

Understanding Sexual Consent Among Adolescents: Protocol for a Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sexual consent remains one of the most important tools in the prevention of sexual violence, for which adolescents are an especially vulnerable group. However, it is unclear how sexual consent processes are defined and used by this population. To bridge this gap in knowledge, we present a protocol for a forthcoming scoping review that will identify and synthesize the available empirical research findings on sexual consent conceptualizations and processes among adolescents.

Methods/Design: Using the framework by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), a systematic search of six academic databases (Education Source, ERIC, Gender Studies Database, PsycINFO, Social Services Abstracts, and Sociological Abstracts) will be conducted; this range has been selected due to the multi-disciplinary nature of sexual consent research. Following two levels of screening, data from the full-text articles will be charted and subjected to qualitative thematic analysis.

Discussion: These collated results will provide a map of key concepts and establish gaps in the extant literature in order to guide future research on this topic. The findings will advance our knowledge of sexual consent as it is understood by the adolescent population; they may also inform the content and delivery of sexual education programs to ensure that they are relevant to their target audience and assist in the prevention of sexual violence.

Keywords: *sexual consent; adolescents; scoping review protocol; sexual violence*

1. Background

Sexual violence, defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as “a sexual act that is committed or attempted by another person without freely given consent of the victim or against someone who is unable to consent or refuse” (Basile et al., 2014, p. 11), is a worldwide problem among the adolescent age group. While rates across countries are varied, a meta-analysis of child sexual abuse among 331 samples across six continents reported a combined prevalence rate of 11.8%, with the highest rate for girl and boy victims found in Australia and Africa, respectively (Stoltenborgh et al., 2011). Furthermore, a recent nationwide study among high schoolers in the US found that 15.2% of girls and 4.3% of boys have experienced some form of sexual violence in the last 12 months (Kann et al., 2018). These figures are alarming, and establish the need for increased understanding of these issues to prevent their far-reaching consequences.

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Sexual violence against and between adolescents is a pressing matter given the increased vulnerability to detrimental health outcomes following an assault. In addition to the risk of physical health consequences, like sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancy, survivors of sexual violence may also experience posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, self-blame, suicidal ideation, and risk of revictimization (Decker et al., 2005; Dworkin et al., 2017; Hedtke et al., 2008; Holmes & Sher, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2013). For many adolescents, these adverse outcomes persist into adulthood, demonstrating the need for early, developmentally appropriate, and targeted prevention programs in addition to responsive intervention services (Miller, 2017).

Sexual consent is a critical component of the definition of sexual violence detailed above, including its prevention. In many circumstances, sexual consent is the determining factor between rape and “just sex” (Fenner, 2017; Gavey, 2005). Despite this, there exists a lack of consensus regarding the precise definition of sexual consent as a result of differing theoretical, ideological, and methodological frameworks among researchers and theorists. Legal definitions exist but purport a relatively straightforward process that does not account for a range of sexual violations, which tend to fall into a complex and ambiguous grey zone. Without a universal definition or agreed upon set of conditions, confusion and contention among the general public are widespread.

This confusion is especially apparent among adolescents, who lack the education or experience to fully comprehend how sexual consent operates in practice. A recent study by Righi and colleagues (2019) among high school students found that while participants provided a definition of sexual consent as verbal and affirmative, they did not specify the activities that require consent, nor did they describe it as an ongoing process. In addition, a group of UK researchers explored how young people (aged 13-20) conceptualize sexual consent, finding that the participants understood “what is meant by giving consent to sex, but have a very limited sense of what getting consent might involve” (Coy et al., 2013, p. 10). They also reported that their sample could describe sexual consent in theory but had difficulty translating it to real world contexts (Coy et al., 2013). The inadequate coverage of consent-related issues in North American sexual education (Byers et al., 2013; Larkin et al., 2017; Padilla-Walker et al., 2020; Willis et al., 2019) leaves adolescents vulnerable to sexual victimization as they enter into a developmentally normative period of dating and sex (World Health Organization, 2016). As such, it is important to understand how adolescents define and navigate sexual consent processes in order to improve the content and delivery of sexual education and prevention programs.

