Unpacking Sexual Coercion: a Curricular Intervention

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WFQS Senior Capstone Project

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“It’s not an act of love if you make her.”
– Paris Paloma, “Labour”

“Everything I’m feeling is much more than who I’ve let inside my body.”
– Carol Ades, “Crying During Sex”

“Long live all the mountains we moved. I had the time of my life fighting dragons with you.”
– Taylor Swift, “Long Live”

Personal Statement

This project grew out of a desire to make sense of my own sexual experiences. My sexual history has been marked by mismatched desire; I often struggled to navigate wanting less sex than my partners. I was frequently having sex that was not enjoyable or enthusiastically consented to. Back then, I thought I was making compromises for the sake of my relationships. As one person explained it to me, "if you always wanted to stay in and I always wanted to go out, we would try to do something in the middle." But, as I would come to realize, sex is not like going out or staying in, and, in the words of Amia Srinivasan, "it isn't really like anything else either." Sex is an intimate personal and political endeavor that can cause so much joy and so much pain, often simultaneously.

At the realization that my relationship with sex had become so unpleasant, I looked for someone to blame. I blamed myself for being a people-pleaser and not sticking to the feminist principles that I outwardly preached. I blamed my partners for being entitled, aggressive guilt-trippers. Neither of these avenues felt right. I knew that it wasn't my fault, and somehow, I knew that my partners weren't really at fault either. This is something I used to have a lot of difficulty explaining to people. "Why don't you hate him?" "Why do you still talk to him?" In my case, I feel confident that none of my partners ever intended to cause me harm. We were all sent out into the world without any skills to protect our own and our sexual partners' mental and emotional well-being. It's no wonder that there is unchecked and unacknowledged sexual harm occurring all the time.

Moreover, I know that the phenomenon of sexual coercion reaches farther than my own relationships. My friends of all genders have shared similar stories of guilt, shame, and general unhappiness; some of them are able to let these feelings go and some carry them into every sexual experience they have. I want sex to be better; I want people to have fun, and I want them to be good to each other. I know that this is possible.

Although I did not realize it at the time, I approached the topic of sexual coercion through the lens of restorative questions. In my research, I asked: what is happening? Why is this happening? How are people being impacted by this? What can we do to repair the harm that has occurred and to prevent future harm? The resulting syllabus attempts to address these questions in the hopes of working towards the more fulfilling sexual culture that I imagine for myself, my friends, my partners, and every other young person. I believe that by having the conversations that this project seeks to inspire, we can rewrite the narratives about sex that hurt us all and foster a sexual ethic that centers connection, interdependence, and care.

Overview

This document is a syllabus for a college-level Gender and Sexuality Studies seminar that centers self-reflection and dialogic engagement with material exploring the social phenomenon of sexual coercion. In addition to a list of readings and discussion prompts, this project creates an archive of frameworks and language that intervene in normative discourses about sex, thus making it a useful starting point for anyone interested in cultivating a deeper understanding of our sexual culture and considering possible alternatives.

Content Warning

Course readings and discussions will cover difficult topics, such as sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, racism, and incarceration. The language of some readings may be graphic, outdated, or exclusionary. These topics may provoke strong emotions or challenging personal reflections. Please prioritize your own well-being as you progress through this syllabus.

Course Description

What is sexual coercion? It is not as easy to identify as forcible rape, but it certainly constitutes a violation not captured by the label of 'bad sex.' Although it is often decentered in conversations about sexual violence and misconduct, sexual coercion is pervasive and colors the intimate experiences of many individuals. In this course, we will examine the manifestations and impacts of sexual coercion and the social hierarchies and cultural norms that justify and encourage this behavior. Although our conceptual framework will be grounded in feminist theory concepts such as rape culture and gender performativity, we will be taking a multidisciplinary approach by exploring sources from the fields of psychology, education, and media studies, as well as popular culture and personal narrative.

Course Outline

Unit 1 - Foundational Concepts (5 Weeks)
- 1.1 - Introduction
- 1.2 - Patriarchy and Power
- 1.3 - Gender Performativity and Sexuality
- 1.4 - Rape Culture
- 1.5 - Sexual Coercion

Unit 2 - Policy Landscape: Law and Education (3 Weeks)
- 2.1 - Legal Definitions
- 2.2 - Models of Consent

2.3 - The State of Sex Education

Unit 3 - Cultural Influences (3 Weeks)
- 3.1 - Pornography
- 3.2 - Popular Media
- 3.3 - Peers, Friends, and Family

Unit 4 - Looking Forward (4 Weeks)
- 4.1 - Sexual Negotiation
- 4.2 - Pleasure and Desire
- 4.3 - Justice
- 4.4 - Wrap-Up

The Urgency of this Topic

In the United States, too many young adults are coming of age in communities that stifle conversations about sex. A lack of comprehensive sex education from schools and families leaves young people scrambling to fill in the gaps with lessons gleaned from peers and popular culture. When pornography and young adult films become their teachers, young people learn to imitate gendered stereotypes and sexual scripts and, thus, lack the tools and language to think through consent, pleasure, and desire on their own and with their sexual partners. In this context, sex that is unfulfilling and unhealthy becomes widespread. I am deeply concerned by the fact that so many people can easily recount a sexual experience that left them feeling violated. This course is designed to show students that sexual coercion is not an individual problem, but a systemic issue enabled by a patriarchal, heterosexist, and sex-averse culture. Ultimately, I want students to examine and challenge their own ideas of sex and consent and use the knowledge gained in this course to imagine and work towards a healthier and more fulfilling sexual culture for all.

Learning Objectives

- Students will engage with theoretical concepts from a variety of disciplines, including gender and sexuality studies, law, education, media studies, and philosophy, and apply them to the problem of sexual coercion.
- Students will examine how social and political realities impact intimate interpersonal relationships.
- Students will explore proposed solutions to the problem of sexual coercion and think generatively about what a better sexual culture might look like.
- Students will reflect on how their own experiences and beliefs have shaped their understanding of sexuality and consider what values are important to them going forward

Implementation

Departmental Context

While sex and sexual misconduct are discussed in many WFQS (Women's, Feminist, and Queer Studies) classes, there is currently no course at Vassar that focuses predominantly on these subjects. Sexual ethics are an important topic for both academic development in gender studies and personal development as a relational human being. This course thus adds a new and exciting area of study to the program.

