

# Let's Talk About Sex, Maybe?

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College students often must deal with many different aspects of the transition from high school to college. While there are obvious transitions that we could expect, such as homework, dorm life, relationships, etc., there are other social transitions that are a little bit more unprecedented than the typical college woes. One such transition is the shift to a different culture of sex. Sex is omnipresent in American culture, but college sheds a light on specific aspects of it. This could cause anxiety in students, especially if this confrontation is new. We are in a special liminal state because the topic of sex and consent are widely talked about in the era of Kavanaugh and Trump. I wanted to explore how discussions of sex and consent could cause transition anxiety for college students in their liminal state. After conducting research, I have found that college students who know what to do to gain consent often do not follow through on those ideas because there are instances which reinforce ambiguity about how to obtain consent. These instances do not match a prewritten script that students are aware of, and thus create a liminal state for those involved. Through both qualitative research and the analysis of preexisting literature, I have found that the specific instances that cause liminality in sexual situations include: the presence of the miscommunication hypothesis, the portrayal of sexual permissiveness within the media, and the presence of the “hook-up culture” impacting how students gain consent.

Liminality is an interesting concept because it underlies most aspects of college. Liminality, as defined by Victor Turner, is the idea of being “betwixt and between.”<sup>1</sup> College students are straddling two very different life spaces, and often struggle to figure out the world around them. Sex is a liminal concept because there is ambiguity surrounding it, especially now. American culture now is a heavily liminal environment regarding topics of

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between,” in *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93.

sex and consent because we have seen and experienced new outlooks on sex. Cultural norms are shifting, and the issue of “boys being boys” both has been focused on in the media and on political platforms. There is an issue of a “gray zone” and the recurring theme of miscommunication with regards to the acquisition of consent.<sup>2</sup> In the age of Kavanaugh, Trump, and movements such as “Me Too,” consent is now a highly liminal discussion in American culture. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use Susan E. Hickman’s and Charlene L. Muehlenhard’s definition of consent as “direct consent signals as signals that are straightforward and unambiguous and indirect consent signals as signals that are ambiguous.”<sup>3</sup> Consent, while easily defined, induces stress in many people. This stress is especially emphasized in new students trying to navigate the collegiate sexual culture. Along with consent, I will briefly define “hook up” culture, which will be explained in this paper. It is important to define “hook-up culture” and why it has been a perpetual idea in college. This is not a new concept, but the assumptions surrounding it are integral in how consent is viewed. The assumptions around “hook-up culture” create a belief that hook-up culture does not allow for proper acquisition of consent.

The “hook-up culture” refers to a culture of partying and alcohol. The hook-up culture is linked to a culture of judgment. There is the idea that there is no obligation in the hook-up culture, as “people just want to fuck.”<sup>4</sup> The culture is most often characterized as one of drunken debauchery, but it often relies on assumptions. When asked about the sexual culture on campus, a respondent said that “hook-up culture is going to a party and having a one-night stand with somebody and then not talking to them.”<sup>5</sup> This respondent most likely did not actually witness the aforementioned hook-up, and instead chose to fill in the blanks with how we have, as a culture, defined “hook-up” culture. This observation is a judgmental one because of how it is phrased. The lack of conversation portrays the hook-up as a quick and unfeeling act. While that may be accurate, it is impossible to accurately assess a situation without actually seeing what happened. This judgment belies the notion that “hook-ups” are not conducive to a safe sexual life. What is interesting to note is that my respondents were quick to deny their involvement in the party culture and the hook-up culture. When prompted about the “hook-up” culture, one respondent said that she didn’t get involved, since “it seems like a lot of people go to parties

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2 Jessica Bennett and Daniel Jones, “45 Stories of Sex and Consent on Campus,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/05/10/style/sexual-consent-college-campus.html>.

3 S.E. Hickman and C.L. Muehlenhard, “By the Semi-Mystical Appearance of a Condom’: How Young Women and Men Communicate Sexual Consent in Heterosexual Situation,” *Journal of Sex Research* 111 no. 3 (1999), 261.

4 Interview with 9B, 2018.

5 Interview with 4A, 2018.

every weekend. People are influenced to go to parties and drink.”<sup>6</sup> There is an inherent judgment surrounding parties and what could happen when attending one.

