



Sexual Compliance: Examining the Relationships Among Sexual Want, Sexual Consent, and Sexual Assertiveness

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Abstract

Unwanted sexual encounters include a broad spectrum of behaviors that may include everything from regretted or coerced sex to sexual assault and rape. Sadly, experience with unwanted sex is all too common among college aged women. A number of factors have been examined in the context of sexual interactions in this population including relationship status, sexual want, sexual assertiveness, and sexual consent. However, research to date lacks analyses which consider the potentially interactive nature of the aforementioned variables in sexual decision making. To that end, the present study examined the role of relationship status, sexual want, and sexual assertiveness on self-report consent in a sexual encounter. Female undergraduate students (N=319) self-reported on their relationship status, as well as their sexual want (desire to engage in sexual activity), sexual assertiveness, and sexual consent behaviors within the context of their most recent sexual experience. A moderated multiple regression was conducted to determine whether sexual assertiveness moderated self-reported sexual want and consent. Relationship status was included as the primary predictor in the aforementioned model. The overall model was significant, indicating an interaction model of sexual decision-making. Generally, women displayed increased sexual consent behavior as sexual want increased across levels of sexual assertiveness, regardless of relationship status. Importantly, women low in sexual assertiveness were high in sexual compliance (i.e. consenting to/engaging in sexual activity even when self-reported sexual want was low).

Keywords Sexual assertiveness · Sexual compliance · Sexual want · Sexual consent · Unwanted sex · Sexual decision-making

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Introduction

Sexual decision making has been conceptualized as involving two elements: sexual want and sexual consent (Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007). Sexual want is an internal desire or willingness to engage in sexual activity. Sexual want can vary across a number of dimensions ranging from ambivalence to clear want or desire (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005). Sexual ambivalence occurs when level of desire and willingness for sexual activity are undecided (Muehlenhard and Peterson 2005; O'Sullivan and Gaines 1998). Unfortunately, sexual ambivalence, or lack of clear sexual want, has been associated with increased risk for sexual assault, as well as increased engagement in unwanted or coerced sexual activity (O'Sullivan and Gaines 1998; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007). For instance, in one study 19% of women who reported being raped (Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007) reported experiencing sexual ambivalence. In another study regarding sexual ambivalence involving male and female participants, 81% reported previously experiencing ambivalence when a partner initiated sexual activity (O'Sullivan and Gaines 1998). More women than men reported experiencing ambivalence (87 vs 75%). Yet in spite of their low self-reported desire to engage in sexual activity, 10.8% of women reported engaging in sexual activity due to feeling pressured or forced (O'Sullivan and Gaines 1998). As such, it appears that sexual want is not the only factor which shapes one's engagement in sexual activity. Moreover, these data suggest there may be distinct gender differences in sexual decision making that may be worth exploring.

While sexual want is an internal desire or willingness to engage in sexual activity, sexual consent can be considered to be the behavioral expression of that desire or willingness. Sexual consent may include both verbal and nonverbal acts indicating one's desire and/or agreement to engage in sexual activity (e.g. removal of one's own clothes, verbal statements of consent, etc.). Sexual want and consent may both be influenced by a number of variables including sexual arousal, relationship considerations (e.g., length of relationship, relationship conflict, intimacy concerns), and potential consequences associated with sex, and consequently sexual want and sexual consent may not always align (Humphreys 2007; Muehlenhard and Rodgers 1998; O'Sullivan and Gaines 1998; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2007). In short, sexual activity may be wanted and consensual, wanted and nonconsensual, unwanted and consensual, or unwanted and nonconsensual. Research suggests that consenting to unwanted sex, as well as not consenting to wanted sex is common (Flack et al. 2007; Muehlenhard and Rodgers 1998; O'Sullivan and Gaines 1998). The act of consenting to unwanted sexual activity has been defined as sexual compliance (Impett and Peplau 2003). As might be expected, engaging in compliant sex (i.e. consenting to sex that is not wanted) has been associated with numerous negative outcomes including feelings of disappointment in oneself (O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998), less pleasure or enjoyment (Vannier and O'Sullivan 2010), decreased condom use (Fair and Vanyur 2011) and possible risk of HIV infection (Whyte 2006). Unfortunately many non-verbal behaviors which may simply be indicators of compliance (i.e. absence of resistance) have been found to be interpreted as indicators of consent,

particularly by men (Beres et al. 2004; Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999). Given the potential conflicts between sexual want and consent, as well as the potentially negative consequences of consenting to unwanted sex, it is important to better understand factors which may affect both sexual want and sexual consent. Moreover, given the distinct gender differences in expressions and interpretations of sexual want and consent, it is important to understand how these variables differ between groups.

