

Does Yes Mean Yes?

Exploring Sexual Coercion in Normative Heterosexuality

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Dans cet article l'auteure assure que la rhétorique du consentement utilisée dans l'activisme anti-viol actuel est obnubilée par la présence de la coercition sexuelle dans les relations hétérosexuelles. La sexualité des hommes a été définie comme active et celle des femmes comme en manque de désir. Cette coercition est intégrée ce qui donne des pratiques sexuelles non-désirées et consensuelles. Pour enrayer cette culture du viol il faut une ré-figuration radicale de l'hétérosexualité et de la place du sexe dans les relations personnelles.

Current feminist anti-rape activism centres around a rhetoric of consent versus non-consent. With slogans like “No Means No” and “Only Yes Means Yes!,” anti-rape activists emphasize the importance of consent and foster awareness of sexual assault in the public consciousness. While the focus on consent is useful in that it establishes a clear definition of sexual assault, the language of consent is also premised on the assumption that sexually coercive behaviour is clearly distinguishable from “normal” heterosexual sex.¹ The prevalence of sexual coercion within heterosexual relationships, however, suggests that the rigid boundary between sexual assault and sex enforced by anti-rape activism may be an artificial construction. In this essay, I will argue that feminist theorists need to engage in thorough analysis of the intersections between normative heterosexuality and sexual assault. In particular, feminist rape theory might benefit from studying the phenomena of consensual, unwanted sex. While discussing the continuities between sex and sexual assault might be an unpleasant, difficult, and even dangerous task, it is nevertheless needed in order to challenge both the emerging backlash discourses of “gray rape” and ultimately the very existence of sexual assault and rape culture.

In her now classic essay “Sexuality,” Catharine A. MacKinnon brought forward the radical claim that “sexuality equals heterosexuality equals the sexuality of (male) dominance and (female) submission” (478). This argument was a strong criticism of the construction of rape as violence, and

inherently distinct from sex. MacKinnon argued instead that violence is inherent to sexuality because sexuality is constructed from the viewpoint of male supremacy (480). While this has often been (mis)interpreted as an “anti-sex” argument, MacKinnon’s argument is in reality far more complex. Consent, according to MacKinnon, is not an impossibility. It is, however, contentious because it occurs in a context of women’s inequality and limited possibilities (484-85). Our cultural understanding of sex and heterosexuality has been shaped around the eroticization of dominance and submission, and this cultural discourse is likely to affect our desires (480-82). From this perspective, consent becomes a contentious issue, because false consciousness or internalization of submission is embodied in female subjectivity.

However, feminist theorists after MacKinnon seem to avoid the difficult discussion of the continuities between rape and sex. Carine Mardorossian argues that rape is a neglected subject in feminist theory, that it has become “academia’s undertheorized and apparently untheorizable issue” (743). If rape is under-theorized overall, the perhaps most neglected subject of analysis is the intersection between normative heterosexuality and sexual assault. While social scientists have done much research on the prevalence of sexual coercion in heterosexual relationships (Hird and Jackson; O’Sullivan et al.; Struckman-Jackson et al.), feminist theorists appear increasingly reluctant to engage in an analysis of these empirical findings. The result of this under-theorization, Mardorossian argues, could be that backlash discourses become the only available theory addressing the issue (748-50).

The “Gray Rape” Discourse

While popular backlash against feminist anti-rape activism in the 1990s contested the prevalence of rape and argued that feminists created “date-rape hysteria” (Gavey 64-67), current backlash discourses centre on the idea that it is hard

to define sexual assault (Jervis). In the 2007 *Cosmopolitan* article "A New Kind of Date Rape," Laura Sessions Stepp defines "gray rape" as "sex that falls somewhere in between consent and denial and is even more confusing than date rape because often both parties are unsure of who wanted what." This gray rape discourse instigated by Stepp and taken up by both professionals and media is harmful to anti-rape activism and clearly problematic. Although the notion of gray rape implicitly points to the intersections between "normal" sex and sexual assault, the concept has not been used to investigate the problems of normative heterosexuality. Instead, the gray rape discourse is used to deliberately confuse the definition of sexual assault and blame survivors for the perpetrator's action (Jervis). Experiences that fit the definition of sexual assault provided by the *Criminal Code* are refigured as "one drunken, regrettable night" (Jervis 166).

