations that she is uncomfortable in.” Inherent in many of these narratives as well as the narratives of some of the women in the study was that women’s communication style needs to be improved and is currently deficient. Arlet also added that he would tell his young female cousin to be aware that men often “lie” and do “manipulative things” to obtain sexual consent. Yet, the advice he’d offer his young boy cousin was to ensure that they felt comfortable in the sexual situation and to ensure that he paid attention to his partner’s consent. Interestingly, he did speak about teaching the young boy cousin not to be manipulative or to lie. He did however encourage the boy to make “wise” decisions and to ensure that his reasoning was not compromised. Also of interest in regards to this topic was Sarah’s advice to her young female cousin, specifically, she explained that she would assure her cousin that whatever happened to her was “not her fault”, in a sense anticipating not only that her cousin would encounter sexual assault but also that she would be blamed for whatever happened to her. To further speculate, it appears as though the notion of
women being deficient communicators may be an internalized notion for some possibly facilitating the occurrence of victim blaming.

**Assuming social and sexual consent communication fluency.** Two of the women, Willow and Terra spoke of NCSEs whereby they felt as though signals that they had transmitted to men were misinterpreted. What was most disturbing for Terra about the incident (whereby her physics tutor asked to kiss her) was that she ever gave off any signs that she was interested in the person and that his request *came out of the blue*. This indicates, that in contrast to this particular experience, Terra’s cues or signals of interest, however subtle they might be, are usually correctly interpreted. While it is clearly impossible to assess her tutor’s understanding of the situation from this vantage point, this example raises an important point in that sexual communication signals may be subtle, fine-tuned and assumed to be present in most people. However, it raises the concern that if someone lacks social skills, experiences communication deficits or struggles with the understanding of social cues such as in the presence of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), appropriately interpreting other’s sexual or romantic cues may be impaired. In fact, research on adults and adolescents with ASD has shown that their romantic functioning may be tied to their level of social functioning and that they may engage in “more intrusive or unacceptable behaviors in attempting to initiate a social romantic relationship” (p.1978) as well as pursuing someone, a romantic interest, for a longer period of time even when they receive a lack of response or a negative response from the person of interest (Stokes, Newton, & Kaur, 2007).

Therefore, while broadly assuming that we all have the same degree of sexual consent communication fluency there may be important exceptions to the rule. Moreover, while relying on solely nonverbal signals may be sufficient in transmitting messages to the vast majority of
people, it is of interest to note that these supposedly clear signals may not necessarily be perceived as such to everyone.

**Trauma and the freeze response.** On account of the prevalence of not requiring words to interpret sexual consent and the use of passive behaviours to express and interpret sexual consent, it seems important to briefly draw attention to the occurrence of the tonic immobility (TI) response and the various ways in which the body may respond to threat (Levine, 2010). The TI response is characterized by the body’s appearance of freezing and stiffness. It may also be accompanied by bodily collapse, muscle weakness and the experience of helplessness. These behaviors are actually adaptive survival strategies. Although the body may appear weak and unresponsive, it is actually fighting for survival (Levine, 2010). In people with trauma, bodily collapse may occur recurrently as a “default” response (Levine, 2010, p. 49). While conjecturing that a person may somehow confuse the freeze response with sexual consent is unlikely, it is worth noting especially when one considers the potential traumatic histories of some people (and the normative use of passive behaviours to indicate sexual consent).

**Wanting and consenting.** The hidden “discourse of ambivalence” (p.15) described by Muehlenhard and Peterson (2005) appeared to be relevant to the findings of the current study. In particular, some participants spoke of feeling unclear in terms of where they stood in terms of sexual consent and non-consent of being somewhere “in between” yes and no. In their study of women’s narratives, Muehlenhard and Peterson discovered that women may want to have sexual intercourse for some reasons and not others. People’s wants desires and actions do not necessarily fall into discrete, clear categories. This description appeared to fit in the current study as well, as the internal process for consent decision making was often described as complex and not clear cut.
Acknowledging the discourse of ambivalence, Peterson and Muehlenhard advocated for the use of a multidimensional model that distinguished wanting from consent. The authors pointed out that while there is an expectation that these constructs overlap, wanting and consenting do not always correspond. The expectation that these two constructs overlap is also demonstrated in the current study when one of the participants expresses that he does not understand why someone would consent to unwanted sexual activity. However, the experience of the split between wanting and consenting was present in the narratives of a number of women interviewed, including Chloe when she explained in a NSCE that she allowed her partner to do things to her but the entire time she did not want the activity to take place.

Peterson and Muehlenhard’s (2007) paper explained that people may view both wanting and consenting as constructs that exist on a continuum that are not necessarily dichotomous. It is possibly useful in more fully capturing the in between experiences articulated by certain participants such as Marie’s NSCE whereby despite wanting a sexual experience and having it transpire she did not feel awake enough to consent to it. The authors suggested that adopting such a model may help validate the experiences of rape victims who may have wanted sexual activity to take place but who did not actually consent to it. It is interesting to speculate how participants may have interpreted some of their experiences if the social framework had adopted the model advocated by Peterson and Muehlenhard.