Pre-requisites: one unit in WFQS or Sociology is recommended but not required

Cross-listing: WFQS, Sociology, Education

Format: Seminar-style, weekly for 15 weeks

*To accommodate a shorter semester, instructors might consider combining Units 2.1 (Legal Definitions) and 2.2 (Models of Consent) and/or 4.3 (Justice) and 4.4 (Wrap-Up)

Evaluation Methods

One goal of this course is to bridge the personal and academic in hopes of fostering a transformative educational experience. Traditional evaluation methods and strict grading criteria may hinder profound engagement for some students. Inclusion of individual and group reflective and contemplative practices may be a better way to evaluate students' intellectual and emotional engagement with course concepts. Recommended evaluation methods include:

- Weekly journals that record student responses to readings and class discussions, coupled with the opportunity to receive dialogic feedback from instructor on journals
- Online discussion forums for students to share thoughts and resources with each other outside of class
- Midterm short response paper that explores a shift in understanding or makes connections between course concepts and outside issues
- Final paper or project that develops an open-ended response to or expansion on course material

Notes for Instructors

This course requires instructors to co-construct knowledge with students in complex and, at times, emotionally difficult discussions. Approaching conversations with humility, vulnerability, and openness are of the utmost importance to facilitating conversations about these topics. It is recommended that instructors become familiar with some of the principles and techniques of restorative practices and trauma-informed pedagogy before embarking on this journey with students.

Facilitation Resources

Pranis, K. (2005). *The Little Book of Circle Processes: a New/Old Approach to Peacemaking.* New York, NY: Good Books.

This short book gives instructors an overview of the concept of peacemaking circles. Although Pranis's focus is on circle processes in the context of restorative justice, their explanation of practices that help foster values of connection, reflection, and understanding may be useful to those seeking to facilitate emotional conversations among diverse groups of students.

CRLT. (n.d.) "Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-stakes Topics." Center for Research on Learning & Teaching at the University of Michigan. https://crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines

This site provides actionable steps that instructors can take to make difficult discussions more productive and comfortable for all. These steps include collaboratively establishing guidelines for respectful discussion, ensuring that all students have the opportunity to voice their opinions, and gathering feedback from students as the course progresses. The site also encourages instructors to think about their own positionality, limitations, and potential triggers in preparation for high-stakes discussions.

Barnard College (n.d.) "Trauma-Informed Pedagogy." Barnard College. https://barnard.edu/trauma-informed-pedagogy

This site provides a brief overview of trauma-informed pedagogy, emphasizing that shifting our philosophies of teaching and learning can help to create a more equitable classroom for all students, regardless of their prior life experiences. The site references the compassion and flexibility demonstrated by instructors during the COVID-19 Pandemic (grace periods, recorded lectures, etc.) and makes the case that these practices should continue as a way of supporting students in a variety of situations.

For more in depth discussion of issues and practices specifically relating to sexual misconduct and trauma-informed pedagogy, see:

Bedera, N. (2021). "Beyond Trigger Warnings: A Survivor-Centered Approach to Teaching on Sexual Violence and Avoiding Institutional Betrayal." *Teaching Sociology,* 49(3), 267-277. https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X211022471

This information-packed piece gives specific examples of ways instructors can teach about sexual violence in a manner that protects the well-being of survivors (as well students impacted in other ways by sexual- and gender-based violence and the classroom community as a whole). These examples include giving detailed descriptions of resources available on campus, making space for disclosure and discussion in office hours, and setting aside time for self-care.

Online Resources

A dynamic version of this syllabus is available online through the Peace Education Center of the Hudson Valley.
https://padlet.com/thepechv/unpacking-sexual-coercion-vo72ye1yg0oo2z2p

Unpacking Sexual Coercion - Syllabus

Unit 1 - Foundational Concepts

Rationale

Unit 1 is designed to give students an introduction to the concepts of patriarchy, gender performativity, and rape culture. These feminist theories are necessary frameworks for understanding the cultural context in which sexual coercion is obscured, permitted, and encouraged, as it is frequently a gendered dynamic that occurs in heterosexual relationships. However, coercion can be perpetrated by any person wielding social power. Thus, it is necessary for students to develop an intersectional lens through which to examine power and socialization.

Essential Questions

- What societal factors shape our understanding of gender identity?
- How do binary, heteronormative constructions of gender impact sexual relationships?
- What other ideologies are at play in creating sexual power imbalances?
- How should we define sexual coercion? How can we relate experiences of sexual coercion to the social context in which they are occurring?

1.1 - Introduction

Roupenian, K. (2017). “Cat Person,” the New Yorker. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person

Roupenian’s short story pushes us to think about why consent should not be the bar for ethical and fulfilling sex. Margot and Robert’s relationship illustrates that coercion is often the result of more factors than individual behavior, including structural power imbalances, cultural narratives about empowerment and sexual norms, etc. Ultimately, there are a variety of interesting threads to discuss in Roupenian’s work and discussion will be guided by what students find salient and their goals for the course.

Discussion Prompts

- What are some of the reasons we have sex? What makes sex different from other activities we do alone or with a partner? What makes sex good or bad?
- How do Margot and Robert’s expectations impact their relationship? Is anyone ‘in the wrong’ in this story?

1.2 - Patriarchy and Power

hooks, b. (2004). “Understanding Patriarchy” in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. New York, NY: Atria Books.

