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An exploration of black women students' sexual experiences

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Abstract

In this research report, I critique the use of consent as a standard for differentiating between harmful/unacceptable and harmless/acceptable sexual experiences. Central to my investigation are the relationship between consent and power. Using material from interviews I conducted with eight Black women situated at Wits University, I analyze three main issues. I first analyze the political implications of emotion, arguing for a recognition of the role emotion plays in regards to sexual consenting practice. I then discuss the connection between bodies and language in discourses on sex, gender, sexuality and violence. I explore this through two frames: first, how Black women's bodies are read through a sexualizing lens and then, through an exploration of the possibilities of communicating consent through non-verbal language. Thirdly, I look at the complexity of meaning making practices, pertaining to experiences of unwanted sex. I make the argument that consent models of understanding sexual violence are inadequate, due to the way they conflate desire and consent, as well as consent and harmlessness. I also make an argument for prioritizing women's understandings of their sexual experiences, over legal understandings of these experiences.

Keywords and terms:

Sex, consent, power, agency, rape, sexual assault, sexual violence, affirmative consent, unwanted sex, unacknowledged rape, South Africa, Johannesburg, Wits University, university students, activism, feminism, Black women