**Limitations of the Current Study**

This study was limited in a number of ways. First, only four men were interviewed for the current study, with only three interviews being usable for data analysis on account of poor recording quality. In contrast seven individual interviews with women were conducted as well
as a focus group composed of three women. It would have been of great interest to hear the perspectives of more men, particularly in a focus group format.

Another possible limitation of this study was the use of interview format to obtain information. This research was focused on human sexuality and therefore personal and sensitive matters were discussed. Research on human sexuality may face methodological concerns due to its subject matter (Catania, 1999). In addition, due to the fact that I was interviewing men in regard to possible scenarios involving sexual assault, they may have been reluctant to be forthcoming in regard to scenarios where their behavior was less than exemplary. That said, considering the amount of revealing (and social more transgressing) content that was shared by men specifically, this concern may be unfounded. There is however always a possibility that people were not entirely honest with me in terms of what transpired in their given narratives.

Another relevant limitation comes from researchers Frith and Kitzinger (1998). They note that focus groups and interviews occur in a certain situational context at a particular time and for a particular purpose, thus they note that what is said in an interview or focus group does not necessarily represent attitudes or behavior that occur outside of it. In each particular context, interviewees are managing their respective identities, responding to expectations as well as the people around them (including me, the interviewer) as well as “justifying, excusing, and otherwise accounting for their behavior in socially plausible ways” (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998, p.300). In regards to matters of sexual refusal and consent particularly, women may be actively presenting themselves in such a way as to reject the common negative portrayal of women as victim (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998). Being aware of this possibility is important to consider when interpreting my findings.
Lastly, the current study was intended to be exploratory. Due to the methodology involved, results are not intended to be generalized to a specific population and no specific claims are being made in regards to the study’s ability to predict students’ behavior. Thus, the method of this study in itself could be considered a limitation due to its lack of immediate applicability to the real world. People who self-select to participate in a study discussing their sex lives may possess certain unique characteristics not found in other people, certainly an openness and a comfort in discussing a taboo topic. That said, I am not making any claims that they are representative of any particular population group as this document is more so intended to promote discussion rather than reach any definitive conclusions.

Implications and Directions for Future Research

What appears to be particularly challenging about the issue of sexual consent is finding a balance between not catastrophizing current normative behavioral practices while at the same time addressing practices that may potentially be fine-tuned. Upon compiling the Findings chapter, I initially felt concerned in regards to the pervasive tendency for participants to express and interpret sexual consent signals non-verbally. However, miscommunication of sexual consent signals did not seem to be an issue for most participants other than a few discussed exceptions (notably the case of John and his partner and alcohol consumption). More concerning was the tendency for sexual consent signals to be ignored when they were communicated and for people to consent to unwanted sexual activity, particularly in relationships.

Sexual education: In terms of implications for sexual education efforts it may be useful to consider that people may already be well versed in the language of refusal and therefore consent communication as well. This is possibly implicated by this current study and by previous research (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; O’Byrne, Rapley, & Hansen, 2006). Thus as found
by other research, rather than focus sexual assault prevention efforts on altering communication styles such as amplifying women’s levels of assertiveness, it may be prudent to focus efforts on targeting men’s behavior as they are vastly responsible for producing the problem of sexual assault (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999; O’Byrne, Rapley, & Hansen, 2006) and perhaps encouraging men to correctly interpret the consent refusal signals they are already familiar with (O’Byrne, Rapley, & Hansen, 2008). It may also be important to inform students that exceptions to social and communication fluency may arise for reasons such as ASD (Stokes, Newton, & Kaur, 2007).

**Sexual consent messaging:** Importantly, this study has uncovered that the meaning and the way sexual consent is negotiated varies as a matter of contextual factors. Sexual consent is complicated and different strategies may be used by people in different situational contexts. Thus, acknowledging context and how it may influence sexual consent negotiation as well as how sexual consent is understood appears to be an important message to transmit to university students. Some more specific suggestions are as follows: considering the changing patterns of consent communication throughout the course of a relationship, it may be important to acknowledge and address these patterns in sexual consent messaging campaigns. It may also be important to address the portrayal of sexual consent communication in the media and encourage media literacy and critical thought on these depictions. In addition, broaching the topic of sexual consent in relationship as well as the prevalence of unwanted (as opposed to only non-consensual) sexual activity within relationships in sexual education classes may be a worthwhile endeavor. It may be helpful for all genders to learn about this distinction. It may also be worth educating students about the various ways by which the body responds to threat (Levine, 2010) especially if passive behaviours are being used to interpret sexual consent. Focusing on the
emotional side as well as the physical side of sex and sexuality in sexual education programs may be especially important.