In this piece, hooks demonstrates the ways that children learn from their families and communities how to properly embody gendered roles, and that they frequently carry these scripts with them into adulthood, as they are policed and punished when they step outside of their expected roles. She explains that men are taught to embody power and strength and women are taught to embody submission and servitude, even if these characteristics do not come naturally to them and even when they wish to be otherwise. Hooks’s emphasis on the corrupting nature of power hierarchies is insightful, and she encourages men and women to form a constructive and equitable bond, rather than simply trading off who gets to be in charge. This piece will allow students to begin thinking about the societal forces that shape heterosexual relationships. How do young people learn that it is men’s role to initiate sexual encounters and women’s role to be seduced? Why do those with social power feel comfortable asserting (and reasserting) their desires until they get what they want? In addition to provoking these questions, hooks’s piece gives students a brief introduction to concepts like patriarchy, masculinity, and gender roles, which are foundationally important to the field of gender and sexuality studies.

Hirsch, J. S., and Khan, S. (2021). Excerpt from “Gender and Beyond” in *Sexual Citizens: Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus.* New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company. 247-251.

In this excerpt, entitled “How to Think About Power,” Hirsch and Khan gesture to structural power dynamics that exist in addition to and alongside gendered hierarchies, including differences in age, race, and wealth. They also describe situational or temporary factors that contribute to sexual assault, such as level of intoxication and ability to access exclusive or private spaces. Hirsch and Khan’s description of power as “personal, relational, and institutional” force will help students extend hooks’s assertions about patriarchy to other systems of domination and think about how sexual coercion may be enacted in sexual interactions that do not fit into the cisheteronormative paradigm.

Discussion Prompts

- How are we taught the values and norms of our communities?
- Where do you see power dynamics at play in your own life?

- To what extent do you embrace or challenge the societal expectations and messages you have learned?
- How might gender norms influence the ways we interact with others?

1.3 - Gender Performativity and Sexuality

Butler, J. (1988). "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519-531. https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893

Having previously read hooks's work, students will have some foundational knowledge that will prepare them to engage with Butler's denser analysis of gender performativity. Although some of Butler's work repeats hooks's assertions about learned behavior and gender roles, their emphasis on gendered behavior as not inherent to a pre-social gender identity or biological sex is helpful in countering narratives that justify sexual misconduct by attributing dominant/submissive and predator/prey dynamics to the natural personalities of men and women. Additionally, their commentary on the social policing of gender performance and the subsequent widespread anxiety about performing gender 'correctly' provides a possible explanation for why people of all genders continue to act in ways that diminish their own autonomy or the autonomy of their partners, even when they appear to understand the importance of consent.

Wiederman, M. W. (2005). "The Gendered Nature of Sexual Scripts." *The Family Journal*, 13(4), 496-502. https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480705278729

Although Wiederman shies away from taking a stance on the reason for gender differences in sexual attitudes, students will be able to fill in this gap with the knowledge gained from Butler's explanation of gender socialization. Wiederman's work illuminates how the internalization of gendered expectations impacts heterosexual relationships and provides students the opportunity to make connections between gender performativity and sexual identity. He explains that social scripts function on a societal level to communicate and enforce standards of appropriate sexual behavior, and on the individual level to reduce uncertainty in interpersonal interactions. In a heteronormative, gender binary, Western culture, our sexual scripts teach men to be goal-oriented and women to exhibit sexual restraint. Wiederman's work gives students insight into what happens when these roles are taken up or challenged by individuals. Although extremely interesting, this piece only covers heterosexual interactions, so students will have to think back on Hirsch and Khan's work to discuss how sexual scripts may function intersectionally, impacting people differently across racial, sexual, and other identities.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to be a man or a woman in U.S. culture? How do these definitions limit meaningful reflection on gender identity for men, women, and people who do not subscribe to a binary model of gender?
- How do sexual (and other social) scripts impact interpersonal relationships? Are they always negative?

1.4 - Rape Culture

Phillips, N. D. (2016). Excerpt from "Rape Culture: the Evolution of a Concept" in *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. 5-13.

Phillips's work provides a succinct history of the term 'rape culture,' and how it used to signify that sexual violence is not a problem of individual bad men, but a problem of societal attitudes about gender and sex that normalize power imbalances. She also introduces the concept of a continuum of harm that is helpful in shifting our conception of violence to a broader paradigm that includes not only physical acts, but any act that violates another person's dignity or autonomy. Phillips ends the excerpt by explaining that as the term rape culture has entered the public consciousness, it has become more abstract. Students will thus be challenged to formulate their own definitions and contemplate the impacts of an overly broad or overly narrow conception of rape culture.

Kessel, A. (2022). "Rethinking Rape Culture: Revelations of Intersectional Analysis." *American Political Science Review*, 116(1), 131-143. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000733

In this piece, Kessel attends to intersectional issues, mainly of race, that Phillips largely neglects in her work. Kessel critiques foundational feminist thinkers that have focused on rape and rape culture as single-axis issues of gender domination. Kessel introduces students to other thinkers like Wells, Douglass, and Davis who theorized that racial stereotypes about the (hyper)sexuality of Black men and women work to reinforce white, patriarchal domination over all marginalized people. Kessel also provides evidence of how various myths, discourses, and practices work to construct and reproduce rape culture and protect the interests of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalist exploitation. Her work is essential in helping students develop an intersectional approach to thinking about sexual coercion, as this lens is frequently decentered in the literature about sexual misconduct.

OPTIONAL: Crenshaw, K. (2016). “The Urgency of Intersectionality.” YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akOe5-UsQ2o

This Ted Talk provides students with a more in-depth understanding of the term ‘intersectionality’ and introduces them to important feminist thinker, Kimberlé Crenshaw. Although it is not necessary to understand Kessel’s argument, and many students may be familiar with the concept from introductory WFQS courses, it is a good recommendation for students who are interested in learning more about the history and development of the idea.