One variable that may impact the display of sexual consent is sexual assertiveness. Sexual assertiveness is external behavior that communicates what one wants in a sexual context, including what one sexually wants, refusing what one does not sexually want, and advocating for safe sex/prevention practices (Morokoff et al. 1997). Greene and Faulkner (2005) found that sexually assertive individuals communicated more about sexual activity, and felt they were “more able to influence their partner’s sexual behavior through talk” (p. 249). Interestingly, women reported more sexual communication behavior, but less perceived efficacy in their ability to negotiate sex than men (Greene and Faulkner 2005). As such, it appears that sexual assertiveness may play a role in the degree to which individuals are able to effectively create a match between their internal desires (i.e. sexual want) and their external expression of that desire (i.e. consent). In short, sexually assertive individuals may be better equipped to both express consent to wanted sex and express refusal to consent to unwanted sex. This ability to align sexual want with sexual consent through being sexually assertive appears to be an important factor when sexual aggression is concerned. For example, sexual assertiveness has been demonstrated to be associated with lower rates of sexual victimization (Greene and Navarro 1998; Livingston et al. 2007; Walker et al. 2011). Conversely, several studies of women have demonstrated that low sexual assertiveness is associated with increased risk for and experience of sexual victimization (Livingston et al. 2007; Greene and Navarro 1998). As such, understanding sexual assertiveness may not only provide valuable information regarding the interaction between sexual want and sexual consent, but may also be useful when considering factors which may impact one’s experience of sexual aggression.

Understanding the interactions between sexual want, sexual consent, and sexual assertiveness is important in order to better understand sexual decision making in a variety of populations. However, one sample where it is especially important to examine these behaviors, given their potential impact on an individuals’ experience of sexual aggression, is among college students. Sexual aggression and coercion are all too common on college campuses, with a survey of twenty-seven different colleges and universities finding that some 23.6% of women experience “nonconsensual sexual contact...” including the “absence of affirmative consent” at some point during their college career (Cantor et al. 2015). Moreover, these data further fail to capture the incidents in which women may engage in compliant sex due to coercion or other factors. In fact some studies report rates of experience of sexual coercion among college women may be as high as 31.7–34% (Fair and Vanyur 2011; Palmer et al. 2010). Given the negative outcomes associated both with engaging in compliant sex (O’Sullivan and Allgeier 1998; Vannier and O’Sullivan 2010; Fair and Vanyur 2011; Whyte 2006) as well as experience of sexual aggression more broadly

(Cantor et al. 2015), it is imperative to better understand factors which may affect sexual behaviors including want and consent in this particular sample.

Data suggest that in examining sexual decision-making, it is important to consider dimensions of want and consent. Reports of sexual ambivalence and sexual compliance among committed sexual partners suggest open discussions and communication regarding sexual feelings are challenging for many. Sexual assertiveness fosters sexual communication, and is related to sexual victimization. Women higher in sexual assertiveness may be better able to communicate refusal to unwanted sexual activity, and consequently may be less at risk for sexual victimization. Thus, it is possible that women higher in sexual assertiveness are less likely to experience sexual compliance. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of sexual assertiveness in the context of sexual decision-making. It was hypothesized that one's level of sexual assertiveness would moderate the relationship between sexual want and sexual consent. It was further hypothesized that increased assertiveness would increase participants' abilities to express consent, thereby leading to a match between internal desire (i.e. want) and the expression of that desire (i.e. consent). Conversely, we hypothesized that individuals who were low in assertiveness would display a miss-match between want and consent, such as in the case of compliant sex (i.e. low want but expressed consent). Additionally, relationship status was explored, as it was hypothesized that the type or category of one's relationship might predict sexual decision-making behavior, such as one's ability to be sexually assertive.

Method

Participants

Participants were 319 undergraduate female students attending a university located in the southeastern United States. The percentage breakdown of participants' ages was as follows: 53.3% 18 years of age, 30.1% 19 years of age, 10.3% 20 years of age, 3.8% 21 years of age, and 2.4% 22 years of age or older. At the time of the survey, 70.5% of participants had been students for less than 1 year, 17.6% for 1–2 years, 5.6% for 2–3 years, 5.3% for 3–4 years, and .9% for 4 or more years. With regards to the ethnic and racial background of the sample, 73.7% of students identified as European American, 16.6% as African-American, 3.8% as Asian, 1.6% as Hispanic, and 4.4% as "other" ethnicities. In terms of sexual orientation 95.3% of participants self-identified as heterosexual, 2.5% as bisexual, 1.3% as homosexual, .6% as asexual and .3% did not report their sexual orientation.