This paper presents a scoping review protocol on sexual consent research with adolescents. The objectives of the forthcoming review are to (1) identify the range, extent, and nature of existing empirical research; (2) synthesize the findings to issue an overview of sexual consent conceptualizations and processes among adolescents and (3) determine the existing gaps to guide future research in this area.

2. Methods/Design

2.1 Scoping review design

This study, guided by the scoping review framework by Arksey and O’Malley (2005), will identify and synthesize the current state of sexual consent research literature conducted with the adolescent (ages 10-17) population between 1990 and 2020. This timeframe was chosen as a result of increased public and research interest in sexual consent issues in the early 90s following the publication of two best-selling books by Tannen (1991) and Gray (1992); these works focused on the observed psychological differences in language and communication between the sexes, sparking the widespread “miscommunication theory” as an explanation for

nonconsensual sex between men and women (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997). Miscommunication theory is a risk-avoidant curriculum that trains young people to express their sexual consent (or lack thereof) in clear, unambiguous, and verbally communicative ways (Fenner, 2017). Although educators of miscommunication theory advocate for “improved communication between the sexes,” advice is commonly directed at “improving women’s communication skills, rather than men’s comprehension skills” (Frith & Kitzinger, 1997, p. 520). However, some research has indicated that normative sexual consent processes are much more indirect and behavioural than the direct and verbal definition espoused by miscommunication theorists (Beres, 2007; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1999; Humphreys, 2007).

The guidelines delineated in the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) Checklist (Tricco et al., 2016) will be followed in order to strengthen the methodological quality of the review and adhere to reporting standards. A scoping review is a “form of knowledge synthesis that addresses an exploratory research question aimed at mapping key concepts, types of evidence, and gaps in research related to a defined area or field by systematically searching, selecting, and synthesizing existing knowledge” (Colquhoun et al., 2014, pp. 1292-1294). Scoping review methods are a suitable choice for the topic of sexual consent among adolescents, as the first author’s familiarity with the literature suggests that the available evidence base is limited; therefore, this scoping review intends to establish the gaps in research and summarize the existing findings (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005). Furthermore, sexual consent is widely considered to be a complex issue that has not yet been comprehensively reviewed, which constitute two important justifications for conducting a scoping review (Mays et al., 2001).

The methods for our study adhere to the scoping review methodology developed by Arksey and O’Malley (2005), which follow a five-stage process: (1) identifying the research question; (2) identifying relevant studies; (3) study selection; (4) charting the data and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting results.

2.2 Identifying the research question

As per the recommendations set out by Arksey and O’Malley (2005) and Levac et al. (2010), this scoping review maintains a broad and comprehensive approach to produce a breadth of coverage, while also developing clearly defined parameters for the study concepts and population. The overall guiding research question was developed by the main author (XX), followed by review and approval by the second author (XX): What is known from the existing literature about how sexual consent is defined and communicated by school-age adolescents? In other words, this review seeks to understand the “what” and “how” of sexual consent among members of this age group (10-17 years). These “facets” (Centre for Reviews and Dissemination, 2001) have been prioritized for their importance in understanding how this population conceptualizes and engages in sexual consent processes, a critical issue for the prevention of sexual violence (Arbeit, 2014; Beres, 2007).

2.3 Identifying relevant studies

In order to generate a comprehensive range of research evidence, we created a search strategy that involved several different sources, including electronic databases, reference lists, and key journals. Prior to the database search, we consulted with a social sciences librarian at the [University blinded for review] to develop a search protocol (including keywords) and identify relevant databases. Due to the multi-disciplinary nature of sexual consent, databases spanning a range of disciplines (e.g., gender studies, education, psychology) were selected. The ProQuest, Ovid, and EBSCO platforms were used to search the following six databases: Education Source, ERIC, Gender Studies Database, PsycINFO, Social Services Abstracts, *Social Science Protocols*, February 2022, 1-7.