Solnit, R. (2018). “A Broken Idea of Sex is Flourishing. Blame Capitalism.” *The Guardian.* https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/12/sex-capitalism-incel-movement-misogyny-feminism

Solnit uses the underpinnings of ‘incel’ (involuntary celibate) culture to illuminate the role that capitalist ideology plays in encouraging depersonalized sexual interactions fueled by entitlement and objectification. Her critique is not fully developed here, but her short explanation offers students more insight into another system of domination that influences how our culture views sex. Solnit’s attention to various current events and figures in popular culture encourages students to consider how these dynamics are present in their lives, especially in the media they consume.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do we see examples of rape culture in our everyday lives? What does it feel like to live in a culture that normalizes sexual misconduct and power imbalances?
- What other ideologies or systems of oppression might play a role in sustaining rape culture?
- What actions can individuals and communities take to counteract the tendencies of rape culture?

1.5 - Sexual Coercion

Gavey, N. (2019). “Unsexy Sex: Unwanted Sex, Sexual Coercion, and Rape” in *Just Sex?: the Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Gavey discusses how collective cultural norms about sex and gender create sexual scripts that diminish the importance of individual desire and mutual reciprocity. Although Gavey

focuses on discourses that shape heterosexual interactions, her acknowledgment of objectification and obligation is a dynamic that may occur in any relationship where one partner has more social power than the other. Gavey also offers an interesting critique of the oversimplification of consent discourses about individuals' right to say no. Her linguistic analysis of speech patterns and discussion of the role of sex identity formation, when placed in the context of interviews with real women, offer students perspective on how theoretical concepts play out in the experiences and perspectives of individuals. Finally, Gavey illuminates many of the tensions that students must work through in order to understand sexual coercion, such as the difference between "giving sex" out of a desire to be altruistic or out of pressure to do the 'normal' thing and the difference between a coercive partner and internalized cultural coercion. Students must contend with high-level philosophical arguments of thinkers like Foucault about how free choice, agency, and power can function in sexual interactions that are colored by harmful cultural narratives.

Lindsay, E. (2018). "Sexual Coercion is Part of a Larger Culture of Coercion." *Medium*. https://emmalindsay.medium.com/sexual-coercion-is-part-of-a-larger-culture-of-coercion-806f86c34c35

In this piece, Lindsay offers a very powerful argument for why coercion, and sexual misconduct with the absence of physical force, is often overlooked. We have difficulty conceptualizing emotional pain as 'real' or legitimate. Lindsay's embodied response to her own experience of sexual coercion encourages students to contextualize sexual misconduct within other normalized methods of manipulation and to consider how we must reject deeply ingrained cultural norms in order to center cooperation and empathy in our interpersonal and sexual relationships.

Discussion Prompts

- What are the dangers and benefits of labeling sexual coercion as sexual assault or rape? How is the theory of a continuum of harm helpful for conceptualizing sexual coercion?
- How can we understand our own desires in the context of internalized sexual expectations? Is it possible to uncover what we 'really' want?
- What would it look like to stop using punishment as a tool for altering others' behavior? Are there alternatives that could work as effectively?

Unit 2 - Policy Landscape: Law and Education

Rationale

Unit 2 is designed to help students understand the ways in which the cultural attitudes discussed in Unit 1 become entrenched in formal institutions, such as the legal and educational systems. In addition to addressing how sexual coercion has been historically neglected in laws about sexual violence and curriculum about safe sex, the authors in this unit encourage students to think about how policy change might (or might not) aid in creating a healthier sexual culture.

Essential Questions

- How do formal institutions perpetuate social inequality? What is the relationship between these institutions and the individual actors within them and what impacts do they each have on the public?
- How do the legal and educational systems currently address sexual coercion? How might different approaches from either system change our understanding of appropriate sexual behavior? What might we want our laws and our schools to say about sexual coercion?

2.1 - Legal Definitions

Cuklanz, L. M. (1996). "A Particular Social Reality: Rape Law and Rape Law Reform." In *Rape on Trial: How the Mass Media Construct Legal Reform and Social Change* (pp. 14–32). University of Pennsylvania Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15zc8z1.5

Cuklanz's examination of the gendered myths codified in rape law provides students with a preliminary understanding of the way that the legal system takes on and reinforces societal biases through written statutes, trial practices, and the conduct of individual actors. Her discussion of the theory of victim precipitation and the requirement of 'utmost resistance' are particularly helpful in conceptualizing why sexual coercion is often not understood as a sexual violation; in addition, the lingering impacts of the common law marital rape exemption provide a plausible explanation for the continued conflation of relationship status with consent.

Schulhofer, S. J. (1992). Excerpt from "Taking Sexual Autonomy Seriously: Rape Law and Beyond." *Law and Philosophy*, *11*(1/2), 69–88. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3504904

In this excerpt, Schulhofer suggests that instead of a singular focus on violent, forcible penetration, the legal system should be concerned with protecting sexual autonomy, both in cases where there is no consent, as well as in cases where consent may be coerced.

Schulhofer challenges the myth that sexual misconduct is a unique crime by situating his definition of sexual autonomy in terms of the social and legal understandings of freedom of choice that we take for granted in other situations. He goes on to explain how autonomy and consent may be constrained when extortionate behavior, professional or institutional authority, or economic power are used to compel sex, as well as how these situations compare to previously established civil case law. Schulhofer believes that the concept of sexual autonomy allows us to expand our thinking about what kinds of sexual conduct infringe on the dignity and freedom of individuals; thus, even if students do not agree with his proposed criminalization of nonviolent sexual misconduct, his writing provides an important perspective on why we must not tolerate sexual coercion.

Discussion Prompts

- How have rape myths changed since the publication of Cuklanz's writing in 1996? How might a sexual autonomy framework challenge rape myths, socially and legally?
- What are the merits and pitfalls of using the legal system as a vehicle for addressing sexual misconduct or changing sexual attitudes? To what extent do laws reflect and/or influence the beliefs and conduct of a society?

2.2 - Models of Consent

Anderson, M. J. (2005). Excerpt from "Negotiating Sex." *Southern California Law Review*, 78(6), 1401-1421.