**Sexual consent messaging at UBC:** In terms of messaging at UBC specifically it is important to note that sexual consent messaging has changed since this project began. Suggestions that students gave on UBC’s previous messaging included being mindful of tone of advertisements to ensure that intended groups are targeted, diversifying representation in consent posters to include non-heterosexual couples, addressing the normative manner by which consent is communicated and doing a more effective job at targeting men in consent discussions. It may be useful to learn the characteristics of people who do not feel that UBC’s messaging is applicable to them, determine their prevalence and reasons for identifying in this manner and devise the best strategies to engage them. Of importance to note is that at least two of the interviewed participants did not have any sexual consent knowledge prior to coming to UBC, thus ensuring that messaging is thorough and comprehensive on campus may be important. Considering the role that participants’ inner voice may play in sexual consent decisions, it may be helpful to target that inner voice in messaging campaigns and encourage students to listen to their inner guidance system.

In addition to these suggestions, a couple of participants voiced a troubling lack of awareness of where to go for emotional support after undergoing disturbing sexual experiences especially when these experiences did not neatly fit into the category of sexual assault. Thus it may be important for UBC students to be better informed of what support systems are available to them. Also, considering the cultural diversity at UBC campus and the potential role that cultural identity may play in sexual consent negotiation it may be helpful to explicitly discuss
cultural differences and their relationships to sexuality in a broader forum including the voices of students.

**Future research:** In terms of areas that warrant further study: more explicit examination of personal identity (having a positive view of sexuality, level of confidence, self-acceptance) and how it influences sexual behavior, explicating specific ways students perceive special situations to change consent communication, examining reasons why men engage in unwanted sex, looking at ways initial sexual experiences influence later experiences/expectations, examining media portrayals of sexual consent negotiation, further exploring the disconnect between the various definitions of consent, and possibly explicitly investigating instances of sexual miscommunication and how they were labelled as such. It might also be interesting to recruit couples into a study and ask them to qualitatively explore the same sexual experience including how consent was communicated. Having two accounts of the same sexual process may undoubtedly prove even more informative than single person accounts.

In future studies, it may also be helpful to recruit participants from the broader community, outside of the university setting to see if any important differences exist. In addition, looking at the consent behavior of people of different ages and/or from different cultural backgrounds may be an interesting avenue to explore. In addition, studying consent processes of people who identify on the LGBTQ spectrum might lend further insights.

**Implications for counsellors:** In terms of implications for counsellors specifically, it may be helpful to be aware of the fact that sexual experiences do not necessarily fall into well-defined categories of wanted or unwanted or consensual or non-consensual (Peterson & Muehlenhard, 2007) there is a lot of grey areas and ambiguities that may contribute to difficult and conflicting feelings for clients. Lastly, considering the emotional impacts of sexual
experiences, it may be especially important for counsellors to feel comfortable enough to discuss matters of sexuality with their clients including the grey and at times ambiguous areas that may accompany them.
doi:10.1037/0022-3514.42.5.830

doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1987.tb00782.x

doi:10.1007/BF01544599


doi:10.1525/sp.2006.53.4.483


doi:10.1177/0038038598032002005


http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963923.n387


http://www.ejhs.org/volume1/consent1.htm


Roles, 60(5-6), 347-356


doi:10.1177/0957926599010003002


doi:10.1046/j.1360-0443.2002.00240.x


doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2005.03.020


Appendices
Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer for Individual Interviews

Volunteers Needed for Research on Sexual Consent

If you are:
✓ A UBC student
✓ Between the ages of 18 – 24
✓ Comfortable talking about your experiences with sexual consent
✓ Comfortable with conversational English
✓ Self-identified as heterosexual

Then we need YOUR HELP investigating the culture of sexual consent on the UBC campus. Involvement will include one 60 minute interview. To find out how you can get involved please e-mail SexualConsentUBC@gmail.com and include your name and telephone number.

Conducted by:

Dr. Richard Young - Educational & Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia
Merike Bruen - Educational & Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia
Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer for Focus Groups

Volunteers Needed for Research on Sexual Consent

If you are:

✓ A UBC student
✓ Between the ages of 18 – 24
✓ Comfortable talking about the culture of sexual consent at UBC
✓ Comfortable with conversational English
✓ Self-identified as heterosexual

Then we need YOUR HELP investigating the culture of sexual consent on the UBC campus. Involvement will include participation in a 90 minute focus group. To find out how you can get involved please e-mail SexualConsentUBC@gmail.com and include your name and telephone number.