Countering the harmful victim-blaming of gray rape discourses is important, but it is questionable whether feminists can effectively do this without engaging in a thorough critique of normative heterosexuality. While it is essential that we continue to insist on clear definitions of consent and sexual assault for legal purposes and in order to protect survivors, it is also important to acknowledge what gray rape discourses unwittingly have picked up on: the prevalence of sexual coercion within normative heterosexuality occasionally makes sex and sexual assault look awfully similar. The dangers of examining these intersections are many, and feminist hesitance to do so is understandable in light of the long and still on-going struggle to get sexual assault recognized as criminal. In addition to the fear of feeding into backlash discourses like the one provided by Stepp, there is likely also a feminist fear of going too far in the opposite direction by constructing heterosexuality as rape by definition. However, the main reason for hesitance might be a more personal discomfort with the subject. Perhaps an examination of sexual coercion and internalization of submission within heterosexuality hits too close to home and heterosexual feminists' own practices.²

Complicating Consent: The Internalization of Sexual Coercion

The prevalence of sexual coercion in heterosexual relationships has been established by numerous research studies (Hird and Jackson; O'Sullivan et al.; Byers and Finkelman; Struckman-Johnson et al.) In early adolescence, sexual coercion frequently occurs as part of dating behaviour (Hird and Jackson). In particular, research shows that sexually coercive behaviour is configured as central to young men's sexuality (Hird and Jackson). However, while sexual coercion in adolescence is most commonly enacted by boys, gender dynamics appear to change somewhat with age. In a study done with male and female U.S. university students,² Cindy Struckman-Johnson, David

Struckman-Johnson, and Peter B. Anderson found that one third of participants reported having used coercion to get another person to consent to sexual activity (84), and the real numbers are likely higher, since 70 percent of the participants reported having experienced sexual coercion (85). Still, the gender difference in coercion is striking: Forty-three percent of the men compared to 26 percent of the women reported having used coercion (81). Women also reported being subjected to coercion much more frequently than men (80), demonstrating that sexual coercion is a distinctly gendered problem. Disturbingly, many of the perpetrators defined their sexually coercive behaviour as "playful" and "beneficial," with the intention of improving a relationship (85). This clearly illustrates the extent to which sexual coercion is normalized and seen as acceptable behaviour.

The prevalence of sexual coercion within heterosexual relationships poses a challenge for anti-rape activism centred on consent. While section 273.1 of the Canadian *Criminal Code* specifies that consent needs to be voluntary, and thus arguably cannot be obtained through pressure or coercion, the lived reality of being in a relationship may make it hard to define coercion. In our society, sexuality and coercion are intertwined so as to constitute "both the offence and the 'normality'" (Schur). When coercion is present from the very first dating experiences in early adolescence (Hird and Jacobsen), it can be normalized as a dating behaviour. Furthermore, expressing non-consent within the dynamics of an intimate relationship, to a person with whom you may already have shared sexual experiences, may be more difficult than expressing non-consent to a person you do not know intimately (O'Sullivan and Allgeier 234).

The language of consent both presumes and sustains the idea of an autonomous, knowing subject whose sexuality and desires are free from social norms and socialization. What is missing, in the words of Charlene Muehlenhard and Zoë Peterson, is a "discourse of ambivalence" (15). A person might, for example, want the consequences of a sexual act, but not the act itself (Muehlenhard and Peterson 16). Or, a person might fear the consequences of not consenting and thus consent to an unwanted sexual act out of fear of damaging the relationship (Gavey). Nicola Gavey's qualitative interviews with New Zealand women about experiences of unwanted sex suggest that women in particular might have a perception of limited choice within relationships. This is partly because female sexuality and femininity are constructed as passive and thus lacking in agency (145). As one of Gavey's interviewees articulates it: "I never would have ever, ever thought of saying yes or no" (138). If actively consenting to a sexual activity is not seen as an option, then how can we expect women to express non-consent? Women's internalization of a feminine subject position lacking in agency means that overt sexual coercion is not required: women might comply with an unwanted sexual act simply because they

are not aware of other options or because the alternatives are perceived to have negative outcomes.