Measures

Participants were asked to respond to questions relevant to their most recent sexual experience. Relationship status at the time of the recent intimate sexual experience was reported. Demographic information on participant age, sex, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and number of years in college was collected.

The Internal Consent Scale (ICS; Jozkowski et al. 2014b) is a 25-item self-report measure that assesses an individual's self-reported desire for a sexual experience (i.e. sexual want). Example items include: "I felt eager." and "I felt comfortable." Items are assessed on a 4-point Likert-type scale. Response options range from "1-disagree" to "4-agree". Mean scores are calculated for a total scale. Higher scores indicate greater self-reported desire for sexual activity (i.e. sexual want/internal consent). In the original study, the overall scale obtained very good internal consistency (Cronbach α ; .95). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .94 for the overall scale.

The External Consent Scale (ECS; Jozkowski et al. 2014b) is an 18-item self-report measure that assesses behaviors an individual engaged in to express his or her consent to engage in a specific sexual experience. Example items include: "I removed mine and/or my partner's clothing." and "I shut or closed the door." Items are assessed dichotomously with participants indicating "1-yes" or "0-no". Mean scores are calculated for a total scale. Higher scores indicate greater external consent. In the original study, the overall scale obtained good internal consistency (Cronbach α ; .85). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .84 for the overall scale.

The Sexual Assertiveness Survey (SAS; Morokoff et al. 1997) is an 18-item measure that assesses an individual's self-reported ability to express their desire for wanted sex as well as their refusal of unwanted sex. Example items include: "I begin sex with my partner if I want to." and "I refuse to have sex if I don't want to, even if my partner insists." Items are assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Response options range from "1- never" to "5- always". Higher scores indicate greater sexual assertiveness. In the original study, internal consistency (Cronbach α) was good for the total scale (.84). In the current study, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .72 for the overall scale. The SAS correlates well with single-items assessing general assertiveness and sexual assertiveness (Morokoff et al. 1997).

Procedure

Participants were recruited via the university's online participant recruitment system. Informed consent, measures, and question items were administered anonymously using Qualtrics (Enterprise Service Tools; Provo, UT). Participants first provided informed consent after reading documentation describing the nature of the study, confidentiality, and right to terminate participation at any time. Participants were prompted to recall their most recent sexual experience, and complete measures in reference to that sexual activity. Measures collected included: internal consent, external consent, sexual assertiveness, and a single-item question on relationship status during the recent sexual experience. The relationship status question asked participants to indicate from a list their relationship status with their sexual partner at the time of sexual activity (e.g., new sexual partners, married). Measure administration was counterbalanced (e.g., half of participants completed the measure of sexual assertiveness before the measures of consent and the other half of participants completed the sexual

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for internal consent, external consent, and sexual assertiveness

Variable	Mean	SD
External consent	.6618	.2295
Internal consent	3.4669	.4896
Sexual assertiveness	3.6842	.5495

Table 2 Correlations among external consent, sexual want, sexual assertiveness, and relationship status

Variable	1	2	3	4
1 External consent	–	.49**	–.15**	.17*
2 Sexual want	.49**	–	.05	.27*
3 Sexual assertiveness	–.15**	.05	–	.17**
4 Relationship status	.17**	.27**	.17**	–

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

assertiveness measure after the consent measures). Upon completion of the survey, participants were debriefed and provided with a list of local psychological services.

Results

Data Conditioning and Preliminary Analyses

The data analyzed is part of a larger data set. Prior to analyses, descriptive statistics were conducted on demographic variables, and distributions on continuous variables were examined for outliers, skewness, and kurtosis (Table 1). Adequately normal distributions were found for all continuous variables (skewness and kurtosis < 2). Eleven participants were removed because they did not indicate any type of sexual activity or indicated “never” during their most recent sexual experience. At the time of their most recent sexual experience, 14.4% of participants were new sexual partners, 24.1% were “friends with benefits”/casually dating sexual partner, 16.3% were exclusively dating sexual partner, 43.6% were in a committed relationship with sexual partner, and 1.6% were married to sexual partner. For analyses, these categories were condensed into two groups: women not in a relationship (new sexual partners and “friends with benefits”; 38.6%) and women in a relationship (exclusive, committed, and married relationships; 61.4%). A correlation matrix of all variables was computed (Table 2). Internal consent positively correlated with external consent, while sexual assertiveness negatively correlated with external consent. Relationship status positively correlated with external consent, indicating that women who reported being in a relationship also reported greater amounts of external consent behavior.

