

A Decision Science–Informed Approach to Sexual Risk and Nonconsent

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Abstract

Sexual risk reduction programs often assume that adolescents and young women care only about the minimization of their risks when making decisions about sexual encounters. As a result, these programs teach only the most effective strategies to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections or sexual victimization. We propose a translational decision science approach that addresses the other outcomes that adolescents and young women might consider. In this study, young women reported their sexual nonconsent goals in response to hypothetical encounters in which their partner wished to have sex when they did not. We found that young women highly valued communicating their intent clearly as an end in itself, as well as a means to avoid unwanted sex. However, they also cited other, potentially conflicting, goals such as maintaining relationship stability and protecting their partner. These other goals were associated with participants' self-reported histories of sexual victimization. Young women who had been sexually coerced or raped attached greater importance to protecting their partner's feelings, preserving sexual relationships, and avoiding awkwardness or embarrassment, compared to young women without such experiences. We discuss the implications for creating sexual risk reduction programming relevant to young women with competing sexual nonconsent goals. *Clin Trans Sci* 2012; Volume 5: 482–485

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Introduction

Young women faced with an unwanted sexual proposition must decide how to signal nonconsent. They may select assertive verbal strategies, physically forceful rebuffs, or subtle nonverbal cues. When evaluating a strategy, women will consider the likely reduction in the risk of nonconsensual sex, but they may consider its effects on other outcomes as well, such as maintaining relationship stability or avoiding embarrassment. However, sexual risk reduction programs often assume that adolescents and young adults evaluate their options on only one outcome. For example, a rape prevention program may limit the nonconsent strategies it teaches to physically forceful options assuming that program participants care only about minimizing the risk that they will be sexually assaulted. In such cases, the needs of adolescents and young adults with multiple goals may not be fully served. In this study, we build on behavioral decision research, a basic science approach to helping individuals make the best possible choices given uncertain outcomes and individual differences in values and goals.^{1–3} Building on earlier work by Fischhoff and colleagues,^{4–6} we apply the field's insights to young women's sexual nonconsent decisions.

The positive and negative outcomes associated with nonconsent strategies have been recognized in the rape prevention literature. For example, Muehlenhard et al. report that young men say that forceful resistance (e.g., kneeing, biting, or kicking) is the nonconsent strategy most likely to stop their sexual advances, but also most likely to harm a relationship.⁷ (See also Ullman and Knight⁸ and Zoucha-Jenson and Coyne⁹). Conversely, they rate options that would preserve a relationship (e.g., smiling and playfully saying no) as less likely to end their advances. In general, the more effective the nonconsent response would be at ending the sexual encounter, the greater the negative effect on the relationship. Given that valued partners perpetrate most sexual assaults,^{10,11} this is a trade-off that many young women will face.

Despite the best efforts of committed professionals, rape prevention programs have had limited impact on the rate of sexual assault.¹² This may be due in part to a failure to account for all the goals that young decision makers balance during risky sexual encounters. In order to understand those goals,

there is no substitute for asking young women directly. This study undertakes that task, examining young women's goals when choosing strategies to communicate sexual nonconsent as a function of the seriousness of the relationship and their personal experiences. We present hypothetical choices depicting realistic settings with uncertain risks and outcomes, including the seriousness of the threat and the effectiveness of the strategy. Young women rated the importance of key nonconsent goals for three types of relationships. We predicted that young women would more strongly value protecting committed relationships relative to casual relationships. Moreover, we expected that women who place greater weight on protecting the relationship would be more likely to report a history of sexual victimization, potentially as a result of accepting increased risk in order to avoid harming relationships or valued partners.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 102 women who identified as heterosexual was recruited from Pittsburgh-area colleges. On average, participants were 20.8 years old (standard deviation [*SD*] = 1.90) and predominately European American/white (72.3%; 17.8% African American/black, 10.9% Asian American, 3.0% Hispanic, 6.0% other). They reported dating histories with an average of 5.8 casual (*SD* = 7.89) and 2.6 serious dating partners (*SD* = 1.51). Most participants reported having had oral or vaginal intercourse (92.7%).

Materials

Nonconsent evaluation questionnaire (NCEQ)

Developed for this study, the NCEQ asks the respondent to imagine that they are deciding how to communicate to a partner that they are not interested in having sex and, then, to rate the importance of seven goals:

- (1) Protecting him (not hurting his feelings or embarrassing him);

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- (2) Protecting the relationship (maintaining commitment, romance);
- (3) Protecting the sexual relationship (continuing to feel close sexually, ensuring he'll initiate again later);
- (4) Not feeling awkward or embarrassed;
- (5) Communicating clearly (making sure that he understands that I do not want to have sex);
- (6) Making sure he doesn't get angry, yell, or hit;
- (7) Not having sex when I'm not in the mood to have sex.

These goals were identified in semistructured interviews¹³ with 34 college-aged women regarding their nonconsent strategies and their reasons for selecting them. Five goals were volunteered frequently during interviews (1–5) and two were included for their theoretical and practical relevance (6, 7).