Anderson problematizes the notion of consent in both the 'No Model' and the 'Yes Model' that have been put forth to reform the standards of rape law. Although the Yes Model has been useful in shifting the burden of proof of sexual misconduct from the victim (proving that they did not consent) to the perpetrator (proving that they obtained affirmative consent), it does not do enough to challenge instances of coercion or ambiguity. Anderson argues that a singular focus on consent in both models puts a disproportionate burden on one partner to make clear the boundaries of acceptable behavior; in addition, the gendered passivity of granting consent hinders at least one partner, usually women, from developing a fully realized understanding of their own desires. Finally, Anderson turns to the 'Negotiation Model,' which students will not read in this section but will return to in Unit 4.

Muehlenhard, C. L., & Peterson, Z. D. (2005). "III. Wanting and Not Wanting Sex: the Missing Discourse of Ambivalence." *Feminism & Psychology*, 15(1), 15-20. https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353505049698

In this short piece, Muehlenhard and Peterson discuss the concept of ambivalence as it relates to sex, consent, and desire. Specifically, they emphasize that it may be difficult to neatly divide sexual experiences into mutually exclusive 'wanted' and 'unwanted' categories and that there is a distinction between wanting sex and consenting to sex. Their work encourages students to think about how a discourse of ambivalence might be used in addressing sexual coercion and whether the strict categorizations of the law are the best tools for constructing a healthier sexual culture.

OPTIONAL: Salam, M. (2018). "Consent in the Digital Age: Can Apps Solve a Very Human Problem?" *The New York Times*.
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/02/technology/consent-apps.html

This article gives students an example of how our society is currently engaging with the concepts of consent, ambivalence, flexibility, and accountability in a changing legal and technological landscape. Salam briefly explores how consent apps attempt to uphold the importance of mutual consent in sexual relationships but inadvertently simplify and potentially weaponize the concept in ways that can be harmful to our understanding of ethical sex, generally, as well as people seeking legal recourse after incidents of sexual misconduct.

Discussion Prompts

- How have you seen the Yes and No Models depicted in media, education, or conversations? Are there advantages to either model that Anderson may be overlooking?
- Does the concept of ambivalence resonate with your personal experiences? How does it challenge attempts to create a dichotomous framework of consent?
- How does 'consent,' in its legal and cultural formulations, reinforce gender roles and limit sexual autonomy? Is consent still a useful or necessary concept for discussing healthy sexual practices?

2.3 - The State of Sex Education

Kendall, N. (2012). "Introduction," in *the Sex Education Debates* (pp. 1-10). University of Chicago Press.

The introduction to Kendall's work provides a brief overview of the current landscape of sex education in the U.S. Her description of Abstinence Only Until Marriage Education, Comprehensive Sexuality Education, and the spectrum of curricula in between will help

students to contextualize their own experiences with sex ed and to understand the political motivations behind different types of programs. Kendall demonstrates how school-based sexuality education is not serving the needs or answering the questions of young people and is, instead becoming "the terrain for adult battles" over politics and morals (9).

> BROWSE: SIECUS. (2023). "The Siecus State Profiles - The State of Sex Ed." https://siecus.org/state-profiles/
>
> Students can review sex education requirements in their home state, the state of their college, and other places of importance and consider how these standards may impact the sexual development of young people who attend public school.

Powell, A. (2010). "Education: Sex, Power and Consent in Schools" in *Sex, Power and Consent: Youth Culture and the Unwritten Rules* (pp. 126-153). Cambridge University Press.

This chapter more closely examines the content of sexuality education and how mainstream curricula often reinforces heterosexist conceptions of sexuality and deprives students of the tools necessary to center pleasure, agency, and fulfillment in their intimate relationships. Although Powell's research was conducted in Australia, the excerpted interview transcripts in this piece demonstrate that young people across the world share a deep frustration with sex education that does not speak to their experiences. Powell's interviewees critique curricular issues such as a narrow focus on penetrative vaginal intercourse, overwhelming emphasis on risk, and underdeveloped discussions of consent. Powell expands on her participants' calls for self-esteem-building programs to highlight how symbolic violence against women and other marginalized groups is reinforced in sexuality education curricula that neglect to address their experiences of desire, thereby hindering the development of their sexual agency. Finally, Powell turns to some proposed suggestions for improving sexuality education, including content that challenges dominant discourses and teaching methods that encourage critical thinking, student-led inquiry, and peer collaboration.

Garcia, L. (2022). "'Now Why Do You Want to Know About That?' Heteronormativity, Sexism, and Racism in the Sexual (Mis)education of Latina Youth" in *Critical Dialogues in Latinx Studies: A Reader* edited by Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, and Mérida M. Rúa, NYU Press Scholarship Online, https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479805198.003.0017

Garcia's interviews with Latina adolescents highlight how sex education for queer youth and youth of color, at best, neglects to address their intersecting identities and, at worst,

perpetuates homophobia and racism. For the participants in Garcia's study, sex educators' preconceived ideas of Latina youth as hypersexual bolstered a moralizing agenda in which educators refused to discuss certain topics, such as contraception or queer identity, in order to convey repressive sexual expectations to their students. Garcia's work encourages students to think about the ways that sex education, though subpar for all students, impacts individuals differently across identity groups.

Discussion Prompts

- What kinds of messages were most pervasive in your experiences with sex education? In what ways, if any, did you see your teachers' implicit or explicit biases manifest in the classroom?
- How might a sex educator discuss gender norms without projecting binaries onto their students (i.e., the idea that all young women need to improve their confidence in order to combat sexual coercion)?
- Powell briefly discusses the possibilities of gender-segregated discussions; what might be the merits and limitations of conversations segregated by race or sexuality?
- Is there (or should there be) a limit to what school-based sexuality education can achieve? Is school the best place for young people to have conversations about sex, pleasure, and desire?

Unit 3 - Cultural Influences on Sexual Coercion

Rationale

Unit 3 is intended to demonstrate the way that sexual coercion is normalized and reinforced by messages from various cultural institutions. Although this unit could have addressed many more entities, I have chosen to focus on pornography, popular media, and community.* Students will investigate how individuals develop an understanding of sex and sexual behavior through explicit demonstrations like pornography, as well as less obvious influences, such as parenting philosophies.

