



## SEPTEMBER SCOPE PRACTICING PREVENTION TIP

### Jason A. Laker, Ph.D.

*TRIGGER WARNING: This month's Tip relates to sexual consent and may be triggering for some readers.*

There has been a significant increase in media coverage over the past few years or so on issues of sex, dating and consent. In particular, the so-called "Hookup Culture" has received a lot of attention, with pundits, academics, journalists, politicians and others decrying the disintegration of our national moral fabric. Many of them blame a contemporary meme, "YOLO" or "you only live once" with its encouragement of instant gratification, physical and sexual risks, exhibitionism or voyeurism.

However, there was a very interesting [article](#) in The Chronicle of Higher Education in August debunking this idea by comparing national data from two points in time, 1988-1996 (when "X-Gens" like me were in college) and 2002-2010 (when the "Millennials" were in school). Interestingly, there seem to be slightly fewer sexual encounters reported in the more recent generation, thus debunking the idea that today's students have any more sexual partners than their predecessors.

We in education have not spent much time deliberating questions about "hookups," their implications or a culture per se. To be sure, it would be a complicated (though valuable) discussion, particularly in terms of ethical and moral questions. Instead, we understandably tend to focus on whether students are willing participants in sexual encounters if and when they have them. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights issued a "[Dear Colleague](#)" letter, reminding us of our obligations to provide an educational community free of sexual harassment and violence (among other things), including credible efforts to prevent or respond. There are a number of valuable resources on SCOPE's sister association's website, [ATIXA](#), on this.

There are clear technical obligations, and even model policies, to be utilized when contending with sexual assault allegations. However, I have been troubled for a long time by what I believe is much less clear: what exactly is sexual consent? Certainly, if one person overtly asks another whether they wish to engage in a particular sexual activity, and the other person overtly says "yes," then that is consent. Laws and policies also stipulate that consent can be withdrawn at any point, presumably through a verbal assertion or perhaps a physical motion away from the activity. That all sounds fine, but I don't believe very many sexual encounters actually involve overt questions and answers. This is one of the reasons our obligations are so difficult to meet, and one of the reasons discomfort with communication around sex hinders our ability to prevent sexual assaults. For that matter, there are sometimes sexual encounters that may not rise to the level of violating criminal statutes or student codes of conduct, but are traumatic nonetheless.

My colleague, [Dr. Erica Boas](#) and I have been conducting a pilot study in what we hope will be a larger multi-year research program, in which we followed a group of students through their entire first year of college. The purpose of the ethnographic study was to understand students' sexual lives and the messages, conditions and experiences found in the social context of college. As strange as it may seem, we actually don't yet understand very much about how students make meaning of, and decisions about, their sexual lives.

Our cohort included students who have never had sex, either waiting for marriage, a significant relationship or a willing partner. It included people in monogamous committed relationships, and some who have periodic one-time sexual encounters or even multiple non-committed ones with the same person. Our student participants shared very specific details about their beliefs, decisions and activities with courageous honesty. Erica and I were alternately fascinated, moved, stunned, troubled or encouraged by the things we heard. These stories included some very creative and respectful approaches to consent, but also some that were dangerously ambiguous for a

variety of reasons. There were also some encounters described which would meet the legal definition of rape, but the students retrospectively regarded them as consensual.

We will be presenting some initial findings at the upcoming [SCOPE Conference](#) next month in Orlando. But for this month's tip, I would like to focus on one very important finding, which is that "consent" is one of those words that seems well-defined to prevention educators, but is far less so in students' day-to-day lives. This practical vagueness can lead to potentially devastating consequences. In our study, we were also struck by how consent or coercion can simultaneously operate within intimate interpersonal encounters, as well as in broader social contexts.

This month, I would like to suggest that you reflect critically on your notions of consent—what it is, and how it is achieved, specifically—and to discuss this with your colleagues and students. To do so, I offer the following questions drawn from our research. They can be utilized for private reflection, all with the goal of promoting personal agency and a culture of consent. **Since some of these questions are quite personal, make sure to seek Institutional Review Board approval before any form of data gathering.**

- What were your earliest teachings (and who provided them) about when and with whom it is OK to engage in sexual activity? How have your beliefs been shaped by these teachings? How and why may your beliefs have changed over time?
- What is your precise definition of promiscuity? Where did you learn this? What reinforces or challenges these beliefs?
- If you have engaged in sexual activity, how exactly did you communicate your desire or willingness to do so? What about your partner? What did you learn from this experience?
- What are your definitions of "hooking up," "dating" and "hanging out"? How do you distinguish them from each other?
- What are examples of non-verbal ways to communicate yes or no to sexual activity? Does this vary depending on the type of activity or partner?
- How comfortable are you in thinking about or discussing sexual desire and pleasure? What are examples of how you think or talk about these things?
- How would you describe your ideal sexual relationship?

These questions are worthy of reflection and discussion. Erica and I had many fascinating and detailed conversations about them with our study participants. We were really struck by the effect of asking follow-up questions intended to elicit more precise answers (for example, about the definitions of "promiscuous" and its variants). Several of our students actually became less certain of the things they had confidently asserted only moments earlier. We are excited to present and write about our study because we believe we are on to some very important things. These include the need to air some dirty laundry and areas of weakness in current practices, but also some hopeful possibilities for helping students to exercise personal agency and achieving true consent.

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For more information about Dr. Laker and his role as Visiting Scholar with SCOPE, please visit <http://wearescope.org/resources/visiting-scholar/>.

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