Sociological Abstracts. Following the database search, a hand search of the reference list citations from all suitable articles will be performed to expand the scope of our findings. In addition, a number of relevant journals (e.g., *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*) will be hand searched for related studies.

2.4 Study selection

The review process will follow two levels of screening: (1) title and abstract review and (2) full text review. After duplicates are removed, articles that contain our search terms in the title or abstract will be identified by the initial screening process and assembled for review; this stage will be completed independently by two investigators, who will also adhere to a set of inclusion criteria (described below). All articles considered pertinent by one or both of the reviewers will be included in the next step for full review. At the full text review level, the two reviewers will perform independent assessments of the full text articles to determine if they meet the inclusion criteria and represent a “best fit” with the research question (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005, p. 26). Articles that elicit disagreement for inclusion or exclusion between the two investigators will be reviewed again and discussed until full consensus is reached. In the event that the reviewers are unable to resolve a conflict, a third independent reviewer will be consulted. An online software program (Covidence) will be employed for the organization and facilitation of screening, reviewing, and extracting articles.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed by the research team, and it is anticipated that they will be refined iteratively throughout the study selection process based on an enhanced familiarity with the literature (Levac et al., 2010). Articles will be included if they meet all of the following criteria: (1) original empirical work published between January 1990 and March 2020; (2) written in English; (3) study sample includes school-age preadolescents and adolescents (ages 10-17); (4) sexual consent conceptualization, communication, or behaviour are the main focus of the study’s aims or findings. Regarding inclusion criteria 3, if there is a large range of adolescents/young adults included (e.g., 15-21 years), the mean age must be under 18 years. In addition, all types of study designs will be included. While articles published in peer-reviewed journals are preferred, related grey literature (e.g., government reports) will also be accepted. We will exclude masters or doctoral dissertations, commentaries, editorials, theoretical papers, books, or book reviews. Materials that are not available online in full-text form will be excluded. There are no geographical restrictions.

2.5 Charting the data

In order to extract and organize key themes and study characteristics from the full-text studies, a data charting form will be developed by the authors in Microsoft Excel. The preliminary variables to be extracted and recorded will align with the central research question, including: the authors, year of publication, journal, the study population, location, and design, methodology, study aims, the provided definition or principles of sexual consent (when applicable), outcome measures, important findings, and applicable recommendations from the authors. Categories may be refined or added to the form throughout the charting process in an iterative fashion so that the data captures the information necessary to answer the research question. Data abstraction will be conducted by both authors independently and then compared to confirm accuracy; any major discrepancies will be discussed and resolved collaboratively until agreement is achieved. These various sources of data will constitute the basis of the analysis.

2.5 Data summary and synthesis of results

In the final stage, data will be summarized to provide an overview of the reviewed materials and the concepts pertinent to the research question. Charted findings will be reported in the form of tables. A descriptive numerical summary will map the results in terms of sample sizes, study methods, and geographical location, allowing for a high-level aggregate snapshot of both the areas of research interest as well as the gaps in knowledge. A qualitative thematic analysis will follow in order to identify any recurrent themes across the articles and provide the reader with a narrative account of the results; qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo) will be employed to facilitate this process (Levac et al., 2010). Per the standard scoping review guidelines, no attempts will be made to assess the quality of individual studies (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Clear and transparent reporting of the scoping review will be maintained throughout, including the researchers' positionality and all critical decisions made.

3. Discussion

The forthcoming scoping review outlined in this protocol will advance our knowledge of sexual consent as it is understood by the adolescent population, a vulnerable group at risk for sexual violence victimization (Finer & Philbin, 2013; Kann et al., 2018; Martinez et al., 2011). Ethics approval is not required for this study as the collected data are retrieved from publicly available sources. Dissemination of results will take place via peer-reviewed publication in a related journal. In addition, the findings will be presented at a multi-disciplinary conference to engage key stakeholders including, but not limited to, policymakers, social workers, legal professionals, researchers, and sexual education facilitators. It is anticipated that through effectual dissemination, these results and recommendations can inform future research, practice, and policy efforts in this field.

Declarations

Funding: The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Competing interests: There are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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