* Other potential topics include: literature, music, religion, technology

Essential Questions

- What cultural factors shape our perspectives on appropriate sexual behavior? Why do these factors have the authority to influence our beliefs?
- How can we become critical consumers of messages from pornography, popular media, and our communities? How can we challenge messages that encourage sexual coercion?

3.1 - Pornography

Srinivasan, A. (2021). "Talking to My Students About Porn" in *the Right to Sex.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

In this chapter, Srinivasan begins by tracing the historical feminist debates about pornography, addressing the tendencies of mainstream porn to eroticize violence against women. Srinivasan explains that porn is not merely a reflection of power imbalances that exist in society; it also functions to recreate these dynamics in the lives of people who watch porn, who learn from and imitate what they misunderstand to be an authoritative guide on sex. This "world-making" power of porn also serves to shape and homogenize the sexual preferences of viewers. Her discussion of (mainly failed) attempts to legislate and criminalize porn encourages students to think about other, potentially more effective, ways to combat the negative influences of mainstream porn. While Srinivasan suggests the possibility of feminist porn, she opposes the "logic of the screen" that hinders viewers' sexual imagination, prompting students to question whether any kind of porn can play a role in the development of a more fulfilling sexual culture.

Nussbaum, M. C. (2017). "Objectification" in *Desire, Love, & Identity: Philosophy of Love and Sex,* edited by Gary Foster. Oxford University Press.

In this excerpt from a longer work, Nussbaum attempts to define objectification, which she sees as a term that has risen to popularity without a clearly understood definition. She outlines seven different forms of behavior that involve treating another human being as an object; these categories and examples are helpful in understanding how our society, specifically the pornography industry, encourages objectification (especially in the forms of instrumentality and denial of subjectivity) and, subsequently, sexual coercion in intimate relationships. However, Nussbaum also posits that objectification need not be understood as always or inherently problematic; she explains that instances of objectification must be analyzed in the larger context of the relationship between the individuals, considering respect, consent, and mutuality. This qualification leaves room for students to question whether and how something like pornography, which seems to participate in large amounts of objectification, can be changed or contextualized to yield a morally neutral or positive outcome.

Jones, M. (2018). “What Teenagers are Learning from Online Porn.” *New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/07/magazine/teenagers-learning-online-porn-literacy-sex-education.html?smid=url-share

Jones’s piece reveals how sex acts depicted in porn shape the desires of viewers and their expectations of their partners. The quotes from multiple interviewees illustrate the importance of communication and sexual negotiation between partners, as many individuals made assumptions or statements that participants of the opposite gender directly refuted. Jones’s discussion of porn literacy as a valuable component of sex education acknowledges that it is unlikely that pornography will be completely excised from our society and encourages students to think about what kind of education around porn could aid young people in combating a culture of coercive sexual expectations.

Discussion Prompts

- How does objectification function in pornography? Is all porn objectifying?
- Is porn inherently damaging to real-life sexual relationships? Could porn be used as a tool for teaching people healthier sexual attitudes?
- What lessons or ideas are most valuable to include in a porn literacy course?

3.2 - Popular Media

Mulvey, L. (1999). "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Feminist Film Theory*, edited by Sue Thornham. Edinburgh University Press.

Although Mulvey's writing is quite dense, her interesting combination of psychoanalysis and film theory provides students with a new lens through which to understand the ways that movies shape our understanding of sex and gender roles. Mulvey introduces students to the concept of the male gaze, which describes how women characters are passively displayed for the sexual fulfillment of male characters and viewers. Male characters, on the other hand, are active protagonists with whom spectators are supposed to identify. Importantly, this structure can be extended beyond a heterosexual gender binary because it models a way of viewing individuals that one may be attracted to that can be taken up by a person of any gender. In short, Mulvey's work helps explain why film, which generally instrumentalizes human bodies for erotic pleasure, may reproduce and reinforce sexual ways of looking that deny the subjectivity of real people.

Meek, M. (2021). "Exposing Flaws of Affirmative Consent through Contemporary American Teen Films." *Girlhood Studies*, 14(1), 101–116. https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2021.140109

In this piece, Meek outlines how changing attitudes about consent have not fundamentally altered how teen films portray sexual intimacy; as in the past, narratives of 'seduction' are colored by controlling and coercive behaviors that are made morally acceptable by later scenes depicting affirmative consent. Meek also illustrates that in filmmakers' quests to showcase women's sexual agency, they tend to neglect even cursory depictions of women obtaining consent from men. This is important not only because it addresses how sexual coercion may be perpetrated by individuals that we see as being disadvantaged in societal power structures, but also because it encourages students to analyze how both comedy and narratives of 'empowerment' may be utilized to reinforce problematic ideas about sex. Finally, Meek broaches the issues that ambivalence, regret, and discomfort pose to the affirmative consent model, which suggests that all sex is strictly either wanted or unwanted.

> OPTIONAL: Meek, M. (2018). "Why We're Confused About Consent - Rewriting Our Stories of Seduction." TEDxProvidence. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdSdyW8Lw_U
>
> Meek's Ted Talk reiterates and builds on the ideas in the required reading for this class session. The video allows students to engage with the material in a different format, which may be particularly beneficial for students who struggle to absorb information from readings.

Discussion Prompts

- How have you heard the term ‘male gaze’ used before? Can Mulvey’s concepts be applied to other power imbalances besides those of heteronormative gender dynamics?
- Why do film and popular media play such a large role in shaping our beliefs about interpersonal and sexual relationships? How do you see this influence in your own life?
- What other kinds of media contribute to the cultural discourse around consent?

