Luckily He Backed Off: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Undergraduate Women's Consent, Attitudes and Behaviors

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Women's sexual beliefs and behaviors are influenced by the overarching demands of society. This paper discusses a portion of a study completed at a small liberal arts institution in the northeastern United States. Female undergraduates (N = 54) answered an online questionnaire concerning their own sexual compliance attitudes and behaviors. O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1998) define sexual compliance as engaging in unwanted sexual activity. Results from this mixed methods study indicate that participants have engaged in sexual compliance (N = 25, 46%) in their own lives. A series of three fictional vignettes of varying sexual scenarios prompted qualitative narratives from participants. Female respondents endorsed the female character's use of verbal communication over physical communication of lack of desire to engage in sexual activity in the vignette. However, although women regularly used verbal communication, they expressed reluctance to do so in specific sexual situations out of fear of making themselves and their partners uncomfortable. Results also indicate that participants assigned women as the "gatekeepers" of sexual activity by giving responsibility often wholly to the female character in the scenarios (Simon & Gagnon, 2005, p. 68). This paper discusses how women's agency in sexual interactions is a prevailing discourse in American culture and is reflected in the compliance behaviors of women. Specific programming endeavors that aim to change this predominant culture are also discussed.

The sexual communication behaviors of women reinforce sexual scripts created by society that dictate roles for men and women. These societal expectations of women can translate into women's own sexual behaviors and beliefs. One example of such behavior is sexual compliance, which is defined as "consensual participation in unwanted sexual activity" (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998, p. 234).

The research discussed here is part of an independent project conducted in the spring of 2011 that originally aimed to understand how rape myths operated through women's sexual behaviors and attitudes. The purpose of the project was to create a dialogue surrounding the issue of women's sexuality and societal expectations through both quantitative scales and qualitative narratives. However, the small number of participants led to a reliance on the qualitative portion of the study rather than results from the scales. Sexual compliance appeared as a dominant theme throughout participants' narratives. The shift in focus to sexual compliance was unexpected; it is a relatively unstudied topic despite its relevance to today's sexual culture. This paper will emphasize the qualitative portion of the larger mixed methods study.

The results presented are a condensed version of a complex set of narratives and scales. Participants' responses are split into comments regarding the behaviors of the characters in the vignettes (named Claire and Matt) and the participants' own experiences with sexual compliance. The study addressed the complexity of women's sexuality by examining the manifestation of society's sexual scripts in female sexual communication styles, and critically examined the agency of women ages 18 to 25 with their sexual partners under an assessment of the dominant culture. The purpose of this paper is to link gender role stereotypes and women's feelings about how they are permitted to communicate their sexual needs. The paper will use the terms from Phillips (2000) - "together woman," and "pleasing woman" - (p. 39) and from Simon & Gagnon (2005) -"gatekeeper" - to categorize results (p. 68). Lastly, the paper suggests programming and future work concerning women's sexuality and sexual expression.

The Complexity of Women's Sexual Agency

Specific sexual roles are assigned to both men and women in heterosexual relationships. Simon and Gagnon (1987) theorize that when assuming a sexual role, women act as "gatekeepers" of sexual activity. Women are taught to determine the boundaries of a relationship and men are taught to push those boundaries. These roles exist interdependently-without one, the other would not ex-

ist. Women's navigation of their own sexual agency can be a manifestation of a societal requirement to negotiate with the typical male role of initiation (Humphreys & Brousseau, 2010; Humphreys & Herold, 2007; Meston & O'Sullivan, 2007; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; O'Sullivan & Bryers, 1992; Simon & Gagnon, 2005; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010). To adhere to assigned gender roles, a woman sometimes finds herself in situations where she complies with sexual activity or intercourse in order to avoid displeasing a man.

