

Consent a Shifting Notion in a Postmodern World

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As sexual violence prevention educators, we are all well aware of the importance of consent in relation to sexual activities. We all know that slogans and chants that have become a welcome mantra at Take Back the Night rallies, such as: “*However we dress, Wherever we go, Yes means yes, And no means no.*”

But increasingly these ideas are becoming more and more archaic in our current culture; at least, that’s what we are finding here in Flagstaff and Coconino County. It used to be that as educators we worked for an understanding that “no” means “no.” The implication was that a negative response to any physical advance was enough to negate that advance. This, however, became increasingly harder to enforce as the general culture continued to blur the line between a verbal or non-verbal “no” and a coy, teasing, flirtatious “noooooo”. This may have more to do with the way vernacular is received. For instance, if something is described as “whack,” the meaning is that it is good, and if you are described as “hot,” what really is meant is that you are “cool” (in 60’s vernacular) or acceptable.

As a result of this cultural confusion, we educators have stated that while “no” still means “no,” “yes” also means “yes”—adding this corollary to the equation as well. Taking this addendum into account, a clear, sober affirmative disavows any misunderstandings between consenting individuals when it comes to relational physicality. Increasingly, however, the line between what is and what is not consent is again blurring.

In Kathleen Bogle’s book, *Hooking Up: Sex, Dating, and Relationships on Campus*, the author explores the current culture wherein relationships begin with consensual activities but devolve from there. In this paradigm, “friends with benefits” becomes a common way for two individuals to have their sexual and physical needs met without thought or the pressure of an ongoing relationship. On the surface, this may seem to many individuals like an acceptable way to bypass all the difficult parts of relationships, such as communication, negotiation, mutual respect, and continual emotional support. However, the difficulties in involving oneself in this type of relationship may result in obvious misunderstandings about consensual activities. For example, common thinking includes the conclusion that “this person is my partner and couldn’t assault me,” regardless of the fact that there is little or no communication about mutual consensual activities.

Another example of the shifting understanding of consent involves the school classroom. Recently, here in Flagstaff, as in many parts of the country, there has been a case of a female teacher having a sexual relationship with her male students. Bypassing the obvious power differential that makes this relationship coercive at best, the reaction around town has been divided mainly along gender lines. Males, for the most part, see it as a rite of passage that a male enter into a “consensual” relationship with an older, female teacher—believing that a minor can give consent to a much older adult. The feeling is so strong and prevalent that there is now a Facebook page gathering names of male students who actually support this woman and her

actions. A link from this site allows others to ‘rate’ and comment on other teachers who have been convicted of sexual assault with their minor students. Again all of these teachers are female and all of the victims are male. Sample posts include the following:

“Man, why would a guy turn over a teacher who is teaching him sexuality. I would love to be with one of them in every grade.”

“Well, it may be wrong, but I wish I was one of those lucky students. They could sexually assault me anytime.”

Females, however, tend to see the relationship for what it was: assault. We know that in Arizona no one 17 years of age or under can consent to having a sexual relationship with someone older than themselves, let alone an authority figure who has been entrusted to care for these minors’ education.

The outrage and confusion stems from the incredibly disparate responses from people depending on whether the teacher is male or female. Patriarchy is still alive and rearing its double-standard laden head in our communities. It is widely accepted that while female minors cannot give consent, and need to be protected, minor males of the same age can give consent. Likewise, a male teacher who has a physical relationship with his female students is viewed as a monster, while a female teacher who has physical relations with her male student is seen as a miracle, a situation to be envied by other males.

Again, consent is at stake here. We must ask how one group of individuals on the cusp of adulthood can—though legally defined as minor—be classified as able to give consent while another group of the same age and fitting the same legal definition is denied that same right simply by gender.

Finally, we must examine the way in which members of the culture are co-opting the word to mean something it absolutely does not represent. Here, the very definition of consent is under attack so as to truly neutralize its effectiveness. As stated at the beginning of this article, the definition of consent is pretty standard and straightforward. However, that definition is being challenged not only in our classrooms and courtrooms, but also on our street corners and in the daily vocabulary of our minors. In the gaming community, especially among those who enjoy playing violent video games, consent is being redefined. According to urbandictionary.com, consent is a new slang term that replaces the word “rape” (e.g., “*I just consented your face!*”).

This last example of an Orwellian twist of words helps to highlight the murky waters that we, as sexual violence prevention educators, must trudge through in order to get our message across. These varying community ideas on what defines consent, and indeed the completely backward slang definition of consent itself, serves to validate the idea so eloquently put by educator Jackson Katz, that, “It takes a village to rape a woman.” As educators, we need to utilize this information and come up with different ways of communicating our message effectively. We need to stand firm on the idea that consent is a positive word and concept and spread that understanding until there can be no doubt about it.