3.3 - Peers, Friends, and Family

Suleiman, A. B., & Deardorff, J. (2014). “Multiple Dimensions of Peer Influence in Adolescent Romantic and Sexual Relationships: a Descriptive, Qualitative Perspective.” *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 44(3), 765–775. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0394-z

This qualitative study documents the variety of ways a person’s social circle may influence their understanding of appropriate or ‘normal’ sexual behavior. Participants describe feeling direct and indirect pressure to find a romantic partner or engage in sexual activity due to concerns about status, belonging, and self-esteem. In addition to general attitudes (real or perceived) about the importance of sexual and romantic relationships, participants report seeking advice from friends on how to navigate sexual encounters. In regards to the influence of romantic partners, participants discuss compromising their own desires in order to please their partners, in hopes of “creating increased emotional intimacy and security.” This study reinforces the idea that sexual pressures are created by a web of interpersonal interactions that extend beyond the individuals directly involved.

Fetters, A. (2020). “Bad Hookup, or Sexual Assault? Sometimes the Friends Decide.” *The Atlantic*.
https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/01/sexual-citizens-friends-affect-views-assault/605425/

Fetters briefly summarizes Khan and Hirsch’s arguments about the role that peers play in “facilitating and interpreting sexual encounters.” Especially in college, when young people are attempting to forge their own understandings of the world away from support networks they may have had at home, the opinions of their friends may carry a lot of weight and the threat of disrupting a social group may prevent individuals from talking about uncomfortable or nonconsensual sexual experiences. Fetters’s summary encourages students to think about the socially-constructed labels we apply to sexual assault and coercion, as well as the role that we all play in contributing to our communities’ collective understandings of consent and respect.

Rivera, M. (2016). “Body Sovereignty and Kids: How We Can Cultivate a Culture of Consent.” TEDxCSU. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EvGyo1NrzTY

Rivera illustrates that from a young age, children are socialized to compromise their bodily autonomy for the comfort of others. This occurs through an accumulation of seemingly harmless occurrences, such as asking a child to hug a relative after they have already refused, or telling a child that they are not really full because they have not eaten enough dinner. In this way, we teach young people to disregard what they feel about their own bodies and desires in order to please others or avoid social discomfort. Rivera’s discussion of the strategies she uses to integrate principles of body sovereignty into her parenting encourage students to reflect on how their own upbringings, directly and indirectly, shaped their understandings of consent and to imagine alternatives for future generations.

Discussion Prompts

- What were the prevailing messages you received about sex and autonomy from friends and family? How might peer influence and family attitudes encourage or obscure sexual coercion?
- What kinds of conversations or programs regarding coercion and consent could be effective and developmentally appropriate for the age groups discussed in these readings?

Unit 4 - Looking Forward

Rationale

Unit 4 is intended to allow students to think about what our society could do differently to address the problem of sexual coercion. The authors in this section propose preventative measures such as implementing a negotiation standard in rape law or exploring pleasure to school-based sex education, as well as corrective measures like restorative justice. The suggestions are non-exhaustive but are curated to encourage students to envision tangible possibilities for creating a more ethical sexual culture.

Essential Questions

- What do we imagine when we say we want a healthier and more fulfilling sexual culture? What practices might help us get there? Whose responsibility is it to enact these changes?
- How does this apply to your own life?

4.1 - Sexual Negotiation

Anderson, M. J. (2005). Excerpt from "Negotiating Sex." *Southern California Law Review*, 78(6), 1421-1438.

In the second half of this piece, Anderson proposes implementing the Negotiation model as the legal standard for determining whether sexual misconduct has occurred. Semantically, while 'consent' implies acquiescence to another's desires, 'negotiation' suggests a collaborative discussion between multiple active participants. Thus, Anderson highlights that the goal of negotiation is to give all parties the opportunity to share and agree upon "intentions, desires, and boundaries" (1423). This process seeks to restore the complex humanity of individuals which has previously been repressed in favor of strict gender norms and sexual scripts. Anderson counters concerns that the negotiation model is too restrictive by arguing that the difficulties that come with navigating new standards are worth the reward of a more ethical sexual culture. Although Anderson focuses specifically on penetration and the legal implications of the negotiation model, her discussion opens the door for students to think more generally about ethical sex beyond consent.

Kukla, Q. (2018). "That's What She Said: The Language of Sexual Negotiation." *Ethics*, 129(1), 70–97. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26541906

With a background in philosophy, Kukla's work considers the linguistic components and ethical implications of sexual negotiation, thereby expanding on Anderson's legal analysis. They echo other writers on the inadequacies of normative consent discourse and highlight how sexual partners often rely on preconceived ideas about how sex should take place, instead of having an explicit discussion with the other person or people. Kukla explains that initiating ethical sex should take the form of an invitation or a gift offer, which allow individuals to express their desires while leaving their partners free to decline. They acknowledge that one of the difficulties with navigating negotiation is that much sexual language is not meant to be taken literally; thus, partners must be able to differentiate between role play, ethical non-consent, and a real attempt to end sexual activity. This, they explain, demonstrates the importance of negotiating safe words and exit conditions, which empowers individuals to go beyond their comfort zones with the knowledge that they can safely end a situation at any time. Ultimately, Kukla argues that we need to thoroughly understand the mechanics of sexual negotiation, not only to prevent harm but also to encourage pleasure and agency. They thus give students a model of how we can tackle the problem of sexual coercion through positive constructionist ideas, in addition to negative dismantling.

sexplanations. (2020). "Sexual Negotiation featuring Midori." YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9s0VVjIi38

In this video, Dr. Lindsey Doe and Midori discuss what sexual negotiation might realistically look like. They emphasize the importance of interpersonal connection, clear communication, and flexibility. Although they focus on negotiation in the context of BDSM, their conversations allow students to think about the value of sexual negotiation in real life.

Discussion Prompts

- In your experience, is sexual negotiation something that is already commonly practiced? Do you think that it is a necessary element of ethical sex?
- Should sexual negotiation be the legal standard for determining rape, as Anderson suggests? Would a law mandating negotiation serve as a deterrent for sexual misconduct?
- How might introducing sexual negotiation skills in sex education impact the sexual behavior of young people? Do you think it would help mitigate sexual coercion?