Both men and women internalize cultural ideals of gender and heterosexuality. This internalization means that pressure and coercion can be enacted indirectly, through shared “cultural knowledge and understandings” (Gavey 139). Gavey highlights the way in which women engage in complex practices of sexual self-disciplining and self-surveillance based on cultural expectations about how a relationship should be like and the role of sex within this relationship (141-51). These self-disciplining practices are

because they are supposed to always want it. As both men and women are aware of this cultural discourse, female perpetrators often can use it actively in committing sexual assault (Struckman-Johnson et al.). Female sexual coercion commonly takes the form of emotional manipulation such as questioning men’s masculinity or heterosexuality or asking the men “why they (the women) were not good enough or pretty enough or loved enough for sex” (Struckman-Johnson et al. 83). Not surprisingly, many male survivors of female-to-male sexual assault question their own sexuality, and often they feel ashamed and

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engaged in by men too. Cultural expectations influence everything from the frequency of sex acts (Gavey) to what kind of sexual acts are performed (Bussel). Assuming that both partners are aware of these cultural expectations, active sexual coercion enacted by one partner towards another is no longer necessary, because coercion has been internalized.

Gendered Implications of Internalized Coercion

The extensive sexual coercion documented by researchers is thus only part of the problem of sexual coercion in heterosexual relationships: the larger problem may be the internalization of coercion caused by the ways heterosexuality is configured in social and cultural texts. Cultural scripts of normative heterosexual dating behaviour centre to a great degree around what Gavey terms the “male sexual drive” (141). The heterosexual economy, Gavey argues, is based on an understanding and shared acceptance of male sexuality as the “dominant driving force” (141). This concurs with MacKinnon’s understanding of male sexual desire as defining both masculinity and femininity (478). The cultural acceptance of male sexuality as more powerful than the female should be seen as placing a burden on women, obviously, but also on men.

Because men are constructed as having a high sex drive, it becomes shameful for men to admit to or exhibit a low sex drive. In fact, potency and virility are seen as “inherent” or “natural” to masculinity (Schur 85). A number of research studies among teenagers have found that the view of male sex drive as stronger than the female and indeed “uncontrollable” is held by both girls and boys from an early age (Hird and Jackson; Impett and Peplau 91). This particular configuration of masculinity creates a paradigm in which men feel they cannot say no to sex

confused because they believe they should have desired the sexual activity (University of Alberta Sexual Assault Centre). However, the male sexual drive discourse can also play out more subtly in heterosexual relationships, by male partners simulating or “feigning” sexual desire (O’Sullivan and Allgeier).

While men may experience sexual coercion at the hands of a female partner, the number of women experiencing sexual coercion enacted by a male partner is significantly larger (Struckman-Johnson et al. 800). Thus the male sexual drive discourse should be seen as having severe impacts on female sexuality. Women are constructed as having lower sex drive and are consequently assigned with the task of “monitoring” uncontrollable male sexuality and desire (Gavey 141). This may make women feel compelled to engage in sexual activity that they do not desire because cultural discourses require them to meet the sexual needs of the virile male. Again, this discourse is often manifested in sexual coercion and pressure enacted by a partner, but it can also be internalized by the woman herself. This sentiment is expressed by several of Gavey’s interviewees who “feel perfectly able to say no” but at the same time would feel “prudish, frigid, and a bit unfair” if they did not consent (154). In this situation, the women are not concerned that their partners will call them prudes; instead, they fear *feeling* like a prude. Female sexual agency is increasingly constructed around being a “good lover” for a male partner, as exemplified by *Cosmopolitan* headlines like “His #1 Sex Wish”; “10 Things He Don’t Wanna Hear In Bed”; “50 Ways to Touch Him There”; and “The Kind of Foreplay He Craves” (*Cosmopolitan*). Such cultural texts participate in an artificial construction of what *all* men want, completely disregarding what the actual desires of a woman’s particular partner might be. Simultaneously, they also set concrete standards and expectations for what

activities a woman should engage in to keep her relationship good and healthy.

What is missing in this cultural construction of heterosex is, of course, female desire. The headlines of *Cosmopolitan* are telling in their concern for educating women about what men want. Although women are constructed as active sexual agents, thus challenging old discourses of female sexual passivity, female desire is not mentioned: it is not a part of the new female sexual agency. As Myra J. Hird and Sue Jackson put it: “young women’s sexuality is defined by its absence and [their] sexuality is framed by the accom-

sexual activity that was unwanted on their part (241). Among the most cited motivations for participating in the sexual activity was wishing to satisfy partners’ needs and “promotion of relationship intimacy” (240). These reasons were cited by both male and female participants and might at the surface appear like positive and reasonable choices. However, these findings still raise the question of why the participants would perceive of sex as a way to enhance a relationship in the first place.