Conducted by:

Dr. Richard Young - Educational & Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia

Merike Bruen - Educational & Counselling Psychology, University of British Columbia
Appendix C: Telephone Screening Interview

When I contact someone who is interested in participating in my study (after receiving their email and finding out which flyer they read), I will read the following statement to them:

“This study focuses on your experiences with sexual consent. I am particularly interested in interviewing heterosexual university students who feel comfortable sharing their experiences of both positive sexual consent experiences as well as negative experiences involving sexual intercourse. The main questions I’m interested in answering is: “How do heterosexual students negotiate sexual consent in sexual encounters (involving intercourse).” I’m now going to ask you a few questions to confirm that this study is a good fit for you:

1. Are you between the ages of 18 and 24?
2. Do you identify your sexual orientation as heterosexual?
3. Are you currently enrolled as a student at the University of British Columbia?
   a. How long have you been attending UBC?
4. Do you currently have any mental health concerns that may interfere with your ability to participate as a research participant?
5. Are you comfortable discussing your personal sexual experiences with a researcher?

If the caller does meet the criteria, then I will say:

“Your experience meets the criteria so now I’ll explain a little about the study. It is a study using a qualitative ethnographic method, which means that I am interested in the culture of sexual consent and that I will primarily employ interviews and focus groups to gather my data. If you decide to participate, I will need to interview you for approximately an hour. The interview will take place at the UBC campus in Point Grey, in a private room in the Education building. Before the interview begins, I will ask you to sign a consent form but you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The interview will be audiotaped and transcribed, but to ensure confidentiality, I will not use your real name, but a pseudonym of your choice. Within a few months of the interview, I will send you a summary of the interview so you can check it to make sure it reflects your experiences. You do not have to make your decision at this moment. If you have any questions, let me know.
Appendix D: Telephone Screening – Focus Groups

When I receive calls/emails from those interested in participating in my study (after receiving their email and assessing what flyer they read), I will read the following statement to them:

“This study focusses on your experiences with sexual consent. I am particularly interested in interviewing heterosexual university students who feel comfortable sharing their perspectives of sexual consent. The main questions I’m interested in answering is: “How do heterosexual students negotiate sexual consent in sexual encounters (involving intercourse).” I’m now going to ask you a few questions to confirm that this study is a good fit for you.”

1. Are you between the ages of 18 and 24?
2. Do you identify your sexual orientation as heterosexual?
3. Are you currently enrolled as a student at the University of British Columbia?
4. Do you currently have any mental health concerns that may interfere with your ability to participate as a research participant?
5. Are you comfortable sharing your perspectives of sexual consent?

If the caller does meet the criteria, then I will say:

“Your experience meets the criteria so now I’ll explain a little about the study. It is a study using a qualitative ethnographic method, which means that I am interested in the culture of sexual consent and that I will primarily employ interviews and focus groups to gather my data. If you decide to participate, the focus group will last approximately an hour and a half. The focus group will take place at the UBC campus in Point Grey, in a private room in the Education building and will involve four other participants as well as a co-investigator(s). Before the focus group begins, I will ask you to sign a consent form but you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. The focus group will be audiotaped and transcribed, but to ensure confidentiality, I will not use your real name, but a pseudonym of your choice. Due to the nature of a focus groups, four other participants may hear the answer to your responses. I will ask everyone to respect each other’s confidentiality although I am not able to guarantee that this will be the case. You do not have to make your decision about participation at this moment. If you have any questions, let me know.”
Appendix E: Consent Form – Interview

Negotiating Sexual Consent among Heterosexual Students on a University Campus

Principal Investigator: Dr. Richard Young, UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Counselling Psychology Program), 604-822-6380

Co-Investigator(s): Merike Bruen, UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Counselling Psychology Program), 604-442-5152

The research conducted for this study will be part of a master’s thesis eventually made available to the public.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to learn more about the culture of sexual consent among heterosexual university students. The objective is to gain a deeper understanding of how consent is negotiated from the perspective of students’ themselves.

Procedures: As a participant in this study, you will be involved in a one hour, audio taped interview with a co-investigator on your experiences with sexual consent. A summary of your interview will be returned to you in order to ensure its accuracy. The total amount of time required of you is approximately an hour. Any questions you have regarding the procedures of this study may be directed to the co-investigator.

Study Results: The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may also be published in journal articles and books.

Potential Risks: Discussion of your experience with sexual consent may involve recounting upsetting or emotionally sensitive stories. You may be at increased risk for experiencing embarrassment while self-disclosing personal experiences of consent. Should the interview go in a direction you are uncomfortable with, you may indicate this and refrain from answering and the interview may go in a different direction or you may stop the interview entirely. The interview is meant to be reflective of your experiences rather than therapeutic. If issues arise that require therapeutic attention, you are encouraged to address these with your GP and/or therapist. A list of community services will be provided to you before the interview begins, in case you decide you would benefit from counselling or crisis line support.