Regression Analyses

Moderated multiple regression was conducted to determine whether sexual assertiveness moderates sexual want and consent. Relationship status, sexual want (ICS), sexual assertiveness (SAS), and interaction terms were entered simultaneously as predictors. Sexual consent (ECS) served as the dependent variable. The overall model was significant, $F(7, 311) = 21.9872$, $p < .001$, and explained 33.11% of the variance (Adjusted $R^2 = .314$). No significant 3-way (Status \times SAS \times ICS) interaction emerged.

Although no 3-way interaction emerged, conditional effects of relationship status on external consent revealed differences at levels of sexual assertiveness and internal consent (sexual want). In short, while there was no three-way interaction, both sexual assertiveness and sexual want differed as a function of relationship status. The pick-a-point approach (an analysis of simple slopes) was used for this examination (Hayes and Matthes 2009). (Moderate values correspond to the mean value for all variables; low and high values correspond to ± 1 standard deviation.) Differences in external consent behavior between those respondents who were in a relationship, versus those who were not in a relationship, were found at low sexual assertiveness and moderate sexual want ($t = 2.3502$, $p < .05$), low sexual assertiveness and high sexual want ($t = 3.0053$, $p < .01$), as well as moderate sexual assertiveness and high sexual want ($t = 2.5487$, $p < .05$). Women not in a relationship reported less external consent behavior than women in a relationship when sexual assertiveness was low and sexual want was moderate or high, as well as when sexual assertiveness was moderate and sexual want was high. All other combinations of sexual want and sexual assertiveness were similar across relationship status (Fig. 1). These results suggest that when sexual want and sexual assertiveness do not align, women not in a relationship display less external consent behavior than women in a relationship.

Since women in a relationship and not in a relationship were found to exhibit differences in external consent behavior at different levels of sexual assertiveness and sexual want, the strength of the association between these variables was examined by relationship status. A significant ICS \times SAS simple slope interaction [$b = .1159$, $t(311) = 2.385$, $p < .05$, Table 3, Fig. 2] for women not in a relationship was found, indicating that effect of sexual want on external consent changes depending on level of sexual assertiveness displayed.

Probing of the simple slope showing the moderating effect of sexual assertiveness on sexual want and external consent for women not in a relationship reveals that at a high ($b = -.0170$, $t = -.5112$, $p = .610$) level of sexual want, level of sexual assertiveness makes no difference in sexual consent behavior. This suggests that women not in a relationship and high in sexual want exhibit similar external consent behavior regardless of level of assertiveness. However, at moderate ($b = -.0934$, $t = -3.443$, $p < .001$, $.6895$) and low ($b = -0.170$, $t = -3.457$, $p < .001$) amounts of sexual want, level of sexual assertiveness appears to influence sexual consent behavior. This finding suggests that as level of sexual assertiveness increases at low and moderate levels of sexual want, women not in a relationship increasingly exhibit less external consent behavior.