The notion of consenting to undesired sex as a harmless form of altruism is questioned by O’Sullivan and Allgeier.

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modation of male desire” (40). The only place a discourse of female sexual desire can be discerned is in the assumed desire to please a male partner. The resulting gendered construction of sexuality and desire is the following: men desire sex; women should desire to be desired. These social constructions of desire in relation to gender and sexuality should make us concerned about the common heterosexual practice of consenting to unwanted sex.

The Problem of Undesired, Consensual Sex

In her discussion of unwanted sex, Gavey defines unwanted sex as sex in which the “women didn’t feel like they had a choice; when the sense of obligation and pressure is too strong” (136). While this would include situations in which the sense of obligation was internalized and the pressure was not intentionally enacted by a partner, the above definition of unwanted sex is too limited. What Gavey exempts from her analysis of unwanted sex is “sex that is unwanted only in the sense that it takes place in the absence of desire” (136). This could lead one to conclude that the practice of consensual, undesired sex is unproblematic. However, given the dominance of male sexual drive discourse in scripting heterosexual gendered subjectivities, as outlined above, the practice of consenting to undesired sex in heterosexual relationships becomes more problematic. While this undesired sex would take place without the presence of sexual coercion in a presumably “healthy” relationship, the motivations for consenting to such undesired sex need to be scrutinized.

In a 2001 study of U.S. college students, Lucia O’Sullivan and Elizabeth Rice Allgeier found that the practice of consenting to undesired sex was common in heterosexual dating relationships. Over a two-week period, 25 percent of the men and 50 percent of the women consented to

Despite the “good” motivations and perceived positive outcomes of consenting to undesired sex with their partner, half of the participants in O’Sullivan and Allgeier’s study also reported negative outcomes (242). The negative outcomes were experienced in terms of emotional discomfort and “feeling disappointed in oneself” (242). O’Sullivan and Allgeier further suggest that participants might have been prone to over-report positive outcomes to compensate for negative feelings (242). In other words, the participants experienced a sense of guilt about their lack of desire or felt discomfort about feigning this desire. The negative feelings experienced by participants after having consented to undesired sex suggest that even this presumably freely-chosen “relationship-enhancing” behaviour is dictated by a particular construction of heterosexuality.

The broader societal pattern of consensual, unwanted sex suggests that heterosexual couples have internalized a discourse of sex as essential to heterosexual relationships (Impett and Peplau 91). In the words of Gavey, “the place of sex within relationships exists as a given, something that is taken for granted as the normal and natural glue that holds together intimate relationships” (142). This dominant view of sex as the natural bond of relationships has particular gendered dimensions. Although large numbers of both men and women consent to unwanted sex, studies show that women consent far more often (Impett and Peplau; O’Sullivan and Allgeier). This finding suggests that women to a larger degree are socialized to accept the task of “enhancing” the relationship and to see sex as emotional investment. A study asking adolescents to define sexual desire found that young women were much more likely to associate desire with heterosexual romance (Regan and Berscheid). One female participant expressed the following sentiment: “I believe sexual desire to be ... the need for a romantic relationship with a

person of the opposite sex” (114). Thirty-five percent of the girls, as opposed to only 13 percent of the boys, saw love or emotional intimacy as the goal of sexual desire (116). It thus appears that the discursive lack of female sexual desire discussed above has been channelled into the maintenance of relationships.

However, it should be noted that women are not alone in engaging in “relationship enhancing” undesired sex. This practice is also seen among men, albeit in smaller numbers (Impett and Peplau; O’Sullivan and Allgeier). In addition, O’Sullivan and Allgeier’s study found that men were significantly more likely than women to consent to undesired sex in order “to avoid relationship tension” (240). This clearly demonstrates that men too perceive of sex as an investment in a heterosexual relationship. The investment in the ideal of heterosexuality—a long-term, monogamous relationship—thus limits both men’s and women’s choices. Consenting to unwanted sex is naturalized, because sex is seen to “constitute an important symbolic means of establishing couplehood” (O’Sullivan and Allgeier 241).