Potential Benefits: The potential benefits of sharing your experiences with sexual consent include possibly gaining an insight your experiences that you did not have before. Sharing your experiences may be helpful to others and may contribute to the wider literature on sexual consent research.
**Measures to maintain confidentiality:** All efforts will be made to ensure your identity remains strictly confidential. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. Direct quotes from the interview may be reported in the findings of this study but these quotes will not reveal identifying information. All documents will be identified only by code number and kept locked in a filing cabinet. Documents stored on computer will be password protected and this password will be kept confidential.

**Compensation:** As a volunteer, no remuneration or compensation will be made for your participation.

**Study Questions:** If you have any questions or concerns about what we are asking of you, please contact the study leader or one of the study staff. The names and telephone numbers are listed at the top of the first page of this form.

**Complaints or concerns about the study:** If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

**Consent and Signature**

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

____________________________________________________  ________________
Participant Signature                        Date

____________________________________________________
Printed Name of the Participant signing above
Appendix F: Consent Form – Focus Groups

Negotiating Sexual Consent among Heterosexual Students on a University Campus

Principal Investigator: Dr. Richard Young, UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Counselling Psychology Program), 604-822-6380

Co-Investigator(s): Merike Bruen, UBC Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Counselling Psychology Program), 604-442-5152

The research conducted for this study will be part of a master’s thesis eventually made available to the public.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to learn more about the culture of sexual consent among heterosexual university students. The objective is to gain a deeper understanding of how consent is negotiated from the perspective of students’ themselves.

Procedures: As a participant in this study, you will be involved in a 90 minute, audio taped focus group with the co-investigator as well as four other participants on your perception of sexual consent. The total amount of time required of you is approximately 1.5 hours. Any questions you have regarding the procedures of this study may be directed to the co-investigator.

Study Results: The results of this study will be reported in a graduate thesis and may also be published in journal articles and books.

Potential Risks: Discussion of your perceptions of sexual consent may involve recounting upsetting or emotionally sensitive stories. Should the focus group go in a direction you are uncomfortable with, you may refrain from answering. The focus group is meant to be reflective of your experiences rather than therapeutic. If issues arise that require therapeutic attention, you are encouraged to address these with your GP and/or therapist. A list of appropriate and affordable counselling services will be provided to you before the interview begins, in case you decide you would benefit from counselling support.

Potential Benefits: The potential benefits of sharing your thoughts on sexual consent include possibly gaining an insight your experiences that you did not have before. Sharing your experiences and impressions may be helpful to others and may contribute to the wider literature on sexual consent research.

Confidentiality: All efforts will be made to ensure your identity remains strictly confidential. You will not be identified by name in any reports of the completed study. Direct quotes from the focus group may be reported in the findings of this study but these quotes will not reveal identifying information. We encourage participants not to discuss the content of the focus group to people outside the group; however, we can’t control what participants do with the information discussed. All documents will be identified only by code number and kept locked in a filing
cabinet. Documents stored on computer will be password protected and this password will be kept confidential.

**Compensation:** As a volunteer, no remuneration or compensation will be made for your participation.

**Study Questions:** If you have any questions or concerns about what we are asking of you, please contact the study leader or one of the study staff. The names and telephone numbers are listed at the top of the first page of this form.

**Study Complaints or Concerns:** If you have any concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or if long distance e-mail RSIL@ors.ubc.ca or call toll free 1-877-822-8598.

**Consent and Signature**

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact. Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

____________________________________________________
Participant Signature Date

____________________________________________________
Printed Name of the Participant signing above
# Appendix G: Ethnographic Interview and Sample Descriptive Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sequence and Type of Question</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Rationale for Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Introduction                  | First off, I really appreciate you taking the time to take part in this, as I have already mentioned to you, I’m interested in learning more about the culture of sexual consent here at UBC. To do this, I’m talking to students one on one to learn about their individual experiences with consent.  
I am wondering, when I say sexual consent, what comes up for you? (or) In your own words, could you describe to me what sexual consent is? | Provides information on the study                                                            |
| Project Explanation            | I wonder, how did you first learn about sexual consent?                  | Introduces the topic of sexual consent into the conversation                              |
| Friendly Question              | I wonder, how did you first learn about sexual consent?                  | Provides information while also helping to put the Informant at ease                     |
| Project Explanation            | As I mentioned beforehand, I’m especially interested in learning about sexual consent from the perspectives of UBC students. I’m particularly interested in focusing on instances of sexual consent involving sexual intercourse.  
I realize that some of these questions are personal and I want to remind you to only answer what you feel comfortable in answering, does that makes sense to you? | Repetition of project explanation with additional information.                              |
| Expressing Interest (in Client’s welfare) | I’m wondering if you could describe to me | Meant to put the client at ease and to remind them of their agency                      |