Phillips (2000) discusses certain trends in society that dominate the definition of women's sexual roles. She investigates the dichotomous expectation that all women face of being expected to be a "together woman" and a "pleasing woman." A "together women" is sexually experienced, demands equality, and has it all; in contrast, a "pleasing woman" ignores her needs for those of her partner. If a woman does express her desires, this communication is always indirect. The contradictory expectations of being "together" and "pleasing" send mixed messages about how women are permitted to act in sexual situations. Women tend to navigate these ideals by adopting a strategy in which a female waits until her partner notices her displeasure rather than purposely communicating this displeasure (Phillips, 2000).

Gendered messages regarding sexuality are not always defined by women's behavior and communication. Humphreys and Herold (2007) indicate that there are sexual scripts that instruct men to ignore the first act of resistance by women because they have learned that it signifies a "token resistance" (p. 305). Initial resistance from women can be interpreted as a strategic move in order to not be perceived as too sexually open, while allowing women to indirectly voice sexual desire. Therefore, women can be construed as being compliant with the accepted gender stereotypes. Men's tendencies to push back on women's verbal responses imply that passive sexual communicative behaviors are rewarded over a vocal sexual agency.

Women's Responses to Mixed Messages

The gender roles described above shape how women navi-

gate sexual roles, which is directly related to the way women communicate their sexual agency. Phillips (2000) states "But what she does—how she exercises that power—is shaped by her sense of what is possible, appropriate, and desirable in hetero-relations, as well as by the particularities of this specific relationship" (p. 21). A lack of women's agency based on society's sexual scripts can lead to sexually compliant behavior. This could be more concretely related to a woman's attitude toward consent as a fixed decision rather than an assessment that is reflected on a continuum of sexual choices. This is related to the male sexual drive discourse, which suggests that society views men's sexuality as most important and unstoppable. This discourse implies that a woman must navigate her sexual choices around the dominant sexual nature of her partner. Through these messages, women are not encouraged to explore their own sexual agency (Hollway, 1985; Phillips, 2000).

Rates of sexual compliance are relatively high in the United States. O'Sullivan and Allgeier (1998) reported that significantly more women engage in sexual compliance than men. More specifically, three studies found that compliance rates varied between men and women, with roughly half of women and one third of men reporting having sex when they did not want to (Impett & Peplau, 2002; Katz & Tirone, 2009; Katz & Tirone, 2010; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2010). Impett and Peplau (2002) also concluded that the length of a relationship has no bearing on a woman's willingness to engage in undesired sexual activity. Understanding sexual compliance is a vital tool to combat the devaluation of women's agency. Evidence suggests that women might engage in sexual compliance out of pressure from society to fulfill certain expectations, but there has been little dialogue on this issue. Distinguishing between agency and compliance is essential to ensure that women understand the positive value of making a choice in sexual situations.

Study

Participants were given one hour to complete an online survey with both qualitative and quantitative measures. They

were given verbal consent and a written debriefing from a female researcher.

Participants

Fifty-four female undergraduate students, aged 18 to 24, participated in the online questionnaire. Participants ranged in class year, including 30 freshmen, 11 sophomores, 6 juniors, and 6 seniors. Racial backgrounds were not evenly distributed, and included 33 Caucasian, 4 Biracial, 3 Black, 1 Asian, and 3 undisclosed.

Vignettes

Three separate vignettes were given to participants depicting a fictional sexual scenario in which Claire, a woman, does not wish to have sex with Matt, a man. Matt and Claire are both undergraduate students who attend the same institution. The vignettes have different versions of the encounter (Appendix A). The scenario describes Matt and Claire meeting at a party and going home together. Matt puts his hand on Claire's breast and she feels uncomfortable. The first vignette ends with Claire feeling uncomfortable.

The second vignette begins identically to the first; however, the scenario describes Claire moving Matt's hand away from her breast and hip, signaling with two physical moves that she does not want to have sex. Matt asks if Claire wants to have sex and Claire says yes even though she does not really want to, because it was easier than saying no.

In the third and last vignette, Claire verbally indicates that she does not want to have sex with Matt when he asks, but then proceeds to have sex when Matt asks a second time. Vignette 3 differs from vignette 2 in that Claire indicates verbally rather than physically that she does not want to have sex. The scenarios in vignette 2 and 3 exemplify sexual compliance.