To try and find an answer to the question of consent and transition anxiety, I sent thirty free-lists<sup>7</sup> and conducted eight six-question interviews. There were two different free-lists, with fifteen men and fifteen women between the two. For the interviews, I interviewed four men and four women, talking to two from each free list. My free-lists helped me determine what the respondents believe to be the “scripts” that ought to be followed in society. The first free-list asked the respondents to list all cues that someone would want to “hook up.” After doing salience, frequency, and average rank calculations, I found that the recurring answers were: touching, flirting, texting, “they say they want to,” eye contact, pick-up lines, and verbal communication. Touching was the most frequently mentioned, while flirting, texting, and verbal communication were the most highly ranked. Touching had the most salience of all the data. This data shows how we, as a culture, have been conditioned to express interest physically above all else.

My second free-list asked the respondents to list all cues that someone would not want to “hook up.” The recurring answers for this free list were: say no, uncomfortable, no eye contact, walk away, unconscious, disinterested, and do not talk. Out of these, “say no” was both the most frequent and had the highest average rank. It also had the highest salience. This data provides us the script of how to show when we are not consenting to an encounter. The frequency of these answers reveals there is an educational method of how to gain consent and how to show that consent is not given. The “scripts” of how to show a lack of consent seem to be very clear to my respondents, as they were straightforward in their answers. People have been taught that saying no is the most clear and direct way. Their answers also reflect any prior education that they’ve had about the topic, including “unconscious.” There is a notion of how people who are unconscious are unable to consent to sexual activity, a concept that has been reiterated from sexual education. There is a script that links intoxication and unconsciousness with a lack of consent. Both free-lists show there is a script of how to obtain consent.

While this data is interesting because it reflects how students on this campus view acquiring consent, it is also interesting because it reflects preexisting literature. Jodee M. McCaw and Charlene Y. Senn did a study similar to mine, looking for cues in dating situations. Their data reflects a similar background as mine. Their cues for “interest” (do want to “hook up”)

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with 5A, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Free-lists are lists that are sent around to determine what is most relevant and important in a list of different items.

are: cooperation with a physical move, “not refusing,” physical proximity, and “says yes.”<sup>8</sup> Although the semantics are different, we see a recurring theme of physicality denoting interest and consent. On the other side, their cues for “refusal” (do not want to “hook up”) are: physical noncooperation, physical resistance, and saying no.<sup>9</sup> The similarities denote that there is a script that is prescribed for sexual situations, and both my respondents and those of McCaw and Senn reflect the conditioned learning of that specific script.

While we have outlined that there are scripts that should be followed with regard to acquiring consent, the next question was to ask if college students actually follow through on those principles. College students largely do not follow those scripts because of various instances that make applying those scripts either more difficult or not possible. Issues arise if the scripts that people have been taught do not match the situation presented. While college students have been taught about having open and honest conversations about consent, there are times when that may not be an option, as “there are likely many more differences between a consensual experience and rape than one simple word,” with that specific word being “no.”<sup>10</sup> The lack of clarity in conversations creates those differences and could possibly muddle the actual conversation about consent. However, it should be acknowledged that conversations about consent may not actually happen. That is a script that is prescribed, but the “in the moment” conversations are certainly dependent on the context, and thus may reveal themselves in different ways.

Consent cannot be adequately obtained when elements of miscommunication are present in a sexual situation. The miscommunication hypothesis presents an instance in which people are often compelled to respond to different situations in ways that they did not want to, and thus do not follow through on the scripts that they understand. This phenomenon creates a culture in which ambiguity is heightened. People know what to do based on education, but “there’s a big divide between seeing things on bulletin boards and having actual conversations about the issue,” as the advice from the literature and pamphlets may be unheeded.<sup>11</sup>

In the moment, the presented scripts may vary greatly based on

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8 Jodee M. McCaw and Charlene Y. Senn, “Perception of Cues in Conflictual Dating Situations: A Test of the Miscommunication Hypothesis,” *Violence Against Women*, 4 no.5 (1998), 615.

9 Ibid.

10 Melanie Beres, “Sexual Miscommunication? Untangling Assumptions About Sexual Communication Between Casual Sex Partners,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 12 no. 1 (2010), 3.