Question asks the informant to
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(i)Typical Grand Tour Question</th>
<th>how you usually express consent to sexual intercourse with a partner?</th>
<th>I really appreciate you sharing that with me. I realize this may be uncomfortable to talk about. If you’re ready to move on, I have a few more questions.</th>
<th>generalize, to talk about a pattern of events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expressing Interest (in Client’s Welfare)</td>
<td></td>
<td>To learn about a typical pattern of events.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Tour Question</td>
<td>I’m also wondering if you could describe to me how you would typically express non-consent to sexual intercourse? How would you indicate your refusal?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Again, I recognize that some of these issues may be difficult to talk about so I very much appreciate your openness to share this information with me. I have another few questions that are a bit more personal in nature,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience Question</td>
<td>Drawing on your own personal experience, could you describe a positive experience with sexual consent that stands out to you? Please take your time and only share the information you feel comfortable in sharing.</td>
<td>Inquires about an Informant’s specific experiences in a setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drawing on your own personal experience, could you describe to me a negative or unpleasant experience with sexual consent that stands out to you? Again, please take your time and only share the information you feel comfortable in sharing.</td>
<td>Inquire about an Informant’s specific experiences in a setting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thanks very much for sharing that information with me. I only have a few more questions left.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Tour</td>
<td>I’m wondering if you can describe to me how you can typically tell when your partner is</td>
<td>To learn more about general patterns</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Question</strong></td>
<td><strong>consenting to sexual intercourse?</strong></td>
<td><strong>of events.</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Tour</strong></td>
<td>Finally, I’m wondering if you can describe to me how you can typically tell when your partner is not consenting to sexual intercourse?</td>
<td>To learn more about general patterns of events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mini Tour</strong></td>
<td>Could you describe X?</td>
<td>These questions typically follow Grand Tour Questions and deal with smaller units of experience. The purpose of using these questions will be to go into greater explanatory depth regarding consent experiences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td>Could you tell me more about X?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sample</strong></td>
<td>Can you give me examples of X?</td>
<td>Sample questions will help elicit particular behavioral examples or events that happened during consent processes.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions</strong></td>
<td>How would you refer to X?</td>
<td>To access the emic language of the Informant used to describe behaviors enacted or specific events that have taken place in the Informant’s sexual consent experiences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Native Language</strong></td>
<td>How would you refer to X?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Direct Language Questions:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hypothetical-Interaction Questions:</strong></td>
<td>Let’s say a stranger asked you about X. How would you explain what is X?</td>
<td>To access the native language used to describe behaviors that have taken place during consent experiences.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other Probes:</strong></td>
<td>Tell me more about X….</td>
<td>This probe may be used as appropriate.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix H: Sample Structural Questions

Structural Questions

Concurrent Principle: Ask structural questions concurrently with descriptive questions.

Explanation Principle: “I’m interested in getting a list of all the different kinds of ______...”

Repetition Principle: Structural questions must be repeated many times to elicit all the included terms of a folk domain.

Context Principle: Provide informants with contextual information.

Cultural Framework Principle:

   Personal: What are all the different ways that people express sexual consent that you know about?

   Cultural: I’m interested in finding out about all the different kinds of ways people indicate sexual refusal, you mentioned XX

Types of Structural Questions:

1. Verification questions:
   
a. Domain Verification Questions: Are there different ways people indicate or express their consent?

   b. Included Term Verification Questions: Is (X) a way to indicate sexual consent?

   c. Semantic Relationships Verification Questions: Would sexual partners ever say, X is a way to express consent?

   d. Native-Language Verification Questions: Is this a term you would use? Would most heterosexual partners usually say ____ when indicating their consent?

2. Cover Term Questions: “Are there different kinds of _____?”

3. Included Term Questions: “Are there other kinds of ______?”

4. Substitution Frame Questions: Questions are constructed from a normal statement used by an informant.
   “You find X in X.”
   “You find X in consent experiences.”

5. Card Sorting Structural Questions

Are these all the ways to express sexual refusal or non-consent?
Appendix I: Contrast Questions

Sample Contrast Questions

The relational principle: the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by finding out how it is related to all other symbols.

The use principle: the meaning a symbol can be discovered by asking how it is used rather than asking what it means.

The similarity principle: the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by finding out how it is similar to other symbols.

The contract principle: the meaning of a symbol can be discovered by finding out how it is different from other symbols.

* Ask for contrasts among members of the same contract set.

Types of Contrast Questions:

1. Contrast Verification Questions: to confirm or disconfirm the difference.

2. Directed Contract Questions: begins with a known characteristic of one folk term in a contrast set and asks if any other terms contrast on that characteristic.

3. Dyadic Contrast Questions: ask the question without having any differences to suggest to the informant. E.g. “Can you tell me any differences between expressing consent and expressing non-consent?”

4. Triadic Contract Questions:
   • Which two of these are different from the others?”
   • May require an explanation or even an example.
   • Follow up with a directed contrast question.

5. Contrast Set Sorting Questions: “Would you sort these into 2 or more piles in terms of how they are alike or different?”