Participants rated each goal on a scale anchored at 0 (not at all important to me) and 100 (extremely important to me). These ratings were repeated for three relationships: *new* (dated only once, not seeing one another exclusively, do not feel committed to the relationship), *casual* (dated a short time, not seeing one another exclusively, do not feel committed to the relationship), and *serious* (dated for a long time, seeing one another exclusively, feel committed to the relationship). The order of the three relationships was counterbalanced across participants.

Sexual experiences survey (SES)

The SES is a psychometrically sound, behaviorally specific, self-report measure of sexual coercion and aggression.^{14,15} Respondents indicate whether they have experienced 10 forms of sexual coercion, attempted or completed rape. The scale is scored dichotomously, characterizing respondents as having ever or never been sexually coerced or raped.

Procedure

Participants completed the study in groups of 2–10, in a large classroom setting with adequate space to ensure privacy. They began with open-ended responses to three dating vignettes in which a partner (new, casual, or serious) initiates a sexually intimate encounter when the woman does not wish to have sex. Each participant described her most likely response in such a situation, her response if the man continued to make advances, other strategies she has tried in similar situations, and strategies that other women might use, but that she would not. These responses were intended to prime women's thinking about personally relevant responses prior to completing the NCEQ, their next task. Following the NCEQ, participants completed the SES and questionnaires about their dating and sexual experiences and demographics. Participants completed the study within 45 minutes and were compensated \$15 for their time.

Analytic strategy

A general linear model (GLM) was used to predict women's nonconsent goals. The model included within-person factors for

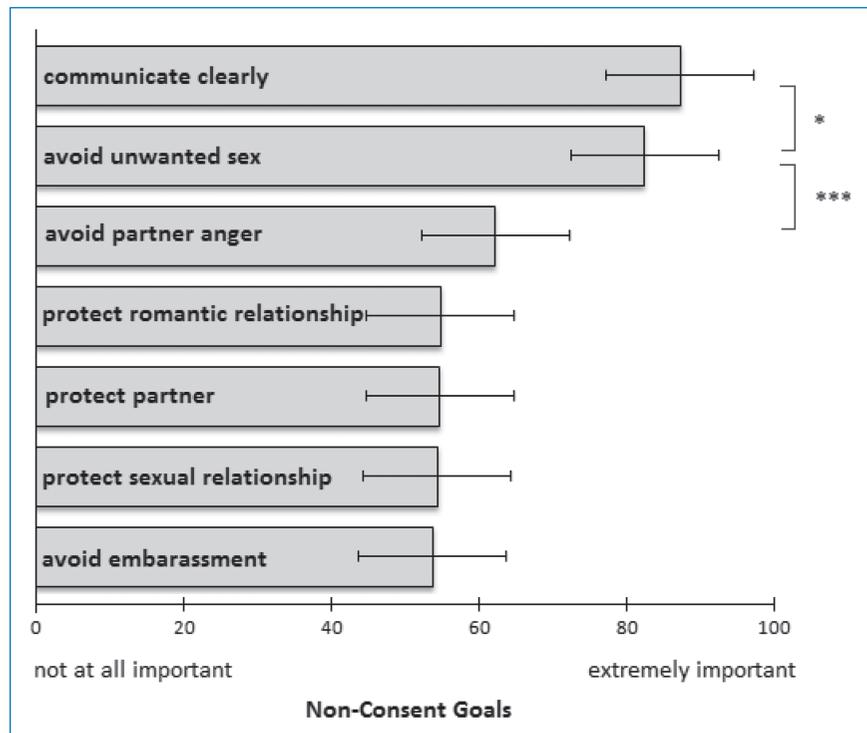


Figure 1. Rank order of nonconsent goals from most valued to least valued. * $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$.

relationship type (new, casual, or serious partner) and importance ratings for the seven goals on the NCEQ. History of sexual victimization was included as a between-person factor.

Results

Sexual victimization

Approximately one-half of participants reported experiencing sexual coercion ($n = 23, 22.5\%$) or an attempted or completed rape ($n = 30, 29.4\%$). These proportions are consistent with estimates from a nationally representative sample of college students.¹⁶

Nonconsent goals and relationship type

The GLM predicting ratings of the seven nonconsent goals revealed significant main effects for goal ($F[6,83] = 47.9, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.35$) and relationship type ($F[2, 87] = 59.4, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.40$). Figure 1 presents the goals in decreasing mean importance. *Post hoc* tests showed that ratings for communicating clearly and avoiding unwanted sex were significantly different from one another ($p < 0.05$) and from the other five goals (which were indistinguishable).

The main effect for relationship revealed that the greatest overall importance weight assigned to the goals was for with serious partners ($M = 72.3, SD = 15.5$), followed by casual partners ($M = 62.6, SD = 15.5$), and new partners ($M = 57.5, SD = 14.7$), with each comparison being statistically significant ($ps < 0.001$). An interaction between goals and relationship type modified the main effects, $F(12,77) = 52.6, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.37$. Follow-up repeated-measure ANOVAs found that for new and casual partners, communicating clearly and avoiding unwanted sex were most important—and significantly more important than protecting the relationship ($ps < 0.05$). With serious partners, participants continued to value highly communicating clearly

and avoiding unwanted sex, however, they valued protecting the romantic and sexual relationship just as strongly. Thus, with a serious relationship, women attach great, and equal, importance to achieving multiple conflicting goals—implying that these are more difficult decisions.

