Affirmative Consent and Assault Ambiguity: Effects on Perceptions of Sexual Violence on College Campuses
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Introduction
Background
• Nearly 20% of undergraduate women report being sexually assaulted (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2005).
• The Campus Sexual Violence Elimination Act (SaVE) of 2013 requires postsecondary institutions to take steps to reduce the prevalence of all forms of sexual violence, including sexual assault.
• California has passed a law requiring colleges to adopt affirmative consent policies, which require that consent to sex be “affirmative, conscious, and voluntary.”

Rape Scripts
• Men and women may have different conceptualizations of what constitutes rape (Clark & Carroll, 2008).
• Many college students endorse a stranger rape script (Ryan 1988; Clark & Carroll, 2008).
  – However, 90-95% of perpetrators are known to the victim (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000; Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, & McAulain, 1996).
• College students’ rape and seduction scripts have similar elements:
  – Manipulative tactics by the man, sexual interest by the woman, substance use (Littleton & Assim, 2003).

Consent
• College men and women differ in how they communicate consent (Rickman & Muesnher, 1999).
• College students most often signify consent by making no response or not resisting (Rickman & Muesnher, 1999).

Purpose Statement
• To assess the effectiveness of affirmative consent policies in influencing peoples’ perceptions of sexual assault on college campuses.

Methods
Participants
• N = 242 recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk (mean age = 35.19, 45.5% male and 53.7% female, 78.5% Caucasian)

Manipulations
• Consent definition: Affirmative with details, Affirmative only, or Non-affirmative
  (Affirmative consent/Consent means affirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement/agreement) to engage in sexual activity. It is the responsibility of each person involved in the sexual activity to ensure that he or she has the (affirmative consent/consent) of the other or others to engage in the sexual activity.
• Rape vignette: low, medium, or high ambiguity
  At this point, Laura said she wasn’t sure she wanted to go any further, but Mike (pinned her arms and legs down/verbally pressured her/kept kissing her). Laura said nothing, and Mike proceeded to have sex with her.

Dependent Variables
• Victim/Perpetrator Blame/Responsibility
• Victim Suffering
• Victim Recovery Time
• Victim Counseling Needed
• Perpetrator Suffering
• Perpetrator Recovery Time
• Perpetrator Counseling Needed
• Consent Perceptions
• Victim Support
• Endorsement of Perpetrator Consequences
• Sexual Assault Likelihood

Results
Consent Main Effects
• Perpetrator Recovery Time, F(2,229) = 3.58, p = .029
  – Non-Affirmative > Affirmative with details
• Hopeful About Decision, F(2,233) = 5.26, p = .006
  – Non-Affirmative > Affirmative with details = Affirmative only

Vignette Main Effects

Discussion
• Providing a definition of affirmative consent has a limited influence on perceptions of sexual assault.
  • Perhaps a more thorough instruction is needed:
    – Conducting workshops is an effective way of increasing college students’ knowledge of consent (Borges, Barnard, & Morinhan, 2008).
  • Perceptions of sexual assault are influenced by ambiguity.
    – Supports the need for an affirmative consent standard.

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