6. Twenty Question Game

7. Rating Questions: to discover the values placed on sets of symbols.
Appendix J: Focus Group Script

Focus Group Script and Interview Guide

1. Introductory script for focus groups:

“As you know, we will be talking about the culture of sexual consent on the UBC campus. The questions in this focus group will mostly be general in nature. I will not be asking you about specific consent experiences, however, if you feel that your personal experiences will contribute to the discussion and you are comfortable in sharing those experiences with the group, then you are welcome to do so.”

2. Focus group questions:

What do you think sexual consent means to university students?
Is sexual consent important? Why or why not?
How do you think people first learn about expressing and interpreting sexual consent?
   What are their sources of their information?
Do you think men and women express consent differently than their partners?
Do you think men and women indicate/express non-consent differently from their partners?
Do you think consent is expressed and interpreted differently in long term relationships than it is in a new relationship? For example, do you think consent is expected to be negotiated in the same way at a party hook-up as it is on a first date?
How do you think alcohol influences sexual consent?
What do you think of the messages about consent that you hear from the university? Do you think it’s relevant to the university experience?
Please explain why or why not?
Would you change any messaging if you could?
Appendix K: Demographics Questionnaire

Demographics Form

Negotiating Sexual Consent on a University Campus

First name only: _________________________________

Gender: MALE / FEMALE

Date of Birth: ____________________________

What year of study are you in at UBC? (e.g., 1st year)______________

What are you currently studying at UBC? _______________________

Were you born in Canada? YES / NO

If NO, what country were you born in: _____________________________

How many years have you lived in Canada: _________________

How would you describe your cultural or ethnic background (e.g., Welsh; Taiwanese; French-Canadian; Sikh; Latino)

________________________________

What language do you usually speak at your home (e.g., English): ____________
Appendix L: Community Contacts

Community Contacts

_Crisis and Support Phone Numbers:_

- **Vancouver Crisis Line (24 hours/day):** 604-872-3311
- **1-800-SUICIDE (24 hours/day):** 1-800-784-2433
- **WAVAW Rape Crisis Centre (24 hours/day):** 604-255-6344
- **Richmond Chimo Crisis Lines (8 a.m. to midnight):** 604-279-7070