Sexual violence and Nonconsent goals

There was also an interaction between nonconsent goals and history of sexual victimization, $F(6,83) = 3.2, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.036$. Follow-up ANOVAs revealed that victimized women gave higher ratings to protecting their partner, $F(1,99) = 6.19, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.059$, protecting the sexual relationship, $F(1,99) = 4.57, p < 0.05, \eta_p^2 = 0.044$, and avoiding embarrassment, $F(1,99) = 7.10, p < 0.01, \eta_p^2 = 0.067$ than did nonvictimized women.

Discussion

Although young women assigned some importance to all seven goals, for all three relationships the most important goals were communicating their intent clearly and avoiding an unwanted sexual encounter. Serious relationships were distinguished from more casual relationships in that protecting the romantic and sexual relationship was just as important to young women as communicating clearly and avoiding unwanted sex. Thus, within valued relationships, women's decisions involve weighing multiple conflicting goals. That conflict may reduce the attractiveness of the relatively forceful strategies that are most effective at avoiding unwanted sexual encounters, but are less effective for achieving women's other goals. In this light, young women may need help in identifying strategies that address their multiple goals.⁴ They need to know, for example, whether specific, less assertive strategies (e.g., moving his hand away from intimate body areas) are likely to increase or decrease the risk of unwanted sex. They also need to know the likelihood that these strategies will help them to achieve their other goals, or conversely, will set the stage for conflicts that damage their relationships, despite the opposite intent.

Avoiding partner anger or violence was also a highly rated goal. For some women, this may indicate a reluctance to spark a negative conversation. For others, it likely also reflects the very real danger that some young women face when refusing a sexual encounter. Given the frequent coupling of physical and sexual violence,¹⁷ advice must address both, recognizing that assertive nonconsent strategies may increase risk of other harm, especially in abusive relationships.

Young women assigned high importance ratings to communicating their intent clearly and avoiding unwanted sex, whether or not they reported a history of sexual victimization. However, women who had been victimized assigned greater importance to the competing goals of protecting the sexual relationship and their partner's feelings, and to avoiding awkwardness and embarrassment. Speculatively, such conflicting goals may lead women who have been victimized to seek compromise strategies (e.g., pushing his hand away) that increase their risk of nonconsensual sex but that are perceived to be less awkward or embarrassing to implement.

At present, neither the research literature nor assault prevention programs provide young women with information about the effectiveness of nonaggressive, nonconsent strategies. Even if that information were available, women would still need to weigh their options, recognizing that young women with different goals and circumstances might legitimately decide that different nonconsent strategies are the best for them.⁴ Some

observers will argue that no woman should care about the stability of a relationship with a partner who is pressuring her sexually. However principled that position might be, it does not address the concerns of young women willing to take such risks. Although no woman would choose a strategy knowing that it would end in a sexual assault, in a dynamic sexual encounter, the point of no return may not be clear. Moreover, assaults are rare enough, and men's compliance with women's nonconsent common enough,¹⁸ that most strategies will usually lead men to deescalate their advances. Of course, a small failure rate represents a very large risk and a small difference in those rates can represent a large difference in the attractiveness of strategies.

Not addressing young women's full decision problem may contribute to the disappointing outcomes of assault prevention programs.¹² Women need to know how the full range of strategies will affect their chances of achieving their full set of goals. The best strategy for preventing a sexual assault may not be the preferred option if the next-best strategy is only slightly less effective while being much better at achieving other goals. Moreover, evidence on effectiveness is sufficiently limited that no strategy can be confidently advocated as the best in any respect for all women, which argues for caution in all recommendations.

Ultimately, only advice that women accept and follow can reduce the risk of sexual violence. To the extent that nonconsent strategies match young women's values and needs, they may be more likely to implement them. Acknowledging the legitimacy of multiple goals may also empower women to keep looking for strategies if the "best" one does not work. Downs and colleagues adopted such a strategy with an interactive DVD intervention that was successful in reducing sexually transmitted infections (its primary goal), among adolescent women, apparently by helping them to resist unwanted intercourse, as suggested by a reduced rate of reported sex.¹⁹

In that spirit, Muelenhard et al. identified strategies that might protect both women and relationships, such as saying, "I really care about you, but I want to wait until the relationship is stronger," without undermining more assertive strategies, should they fail.⁷ More research is needed on how well different strategies achieve different, often simultaneous goals. The questionnaire results reported here were elicited as responses to a briefly described unwanted sexual advance. Under the time, social, and emotional pressure of real sexual encounters, women may perceive goals missed in our study or miss ones evoked in its calmer setting. To evoke the dynamic processes of real encounters, in which goals may shift as strategies succeed and fail, research could include simulated encounters or detailed reconstructions of actual ones. Future research that mimics these challenges by requesting women's values or choices, while manipulating time, cognitive load, or affective states may provide a better understanding of the ways in which context shapes sexual decision making and nonconsent goals.

Disclosures

None.

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