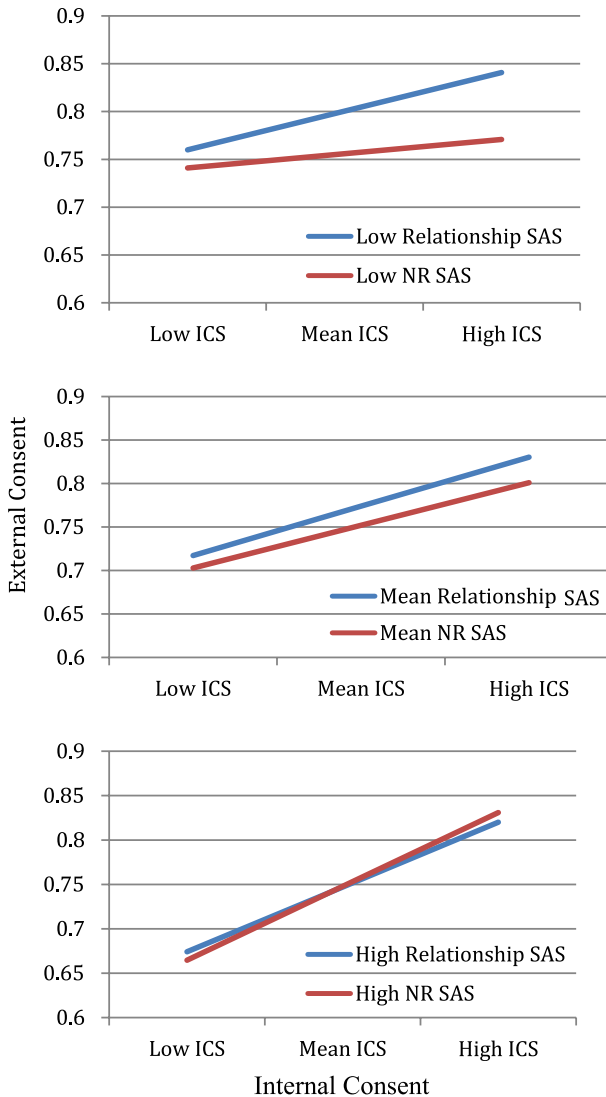


Fig. 1 This graph represents the 3-way (Relationship Status \times SAS \times ICS) Interaction. SAS Sexual assertiveness, ICS Internal consent, NR Not in a relationship

Examination of the simple slope of internal consent (Fig. 3) reveals that for women not in a relationship and low in sexual assertiveness ($b = .176$, $t = 3.284$, $p < .01$), moderate in sexual assertiveness ($b = .262$, $t = 8.203$, $p < .001$), and high ($b = .348$, $t = 8.342$, $p < .0001$) in sexual assertiveness, level of sexual want appears to influence sexual consent behavior. This result suggests that as level of sexual want increases, women not in a relationship increase in external consent behavior, regardless of level of sexual assertiveness.

Table 3 Moderated multiple regression for women not in a relationship

Model	β	SE	T	p
Intercept	.6709	.0141	47.4152	.0000**
Status	-.0425	.0230	-1.8457	.0659
ICS	.2620	.0319	8.2027	.0000**
SAS	-.0934	.0271	-3.4429	.0007**
Status \times ICS	-.0856	.0464	-1.8455	.0659
Status \times SAS	.0643	.0427	1.5076	.1329
ICS \times SAS	.1559	.0654	2.3853	.0177*
Status \times ICS \times SAS	.0878	.0899	0.9772	.3292

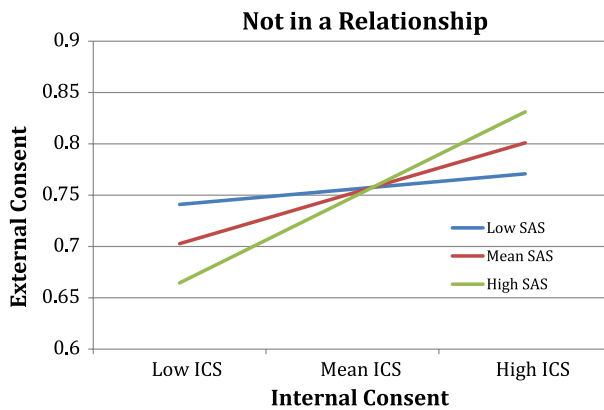
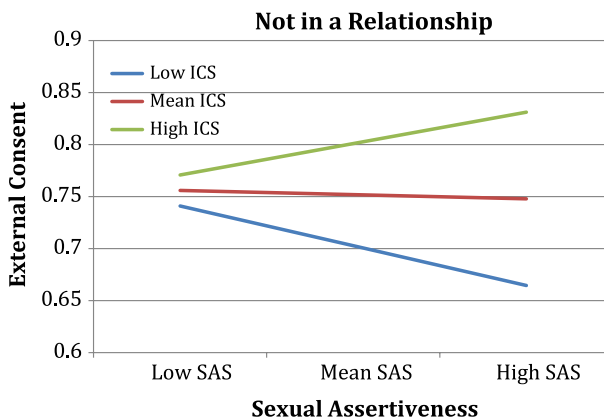
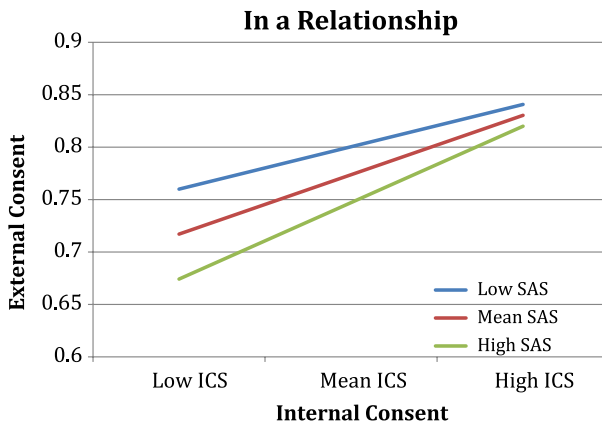
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ **Fig. 2** This graph represents the correlation between internal consent (ICS) and external consent (ECS) at different levels of sexual assertiveness (SAS) for women not in a relationship**Fig. 3** This graph represents the correlation between sexual assertiveness (SAS) and external consent (ECS) at different levels of internal consent (ICS) for women not in a relationship