Participants were asked to judge whether the female and male character should have acted differently in the three sexual situations, for example, "Should Claire have done something dif-

ferently?" and "How should Matt proceed?" The participants were then asked whether they had been in a similar scenario, and if so, how they had acted in those situations.

Results

Claire's behavior

The responses discussing Claire's behavior throughout the three vignettes varied only slightly. For all three vignettes, most participants suggested that Claire voice her lack of desire to engage in sexual intercourse. For instance, one participant responded that Claire should have given verbal cues such as, "She can say she does not want to have sex with him," to convey to Matt that she does not want to have sex. However, participants responding to the second vignette advised Claire to be more forceful in general. For instance, 49% of women ($N = 26$) indicated in vignette 2 that Claire should have "said no" rather than proceed. These responses assigned responsibility to Claire for expressing her true desires.

Interestingly, in both vignettes 1 and 2, participants advised Claire to imply that sexual activity would occur at a later time. One such response stated, "She could say that this was really as far as she wanted to go that evening." Similarly, participants implied that Claire should tell Matt that although she did not want to have sex now, other physical behaviors would be acceptable. However, this was not a choice indicated in the vignette script. Participants seemed concerned with Claire giving Matt a clear response or "shut down," which directly contrasts the expectations of a "pleasing woman." Saying no to Matt would violate the expectation that women act indirectly in their sexual agency. If Claire were to say no, she would be both upfront about her sexual desires and not pleasing to the dominant male.

Although responses related to vignette 3 overwhelmingly expressed that verbal communication was best, the responses had a critical tone concerning the contradiction between Claire's verbal consent and physical dissent. For instance, one participant wrote, "She still should have said no since she didn't want to

have sex with him the first time he asked." Other participants did acknowledge Claire's first refusal by commenting that Claire should have "made it clear that she meant no the first time, and respond with no the second time he asked her. Be persistent."

Of the 23% of participants ($N = 11$) who commented that Claire should have been more assertive, we saw strong elements of victim blame. Victim blame places responsibility for a sexual assault on the victim rather than the perpetrator. One participant commented that Claire had done herself a disservice by taking the easy way out and telling Matt that she didn't feel like it, stating, "Yes, she should have sticked *[sic]* to her original answer and not done the stupid decision of taking the easy path. It was her fault." This statement assigns Claire the responsibility to provide the correct signals rather than giving Matt responsibility for misinterpreting the signals she did give. These responses suggest that Claire is accountable for giving in. The "wait until he notices" discourse presented by Phillips (2000) discusses tactics that women use to help manage heterosexual relations (p.147). Women rely on a partner's compassion in order to exit an uncomfortable situation. Women must remain passive and "wait until he notices" in order to still be a pleasing woman (Phillips, 2000, p. 147).

Matt's behavior

Fifty percent of participants in vignette 2 ($N = 25$) indicated that Matt should "ask if she is sure," whereas only 14% in vignette 3 ($N = 7$) indicated that Matt should verbally ask Claire again if she wants to have sex. In the verbal responses of vignette 2 and 3, participants assigned responsibility to either Claire or Matt, but not to both. For example, one participant commented, "Ask again because this girl obviously doesn't know what she wants."

In both vignettes 2 and 3, participants addressed the concept of consent and what consent means. Participants indicated that while Matt *should* ask again, he does already have consent, which means that he *could* just continue if he so wished. One participant articulated clearly, "There is not much realistic choice for Matt if she actually said yes, although being sure that his partner

is comfortable and asking again would be the wisest/most caring choice." These responses mimic society's intent on women being the "gatekeepers" of sex and men trying to "go as far as possible." By assigning Claire responsibility to stop sex, participants validated the concept that Matt's sexuality is uncontrollable.

Moreover, 24% ($N = 12$) of participants indicated that in vignette 2, Matt should proceed with sex "since Claire said yes." This trend that consent is a fixed decision and Claire cannot change her mind once she has given consent mirrors the responses where participants advised Matt to proceed with sex. For example, a participant stated, "If Claire said yes then Matt should have sex with her. He asked her." Another said, "Have sex. She gave consent." This implies that once verbal consent is given, physical cues are no longer as important. This could be interpreted to mean that consent does not exist on a continuum but rather as a fixed decision.