11 Jessica Underwood, “It’s Easy to Ignore There’s a Problem: Students Discuss Consent, Trauma, and Kavanaugh,” *The New York Times*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/02/smarter-living/the-edit-consent-kavanaugh.html>.

social cues or outside pressures. This is where the miscommunication hypothesis muddles the path toward obtaining consent. Furthermore, this explains why college students struggle with having these conversations. The miscommunication hypothesis consists of three different ideas that get enacted in different situations. The first concept presented in the miscommunication hypothesis is the idea of a prevention strategy, which is where “women have been advised to clearly communicate their sexual intentions to prevent being raped.”<sup>12</sup> This reflects the scripts of what to do to show a lack of consent, as my female respondents often reiterated the notion of saying no and stepping away from the situation. There is a gendered issue with this, as this strategy does fall onto the woman in this situation to prevent an attack, rather than on their partner to prevent the attack. The second concept presented is the idea of token resistance. Token resistance is “one form of sexual miscommunication of sexual intent [which] is to say no to sexual intercourse while meaning yes.”<sup>13</sup> This is a denial of the prescribed script because the response is liminal itself. There is a response, but it does not actually reflect what the person wants, showing a state in which both people involved are unsure of the cue. On the other side, people may consent to unwanted sex, which is “the reverse of token resistance.”<sup>14</sup> This can come from outside pressures or an inability to say no when placed in the situation.

I asked my respondents if college students had anxiety about talking about consent. While there were a variety of responses, there was a recurring theme of being anxious because of a lack of knowledge about when and where to say no. This can be linked to the miscommunication hypothesis, because not knowing when to stop/start may lead to one of those tenets of the miscommunication hypothesis being used instead of the straightforward scripts. The idea of bringing up consent elicited some nervous reactions from the respondents, reflecting the anxiety and weirdness surrounding obtaining consent and the discussions around it. One such respondent said that there is anxiety in bringing up consent “because it’s a controversial topic.”<sup>15</sup> It appears that this topic is controversial because there is a lack of clarity around how to actually gain consent in this situation that deviates from the script. While there is a presumed controversy linked to talking about sex, one respondent noted that “people have built up a resistance and have become blasé about it.”<sup>16</sup> This taboo comes from a general squeamishness about sex that has pervaded our

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12 Hickman and Muehlenhard, 270.

13 Susan Sprecher, et al., “Token Resistance to Sexual Intercourse and Consent to Unwanted Sexual Intercourse: College Students’ Dating Experiences in Three Countries.” *Journal of Sex Research* 31, no. 2 (1994), 125.

14 Ibid, 126.

15 Interview with 4A, 2018.

16 Interview with 10A, 2018.

culture. The nonchalance toward sex can possibly manifest itself into miscommunication, most likely in the realm of consent to unwanted sex. If people are nonchalant about bringing up sex, the nonchalance could extend itself to the means of acquiring consent. There is an idea that it is uncool to bring up consent which may lead to miscommunication and misinterpreted cues.<sup>17</sup>

While miscommunication can arise from avoiding controversy or being nonchalant, miscommunication can also arise from a lack of experience in knowing when and how to acquire consent when placed in the situation. In the midst of a “hook-up,” there is a fear that bringing up the issue can ruin the moment. That fear may lead to the topic either not being brought up or the answer not matching the scripts. One respondent gave a scenario expressing that awkwardness, stating that people might find it “awkward to ask and it ruin the moment if they ask.”<sup>18</sup> The scenario presented is a scenario of people kissing, with one person thinking “oh heck I have to ask if they want to do this.”<sup>19</sup> This example reflects the potential stiffness that comes from asking about consent. This description does reflect the idea that asking for consent is uncool and almost unsavory to bring up. If it were to disrupt anything, it would ruin the mood. There is an idea that pausing a session to ask about consent is clunky because “people don’t know what to talk about and what to expect.”<sup>20</sup> The lack of knowledge about what to say and what to expect can create the instance of miscommunication or a complete lack of communication. Either way, it is nearly impossible to acquire consent because the topic is either not brought up or the answers are not exactly clear.

Another instance that impedes how college students negotiate the acquisition of consent is how the media present the acquisition of consent. Media don’t show any script with regards to obtaining consent. This is an example of the miscommunication hypothesis that confuses people in real situations, as it has been “pervasive in not only popular understanding and the media but also in much of the psychological and sociological literature on acquaintance rape.”<sup>21</sup> The representations from the media reflect onto the viewing public and influence ideas about sex, consent, and relationships. Other than presenting a lack of script about consent, there is also cultural variation that can account for instances than affect the scripts. The cultural variation is best reflected through the media and how films portray love and relationship roles. In the US, we are an individualistic society that values “sexual freedom for men and women and sexual permissiveness.”<sup>22</sup>

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17 Interview with 3B, 2018.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Interview with 7B, 2018.

21 McCaw and Senn, 610.

22 Elaine Hatfield and Richard L. Rapson, *Love and sex: Cross-cultural perspectives*,

The dominant culture allows for experimentation in both sex and the conversations surrounding it. This idea of sexual permissiveness gives us the gray area in obtaining consent, which is linked to the notion of the miscommunication hypothesis.