_Services Offered at UBC:_

- **Brock Hall UBC →** (see map)
  - (individual counselling offered):
    - 604-822-3811 Brock Hall, 1874 East Mall, Room 1040  Vancouver
- **Sexual Assault Support Centre**
  - (emotional support services offered) 604-827-5180
- **UBC Hospital:** 604-822-7121
## Appendix M: Focused Codes and Theoretical Categories Found in Transcripts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Category</th>
<th>Focused Codes</th>
<th>Focused Codes</th>
<th>Focused Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MEANING</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Variables</td>
<td>Influence of Relationship</td>
<td>Feeling safe/unsafe</td>
<td>Emphasizing pleasure/mutual enjoyment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Building relationship</td>
<td>Trusting/Being distrustful</td>
<td>Feeling respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship guidelines</td>
<td>Trusting others/not</td>
<td>Being on the same page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship goals</td>
<td>Being on the fence</td>
<td>Not requiring words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Characteristics of SC in ST/LT R</td>
<td>Testing the waters</td>
<td>Not being able to talk about it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning about partner</td>
<td>Needing to be careful</td>
<td>Feeling connected (disconnected)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role expectations</td>
<td>Feeling cared for/(not)</td>
<td>Feeling familiar/understood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having assumptions</td>
<td>Creating intimacy</td>
<td>Being permitted to say no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling pressured/(not)</td>
<td>Appreciating partner/partnership</td>
<td>Fast tracking SC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling obligated</td>
<td>Using sex to maintain relationship</td>
<td>Mood matters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Putting his needs first</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MEANING</strong></td>
<td>Consent as Process</td>
<td>Sources of Knowledge</td>
<td>Noticing Media’s Influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Context</td>
<td>Defining SC</td>
<td>Subconscious learning</td>
<td>Noticing UBC Messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal &amp; External Influencers &amp; Engagement with SC</td>
<td>Associations with SC</td>
<td>Reflecting on own teaching</td>
<td>Receiving Many messages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beliefs about others</td>
<td>Shaping later experiences/expectations</td>
<td>Risks of Messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Perception of SC</td>
<td>Talking about sex at home</td>
<td>Feeling alienated from UBC msg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relevancy of SC/Importance of SC</td>
<td>Take away lessons</td>
<td>Feeling exempt from messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Norms</td>
<td>Repeating parents’ messaging</td>
<td>Appreciating UBC message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gender Role Expectations</td>
<td>Feeling confident/Informed (vs. not)</td>
<td>Messages are relevant/irrelevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social roles re: sexual behavior</td>
<td>Teaching strategies</td>
<td>Suggesting changes in Messaging</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Seeing gender differences (not)</td>
<td>Teaching SC to cousin</td>
<td>Addressing Grey Areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men’s consent/Women’s consent</td>
<td>Factoring in age</td>
<td>Seeing a new/diff perspective</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Perceiving unfairness</td>
<td>Teaching/Doing it differently</td>
<td>Wanting Social Change</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Women's relationship to sexuality</td>
<td>Using fear as a teaching tool</td>
<td>Needing change</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Being expected to cross token boundaries</td>
<td>Focusing on consequences</td>
<td>Broadening definition</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Jumping through hoops</td>
<td>Using familiar examples</td>
<td>Seeking to broaden consent discussion</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Demonstrating Social Value</td>
<td>Continual Learning</td>
<td>Finding SC to be complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Influence of situation</td>
<td>Gaps in Experience/Knowledge</td>
<td>Continuing SC conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Special situation</td>
<td>Necessary consent ingredients</td>
<td>Losing Impact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexualizing places/sexualized</td>
<td>Relevant Acts/Irrelevant Acts</td>
<td>Limiting their audience</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Emphasizing the mood</td>
<td>Limits of SC</td>
<td>Finding Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Getting mixed messages</td>
<td>Getting mixed messages</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MEANING</strong></td>
<td>Being sexually open</td>
<td>Identifying as the exception to the rule</td>
<td>Defining Boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Factors</td>
<td>Feeling true to self</td>
<td>Not identifying experience as rape</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Experiencing personal growth</td>
<td>Considering Future Self</td>
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<td>Questioning self</td>
<td>Being Split from Sober Identity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Being good to self</td>
<td>Connecting SC to level of comfort</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Having faith in others (not)</td>
<td>Personalizing SC</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Cultural Factors</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NEGOTIATION</strong></td>
<td>Being hopeful</td>
<td>Being predictable/unpredictable</td>
<td>Making things complicated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Factors/Variables</td>
<td>Being vulnerable</td>
<td>Being certain/not certain</td>
<td>Lacking ability to say no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Description</td>
<td>Being turned on</td>
<td>Feeling free/feeling trapped</td>
<td>Being physically stronger (weaker)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affective States</td>
<td>Being accepted</td>
<td>Feeling wanted/not feeling wanted</td>
<td>Killing the mood</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being confused</td>
<td>Feeling out of it</td>
<td>Risks/fears surrounding SC</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Being honest/disonest</td>
<td>Feeling pleasure/not feeling pleasure</td>
<td>Consent unfolding IRL</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Being out of it</td>
<td>Feeling awkward</td>
<td>Building consent</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being surprised/thrown off</td>
<td>Feeling effortless</td>
<td>Hurting Feelings (not)</td>
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<td>Being present/attuned (not)</td>
<td>Experiencing mixed emotions</td>
<td>Lacking words to describe</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Being aware</td>
<td>Changing your mind</td>
<td>Noticing ambiguity</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NEGOTIATION</strong></td>
<td>Last Resort Strategies</td>
<td>Encouraging vigilance</td>
<td>Consent strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tactics/Strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td>Being Clear/Unclear</td>
<td>Manipulating the Situation</td>
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<td>Being attentive</td>
<td>Giving In</td>
<td>Using honestly intentionally</td>
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<td>Switching subjects</td>
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<td>Taking your time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Being Direct/directing</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NEGOTIATION</strong></td>
<td>Ways of Showing Yes/No</td>
<td>Using clear language</td>
<td>Pulling away/coming close</td>
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<tr>
<td>SC Expression</td>
<td></td>
<td>Direct communication/indirect</td>
<td>Going along with it</td>
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<td>Using words</td>
<td>Being silent</td>
<td>Actively participating</td>
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<td>Non Verbal Communication</td>
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<td>Ways of Asking</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NEGOTIATION/MEANING</strong></td>
<td>Explanations/Justifications &amp; Dealing with Repercussions</td>
<td>Making Assumptions</td>
<td>Experience regret</td>
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<td>Explaining actions/processes</td>
<td>Assuming consent</td>
<td>Making sense</td>
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<td>Reasoning for deciding</td>
<td>Having expectations</td>
<td>Getting over it</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Justifying behavior</td>
<td>Avoiding shame</td>
<td>Impacts of recreational drugs/alcohol</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Decision Making Process</td>
<td>Avoiding experience of regret</td>
<td>Ignoring Emotional Health</td>
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<td>Influence of Mindset</td>
<td>Experiencing internal shame</td>
<td>Pointing out physical diff</td>
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<td>Making exceptions</td>
<td>Feeling Accused</td>
<td>Identifying a special case/situation</td>
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<td>Pointing out hidden expectations</td>
<td>Feeling Blamed</td>
<td>Comparing positive SCE to NCE</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lowering standards</td>
<td>Feeling guilty</td>
<td>Using Biological Explanation</td>
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<td>Ignoring consequences</td>
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