Some participants put themselves in the position of a man and described how men *probably* would act in this situation. This indicates an acknowledgment of the disparity between how men should act in this situation and how they might actually act. However, the lack of an overlap did not seem to affect the participants. For example, one participant commented, "Well, if I were in the same position as Matt, I would try to read body language and realize that she really didn't want to. However, most men don't do that especially when intoxicated so I would assume he would see it was a green light." The participant was not critical of this male oversight.

Only in vignette 3 did participants ($N = 34$, 69%) overwhelmingly respond that Matt should stop, "He shouldn't have sex with her because she said no the first time. He should have not asked her again." Participants could have felt that Claire's use of verbal signals in vignette 3 gave no legitimate room for Matt to ignore Claire's sexual role. This could be because participants connected this clearer indication of sexual compliance to their own experiences of sexual compliance rather than a situation that allows more room to critique Claire's nonverbal, passive communication.

Women's own similar experiences

When describing their own use of sexual communication, participants expressed pride concerning their sexual agency. Of the 50% ($N = 27$) of women who said they had been in a situation similar to vignette 1, 63% ($N = 17$) of them indicated that they had used verbal cues such as "I told them I wouldn't have sex with them and they respected it" to signal lack of desire. These included participants just saying no, as in "I said no which I fealt *[sic]* really good about." Other responses indicated that participants eventually said no after feeling uncomfortable for some time.

Thirty percent of those 27 women ($N = 8$) gave a physical cue such as "A boy tried to finger me and I didn't want to so I moved his hand away." Participants indicated conveying their discomfort through body language. Lastly, two women (7%) indicated that they used both physical and verbal cues such as "Just pushing the hand away usually gives them the memo however on occasion I have had to say no and they have been respectful." This suggests that verbal communication was considered the last resort for this participant.

Other types of responses indicated that women had had sex when they did not want to for various reasons. Sixty-two percent ($N = 8$) of the responses from vignette 2 described participants' own sexual compliance. When the participants described their own sexually compliant situations, they described knowing that they did not want to but still continuing with sex either out of obligation to a boyfriend or because it was easier than saying no to their partner. For example, one participant wrote, "My boyfriend. It was his birthday. Didn't want to say no. It didn't really bother me. I just wasn't into it." Another participant described, "I have said yes to a guy to having sex when I really didn't want to but did anyway because it would have been awkward if I said no." These responses indicate that these women appeared to consent to unwanted sex out of caring about the traditional feminine pleasing role. Although participants took responsibility for their part in consenting, they also presented with negative emotions toward the encounter. One participant described being ashamed:

I was in a situation where I said no multiple times

> but after months of saying no, I finally said yes... I felt ashamed that I didn't stick with my initial response (no) and it kind of made me feel sick. But at the same time I thought it would be a different experience so I should try it.

After this participant explained her negative emotions surrounding her decision, she justified the experience and controlled these negative emotions by rationalizing her decision.

Discussion

Specific themes emerged consistently from participants' responses that demonstrated a support of dominant gender role stereotypes confirming previous research. There are some participant responses within this section that were not highlighted in the results but are nevertheless relevant to the discussion. Participants assigned Claire the role of the "gatekeeper" and critiqued her for not being a "together woman." One participant wrote that Claire lacked self-respect as a woman, stating, "Yes, she shouldn't have been such an idiot, respected herself and not been so afraid to get out of the situation fearing his opinion of her." Other women defended Matt by claiming that Claire gave unrecognizable signals, "Matt should proceed to have sex with Claire. As far as this story goes, it appears that Matt is not a mind reader." Lastly and more clearly, participants concluded that the misunderstanding in the situation was Claire's fault, "Yes, she should have sticked [*sic]* to her original answer and not done the stupid decision of taking the easy path. It was her fault."