4.2 - Pleasure and Desire

Koepsel, E. R. (2016). “The Power in Pleasure: Practical Implementation of Pleasure in Sex Education Classrooms.” *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 11(3), 205–265. https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2016.1209451

Koepsel sees school-based sexual education as a potential vehicle for improving individuals’ understanding of sexual pleasure, which she defines as “the combination of satisfying stimulation of the body, accompanied by psychological feelings of enjoyment” (211). She argues that increased engagement with the concept of pleasure would help to counteract cultural discourses that link sex and pleasure to danger and deviance, thereby empowering students to embrace their identities and desires and hopefully develop an overall healthier relationship to sex. Pleasure education can help students think about their boundaries and interests, as well as practice using strategies to convey their thoughts to future partners. Koepsel also argues that pleasure education reinforces the idea that individuals are sexual subjects with agency to choose to engage with sex in the way that is best for them, which is especially empowering for students with marginalized identities that are frequently neglected, objectified, or desexualized. Finally, teaching about pleasure expands individual awareness of the spectrum of human sexuality (identity, biology, behavior, etc.) and increases their capacity to think about the possibilities of intimacy and demonstrate concern for others. The second half of Koepsel’s work provides detailed examples of activities and language that instructors can use to begin incorporating pleasure into sex education classrooms.

Srinivasan, A. (2021). Excerpt from “the Right to Sex” in *the Right to Sex.* Bloomsbury Publishing.

In this excerpt, Srinivasan makes an argument about the value of a feminist praxis that allows for seemingly contradictory ideas to be considered together. She compares older ‘anti-sex’ feminisms that argued that certain behaviors, fantasies, or clothing choices were merely a result of internalized patriarchy, with newer ‘pro-sex’ feminisms that argue that a person’s proclaimed desires must not be questioned or given a moral value judgment. She puts forth the idea that a more radical critique of sex and desire would attempt to integrate the two schools of thought by being wary of moral authoritarianism that attempts to control desire, while acknowledging that our desires are often shaped by the politics of our social world. Although the connection may not be obvious at first, as Srinivasan is mainly concerned with identity-based desire, her arguments can be extrapolated to help students approach complex issues related to pleasure and desire, especially regarding the ethics of power imbalance relationships or roleplay.

Discussion Prompts

- What is the relationship between pleasure and empowerment or pleasure and intimacy? Do you think that pleasure education encourages people to think more about their own needs or the needs of their partners? How might either of these impact instances of sexual coercion?
- Taking up Srinivasan's challenge to analyze the political nature of desire, what should we think about sexual pleasure that seems to reinforce social inequality or gendered sexual scripts? How might a sex educator discuss the positive and negative aspects of something like BDSM?

4.3 - Justice

Law, V. (2018). "How Can We Reconcile Prison Abolition With #Metoo?" *Filter*. https://filtermag.org/how-can-we-reconcile-prison-abolition-with-metoo/.

Law succinctly explains why carceral feminism, or the push for more police involvement and harsher prison sentences in cases of gender-based violence, frequently fails survivors. Carceral solutions increase surveillance of both perpetrators and survivors, allowing for the criminalization of survival tactics and further reinforcing a cycle of violence that includes police brutality, retaliatory attacks, and victimization in court and in prison. The criminal justice system does little to provide survivors with material and mental health resources for healing and 'invisibilizes' perpetrators instead of asking them to reckon with the harm they have caused. In contrast with carceral feminism, Law looks at practices of transformative justice where communities come together to hold abusers accountable and support survivors. She acknowledges that these solutions are imperfect, non-comprehensive, and case-dependent, but her article gives students a framework for thinking about productive strategies for addressing sexual misconduct outside of the criminal justice system.

Casey, G. (2018). "Restoring Justice: Repairing the Harm After Sexual Assault," *TEDxUF*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGzjM1JEbwo

Casey outlines the key components of restorative justice in cases of sexual misconduct; she emphasizes the need for an offender to acknowledge "the life-altering trauma that they are responsible for" (which is prevented by the adversarial criminal justice system where the accused is encouraged to remain silent and not admit guilt) and the shared goal of deciding on resources and actionable steps that can aid in the healing process and prevent similar harm from happening again. Casey also acknowledges that there are times when restorative justice practices are not feasible and that they should not be forced onto anyone who does not want to participate voluntarily. Ultimately, Casey's hope is that

successful restorative justice will increase accountability, empathy, and concern for others.

OPTIONAL: Dickie, B. (2000). *Hollow Water*. *National Film Board of Canada*. https://www.nfb.ca/film/hollow_water/.

Hollow Water explores the linkages between sexual misconduct and restorative practices in an Indigenous community. It is an emotionally difficult watch, and thus may be better for students to engage with outside of class. Students should be warned about the content, and instructors should offer a safe place to discuss the film if they choose to recommend it.

Discussion Prompts

- Do you feel more aligned with Anderson's proposal of increasing the legal system's purview over sexual misconduct or today's thinkers' (Law and Casey) push for sexual misconduct to be handled outside of the criminal justice system? What are the benefits and drawbacks of each approach?
- What kinds of transformative justice practices might you recommend to partners trying to heal from an incident of sexual coercion? What other strategies do you think should be used in the aftermath of sexual coercion?

4.4 - Wrap-Up

Estes, Y. (2010). "Mutual Respect and Sexual Morality: How To Have College Sex Well" In *College Sex and Philosophy: Philosophers with Benefits* edited by Michael Bruce and Robert M. Stewart. (pp. 209–219). Blackwell Publishing.

Estes briefly articulates the idea that ethical sex must uphold human dignity and demonstrate mutual respect. Her witty writing summarizes major themes of the course and encourages students to think about the importance of the material in their own lives.

Discussion Prompts

- Has this course changed the way you think about sex? What has resonated and what has not?
- How do you think you will apply course concepts in your own life? Which reading or idea would you most recommend to a friend or partner?