Table 4 Moderated multiple regression for women in a relationship

Model	β	SE	t	p
Intercept	.6236	.0253	24.6557	.0000**
Status	.0123	.0123	.2574	.7967
ICS	.0425	.0449	.9463	.3447
SAS	−.1484	.0370	−4.0153	.0001**
Status×ICS	.1338	.0700	1.9130	.0567
Status×SAS	−.0213	.0614	−.3467	.7291
ICS×SAS	.2437	.0617	3.9493	.0001*
Status×ICS×SAS	−.0878	.0899	−.9772	.3292

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ **Fig. 4** This graph represents the correlation between internal consent (ICS) and external consent (ECS) at different levels of sexual assertiveness (SAS) for women in a relationship

A significant $ICS \times SAS$ simple slope interaction [$b = .2437$, $t(311) = 3.950$, $p < .001$, Table 4, Fig. 4] was also found for women in a relationship, indicating that effect of sexual want on external consent behavior varies depending on level of sexual assertiveness. Examination of the simple slope showing the moderating effect of sexual assertiveness on sexual want and external consent reveals that at high ($b = .090$, $t = 1.761$, $p = .079$) and moderate ($b = -.0290$, $t = -0.882$, $p = .3784$) amounts of sexual want level of sexual assertiveness makes no difference in sexual consent behavior. This finding suggests that women in a relationship and high or moderate in sexual want display similar external consent behavior irrespective of level of sexual assertiveness. However, at low ($b = -1.484$, $t = 3.9493$, $p < .001$) levels of sexual want, level of sexual assertiveness appears to influence sexual consent behavior. This suggests that as sexual assertiveness increases at low amounts of sexual want, women in a relationship report less external consent behavior.

Examination of the simple slope of internal consent reveals that women in a relationship and low in sexual assertiveness ($b = .043$, $t = .946$, $p = .345$), level of sexual

want makes no difference in sexual consent behavior. This suggests that women in a relationship and low in sexual assertiveness exhibit similar external consent behavior regardless of level of sexual want. However, at moderate ($b=.176$, $t=5.246$, $p<.001$), and high levels of sexual assertiveness ($b=.310$, $t=6.147$, $p<.001$; Fig. 5) level of want appears to influence sexual consent behavior. This result suggests that as level of sexual want increases, women in a relationship increase in external consent behavior.

Discussion

The decision to engage in sexual activity has long been viewed as a dichotomous yes/no choice. Recently, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) suggested that sexual decision-making is better viewed as an interaction between sexual want and sexual consent. That is, display of sexual consent behavior likely varies as a function of level of sexual want. Findings from the current study are consistent with an interaction model of sexual decision-making.

Research has demonstrated that sexual assertiveness may be an important factor in display of sexual consent behavior (Morokoff et al. 1997). Most often examined in the context of a woman's ability to refuse unwanted sexual advances, studies have suggested that women who display more sexually assertive behaviors exhibit higher levels of refusal behavior when confronted with unwanted sexual advances (Livingston et al. 2007; Walker et al. 2011). Consistent with these findings, sexual assertiveness was found to moderate the relationship between sexual want and sexual consent for women in and not in relationships.