Media can also perpetuate how each gender deals with topics of sex and consent. There is a view of what makes good spouses and significant others which does mention how each fulfills roles concerning sex. Much like the miscommunication hypothesis and the idea of prevention strategy, the weight of acquiring consent and the conversations around consent often falls onto the women rather than their partners. There is an idea that “relates to the socialization of girls and women to be responsive to and compliant with male sexual advances.”<sup>23</sup> This is where the media can be a negative influence on how we look at acquiring consent. We see in films and other types of media that it is the women that have a role of responsibility with regards to their own safety, as opposed to their partner’s role to prevent any injury. This is seen through both film and real-life examples of victim blaming, as opposed to the blaming of the perpetrator themselves.

When asked about how they acquired their scripts, people often responded with a type of medium. One such respondent said “I’ve seen a lot of movies—romantic comedies are my favorites.”<sup>24</sup> This source of the scripts is a common source, but a source that could cause a sense of anxiety. Since the scripts are not straightforward in media, there is a possible lack of education about those scripts. If there is the lack of knowledge, the acquisition of consent can be impacted. The scripts are present in the data, but the question is that if the media actually present those scripts. The literature says no, yet the respondents call on the media as a source for their scripts. This itself is a liminal idea because there is a divide between the source of the scripts and the implementation of the scripts in the source. If it is unclear within the source, it could possibly be unclear when placed in the situation. Movies and media portray a very different romantic perspective than college life. What works within a fabricated construct of a movie does not enmesh itself well into the real world. Movies portray an image, and “social media does portray this image that you have to do these things to be noticed by people.”<sup>25</sup> The presentation differs from the reality, yet the scripts seem to come from the same source. The scripts presented in the media and followed by my respondents are most often implemented in what my respondents call the “hook-up culture.”

This denial of participation in the hook-up culture reflects the innate

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Allyn & Bacon, 1996, quoted in Sprecher et. al, 126.

23 Laina Y. Bay-Cheng and Rebecca K. Eliseo-Arras, “The Making of Unwanted Sex: Gendered and Neoliberal Norms in College Women’s Unwanted Sexual Experiences,” *Journal of Sex Research* 45, no. 4 (2008), 391.

24 Interview with 4A, 2018.

25 Interview with 10A, 2018.

fear in it. Parties and hook-up culture act in a way where safety is impeded and there is the idea that all interactions could be negative ones. The literature presents many stories where sexual encounters begin with parties, and there is a sense of regret presented. One story presented in the literature begins with a party and ends with the woman walking out to avoid the sexual encounter.<sup>26</sup> When there is a strong link between the party-oriented hook-up culture and the possibility of muddled consent, there is a cause to argue that these situations are dangerous and are judged to be dangerous that is only solidified when there is concern for others, as an outside view may reveal a possible issue. There is a large cause for anxiety because “people worry about their friends. You need to see if your friends are in the proper state to give consent.”<sup>27</sup> When there is the possibility of harm coming to others, it appears that there is more judgment of the situation that they’re in.

Partying and alcohol create a setting in which inhibitions are lowered, which makes acquiring consent difficult. This is a big cause of the judgment and fear associated with the hook-up culture. This is a part of the definition of hook-up culture because of how present partying and alcohol are. Hook-up culture was linked to partying in three of my interviews, which is interesting because the mention of partying and hook-up culture were both unprompted. The respondents reached this definition through their own conceptions of what a college sexual culture is. Partying and alcohol help facilitate that culture, which makes the acquisition of consent difficult. Alcohol lowers inhibitions and makes the conversations very difficult to have or does not allow them to be mentioned at all.

Partying and alcohol allow for a *laissez-faire* view on sex. This brings back the idea of having no obligation or worry associated with sex. There are some people that need the alcohol to provide them with confidence to pursue sex and frees them from the consequences of sex. This creates an “anything goes” view and acts as a “unlimited get-out-of-jail-free card,” which can blur the line of how the scripts are followed.<sup>28</sup> If there is a perspective of nonchalance surrounding the encounter, there may also be a nonchalant view about applying the scripts of consent. The lack of obligations and the nonchalance create a way where people can “flirt without repercussion.”<sup>29</sup> This is where interpretation can be impacted, and creating a situation where the scripts of consent don’t fit the context.

The addition of alcohol as a driving force behind the encounter does create a situation where the scripts do not fit. The scripts presented by the free lists show an idealized conversation about sex, with the respondents

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26 Bennet.