In addition, many participants agreed that once verbal consent was given, other types of consent or nonconsent were illegitimate or somehow not as important. One participant remarked, "If Claire said yes then Matt should have sex with her. He asked her." This response assigns Matt no responsibility for understanding the sexual desires of his partner, indicating that consent is not permitted to be ambiguous or a process. This is problematic, considering many of the responses given by the participants themselves involve much ambiguity and confusion.

Results demonstrate a disconnect between how women

behave and how they think other women should behave. Participants were critical of Claire while still making similar choices in their own lives. The conflict that the participants might have felt in their own lives probably biased the critical nature of their responses to Claire. In essence, participants may actually have been critical of the agency they did not always take in sexual situations, and this was displaced onto the character Claire.

Although participants indicated that Claire should use verbal communication skills over any other type of communication, they expressed a discontent with using this method themselves even though it was the most self-reported communication style. One participant described this discomfort, "I said that I was not ready to have sex but I felt uncomfortable having to say that." Other participants described avoiding taking agency using the word no by making excuses, "I tried making up excuses why I couldn't instead of just saying no." Lastly, one participant described saying no as possibly spoiling the mood of the moment, "I have said yes to a guy to having sex when I really didn't want to but did anyway because it would have been awkward if I said no."

The study originally aimed to link victim blame, sexual compliance, and rape culture, but in the end the results spoke the most about sexual compliance. This research can begin to change the way society examines and discusses rape. As Powell (2008) suggested, we "overlook those experiences of pressured or coerced sex, wherein the line between consent and non-consent becomes for some, increasingly blurred" (p.169). Society fails to encompass the ambiguity of consent, which leads to a dominant model of the concept of rape. As Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) agree, "rape victims who accept the narrow definition of rape promoted by the dominant model and who had reasons for wanting to have sex may believe that their experience does not qualify as rape" (p.74). This leads to underreporting and the persistence of a narrow definition of rape. The most problematic outcome occurs when one does not acknowledge that a rape trauma has occurred and the healing process is fragmented.

Limitations and Future Directions

Because the study aimed to provide both qualitative and quantitative data, one limitation is the small sample size, which does not allow for generalization of the results. While these answers are valid and important, the power of this statistical test creates results that are not applicable to all populations.

In addition, this research was based at an undergraduate, upper-middle class, liberal arts college and focused only on hetero-normative behaviors. Further research must focus on how sexual compliance and sexual coercion are interrelated and can be applied cross-culturally and within same-sex relationships. Education about these sexual scripts and ways women, perhaps unknowingly, control these expectations can reduce sexual compliance rates and better our understanding of rape culture. Moreover, men's sexuality and the discourses surrounding male dominance should be investigated, as these roles reinforce problematic gender role stereotypes for women.

Changing this culture requires empowerment and education. Programs in high school and middle schools can lead to dialogue surrounding these issues at an early age. Society must begin to expand its idea of women's sexual roles. Giving females voices concerning their own bodies and sexual agency is the first step toward giving them power in sexual situations.

Programs such as Girls Write Now (GWN) can help give females the dialogue and space to express their feelings concerning their sexuality and role in society. GWN is an after school creative arts program for high school girls living in New York City. Since 1998, GWN has been providing 3,500 women each year with the opportunity to receive a mentoring relationship with a creative writing community (*http://www.girlswritenow.org/gwn/*). Giving our youth the language to both understand these messages and then voice their opinions is an important step in changing our culture surrounding women's sexual agency. The understanding and breakdown of these messages can then help spread awareness to other groups and other places. This can help eliminate the behaviors, such as sexual compliance, that prevent agency and promote victim blaming.

On a smaller scale, programs such as the Crime Victims

Treatment Center (CVTC) of Roosevelt and St. Luke's Hospitals are safe spaces to receive free counseling for survivors of sexual violence. CVTC is a program offered within hospitals in which volunteers meet survivors during rape and domestic violence examinations. The CVTC staff then reaches out to the survivor for support (*http://www.cvtc-slr.org/*). Because our understanding of victimhood is so limited, many individuals may feel as though they do not count as a victim. Instead of understanding the complicated nature of sexual roles, victims are taught to blame themselves. The CVTC is a safe space for men and women to discuss the ambiguity of sexual roles and activity in order to heal after a traumatic sexual experience.