Relationship status differences were evidenced at *moderate* and *high* levels of sexual want when sexual assertiveness was *low*. Women in a relationship reported more sexual consent behavior than women not in a relationship at these combinations. It may be that women in a relationship are more compliant than women not in

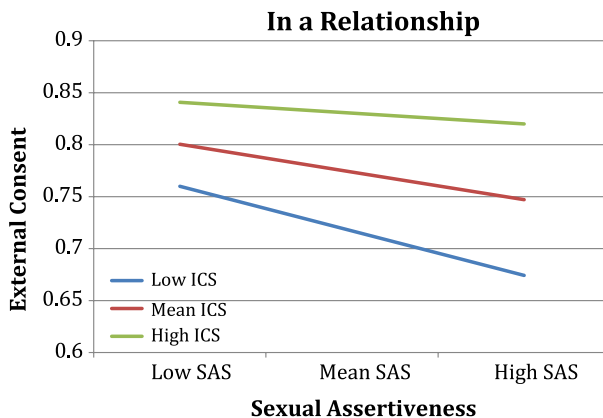


Fig. 5 This graph represents the correlation between sexual assertiveness (SAS) and external consent (ECS) at different levels of internal consent (ICS) for women in a relationship

a relationship when sexual want is *moderate* and sexual assertiveness is *low*. Perhaps it is less important for women in a relationship to refuse sexual activity when want is *moderate*, as sexual activity may actually demonstrate commitment to the relationship (Impett and Peplau 2003) and/or promote intimacy within the relationship (O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998). Conversely, it could be that women in a relationship more agree to sexual activity due to fear of the partner losing interest (Impett et al. 2005). Compared to women not in a relationship, women in a relationship reported less external consent behavior as their self-reported levels of sexual assertiveness increased when sexual want was *moderate*.

Sexual assertiveness level was associated with external consent for women in a relationship when sexual want was *low* and/or *moderate*, and for women not in a relationship when sexual want was *low*. This finding is consistent with previously cited research suggesting that women who report engaging in more sexually assertive behaviors exhibit high levels of refusal to unwanted sexual advances (Walker et al. 2011). Conversely, women *low* in sexual assertiveness appear to be most at risk for compliant sex when sexual want is low, as they reported higher levels of consent to sexual behavior relative to women with moderate and high levels of sexual assertiveness. This is true regardless of relationships status. Men primarily use verbal behavior to identify sexual non-consent (Jozkowski et al. 2014a) and are likely to assume a woman has consented to sex in the absence of verbal or physical sexual refusal behavior (Burkett and Hamilton 2012). Consequently, women low in sexual assertiveness may be at elevated risk for sexual victimization. In the absence of salient verbal and non-verbal refusal, men may not recognize or understand that their partner does not want sexual activity.

At *high* levels of sexual want, level of sexual assertiveness reported by both women in relationships and women not in relationships did not statistically influence display of external sexual consent behavior. That is, high levels of consent behavior were reported irrespective of sexual assertiveness level. It may be that when a woman's sexual want is high, bold/forceful external displays of assertive sexual interest are not necessary to prompt sexual contact with her partner. A woman may just have to respond to a man's initiation of sexual activity (Burkett and Hamilton 2012), as absence of verbal consent (no response) is often interpreted as sexual consent (Beres et al. 2004; Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999).

Regardless of level of sexual assertiveness, level of sexual want predicted external consent behavior for women in a relationship. Women in a relationship *high* in sexual want reported the most external consent behavior compared to women moderate and low in sexual want. This may be beneficial for the relationship, as approach motives have been shown to be associated with closeness, fun, and satisfaction in a relationship (Impett et al. 2005). Similarly, level of sexual want differentially predicted sexual consent behavior for women not in a relationship who were *moderate* and *high* in levels of sexual assertiveness. As sexual assertiveness increased, level of sexual want more closely aligned with external consent behavior, indicating that women not in a relationship more often agreed to sexual activity when it was increasingly wanted and less frequently agreed when sexual activity was less wanted. However, at *low* levels of sexual assertiveness, sexual want made no difference in sexual consent behavior, as women not in a relationship consented

to sexual activity at similar levels regardless of sexual want when sexual assertiveness was *low*. This is problematic, as these women appear not to be communicating their level of sexual interest. Thus, they are less likely to influence the sexual experience (Greene and Faulkner 2005), putting themselves at increased risk of sexual victimization (Livingston et al. 2007).