Sex as Property

Within this language of sex as a practice of relationship-enhancement, sex is constructed as a gift, something to be sacrificed. The construction of sex as something that can be given and taken is problematic because this is the very same assumption that underlies rape. Sharon Marcus strongly criticizes the construction of female sexuality as property, arguing that it is this property metaphor that makes the rape script possible (399). Rape is seen as an appropriation of sexuality because sex, and female sexuality in particular, is seen as an object (398). According to Marcus, the elimination of rape requires a restructuring of the ways that sex and sexuality is talked about and conceived of: “The most deep-rooted upheaval of rape culture would revise the idea of female sexuality as an object, as property, and as an inner space” (399). From this perspective, even the consensual “giving” of sex becomes problematic, because “giving to” is only a few steps away from “giving in to.”

These insights suggest that what is needed in a re-figuration of heterosexuality is a removal of sex from its pedestal within heterosexual relationships. Sex needs to be separated from sexuality, not seen as integral to the preservation of heterosexual romance. As Hird and Jackson argue, “the fusion of love and sex facilitates using love as a coercive tool” (38). When love is used as a coercive tool, the language of consent is too simplistic to capture unwanted sex. A conceptualization of consent as yes or no does not go to the root of the problem: the lack of positive choices (Gavey; Bussel). As argued above, the dynamics of a relationship can severely affect men’s and women’s perception of choice when faced with unwanted sexual initiatives.

Implications for Anti-Rape Activism

Thus it appears that anti-rape activism needs to go beyond reliance on a mere rhetoric of consent. This does not mean letting go of consent, but recognizing that consent is only “ground zero” (Corinna 183). Holding on to rigid definitions of consent and sexual assault is important in confronting backlash and resistance, as well as in working with survivors and with the law itself. Anti-rape activism therefore needs to continue educating about consent. However, to fully confront backlash and rape culture, feminist theory and activism need to go much further. We need to recognize that sexual coercion operates in many ways and has become integrated into normative heterosexuality. Just because a particular sexual experience cannot be defined as sexual assault, it does not mean that the experience is “okay.” The problem with sexual relations is not merely a problem of consent in terms of yes or no: it is about who is asking, who is consenting (or not), and for what reason.

In essence, what is needed is a re-figuration of consent as not just an answer to a yes/no question, but rather as an affirmation of shared desire (Corinna 185). To begin the move towards this re-figuration of consent, we need to drastically refigure heterosexuality and social constructions of masculinity and femininity. As long as gender roles are constructed around the male sexual drive, female desire will continue to be absent in cultural discourses, and this lack of desire will continue to be internalized. Constructing visions of shared desire entails separating sex from sexuality, so that sex can become an expression of sexual desire rather than an affirmation of a relationship or a mere emotional investment.

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¹The focus of my paper is heterosexual relations, but I would like to emphasize that sexual coercion and sexual violence affects people of all sexual orientations. My paper does not intend to erase neither lgbt experiences of sexual coercion nor the invaluable contribution of the lgbt community to anti-rape activism. Sadly, most research on sexual coercion has been done with heterosexual participants, and there is a significant lack of research on lgbt relations and sexual coercion. Although I do not wish to add to this neglect of lgbt relations, I have nevertheless chosen to limit my paper to heterosexual relations for clarity’s sake. Also, my paper attempts to explore the specific role that normative heterosexuality plays in shaping dominant understandings of sex and sexual assault, as well as dominant cultural con-

structions of masculine and feminine sexual roles. While some parts of my paper relates exclusively to heterosexual relations, the discussion of undesired, consensual sex should be relevant to LGBT relations as well.

²Of course, the continuities between sex and rape are not unique to heterosexuality, and discussions of sexual coercion are likely to make all feminists, regardless of sexuality, uncomfortable. However, as earlier noted, this paper is limited to a discussion of heterosexual relations. I am solely looking at the construction of heterosexuality to avoid making a muddy topic even muddier.

³It should be noted that although all participants were heterosexual, the incidents of sexual coercion did not necessarily occur within a relationship.

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CAROLYNE VAN DER MEER

The Workshop

It's easier to write
The tired, old man
walked slowly into the
dark, smoky room
she said

or
The handsome young man
strode purposefully into the
sundrenched room

than it is to write
The man walked into the room

I didn't write anything
because you never showed up
or maybe I left
before you arrived

Carolyn Van Der Meer's poetry appears earlier in this volume.