27 Interview with 4A, 2018.

28 Bennet.

29 Ibid.

saying yes or no, or physically walking away. However, these responses do not reflect the addition of alcohol. Alcohol can fundamentally change how those scripts are used. Alcohol creates a notion where it cannot be used as an excuse for not using the scripts. Even if we have been taught the idea that alcohol is equivalent to impaired judgment, those placed in the situation often report “never using statements about their level of intoxication or direct refusals to signal their sexual consent; they did, however, frequently convey consent by not resisting.”<sup>30</sup> The “not resisting” notion does both support and contradict the scripts set forth by the free lists. My respondents said that a way to convey consent was to say yes in the situation. However, there was no mention of alcohol in my respondent’s view, which does impair how effectively someone can say no or yes. There is a lack of resistance presented in the scripts, but the scripts, based on my data, have not explicitly dealt with the introduction of alcohol into the situation.

Alcohol and its impairment create a strong amount of ambiguity and reinforce the liminal state with regards to the scripts. Parties and the consumption of alcohol at those parties are a place where certain actions are heightened. Parties are a place where “people will approach you and start touching you.”<sup>31</sup> There is physical contact present at parties that may be supported by alcohol. The use of the scripts is based on the interpretation of the situation. If the situation is muddled based on the presence of alcohol, students may have a difficult time in determining if the script should be used and when it should be used. Alcohol creates a situation where “people take it as anything to interpret, whether it is ambiguous or interpretative, especially if there are substances involved.”<sup>32</sup> How the scripts are used is entirely dependent on the person and “if they’re inebriated or not.”<sup>33</sup> Some people may interpret cues differently based on the consumption of alcohol, as “intoxicated men perceive more sexual intent in women than do sober men, attending more to women’s cues of sexual interest and less to their cues of uncertainty or disinterest.”<sup>34</sup> If that focus is present, any use of the script may be negatively impacted if those cues are ignored. Inebriation

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30 Hickman and Muehlenhard, 268.

31 Interview with 4A, 2018.

32 Interview with 10A, 2018.

33 Interview with 3B, 2018.

34 Antonia Abbey, Tina Zawacki, and Philip O. Buck, “The Effects of Past Sexual Assault Perpetration and Alcohol Consumption on Men’s Reactions to Women’s Mixed Signals,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 24, no. 2 (2005), 129-155 and Coreen Farris, Teresa A. Treat, and Richard J. Viken, “Alcohol Alters Men’s Perceptual and Decisional Processing of Women’s Sexual Interest,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 119, no. 2 (2010), 427 quoted in Charlene L. Muehlenhard, Terry P. Humphreys, Kristen N. Jozkowski, and Zoë D. Peterson, “The Complexities of Sexual Consent Among College Students: A Conceptual and Empirical Review.” *Journal of Sex Research* 53 no. 4-5 (2016), 461.

creates the ambiguity that does not accurately allow the respondents to enact the scripts that they have been taught.

The miscommunication hypothesis, hook-up culture, the media, and partying all create a liminal period for those involved in sexual activity. There is liminality because people are unsure of how to bring up the conversation, and when they do, there is ambiguity about what to say and what to do. That ambiguity creates transition anxiety as people move from pre-hook-up to the hook-up itself. If there is a lack of clarity surrounding what was said, then there will be both liminal conversations and liminal encounters.

Sex and consent are issues that could be researched more and have wider implications in American culture. I am interested to see how consent is viewed now in a post-Kavanaugh and post-#MeToo movement world. Has there been any significant changes in how we interpret consent? Have we become stricter in the enactment of the scripts? I am also curious to see if there is a belief that the scripts should change. People know what the scripts are, but they are rigid in their approach. There ought to be new scripts that allow for a variation in the situation beyond just a clear ask of consent. We could research how/if technology has changed how people gain consent. It would be interesting to see if there may have been a change in how people gain consent based on the ease of communication. There is a risk with apps such as Tinder that may presume that consent is given and will remain, even if consent is actually revocable.<sup>35</sup> Finally, I would like to see if there is research on if acquiring consent could be made less taboo. There is controversy that surrounds the discussions about sex, which makes the actual implementation of the scripts more difficult because of the stigma surrounding them.

While talking about sex often makes people uneasy or uncomfortable, we are in a liminal state with regards to it. Due to our position in limbo, we are in a time where discussions about sex and consent are at their most relevant and significant. In this research, the students reflect a larger theme about the liminal view of sex. They acknowledge that they know about how to obtain consent but express liminality in how to actually obtain consent. Sex is viewed and talked about sparingly in American culture, which has created a larger liminal state that extends beyond college students.

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35 Tom Dougherty, "Fickle Consent." *Philosophical Studies* 167, no. 1 (2014), 25.