Findings of the current study help clarify the relationships among sexual assertiveness, sexual want, and sexual consent behavior. Higher levels of sexual assertiveness generally indicate a better ability to communicate sexual want or lack of want to a partner. Individuals who express their level of sexual desire may be less apt to be misinterpreted by their partner, as each gender likely interprets sexual consent behavior guided by gender specific stereotypes regarding expression of sexual consent behavior (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999). Enhancing sexual assertiveness may be an important factor in efforts to enhance clarity of sexual communication. Winslett and Gross (2008) found that discussion of sexual boundaries prior to sexual activity resulted in men and women demonstrating shorter response times when asked to identify at what point a woman wanted a man to stop making sexual advances.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the current work deserve mention. The sample was composed of college students largely of European descent. In order to examine the generalization of findings it would be useful for future studies to include a more ethnically/racially and sexually diverse sample, as well as community samples. Another limitation of the present study was the collection of data on participant age as a categorical variable. This method prohibits the researchers from providing more fine-grained analyses of differences based on age. Future work examining college students might examine whether sexual assertiveness varies as a function of age, given that college students are typically in the developmental stage of emerging adulthood, and thus may be in a process of exploration and growth with regards to their abilities to understand and express their internal desires (Arnett 2000). Additionally, although data were collected on several demographic and contextual variables (e.g. sexual orientation, number of years in college, alcohol use at last sexual encounter, etc.), statistical considerations precluded close examination of these variables in the relationship among sexual assertiveness, sexual want, and sexual consent. It might prove beneficial to examine these variables in future studies. For example, a larger sample size would allow examination of these variables across type of sexual activity.

Another limitation of the present study, was the use of self-report measures which may be subject to social desirability. However, it is important to note that in assessment of sexual behavior, anonymous self-administered surveys have been shown to increase rates of disclosure (Fisher 2009). With regards to the measures administered, it should also be noted that participants were asked to consider their most recent sexual experience. However some measures, such as the SAS, may have included items which might not necessarily apply to participants' most recent sexual experiences (e.g. I put my mouth on my partner's genitals if my partner wants me to,

even if I don't want to). As such, it may be that participants answered questions with other encounters in mind. However, it should be noted that this is a larger flaw of the measures in this area of research. Presently, measures of sexual want, sexual consent, and sexual assertiveness ask for participants' to respond based on their typical behavior, however, given that numerous contextual factors may shape responding (e.g. current relationship status, mood, availability of condoms, etc.) future research might benefit from construction of measures which assess these behaviors on the level of individual interactions and behaviors, rather than broad tendencies. It should also be noted that there may have been certain contexts in which respondents and their partners aligned in terms of both want and consent, making respondents' use of sexually assertive behavior less important. However, given the rates of sexual assault, as well as self-reported compliant sex in samples of college women, we would argue that the aforementioned situation would likely be relatively uncommon.

Implications of these data may be particularly relevant within the context of committed relationships, where instances of sexual ambivalence and sexual compliance may occasionally occur. While partners in such relationships may not view compliant sex as sexual victimization, failure to communicate effectively holds potential for hurt feelings and perception of insensitivity, leading to relationship tension. Fostering sexually assertive behavior may ultimately benefit couples' interpersonal relationships (e.g., enhance efficacy, reduce tension). It should also be noted that even in situations where there is a discrepancy between an individual's internal sexual desire (sexual want) and their external behavior in a sexual encounter (sexual consent), sexually intimate interactions do not always result in coercion or compliance (O'Sullivan 2005). As such, future work should give greater attention to the many variables which may impact sexual decision making. Such variables might include alcohol or other substance use, perceived social norms regarding sexual behavior, sexual expectancies both in and out of relationships, and relationship status.

One factor in particular that merits further examination is the rising trend of "hookup culture" at colleges and universities. Hookup culture specifically refers to a relatively new trend among young adults, including college students, to engage in casual or uncommitted sexual encounters which may or may not include penetrative intercourse (Aubrey and Smith 2013; Garcia et al. 2012; Bernston et al. 2014; etc.). This cultural trend is typically defined by the individuals engaged in the sexual encounter in question having an absence of any expectation for more traditional romantic involvement in the future (Aubrey and Smith 2013; Fielder et al. 2014). Though this cultural trend of "unattached" sexual interactions has gained more attention recently, little scholarly work has examined how this shifting cultural norm may impact sexual decision making or interact with traditional sexual scripts and sexual assertiveness in particular (Olmstead et al. 2013; Grello et al. 2006). As such, it may be beneficial for future work on sexual want, consent, and assertiveness to examine these behaviors in conjunction with a methodologically sound exploration of attitudes and assumptions about college hookup culture.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Human and Animals Rights All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants in the study.

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