The effects of society's mixed sexual expectations on both the behaviors and thoughts of the female participants are evident in the present study. Participants were more understanding of their own sexually compliant behaviors rather than the sexually compliant behaviors of a fictitious woman. Further research should address this gap because it is difficult to measure the psychological and social impact of consenting to unwanted sex. It is impossible to fully understand how the impact of society's control over female sexuality influences self-image. As social workers, it is our ethical obligation to understand the oppressiveness of social messages and provide opportunities for the empowerment of our clients who are struggling to become agents in their sexual experiences.

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Appendix A

Vignette 1:

Claire was at a party drinking a few beers with her friends. She started kissing Matt, who is in her statistics class. They had been flirting all week, and Claire really liked him. Matt asked Claire to come home with him, and she agreed. Once they were in Matt's room, they were kissing. Matt started putting his hand on her breast, which made Claire feel uncomfortable because she didn't really want to have sex with Matt that night.

How might Claire communicate that she doesn't want to have sex?
Have you ever been in a situation like this?
If so, how did you react?

Vignette 2, Version 1:

Claire was at a party drinking a few beers with her friends. She started kissing Matt, who is in her statistics class. They had been flirting all week, and Claire really liked him. Matt asked Claire to come home with him, and she agreed. Once they were in Matt's room, they were kissing. Matt started putting his hand on her breast, which made Claire feel uncomfortable. She moved his hand to her hip. He continued to move his hand back to her breast, and she continued to try to move him away. Matt asked if Claire wanted to have sex, and Claire said yes, even though she didn't really want to, because it was easier than saying no. How should Matt proceed?

Should Claire have done something differently?
Have you ever been in a situation like this?
If so, how did you react?

Vignette 2, Version 2

Claire was at a party drinking a few beers with her friends. She started kissing Matt, who is in her statistics class. They had been flirting all week, and Claire really liked him. Matt asked Claire to come home with him, and she agreed. Once they were in Matt's room, they were kissing. Matt started putting his hand on her breast, which made Claire feel uncomfortable. She moved his hand to her hip. He continued to move his hand back to her breast, and she continued to try to move him away. Matt asked if Claire wanted to have sex, and Claire said OK, even though she didn't really want to, because it was easier than saying no.

How should Matt proceed?
Should Claire have done something differently?
Have you ever been in a situation like this?
If so, how did you react?

Vignette 3, Version 1:

Claire was at a party drinking a few beers with her friends. She started kissing Matt, who is in her statistics class. They had been flirting all week, and Claire really liked him. Matt asked Claire to come home with him, and she agreed. Once they were in Matt's room, they were kissing. Matt started putting his hand on her breast, which made Claire feel uncomfortable. She moved his hand to her hip. Matt asked if Claire wanted to have sex, and Claire responded, "I don't feel like it." He continued to move his hand back to her breast, and she continued to try to move him away. Matt asked again if they could have sex, and Claire said yes, even though she didn't really want to, because it was easier than saying no.

How should Matt proceed?

Should Claire have done something differently?
Have you ever been in a situation like this?
If so, how did you react?

Vignette 3, Version 2

Claire was at a party drinking a few beers with her friends. She started kissing Matt, who is in her statistics class. They had been flirting all week, and Claire really liked him. Matt asked Claire to come home with him, and she agreed. Once they were in Matt's room, they were kissing. Matt started putting his hand on her breast, which made Claire feel uncomfortable. She moved his hand to her hip. Matt asked if Claire wanted to have sex, and Claire responded, "I don't feel like it." He continued to move his hand back to her breast, and she continued to try to move him away. Matt asked again if they could have sex, and Claire said OK, even though she didn't really want to, because it was easier than saying no.

How should Matt proceed?
Should Claire have done something differently?
Have you ever been in a situation like this?
If so, how did you react?

Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD):