Deconstructing Rape Culture Through An Exploration of Consent, Desire, and Pleasure

Yael Rosenstock

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the Community-Based Research Commons, Gender and Sexuality Commons, and the Public Health Commons

Recommended Citation

http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2035

This Capstone Project is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Works by Year: Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
DECONSTRUCTING RAPE CULTURE THROUGH AN EXPLORATION OF CONSENT, DESIRE, AND PLEASURE

by

YAEL ROSENSTOCK

A capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment for the degree of Masters of Arts, the City University of New York

2017
Deconstructing Rape Culture Through an Exploration of Consent, Desire, and Pleasure
by
Yael Rosenstock

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in MALS in satisfaction of the capstone requirement for the degree of Masters of Liberal Arts.

Date
Capstone Advisor
Donna Nickitas

Date
Executive Officer
Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Deconstructing Rape Culture Through an Exploration of Consent, Desire, and Pleasure

by

Yael Rosenstock

Advisor: Donna Nickitas

Desire and pleasure based education combats the notion of passive consent by prioritizing positive experiences for all members involved in sexual activities. A focus on desire requires that we learn and listen to our partner’s needs and respect their boundaries. It questions a patriarchal script of sex in which male pleasure, specifically when penetrating a partner, is the critical part of the sexual act. Sex motivated by mutual desire and pleasure forces us to step back and learn, not just about our partners but ourselves, so that we may communicate our wants and needs effectively.

To understand how to navigate conversations that prioritize desire and pleasure and work towards eliminating non-consensual experiences, QC Sexploration and Information conducted focus groups to gauge student levels of self-awareness, awareness of issues around consent, motivations for different behaviors, and views on engaging in sex. We wanted to ensure that we would be providing interventions that addressed some of the different ways in which rape culture is preserved, including knowing more about the taboos and sexual scripts that may or may not influence desire and pleasure.

Recommendations from this study include the development of a peer sex education program at Queens College to increase the ability to influence a cultural change to deconstruct rape culture. Student-led programs have the potential to serve students by providing spaces where students feel respected and heard. Peer educators at Queens College would have the opportunity to be trained with a focus on consent, desire, and pleasure as a form for addressing the sexual scripts, taboos surrounding sex, and the gap in comprehensive sex education to deconstruct rape culture in today's society.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank the two women most involved in helping me complete my capstone, Dr. Spring Cooper and Dr. Donna Nickitas. Dr. Cooper, without knowing me, agreed to allow me to conduct my study under the auspices of her larger CUNY study when we realized the similarities between our work. Though she could not be my advisor, she has served as a supportive mentor along the way. I want to especially thank Dr. Donna Nickitas who agreed to become my advisor at the last minute, also without knowing me, as a favor to Dr. Cooper. Dr. Nickitas provided me the tools I needed to succeed and has been more than I could have hoped. Though my first drafts were quite rough, Dr. Nickitas was consistently optimistic, supportive, and warm throughout the process and I cannot thank her enough. Thank you to Dr. Matthew Gold and Dr. Elizabeth Macauly-Lewis who helped me develop my project idea into a workable capstone proposal and for leading an excellent MALS program here at the Graduate Center.

This White Paper would have been impossible without the project conducted by the QC Sexploration and Information Group Team. We began meeting during summer 2016 and have had several iterations as a result of multiple commitments. I want to acknowledge the following people who made significant contributions during different parts of its development: Erica Caparelli, Surbhi Chibber, Carmine Couloute, Sharon Jackson, Hillel Katanov, Marcia Suarez, and Mo Urzola. You can see their bios in the appendix under team members. However, a special thank you to my consistent co-conspiradora throughout this and many other endeavors, Marcia Suarez. Her energy, never-ending interest and engagement in this work, and friendship has made QC Sexploration a success.

Our work would also not be possible without the support from the staff at the Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding (CERRU), especially the support of our Executive Director, Sophia McGee. Sophia has made CERRU into an organization that supports employees’ development and creates an atmosphere that allows CERRU to flourish and grow. I feel truly respected and capable because of Sophia’s trust in my ability to execute new program ideas while maintaining my other responsibilities.
I am pleased to have had the opportunity to facilitate this participatory action research project. This would not have been conceivable without the training I received at the Summer Institute on Critical Participatory Action Research through the Public Science Project at the Graduate Center. My mentorship continued through a class with Dr. Maria Torre and the unofficial but ever appreciated guidance of Dr. Limarys Caraballo. I am also grateful to Daniela Francisco who had the faith and courage to allow me to teach a course that helped me practice my facilitation skills by leading teenagers to develop their own projects within a classroom setting.

I’d like to thank my parents, sister Arielle, and Titi Idelyn for listening to my constant rambles about this project and all the projects leading up to this point. They didn’t always understand my plans but always supported me in pursuing my interests and passions.

Lastly, I want to thank my best friend, Katherine Kolios, who helped me realize that I have always been interested in public health but didn’t have the vocabulary to express it. Aside from her love, support, and excellent editing skills, I want to thank her for posting articles related to my interests on Facebook which not only help me stay informed but also help others on my page, too!
QC Sexploration and Information Group (QC Sexploration) was bred from a desire to form a participatory action research (PAR) team to address sex-related programming gaps at Queens College of the City University of New York (CUNY). The team has several working groups with different foci and outcomes. I dedicated myself to consent and rape culture, desire and pleasure, and indirectly, healthy relationships. My exploratory goals were to find ways of deconstructing rape culture; including issues such as a pervasive lack of respect for, and violence towards, women and sexual minorities, consent, and insufficient education in areas of desire and pleasure. Awareness in, and education about, consent and rape culture fosters healthy relationships, whether it be in romantic, familial, platonic and personal, or professional relations. The part of QC Sexploration described in this paper was conducted with a larger CUNY-wide research initiative, led by Dr. Spring Cooper. This CUNY-wide research initiative was established to develop primary prevention programming to reduce incidence of sexual assault.

I collaborated with a team of undergraduate students, and one alumna at Queens College to collect information to better understand and assess where QC students were in their base knowledge on sex-related concepts. We were interested in learning what types of workshops and events students would attend. Our goal was to provide responsive sex-related programming on campus beginning in the spring of 2017. Queens College is the only campus in which PAR work was conducted and supervised by Dr. Cooper’s research study.

Inspiration for this project arose from researching efforts at other universities that produce “Sex Weeks” as well as researching Brandeis University where there is an operational peer sex education program. From the Brandeis program and other universities’ events, I explored and compared the data for formulating curricula for the QC student population.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 1

Background and Problem ..................................................................................................................... 2

Terms & Current Examples ............................................................................................................... 2

Taboos, Sexual Scripts, and Desire and Pleasure .............................................................................. 4

Methods ............................................................................................................................................ 7

Research Design ............................................................................................................................... 7

Sample .............................................................................................................................................. 8

Recruitment ..................................................................................................................................... 8

Data Analysis and Results ............................................................................................................... 9

Quantitative Results ....................................................................................................................... 9

Qualitative Results ......................................................................................................................... 10

Discussion ....................................................................................................................................... 16

Project Execution ............................................................................................................................ 19

Limitations ....................................................................................................................................... 21

Future Directions ............................................................................................................................ 22

Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................... 23

Appendix A: Four Quadrants of Change ......................................................................................... 24

Appendix B: QC Sexploration Team Bios ...................................................................................... 25

Appendix C: Survey Collection Tool ............................................................................................. 27

Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer ....................................................................................................... 28

Appendix E: Intimacy handouts ...................................................................................................... 29

Appendix F: Sex Day Flyer .............................................................................................................. 32

Appendix G: Program Overviews for Sex Day Events .................................................................. 33

References ........................................................................................................................................ 39

Autobiographical Statement ............................................................................................................ 42
List of Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Focus Group Survey Responses of Desired Sex-Related Workshops

Table 1: Themes, Codes, and Examples from Focus Group Data

Table 2: Future Workshop Ideas Suggested from Focus Groups, 2016, n=12
Introduction

Sincere and enthusiastic consent is often missing from sexual encounters which leads to uncomfortable and sometimes, traumatic experiences. The underrated importance of consent is fueled by the pervasiveness of rape culture in society at large from media, the judicial system, and a lack of comprehensive sex education. To address the gap in sex related programs and education at Queens College (QC), a participatory action research (PAR) project, QC Sexploration and Information Group (QC Sexploration), was developed through the Center for Ethnic, Racial, and Religious Understanding (CERRU). From this project, my role was to facilitate initial meetings and spear-head the formation of teams to specialize in one of the six topics that QC Sexploration identified in those initial summer 2016 sessions. Because of those preliminary sessions, I chose to concentrate in the areas of (1) consent and rape culture and (2) desire and pleasure. The realization that desire and pleasure based education could be used to improve communication of consent, thereby improving relationships and deconstructing rape culture, became the basis of my capstone.

The data collected was foundational for the development of programs to introduce counter-rape-culture ideals and practices while fostering a culture shift at Queens College. Our approach consisted of engaging the first two of the four quadrants of change, Individual and Relationships, with a long-term goal to engage the third, Culture.\textsuperscript{1,1} The points of influence chosen to dismantle rape culture addressed sexual scripts, taboos surrounding sex, and a lack of comprehensive sex education. These foci included important terms such as rape, rape culture, consent, and desire and pleasure.

The project presented details data collection and analysis around sexual attitudes and desired sex programming. The outcome of that analysis informed the programming offered in Spring 2017 as well as future directions for QC Sexploration. The data analysis concentrated on the focus groups conducted by myself and Mo Urzola\textsuperscript{ii}, a student researcher, under Dr. Cooper’s IRB. An amendment to the IRB was submitted allowing us to survey each of the focus group participants with information specific to Queens College. The same survey was administered to additional students by members of QC Sexploration outside of the focus groups and was consistent with the focus group sample.

\textsuperscript{1} See Appendix A for Four Quadrants of Change Chart
\textsuperscript{ii} See Appendix B for QC Sexploration Team Bios
The themes explored are based upon heteronormative constructs, that is, on models that center heterosexual experiences as the norm. While issues of consent, desire, and pleasure are important to all genders and all romantic pairings, the focus of this paper will be to document QC Sexploration’s efforts to begin to dismantle or deconstruct this mostly heteronormative culture. However, before exploring the data, events produced, and their role in that dismantlement, we begin with a background of the key terms.

Background and Problem

In this section, rape, rape culture, and consent is defined and desire and pleasure based education is explained. Furthermore, an explanation of the points of intervention against rape culture that addresses sexual scripts, taboos surrounding sex, and a lack of comprehensive sex education are explored. The rationale for using desire and pleasure, though often ignored topics in research, as forms of influencing a cultural shift, are relevant to deconstructing rape culture.

Terms & Current Examples

Rape is a sexual act that is forced upon someone against their will. This may include penetrative, oral, and manual sex, though the latter two are often overlooked. Rape culture is defined as “…a system that promotes the normalization and trivialization of rape. It’s a system that encourages the idea that male sexual aggression is the norm, and that violence and aggression are themselves sexy” (Theriault, 2012). Rape culture is NOT the assumption that all men are rapists nor the assumption that women are victims or disinterested in sex. Rather, it is the belief that a woman deserves to be raped for stepping out of “acceptable behavior,” and that sex is a commodity with a fair marketplace value that one should expect. Rape culture is teaching young women how to not get raped rather than raising all children to respect boundaries and engage in consensual situations. Two very public and recent examples of rape culture are detailed below.

One is the normalizing of rape culture in society. During the 2016 Presidential election, a recording was released of the Republican nominee describing the way in which he sexually assaults women and the phrase “grab ‘em by the pussy” became popularized. The recorded evidence of his admitting to sexual assault combined with a lack of legal action against him has led other young men, including young boys, to feel they have a right to touch women and girls without consent. In fact, some men tweeted
messages such as, “every woman that voted for Trump… I hope u get grabbed by the pussy at work
everyday for the next 4 years by a random co worker” and “I heard a woman bragging that trump won and
how she voted for him…I was so annoyed so I grabbed her by the pussy #trump #notmypresident.”³ The
men who made these comments may think they are part of the solution for denouncing Trump and his
racist and sexist rhetoric but they continue the cycle by threatening the same violence on women. These
men do not see a problem with continuing violence if they see the women as deserving of punishment for
disagreeing with their politics. Sexual assault should never be used as a tactic to develop a just society
because it reproduces injustices. In seeking a more ethical society, we must engage tools that don’t
victimize marginalized peoples to reach those goals.

In other normalizing news, the justice system upheld rape culture when the infamous Brock Turner
was sentenced to a lenient six-month sentence for the sexual assault of an unconscious woman. Though
he was found guilty, he, like other young men, received a lenient sentence because as a society, we
normalize rape rather than punish it. Judge Persky said, “A prison sentence would have a severe impact
on him [Brock Turner],” which completely ignores the severe impact Turner’s assault had on his victim or
the impact Judge Persky’s sentence had on our society and the negotiation of ideals.⁵ The greater value
placed on not impacting the future of perpetrators of violent and heinous crimes than justice for their
victims is a serious societal failing. Rape completely ignores the ideals of consent and maintains power
imbalances between genders.

Consent, or its absence, determines whether a sexual act is or isn’t rape. Consent is providing
permission to engage in an activity or to have an activity performed on oneself.⁶ The act or activity must
be mutually agreed upon by all parties, without coercion or undue influence, in which everyone is mentally
capable of providing consent (i.e. high levels of intoxication interferes with one’s ability to consent).⁷,⁸
When engaging in sexual activities, consent must be considered fluid because it can be revoked at any
time for any reason. Explicit and verbal communication is considered radical consent because we are so
accustomed to assuming a situation is consensual⁹. Rape culture practices victim blaming in cases where
victims do not scream, fight, or otherwise demonstrate a lack of consent, or by rationalizing rapes against
women who step out of socially acceptable positions.¹⁰,¹¹ We must shift the expectation that an absence
of “no” implies consent and penalize perpetrators of sexual violence for neglecting to respect the feelings
and safety of the person with whom they had a sexual encounter. A step further than ensuring our partners feel respected and safe, though closely tied, is striving to have partners feel excited and enthusiastic, which is where desire and pleasure based education become important.

Desire and pleasure based education combats the notion of passive consent by prioritizing positive experiences for all members involved in sexual activities. A focus on desire requires that we learn and listen to our partner’s needs and respect their boundaries. It questions a patriarchal script of sex in which male pleasure, specifically when penetrating a partner, is the critical part of the sexual act. Sex motivated by mutual desire and pleasure forces us to step back and learn, not just about our partners but ourselves, so that we may communicate our wants and needs effectively. To understand how to navigate conversations that prioritize desire and pleasure and work towards eliminating non-consensual experiences, we conducted focus groups to gauge student levels of self-awareness, awareness of issues around consent, motivations for different behaviors, and student views on engaging in sex. We wanted to ensure that we would be providing interventions that addressed some of the different ways in which rape culture is maintained including knowing more about the taboos and sexual scripts that may or may not influence desire and pleasure.

Taboos, Sexual Scripts, and Desire and Pleasure

Rape culture is a form of oppression against women that, like other forms of oppression, is ignored to maintain domination by those with power. It is a system that places blame of sexual violence on those who experience the violence rather than on those who commit it. The general taboo around discussions of sex, desire, and pleasure, lack of comprehensive sex education, and the normative sexual scripts by which we live, provide a mask of excuses behind which rape culture flourishes. Below we explore the ways in which these three forces contribute to consistent and engrained violence.

Sex as taboo has a long history and is directly linked to the subjugation, and attempted erasure, of female sexuality. Though past evidence of open female sexuality exists and is documented in

---

iii Evidence of the demonizing of sex, and women specifically as they relate to sex, dates back as far as ancient Rome and the threat Isis, a Goddess that represented assertive womanhood, posed. Judaism laid the groundwork for distrust of women that Christianity later took further through the ideals of chastity transforming it into “loathing for the body and a severe condemnation of sexual acts” (Roberts, 57).
cases are somewhat rare. Sex has been portrayed as an act solely performed for procreative reasons that was sinful to enjoy and a vice of only men, where women were the passive and unenthusiastic receivers. The attempted erasure has made it difficult for complicated and nuanced discussions on female sexuality to arise. It sometimes leads to extremes of women wanting to yell about their liberated sex drives from the rooftops without acknowledging issues that exist. Though it can be considered an improvement that more articles and books discuss the clearly existent female libido, these conversations are often superficial. As a country, we are moving more towards a culture of casual sexual encounters yet we shy away from open and honest discussions with partners about our needs, fears, desires, and experiences. While the quantity of sex-related conversations has increased along with the frequency of casual sex, the quality of those encounters still suffers and many people continue to have numerous negative sexual experiences (23-27% of college women), including avoidable traumatic encounters, possibly due to the lack of formal education we offer on these topics.

In the US, sexual education is often censored or non-existent. In fact, per the Guttmacher Institute, only 24 states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education at all. Only 13 states require that medically accurate information be used and 8 that it be “appropriate for a student’s cultural background and not be biased against any race, sex or ethnicity”. There are 13 states which require discussion on sexual orientation but only 9 of which require it be inclusive. There are four states that require that only negative information be shared, thereby alienating queer youth through a curriculum that invalidates their identities. When students are kept from comprehensive sex education in schools, they begin to turn elsewhere for information.

Sex education continues to be a censored struggle causing media to become a major source of sex education for U.S. based youth. According to one study, 20% of portrayals of sexual intercourse on TV were between non-relationship based but familiar characters, and another 15% among characters who had just met. Therefore, 35% of all sexual encounters on TV are casual. In response to this casual shift, there has been an explosion of articles and blogs written about the negative outcomes of contemporary casual sexual relationships. Studies done on casual encounters have ranged from concluding that there are negative psychological effects to neutral effect to positive effects. Similarly

_Lysistrata_ by Aristophanes and _The Wife of Bath’s Tale_ by Geoffrey Chaucer are works in literature where female sexuality is explicitly represented.
to Robert Weiss in the Huffington Post.\textsuperscript{31} I disagree with the premise that casual encounters are in and of themselves problematic as there are those for whom it is more or less likely to be a positive experience. However, part of what causes negative experiences is a lack of open and honest dialogue about sentiments. For that reason, QC Sexploration hopes to encourage more open dialogue about negative experiences and how to avoid them. Unfortunately, those types of conversations are illegal within the school system in some states and rarely portrayed on TV, leaving youth’s attainment of this skill uncertain before college and sometimes indefinitely. The problem is exasperated by the wide representation of sexual scripts which adhere to a sexist and oppressive narrative.\textsuperscript{32}

Sexual scripts are the generally agreed upon idea that within heterosexual encounters, the man is the active agent and the woman the passive receiver or “sexual gatekeeper.”\textsuperscript{19,33} This script, though challenged by some female characters, as well as actual women, is broadly accepted and perpetuated. An analysis on 130 scenes from 34 popular films with a focus on teen characters found that teen girls are not supposed to vocalize desire and those that do are “bad girls” who suffer negative consequences.\textsuperscript{34} The expectation that men must initiate each romantic and sexual advance and women must choose whether to permit each advance furthers a culture in which men learn to push woman towards their own sexual goals. It’s seen as the man’s job to seek out sexual fulfillment and to engage in a back and forth in which the woman may feign disinterest before submitting. This script is incredibly dangerous in its perpetuation of rape culture and maintenance of female sexual disempowerment. Sex for all parties could be fulfilling, pleasurable, and safe if we changed the sexual scripts so that women are open about their desires and didn’t put pressure on men to act as predators.\textsuperscript{35}

Sex would also be greatly improved if fulfillment for all parties were a priority. It is imperative that we deconstruct the narrative in which “sex,” when about heterosexual couples, is only seen as a penetrative penile act. As it stands, it is an act of defiance to prioritize a woman’s sexual satisfaction as an equally important definition of sex to that of penile penetration. According to an article published by the Journal of Sex Research, 67% of women who had engaged in penile-vaginal sex had faked an orgasm because, “orgasm was unlikely, they wanted sex to end, and they wanted to avoid negative consequences (e.g., hurting their partner’s feelings) and to obtain positive consequences (e.g., pleasing their partner).”\textsuperscript{36} I am not implying that all sex should lead to orgasm nor am I attempting to create more pressure for women to
perform in certain ways. However, it is problematic that we consider it normal for women to not orgasm or for women to fake orgasms for their partner’s well-being or just so they can stop having sex.

The Huffington Post recently ran an article that questions the lazy myth that women can’t orgasm. In “Straight Women Are Having Fewer Orgasms Than Everyone Else” by Jenavieve Hatch, there is a stark contrast between straight and bisexual cis-women and lesbian cis-women in orgasm achievement. The article references a study by Chapman University, Indiana University, and the Kinsey Institute, which surveyed over 52,000 adults. The study found that heterosexual men report having the most orgasms, 95% of the time, with gay men and bisexual men reporting 89% and 88% respectively. Lesbians reported orgasming 86% of the time in comparison with bisexual and straight women at 66% and 65% respectively. Therefore, lesbians orgasmed at a much higher rate than women who have sex with men, whether straight or bi. The article highlighted that if lesbians are having orgasms, it means that women are clearly capable but the fact that they don’t speaks to the sexist nature of how we are socialized around sex and whose pleasure is important.

QC Sexploration hopes to create brave spaces where conversations in which the sexual scripts are questioned can blossom and comprehensive sex education is provided. These conversations will move sex from being perceived as a penis-centered activity into one where all partners are valued and sexually fulfilled. The attention to desire and pleasure as a priority within sex, while acknowledging other motivations such as the emphasis on procreation within religious populations, forces open conversations in which consent is centered rather than assumed, thus deconstructing the power of rape culture.

Methods

Research Design

A mixed methods study, with approval from the City University of New York (CUNY) IRB, was conducted consisting of three focus groups and post focus group surveys with students at Queens College. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without penalty through a signed consent form which was also orally reviewed. Within this paper, I analyze the results of the three focus groups and twelve surveys with the understanding that due to the small n, the information collected is not generalizable but represents a small student sample at

See Appendix C for Survey Collection Tool
Queens College. The focus groups were coded by one undergraduate student, an alumna of Queens College with an MA in Sociology, and myself using grounded theory approach.

The research was conducted to develop responsive and well-informed programming for the Queens College community. In addition to the data collected from the focus groups, the team used a supplemental 58 surveys collected independently of the focus groups by other members of QC Sexploration online and in person, to inform the programming offered. The supplemental data, though considered during program development, was not analyzed for this paper.

Sample

The sample population was recruited at Queens College consisting of undergraduate students. Queens College is a large urban college and a mostly commuter school. The undergraduate student population is 16,000 students representing 170 different countries and over 110 language and dialects, is 56% female, and practices an array of religions.

The focus group sample included three seniors, five juniors, and four sophomores for a total of twelve students. Ten out of twelve students identified as women or female and the remaining two as male. The majority, eight, identified as sexually active with one partner while three identified as non-sexually active by choice and one as non-sexually active, not by choice.

Recruitment

Recruitment was multifaceted. Dr. Cooper’s flyer\textsuperscript{vi} was posted on campus and shared via Facebook. However, most of our participants came from word of mouth and announcements made in the library prior to beginning the second and third focus groups. Students were compensated with a $20 metro card for their time.

Data Analysis and Results

The surveys were used to determine what types of workshops to provide, what had been done before, and to generate ideas of what students would like to see. The focus groups were mostly exploratory and informed the type of materials the team produced and provided during workshops. They

\textsuperscript{vi} See Appendix D for Recruitment Flyer
also guided the format and content of the requested workshops and led to small discussion groups. The results of these data collection methods are detailed in this section.

**Quantitative Results**

As part of the surveys, students were provided a list of possible workshops and asked to check off any that would be of interest to them if offered. Also, during the focus groups students were asked, through open-ended questions, the types of programming they would like to see on campus. The following is based upon those two sources of data.

“Polyamory and/or sex with multiple partners,” “Introduction to BDSM,” and “Dirty Talk” were the least popular workshops, with two, three, and four votes respectively. Only two focus group participants were interested in participating in “joining a club for those who abstain from sex.” The most popular workshops were “Understanding Rape Culture & Considering How to Address It,” “Understanding Boundaries and Consent,” “Self-defense Techniques,” “A Lesson in Female Bodied Anatomy,” and “A Lesson in Female Bodied Orgasm” with ten, nine, eight, seven, and six votes respectively. Figure 1 represents the survey responses of the focus group participants.

![Focus Group Survey Responses](image)

Figure 1 Focus Group Survey Responses of Desired Sex-Related Workshops, 2016, n=12
The survey also asked students about topics they would like to see covered in events as well as their experience with programming at the college so far. Requested topics included an event on maintaining celibacy, three on communication (with partners, discussing virginity, and establishing contracts), one on LGBTQ+ tolerance, one on gender presentation and the last about religion and its effect on sex and sexuality. When asked whether they had attended any consent, rape culture, desire and pleasure, and healthy relationships based programming at Queens College in the past, 75% of the study participants said no or N/A (n=9). One student responded that she attended a Student Union sponsored event, “Party with Consent” but found it “ineffective and pointless” (Focus Group 1). Two students mentioned an online workshop or survey and one that some of the events hosted by CERRU, helped her “become more comfortable in my sexuality” though she didn’t mention which (Focus 1). One of the students who replied “N/A” considered the focus group her first event and commented “I enjoy and it is really open” (Focus Group 2). There is a clear lack of programming available, especially given that the Student Union claims to have a mandatory event for Freshman and Transfers though only one student mentioned attending that event.

Qualitative Results

The focus groups were transcribed by the three researchers coding the data using Grounded Theory Approach. The focus groups were exploratory in nature and line by line analysis was conducted to develop repeating codes that eventually led to eight themes: Virginity is a Construct with Societal Impact, Consent is Key, Sex is Taboo, Boundaries are a Struggle, Sex Begets Sex, Sex and Emotions are Tied in Together, Comfort and Self Love Improves Relationships, and There are Different Types of Sex. Table 1 illustrates the journey from raw data to repeating codes to the eight themes.

Virginity is a construct with societal impact was a theme expressed in two distinct ways. The first focus group discussed stigmatization of being a virgin and the aggravation of defending one’s choice not to engage in sex. While students had different definitions of virginity, they all were confident in whether they identified as virgins and considered it a personal choice. One student who identified as a virgin felt strongly that she and those who practice abstinence are unfairly judged. Others agreed that individuals who do not engage in sex are attributed with characteristics others assume to be true. For example,
“being abstinent doesn’t mean they can’t go out or know how to have fun or that they are waiting till marriage or a prude, they just made that decision” (Focus Group 1). Also, the student who identified as a virgin has experienced men who want to push her to engage in sex. She is interested in forming a community so that others who abstain can talk about their experiences and seek support from one another since it is not a celebrated status in a college setting. The third group had different experiences, likely because they were from countries that equated virginity with purity and placed a high value on that purity. They themselves did not seem to place the same value on virginity and were appreciative that the same restrictions on people’s sexual lives don’t appear to exist in the US. Unlike the first group, they did not name negative stereotypes associated with virginity.

Consent as key was a strong theme, however, the way of communicating consent varied from person to person and included direct-verbal, indirect-verbal, non-verbal communication, and intuitive knowledge. Some students clearly described engaging in verbal consent and one qualified that familiarity influenced type of consent, “if it were someone I’d never met before, I would make it as explicit as possible. There’s too many grey areas. Even mid-sex. I want to make an environment where the person can say no…” (Focus Group 3). This young man’s description also spoke to his understanding that consent can be revoked at any time because consent in one moment does not guarantee consent in the next.

While verbal and direct consent is stressed by sex educators, many participants spoke of other forms of communicating consent. When asked how to initiate sex, one young woman, suggested introducing a karma sutra book or video which would indicate interest in sex to her partner (Focus Group 1). One young man in a long-term relationship described “an evolved implied consent, with like a look, a nod, a finger wave, as opposed to explicitly saying, ‘oh I want to have sex’ (Focus Group 3). Body language-based consent has been commonly brought up during consent workshops I have hosted and though valid, can lead to grey areas. Lastly, there were those who felt they intuitively knew when to engage in sex such as one female participant who described consent as “It’s just like a mutual bonding of understanding at that point” and a male participant, “there are right moments where you feel it” (Focus Group 1; Focus Group 2). All the students expressed that consent is important but there was no consensus on how one would communicate consent. Given the reluctance to have direct conversations due to the taboo nature of those
conversations, consent can become tricky. Nonetheless, consent is key to having safe and comfortable sexual experiences.

*Sex as taboo* stood out as a theme because students described multiple situations in which important conversations were not had because they did not know how to engage or were uncomfortable discussing the topic. These conversations included ones about consent, how to return a relationship to one without sex, how to express a lack of desire, and how to express interest in sex. In all the focus groups students thought it would be beneficial to have spaces at the college where issues concerning sex were discussed though they all recognized the difficulty, "one of the problems with this kind of topic is that it’s so hidden because people don’t want to bring it up or talk about it even though it’s really relevant" (Focus Group 1). One reason provided for why sex is taboo, besides its intimate nature, is the fact that some view sex as immoral. Though none of the students claimed that they personally viewed sex as immoral, all the groups discussed how it is viewed in their cultures and churches as taboo or inappropriate.

*Boundaries are a struggle* was the next theme and relates to sex as taboo because a lot of issues concerning boundary-making arose from a difficulty in engaging with important conversations about needs and safety. One student expressed that she passively sets boundaries leading her to have to remain defensive against propositions, while another student simply stated, “I don’t think I do a good job setting boundaries…” (Focus Group 1). The idea of bystanders was introduced for situations in which “you may not feel strong enough or you may feel embarrassed and you personally don’t want to do it” even when you want a situation to end (Focus Group 2). The other struggle in boundary making was for those who would clearly set them, but those boundaries were not respected by others. Most of the stories about disrespecting boundaries involved men disrespecting the limits of women in person, however, one student shared about a woman on Instagram not respecting the lines he had set and sending him unwanted explicit pictures (Focus Group 3). Whether an issue of setting boundaries or having limits respected, students had trouble.

Related to a student’s ability to set boundaries was their libido. Students felt that libido was heavily influenced by whether someone had already experienced sex, thus the theme *sex begets sex*. While this theme was mostly unique to Focus Group 1, it is included because of the high number of references to this idea throughout the discussion explicitly and implicitly. Students described the difficulty in saying no
to sex once one has it due to sexual cravings. One student was interested in tools for controlling her sexual urges because “it’s harder to say no because you still get that craving that you want it” (Focus Group 1). She and another sexually active student felt that having sex too quickly within a relationship destroys the possibility of a future for that couple but there is difficulty in saying no due to sexual urges. All, including the student who had never had sex, believed that it is easier to say no if you’ve never had sex because “you don’t exactly know what that crave’s about” (Focus Group 1).

The sexual urges and cravings described by students were considered negative because of a belief that formed the next theme: *sex and emotions are (or should be) tied together*. The first two focus groups explicitly discussed the idea that “most of the time it’s better to get to know the person first” before engaging in sex (Focus Group 2). Students expressed requiring a level of intimacy and familiarity with a partner before sex and one specified that “pleasure, emotions, sensitivity, and vulnerability is when [sex] is the best and when you feel the pleasure in it” (Focus Group 1). While emotions and intimacy were not synonymous with sex, they were of the upmost importance, and when missing, led to negative results. This was clear through two students expressing unsuccessful relationships in which they were unable to build intimacy or a serious relationship after engaging in sex too “quickly” (Focus Group 1). Despite feeling that sex too early would lead to difficulty in developing a relationship, the same group claimed that sex “brings on attachment and sometimes [you’re] overpowered by emotion” (Focus Group 1).

The incongruence of sex creating attachment but also possibly hindering that attachment is explained by the theme, *comfort and self-love improves relationships*. Within this theme there is some overlap with the above but it expands on the ideals of self-reflection, self-love, and friendship within relationships. Students explained the importance of having personal space within relationships based upon trust and confidence in one another and the ability to acknowledge mistakes (Focus Group 1 & 2). One male student explicitly stated, “they have to be really good friends” (Focus Group 2). A female student who had shared her own tales of unwanted sexual experiences within a relationship explained that she “was never able to establish that boundary…. Because I wasn’t in love with myself…love yourself…you do so much more when you love yourself…” (Focus Group 1). Students mentioned casual relationships but appeared to place a value on relationships involving friendship and emotion.
Table 1 Themes, Codes, and Examples from Focus Group Data, 2016, n=12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Examples from Focus Group Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virginity is a Construct with Societal Impact</td>
<td>(1) Virginity/abstinence does not equal identity (2) There is pressure to have sex (3) Virginity is purity (4) Virginity is a commodity</td>
<td>“being abstinence doesn’t mean it affects their personality…” (F1) “…in a group of guys, it’s [virgin] is a derogatory term. They’ll call you a fag” (F1) &quot;virginity is synonymous to purity” (F3) &quot;In China, they think a virgin is more valued” (F3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consent is Key</td>
<td>(1) Consent must be mutual (2) Use direct communication (3) Consent can be communicated indirectly or without words (4) Desire is not necessary</td>
<td>“…and it goes Both ways, if a guy says no, I step out” (F2) “At the beginning [of my relationship], we explicitly said, this is the plan, we’re not going further” (F3) &quot;I won’t say, ‘Hey, I’m going to have sex with you.’ We start by making out. I feel like if I don’t want to go further, I will just say, ‘I will stop here” (F3) “you’re in a relationship and I don’t really term it as rape but your heart’s not in it and he’s not forcing you or anything” (F1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex is Taboo</td>
<td>(1) Important conversations are not happening (2) Need small or student only spaces (3) Discussions are nonexistent (4) People think sex is immoral or wrong (5) Stigmatizing types of erotic experiences</td>
<td>&quot;some people are scared to talk about sex because they don’t want to scare people away…” (F2) “I don't feel like the administration could provide this cause I wouldn’t feel too open talking about my sexuality with like faculty members that I’ll probably see…” (F1) “Small groups like this would be beneficial” (F3) “I do think one of the problems with this kind of topic is that it’s so hidden because people don’t want to bring it up or talk about it even though it’s really relevant” (F1) “in different cultures it's taboo to have sex before getting married” (F2) “I would consider that [auditory stimulated orgasm] a psychological problem I think” (F2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries are a Struggle</td>
<td>(1) Direct boundary making (2) Indirect boundary making (3) Some people don’t respect boundaries (4) We need help setting boundaries (5) lighting is a challenge (6) Culture can inform boundary making</td>
<td>&quot;he tried to come at me once and I was like don’t you think about it[!] and he stopped” (F2) &quot;I'll never say yes. It might take a long time [to communicate no] but you’ll never hear a yes” (F1) “I’ve explicitly told them no, please, stop messaging me…but they continued…” (F3) &quot;sometimes you may not feel strong enough or you may feel embarrassed and you personally don’t want to do it” (F2) “It has happened to me that even if I don’t feel 100% sure, I’ve gone with it just because they won’t stop” (F3) “Here, some guys tell me, want to hang out with me? I reply directly, I don’t want to. But in my country, we will say indirectly. ‘Mm, maybe I want to wait till after we are very close and see if we are suitable.’ The boy will understand I don’t want to be in a relationship…” (F3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Begets Sex vi</td>
<td>(1) Sex as craving (2) Harder to say no once you’ve had sex (3) Easier for virgins to say no (4) Others don’t respect no once you’ve had sex (5) Trying to control sexual urges</td>
<td>“I feel sex is addicting” (F1) &quot;so once you’ve already had it and you’ve been in that situation it’s easier to have sex with a new person and it’s harder to say no b/c you still get that craving that you want it” (F1) “what makes it easier for me [saying no] is that I’ve never had sex and because I don’t understand what that is, it’s easier for me to just say no” (F1) “It’s harder if I’ve engaged in any sexual conduct with someone. For some reason, they think they’re entitled to keep continuing with that” (F3) “talking about the urge, the itch, I like the whole masturbation thing because it helps that urge down die a bit but not completely” (F3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex and Emotions are Tied in Together</td>
<td>(1) Fast sex is bad for relationships (2) Sex builds attachment (3) Emotion in a relationship is good (4) Intimacy is needed</td>
<td>“every time I get into a relationship and I have sex with the person quickly, I’m done with the person” (F1) &quot;when you’re in a relationship, because you’re with this person more, you do attach as part of your relationship, we’re having sex, this is what we do &quot; (F1) “I feel like most of the time it’s better to get to know the person first” (F2) “There has to be some form of intimacy [to engage in sex]” (F2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort and Self Love Improves Relationships</td>
<td>(1) Love of self is necessary (2) Important to feel comfortable with partner (3) Confidence against insecurities</td>
<td>“was never able to establish that boundary… because I wasn’t in love with myself and I needed him for comfort” (F1) “being yourself and having your weirdness out there and not being judged for your weirdness; no berating” (F1) Give them the space to have his/her freedom…shows confidence (F2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are Different Types of Sex</td>
<td>(1) We have sex for love (2) People have casual sex (3) Sex is sometimes for others (4) Sex can be threatening</td>
<td>“must be close to love to want to engage in anything sexual with you” (F1) “in a relationship, say ‘make love.’ but if I wanna just hook up with someone, I just say ‘have sex” (F3) “What about if in marriage or long term relationship and women don’t want to have sex as much as men do but you know, you’re in a relationship” (F1) “he would threaten to leave when I didn’t want to have sex and I’d have to have sex with him” (F1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

vi This theme mostly emerged in the first Focus Group and was very important to this group.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idea Topics</th>
<th>Specific Ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Rape Culture</em></td>
<td>&quot;Teach men how to understand how to take a no&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consent</td>
<td>consent workshop to help people who may think that b/c they made out with someone they have to have sex; how to say no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating spaces that question taboos</td>
<td>creating a space where we can talk about sex, sexuality, gender identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Gender &amp; Oppression</em></td>
<td>Gender justice workshops (Where they talk with a group of women or men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Intimacy after sex</em></td>
<td>&quot;[Sex] shouldn't define the relationship and you shouldn't feel its &quot;over?&quot; you can decide to go back to the way it [relationship] was or continue with what is happening in terms of sex&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skills</td>
<td>identify emotional and mental abuse because people don't know the signs; identifying signs of abuse within a relationship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students preferred sex within relationships, however, when asked to think of ways to express "sex", students indicated that there are different types of sex. The four major types of sex identified were casual, dutiful, threatening, and love-based. Every single group brought up the phrase *netflix and chill*, in addition
to other ways to express casual sex such as “hook up”, “friends with benefits”, and “get jiggy.” Some students felt this language insinuated a lack of consequences attached to the act of sex or simply a general casualness about the partner about or with whom these terms would be used. Two students discussed a scenario in which a couple has sex and one partner consents but lacks desire. They described it as routine sex within a relationship where the couple has different libidos (Focus Group 1). One of the same women described sex she had under threat of being left alone or not being brought back home (Focus Group 1). In this case, if consent was given, it was coerced. Lastly, there was love based sex, which was also mentioned in all focus groups and can be seen described when students considered traits of healthy relationships. However, love based sex, possibly due to study design, was mentioned minimally.

In addition to the themes developed above, students were asked to consider event ideas for the future. The event ideas centered around rape culture, consent, creating spaces to question taboos, gender and oppression, intimacy after sex, and some specific to skill development. Table 2 uses some of the language used by participants when explaining their workshop ideas.

**Discussion**

The combination of focus groups and surveys provided a larger picture of what types of programming to provide. This information helped us understand the points of views, knowledge bases, and concerns of students interested in attending events. While the members of the team are diverse in our experiences, races, religions, genders, and sexualities, we are not representative of the whole campus and benefited greatly from the information students generously provided. The themes that were pulled from the focus group data as well as the results from the surveys spoke to the ways in which taboo and sexual scripts lead to unwanted sexual experiences and the ways in which students address, make sense of, or flounder in attempting to avoid them. Two of the themes provide evidence of students working against rape culture in their own lives and were useful in developing materials that could assist others in having healthy relationships.

Themes on virginity, boundaries, libido, and sex as taboo emerged and revealed a need for education aimed at destigmatizing. Deconstructing labels and social constructs around these themes is a
necessary step towards dismantling the power of rape culture because of the ways in which they fuel ideologies and dangerous behaviors. For example, the control of sexuality through sexual scripts, social stigma, and sexual violence as punishment for women who transgress what society deems appropriate behavior, is predicated on the constructions of identities and means of interaction discussed in several of the themes. The construction of virginity serves as a good example because while one international participant considered the US more open minded because it doesn't appear to stigmatize non-virgins as much as other places, some US based students felt the association with the label was stigmatizing (Focus Group 3). Both association with and non-association with the label of virgin leads to a negative (or positive) impact in how society interacts with an individual and serves as an opportunity for others to judge one’s actions or inactions, and therefore, one’s credibility as a victim. The belief that the outside world has a place in judging the personal sexual lives of consenting adults feeds rape culture when applied to cases of non-consensual sex and must therefore be addressed through deconstructing education.

The stigma and judgment associated with certain sexual preferences and activities may also explain the lack of interest in specific workshops listed in the survey. The least popular workshops were “Polyamory and/or sex with multiple partners,” “Introduction to BDSM,” and “Dirty Talk,” all of which could be considered alternative or non-normative sexual practices. Due to an emphasis on the positive value of monogamy within our society, polyamorous relationships are perceived to be deviant, greedy, or unnatural though there are non-mainstream books and articles that argue the opposite. The stigma surrounding polyamory is highlighted by a comment one woman, Wyatt, left on an article, “while coming out to my family as bi would be difficult, coming out as poly is absolutely terrifying.” Bisexuality is a very stigmatizing identity within the straight, lesbian, and gay communities as the identity’s validity is questioned. Therefore, the statement that coming out as poly is more terrifying than coming out as bisexual emphasizes the high level of stigma associated with that identity.

BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism, Masochism) is considered alternative sex although due to Fifty Shades of Gray, BDSM has been brought into the mainstream view. However, very few have any real understanding of what the acronym means or how individuals practice or relate to it. There are concerns that feminism and BDSM can’t coexist and inherently is disempowering
to women, especially those who identify as submissive. There is debate of whether choice can exist even within explicitly consensual spaces which leads to the belief that BDSM is misogynistic and a form of abuse against women. The conversation is significantly more complex than can be discussed here and for that reason, requires more discussion around the issue for those interested or concerned to avoid unfounded judgment and stigma.

The taboo around dirty talk may be related to people’s discomfort in talking about sex explicitly leading to feeling silly or inappropriate. As an alternative sexual practice, there may also be a lack of understanding in the potential of dirty talk to encourage openness, safety, and communication. Igniting conversation around topics like these helps open conversations so that desires, needs, and boundaries can be discussed. Despite the lack of votes for workshops that could be considered taboo, during the focus groups themselves, there were several suggestions for events that would address taboo topics pointing towards an interest in having destigmatizing conversations which is a positive sign (see Table 2).

The remaining themes around consent, the connection between sex and emotions, self-love and comfort, and different types of sex connect to the importance of understanding one’s needs and those of others before engaging in sex as a step towards dismantling rape culture. Students brought up consent based values across the focus groups but differed on what it looked like and how to engage. One of the most popular request for future events, both within the focus groups and surveys, was about communication and negotiating needs, indicating that consent is a valued concept but there is a lot of work that needs to be done so students feel comfortable with negotiating boundaries and consent. For example, one student stated that “there’s moments where you need to talk, you need to persuade him or her” (Focus Group 2). Convincing someone to engage in an act is not respectful of boundaries, however, sexual scripts wrongfully insinuate that persuasion is a normal part of sexual encounters.

It is important to consider the acts that are comfortable for oneself as an individual to work towards avoiding unwanted situations. Consent should be actively sought but it is helpful to feel comfortable knowing one’s own limits and how to express boundaries before engaging in sexual activity. One student shared her experience of having unwanted sex for comfort, “when you’re not in a good place and dealing with that issue of being pressured into sex you’re probably going to have more. It’s comfort” (Focus Group 1). Part of feeling comfortable and ready to be vulnerable with another person is self-
knowledge and practicing communication with others which led us to develop intimacy sheets for self, non-sexual amorous relationships, and sexual relationships. Building intimacy or friendship with a partner and oneself were examples provided by students for how to engage in more consensual relations.

Rape culture is perpetuated by a lack of openness in discussing sexual needs and wants and a lack of confidence in setting one’s own boundaries. Normalizing discussions about desire, pleasure, wants, needs, and boundaries begins to break down the taboo and leave less room for the dangerous sexual scripts of rape culture that lead to unwanted sexual experiences. QC Sexploration’s program development reflects the use of consent, desire, and pleasure based education for addressing individual, relationship, and culture change for dismantling rape culture.

Project Execution

On February 14th from 10:45am – 2:55pm, QC Sexploration hosted its first Annual Sex Day, which boasted a variety of events to appeal to audiences with different needs. We incorporated top votes including a lecture on female-bodied anatomy, a consent workshop, and an informal discussion on rape culture. We decided to also address the less popular event topics of BDSM, Polyamorous relationships, and Virginity & Abstinence through simultaneous informal discussions lead by different facilitators to be inclusive of minority needs as well as majority interests. Though rape culture was the most popularly asked for event in our focus group sample, we chose to have an informal discussion to help us gather more information about what a larger event should encompass. The idea of small groups arose from the focus groups and in comments on post-focus group surveys, where there was positive feedback about the focus group environment and the suggestion of having conversations in small numbers.

All the events and discussions were positively received. The BDSM group left with information about how to connect to the larger community and with talk of a possible follow-up discussion. The Rape Culture group discussed the idea of having a larger event dedicated to rape culture, which had already been an intention. While no one attending the Poly discussion appeared to be practicing polyamory, there

---

viii See Appendix E for Intimacy Sheets  
ix See Appendix F for Sex Day Flyer  
x See Appendix G for Program Overviews of each program and discussion  
xi To be more gender-inclusive, we changed Female-Bodied Anatomy to Velvets, Vulvas, and Vaginas, thereby not gendering body parts.
was interest in learning more about different forms of relationships. The last group, Virginity and Abstinence, due to positive feedback and desire for community, is working on developing monthly group sessions. One student commented that they are interested in having “a place for people who are inexperienced to feel comfortable asking for advice” and that their favorite part of the session was “being with other people with similar experiences.”

The focus groups and engagement in discussions influences individuals in their self-awareness, knowledge of issues, and examining their assumptions and mindsets, as well as fostering empathy, building bonds, promoting respect and teamwork, increasing awareness of interdependency, and negotiating their social identities. These are parts of engaging in social change at the individual and relationship levels. For example, within the focus groups, there were students demonstrating changed or evolved viewpoints from that which their culture or society taught. When discussing virginity, international students identified a lack of a strict adherence in the US to the exalted belief of its association with purity. They recognized the way virginity is constructed here in comparison to their homes and were making new meaning. Similarly, an unexpected but appreciated surprise was the work towards individual and relationship change that occurred within the spaces of the focus groups themselves. While analyzing the focus groups, the coders recognized the level of self-awareness and critical consciousness among some, and willingness to engage with different opinions among almost all the students participating.

One of our prompts asked students to define activities that would cause someone to no longer be considered a virgin, which we would follow up with a question about whether non-heterosexual couples complicated that definition. While the first two groups required the prompt to consider same-sex interactions, one student in the third focus group spontaneously argued, “But maybe with my sociology friends, my social science friends, virginity is different because to have the definition of virginity be only heterosexual penetration, that completely invalidates same-sex interaction and homosexual couples. You invalidate an entire group of people based on your heteronormative standards...” (Focus Group 3). His statement not only demonstrated his critical awareness of other groups, it inspired another student to reconsider her definition of virginity to incorporate experiences of queer people leading her to have an individual change and for that interaction to be a relationship change. This encounter also began the third quadrant of change’s step of transforming “taken for granted ways of meaning making.”
To influence a cultural change, however, there needs to be more interaction with students on a larger scale when doing this work. Thankfully, we found an interest in having more access to sexual education programming and for it to be regular occurrence. The events themselves received overwhelming positive response and had high ratings across all measured goals. We asked whether individuals found each session useful and informative, if the speaker was knowledgeable, and about comfort level at the event. 86% of attendees said they were likely to be interested in attending monthly events and 100% said they would attend another workshop or training.

For those who filled out surveys after the consent workshop, there was general appreciation of discussing consent across different spaces, both sexual and nonsexual circumstances. One student mentioned that learning to establish boundaries was the most useful piece. There was also interest in more consent based events to get deeper into the topic as time was limited. Overall surveys showed that there is more demand for more events around consent, rape culture, and female arousal from those who attended Sex Day. Students who were present appear aware of the issues and are consciously interested in addressing problems that exist.

QC Sexploration team is eager to continue addressing the needs of the campus student population, providing education where there is missing information, and addressing topics that make many uncomfortable to address. We hope to expand so more students can engage in safe, consensual, and satisfying experiences in their lives. Queens College can also be considered a microcosm of the borough of Queens and of the greater world as more cities diversify. Therefore, we see the work performed here as a possible model for dismantling rape culture in the larger society. Additionally, as students at Queens College are involved in different communities outside of campus, as we move the campus towards a more sex positive, consent, desires, and pleasure based culture, students will be able to ripple that effect into their communities.

Limitations

The focus groups had the lowest level of freshman participants across all undergraduates. This may be because freshman in their first semester have not had the opportunity to become involved in groups with which QC Sexploration has developed a relationship. I imagine it was also a combination of the focus groups being held during fall finals week where new students may be more nervous about
taking a break from their studies as well as less of a reach with this population due to fewer channels of communication given their relative newness to campus. As the youngest population that may still retain a semblance of high school culture, and therefore not have acclimated to a new community's social norms, it is a gap that should be addressed in future data collection.

A larger team is needed to expand outreach and host more events. Even though event participation was successful given the relative newness of QC Sexploration and general Queens College event turnout, there is the potential to reach many more people. A large portion of the population is part of religious communities and they too, though specifically sought to develop inclusive language and programming, were not able to commit. Due to over commitment of students with their daily lives, it would be important to create a dedicated cohort for whom this work was structured and expected, perhaps for credit, as there was significant interest in being part of the team from many people, including members of the religious communities.

Lastly, QC Sexploration needs a useful measurement for checking progress as time goes on. The focus group design was exploratory and though we received positive feedback both verbally and through post-workshop surveys, we plan to run more directed focus groups. A survey based tool that can more conclusively measure the desired outcome of deconstructing rape culture through this type of programming is also needed.

**Future Directions**

QC Sexploration is hosting two more events during the spring 2017 semester to incorporate more of the popularly requested topics. In March, a self-defense class was hosted leading to interest in developing a *Badass Army*. This would be a group of people meeting biweekly or monthly to practice self-defense moves together. The idea is inspired by a workshop I attended at the *Desiree Alliance* for building *Whore’s Armies* with the same premise. In May, the event will focus on female orgasm and arousal, though we are searching for more inclusive language. Because we do not have a budget for a speaker, our intention is to create a knowledge crowd-sourced event. We would incorporate the OMGYES interactive videos, discuss our own experiences with pleasure and sex, including masturbation, and open the floor for questions, suggestions, and knowledge sharing.
Longer term goals include developing a peer sex education program to address students interest in student led spaces and more programming. A grant application was submitted in the amount of $81,000 for three years to cover training 10-15 students in the full scope of topics under QC Sexploration. These students would host 10-15 events, workshops, or discussions a semester to address diverse interests and expand the reach of programming. If funded, the project would be able to work towards cultural change because it would influence larger segments of the campus to engage with sex positive, consent, desire, and pleasure focused learning.

Conclusion

QC Sexploration set out to inspire a culture shift, or as professor Dr. Ananya Mukherjea put it, a cultural landslide. My experience working as a mentor with CERRU’s Social Change Fellows taught me that to influence cultural change one must first affect change at the individual and relationship levels. With that in mind, QC Sexploration prioritized understanding the intersecting needs of the QC community before recommending and developing programming that could motivate a cultural change. As hoped, the data collected from the surveys and focus groups provided the insight needed to develop programming responsive to campus community needs for the recent “Sex Day” on February 14th as well as events for the rest of the semester and recommendations for future work. The data laid the groundwork for producing events that worked on individual and relationship change and helped us to develop a plan for cultural change.
## Appendix A: Four Quadrants of Change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Relationships/Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Increase self-awareness and accurate self-assessment</td>
<td>- Transform Conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Increase knowledge about the issues and factors impacting one’s choices and actions</td>
<td>- Build trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Self-confidence</td>
<td>- Foster empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Skill training</td>
<td>- Build bonds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Emotional self-control; responding rather than reacting</td>
<td>- Service orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Adaptability/flexibility</td>
<td>- Influence others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Initiative</td>
<td>- Promote respect and recognition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Examine assumptions and mindsets to transform “how” one knows</td>
<td>- Teamwork and collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Align espoused values and theories in action</td>
<td>- Communication: listening openly and speaking clearly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Structures/Environment (competitors/allies, economy, social system, and natural environment)</th>
<th>Organizations/Larger Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Change the rules, values, principles, beliefs</td>
<td>- Work/lobby for more just policies, greater transparency, and accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Explore and transform taken-for-granted ways of meaning making</td>
<td>- Reform systems and processes to foster more inclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Promote cross-cultural engagement and working with differences</td>
<td>- Change systems and processes to better achieve expressed goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Change the prevailing narratives</td>
<td>- Align systems, processes, and structures with espoused values and theories in use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Transform power positioning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on Generative Dialogic Learning Processes (2008), Generative Change Community
Appendix B: QC Sexploration Team Bios

Carmine Couloute – Discussion facilitator
In middle school, Carmine was in an all girls’ class and the school scheduled them for an abstinence and virginity class. Being 11, everyone thought it was ridiculous - sex, what!? If it happened, it happened but she thought that in the seventh grade it just wasn’t supposed to happen. Carmine didn’t grow up exposed to sex or affection, especially in the Haitian church. The abstinence class reinforced the strict teachings of her parents. Her parents never showed affection so affection wasn’t in her life. Other than hugs, she never participated in anything, thought it was gross. As she got older, Carmine didn’t find anyone that she liked or wanted to have sex with and amongst her friend group, there was no one she could relate to. This inspired Carmine to want to create a group for students who identity as virgins or abstinent, to have a safe space to speak about frustrations that no one would understand. It’s a space to share experiences, feel that they’re not alone and ask question they don’t feel comfortable asking even those who they love.

Erica Caparelli – Discussion facilitator
Erica Caparelli is a white, queer woman and junior-year undergraduate student in Sociology and Psychology at Queens College. Erica has plans to pursue her Master's degree in Social Work after she achieves her bachelor's degree, as she has a joint interest in social policy as it pertains to issues of race, class, gender, education, and disability and mental health. Erica’s participation in QC Sexploration is inspired by her passion in educating the public, younger populations in particular, on sex and rape prevention. Erica’s involvement on campus also includes participation in the women’s empowerment club, QC grrrlz, as the club’s Vice President.

Surbhi Chibber – Qualitative Data Analyst
Surbhi Chibber is currently pursuing a BA in Fashion and Textiles at CUNY Queens College. She was born and raised in Germany and has a twin brother and a younger brother. Since Surbhi was young, she always wanted to become a world-renowned Couturier, who specializes in Indian Bridal Couture. She was inspired by her mother, who always used to dress in Indian attire and accessorize with Indian jewelry. Surbhi is multilingual and fluent in English, German, Hindi, and Punjabi. She considers “Sexploration” very important for several reasons. One, we live in times where sex is seen from different perspectives; society, religion, and culture. Second, Surbhi feels that though we all have a basic understanding of sex, we still don’t understand certain aspects of it: consent and rape culture. She is part of Sexploration because she would like to take an active role in informing the student body.

Sharon Jackson – Qualitative Data Analyst
Sharon's interest in research began at the age of 16, when, out of simple curiosity, she interviewed the parents of Lori Berenson, a journalist jailed in 1996 in Peru while attempting to expose
government corruption. Not long after, as part of a school project, Sharon interviewed Lynn Cox, a swimmer who crossed the English Channel at the age of 15. These experiences taught her that there are entire worlds within the minds of people, and there is so much that can be learned from exploring these worlds. She continued to explore them while earning her master's degree in sociology at Queens College, her focus on qualitative data, and afterwards as well, as she began her internship with CERRU. Now, this theme of exploration of worlds carries forward as she works with QC Sexploration. As a feminist and lover of all things sociological, Sharon is fascinated by the ways society's ideas on sex and gender penetrate into our inner worlds and shape our beliefs and actions, both within the bedroom and without.

**Hillel Katanov – Co-founder, survey data researcher**

Hillel is a Jewish Queer student leader on campus who is dedicated to making a campus a more inclusive space. He is Vice President of PRISM: Queens College's Gender and Sexuality Alliance, and LGBTQ+ inclusivity Coordinator for Queens College's Hillel Club.

**Marcia Suarez – Co-founder, researcher, workshop leader & facilitator**

In trying to understand herself and her body, Marcia began to discover and explore sex from a young age. Being raised in a culture where people don’t really talk about their body, much less their sexuality, it was exploring a really awesome and beautiful taboo world of sorts. Through this curiosity, she was able to come to terms with her own sexuality and now navigating healing post-sexual trauma. She considers sex a means to understand people and believes that education about sex and sexuality is crucial to healthy development of young people and adults alike. In her youth, she became interested in BDSM and kink because it was different than all the other sex advertised and because it somehow fit reasonably in her life. Now her interest is in using kink and BDSM to navigate healing and understanding of the mind and body. Sexploration and Information Group gives her a chance to talk about sexuality in a safe space and create a safe space to do this for other people.

**Mo Urzola – Focus group facilitator**

As a queer gender-non-conforming Latinx immigrant, Mo Urzola has been interested in learning the multifacets of oppression. This includes the different systems that effect individuals daily and how intersectionality plays an important role in recognizing the diverse compression and formation of barriers that each person uniquely faces. Currently they are involved in CERRU as a Dialogue Fellow, part of Transjustice, a program facilitated by the Audre Lorde Project, and Transform, a program led by the Sylvia Rivera Law Project. Mo believes that fighting for the liberation of gender expression and sexual freedom is a key piece to the liberation of all people of all identities.
Appendix C: Survey Collection Tool

Sex Programming Survey

1. Year In School
   - Freshman
   - Sophomore
   - Junior
   - Senior
   - [ ]

2. Gender _____________________

3. Are you currently sexually active?
   - No, by choice
   - No, not by choice
   - Yes, with one partner
   - Yes, with multiple partners

4. Check all of the following workshop topics in which you might be interested in attending:
   - Understanding boundaries and consent
   - Using sex toys
   - Dirty Talk
   - Introduction to BDSM
   - A lesson in female-bodied anatomy
   - Female-bodied orgasm
   - Masturbation techniques
   - Male-bodied pleasure techniques
   - Polyamory and/or sex with multiple partners
   - Understanding rape culture & considering how to address it
   - Self-defense techniques
   - Joining a club for those who choose to abstain from sex
   - [ ]
   - [ ]
   - [ ]
   - [ ]

5. What kinds of programming have you attended at Queens College around consent, rape culture, desire & pleasure, and healthy relationships? Please describe the event(s) and what it/they was/were for:

   [ ]
   [ ]

6. What do you think about the previous QC events you have attended?

   [ ]
   [ ]

7. Is there any other information you’d like to share?

   [ ]
   [ ]
Appendix D: Recruitment Flyer

**Students: Be Included in a RESEARCH STUDY!**

We Need You!

We want to understand YOUR perspectives on friendships and relationships on CUNY campuses.

**A NEW RESEARCH STUDY** is facilitating honest and open discussions about friendships and relationships on CUNY campuses. We want to hear about your positive and negative interactions with other students or staff, or administrators regarding gender, intimacy and sexuality. The feedback from the group will be used to develop public health messages and programming to promote healthy friendships and relationships on CUNY campuses.

**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED** for a one 60-90 minute focus group conducted conveniently at your campus.

**COMPENSATION IS PROVIDED** $20 MetroCards will be distributed as incentives upon completion of one 60-90 minute focus group.

Interested? Visit goo.gl/jLy2
Questions, Comments, Concerns? Email [FR_CUNY2015@gmail.com](mailto:FR_CUNY2015@gmail.com)
Contact for more information:

---

Spring Chenoa Cooper, PhD
Associate Professor
55 West 125 Street, 8th Floor, New York, NY 10027
+1 646 804 8348 | spring.cooper@spch.cuny.edu

CUNY Institutional Review Board Study Number 2015-0836.
Appendix E: Intimacy Handouts

Building Intimacy with Yourself

- Journal
- Ask yourself questions that you would normally ask of a person that you recently started dating
- Take a candle-lit bath or shower alone
- Massage your own body
- Wear oils and lotions that smell nice
- Ask yourself what you want
- Compliment yourself
- Spend time alone with yourself without distractions
- Have a conversation with yourself
- Trust yourself
Building Emotional Intimacy with a Partner
(You DO NOT have to have sex)

Emotional Intimacy: closeness created through sharing our feelings, thoughts, and desires

❖ Spend time together without electronics
❖ Engage in mutually pleasurable hobbies together
❖ Plan dates that fulfill your partner’s bucket list (even if it isn’t on your own)
❖ Read together
❖ Hold hands
❖ Just be
❖ Go for a walk
❖ Be honest
❖ Maintain eye contact for 30 seconds
❖ General eye contact
❖ Positive affirmations
❖ Non-sexual touch; affectionate touch
❖ Perform acts of service for each other
❖ Give one another thoughtful small gifts
❖ Cook together
❖ Feed one another
❖ Give each other scalp massages
❖ Watch favorite movie together
❖ Learn your Love Language [http://www.5lovelanguages.com/](http://www.5lovelanguages.com/)
Building Intimacy with Sexual Partners
(The building emotional intimacy list also applies)

- Give one another massages
- Wash each other’s hair
- Bathe one another
- Wash your partner up after sex
- Go away together
- Explore your yes/no/maybe/fantasy sheets and have an honest discussion
- Explore fantasies through role play
- Phone/video/skype/internet sex
Appendix F: Sex Day Flyer

After collecting surveys and running focus groups, we are ready to present responsive sex-related programming. This event is a queer-inclusive safe space for all Queens College students. We have three sessions planned, details below. We will have free condoms & magazines available for participants to take with them.

QC Sexploration & information Group PRESENTS

Sexploration’s First Annual Sex Day:

Let’s Sexplore!

Date: February 14th
Location: Q-side Lounge
Time: 10:45am – 2:55pm

10:45am - 12:00pm
Velvet, Vulvas, Vaginas: A Lesson in Anatomy
Marcia Suarez will take you through the intricate layers of vulva and vaginal anatomy that very few are aware exist. Come prepared.

12:15pm - 1:30pm
Consent Workshop: Understanding Boundaries, Yours and Theirs:
Joh Yael Raterarrock in a workshop that navigates boundaries and how to set and respect them both in and out of sexual situations.

1:40pm - 2:55pm
Informal Discussion Groups:
Join one of four discussion groups (BDSM, Roze Culture, Polyamory, and Virginity and Abstinence) where you can ask questions, share your sentiments and meet others interested in learning more. Discussions are led by four Sexploradoras from QC Sexploration and Information Group.
Appendix G: Program Overview for Sex Day Events

Consent Workshop: Understanding Boundaries, Yours and Theirs with Yael Rosenstock

Workshop Description:

Join Yael Rosenstock in a workshop that navigates boundaries and how to set and respect them – both in and out of sexual situations.

Workshop Objectives:

- Familiarize terms and ideas: Consent, rape culture, radical consent, not gendering body parts, power dynamics
- Identify ways in which to communicate consent or a lack of consent
- Review importance of recognizing and respecting consent cues
- Identify gray areas of consent
- Stress mutual desire and pleasure as motivation for engaging in sex

Outline:

Workshop Overview: Total Time 60 minutes
I. Introductions, Personal Gender Pronouns, and asking what they are hoping to learn
II. Setting ground rules for engagement in the space
III. Tea-Cup video with follow-up questions
IV. Defining Consent & radical consent followed by participants listing, on the board or flip chart paper, ways consent and a lack of consent are communicated
V. Power dynamic exercise: Participants are broken into groups, assigned a power dynamic and asked to work together to act out or describe ways of establishing safety for the less powerful person when boundaries are crossed (NOT SEX-RELATED BOUNDARIES)
VI. Safety plans:
   a. Homework assignment to practice saying no
   b. Explanation of yes/no/maybe/fantasy sheet handouts
VII. Reviewing different feelings that arise when actively practicing consent
VIII. Debrief

References

Velvet, Vulvas, and Vaginas: A Lesson in Anatomy with Marcia Suarez

Workshop Description:
Marcia Suarez will take you through the intricate layers of vulva and vaginal anatomy that very few are aware even exist. Come prepared

Workshop Objectives:
- Familiarize audience with difference between vulva and vagina, establish a trans-inclusive environment separating gender from vulvovaginal anatomy
- Normalize vulva and labial diversity of colors and sizes
- Identify the different layers and parts of vulva and vaginal based anatomy, their functions, and how their appearances change during different levels of arousal
- Optimize the importance of pelvic floor muscles for pleasure and for health
- Explore the ways in which different parts can be stimulated
- Demystify healthy and unhealthy care of vulvas and vaginas

Outline:
I. Read from Vagina Monologues and ask participants to give names they have heard or used as euphemisms for ‘vagina’
II. Start from the “outside” view, the mons pubis, and then the vulva, normalization of labial diversity, the difference between outer labia and inner labial, along with the way that the labia change and look upon arousal
III. Emphasis on the importance of “touch when wet” since touching the inner labia or urethra without lubrication can cause irritation, pain, and sometimes infections
IV. Review labial diversity with pictures to counter the popular emphasis on how the porn industry often portrays labia that have been airbrushed, edited, and held open.
V. Short overview of the perineum and the anus
VI. Go into the vagina muscle and its functions, as well as covering pelvic floor muscles and their levels
VII. Anatomy of the clitoris with brief explanation of function of pleasure

References:
**BDSM** with Marcia Suarez

*Discussion Description:* Informal Discussion on BDSM.

*Discussion Objectives:* Introduce students to BDSM as a concept.

**Outline:**

I. Define acronym BDSM and how each piece correlates and intersects with each other
II. Define kink & vanilla and have group discuss what they feel falls under each as well as explore how people normalize and ostracize practices differently
III. Invite each participant to make their own hard and soft limits list and an "F**k" yes list
IV. Review the importance of continuous consent
V. Discuss structure of a D/s relationship including contracts, kink, sadomasochism, after-care and especially communication and balanced submission
VI. Review safe words and hand signals, how they are used, how to use them, and how to connect with one’s partner(s) after play has been stopped
VII. Contrast differences between abuse and BDSM
VIII. Reiterate the concept of continual consent as a basis for all and any relationship, regardless of play.

*References:* N/A
**Polyamorous Relationships** with Yael Rosenstock

*Discussion Description:* Informal Discussion on Polyamory

*Discussion Objectives:* Introduce the idea of polyamorous relationships and provide a space for answering questions.

**Outline:**

I. Define what polyamory isn’t
II. Break down four types of polyamorous relationships
III. Importance of communication and honesty in poly and all relationships
IV. Ways polyamorous relationships can become problematic or a challenge while comparing problems and challenges to monogamy
V. Prepared questions (were not used, conversation flowed naturally)

**References:**

Rape Culture with Erica Caparelli

Discussion Description: Informal Discussion on Rape Culture

Discussion Objectives:

➤ Learn accurate terms and concepts in relation to rape, consent, and rape culture
➤ Review statistics and debunk any pre-learned rape myths
➤ Encourage students to think critically about sexual relations and to challenge rape culture moving forward

Outline:

I. Establish discussion group as a safe space; define safe space
II. Introductions, ask why students chose to attend Rape Culture focus group rather than Virginity and Abstinence, BDSM, or Polyamorous Relationships, and ask students to briefly mention what they already know about rape culture, if anything
III. Lead discussion defining rape through open discussion about the differences between legal definitions vs. laymen’s definitions vs. feminist definitions
IV. Define rape culture with reference to Milkweed Edition’s book, Transforming a Rape Culture
V. Discuss how rape culture impacts individuals from all identities, races, religions, backgrounds, ethnicities, and sexualities with statistics taken from Human Rights Campaign/hrc.org
VI. Hand out Rape Myths vs. Facts worksheet taken from West Virginia University's Students’ Center of Health followed by open discussion
VII. Closing; discussion on how to move forward with new knowledge
VIII. Hand out discussion outline and copy of Melissa McEwan’s blog post taken from Shakesville

References:

4. WELLWVU. "Rape Myths and Facts.”; WELLWVU Students Center for Health. West Virginia University. Web.
Virginity and Abstinence with Carmine Couloute

Discussion Description: Informal Discussion on Virginity and Abstinence

Discussion Objectives: Create a space for people who identify as virgins or abstinent to feel safe sharing their experiences.

Outline:

I. Question definitions of virginity and abstinence and acknowledge the diversity of responses
II. Discuss different scenarios they have experienced in relation to virginity and abstinence
III. Discuss how participants navigate their lives and their relationships with parents, friends and significant others
IV. Explore ideas of manhood and how male virgins are viewed
V. Examine the role of religion and gender in virginity and abstinence
VI. Share more personal experiences

References: (N/A was opportunity to meet one another)
References


**Autobiographical Statement**

I am a white-presenting-Latina, Jewish, queer, cisgender, middle class, master of arts in public health and psychology student in her 20’s. I grew up in a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic household and am first, second, and third generation in the country and in college, depending on which part of the family I cite. Though there is much diversity of experience in my family of SES and discrimination based upon ethnic & religious identity, my memories consist of being part of a middle-class background where I have not personally dealt with poverty and I have been privileged in my experiences with others. I have faced minimal personal discrimination though I read and listen about the experiences of others so that I may be useful as an ally.

My first experience in working with sex-related topics was at 14 when I became a Teen Reproductive Rights Peer Health Educator for the New York Civil Liberties Union. My trajectory of volunteer work and research from then on is identity and sex related. While I am lucky to not have experienced trauma or sexual violence at the hands of trusted adults, I had a sexually, emotionally, and mentally abusive boyfriend in high school which changed the way I would engage with sexual and romantic relations for years after. My experiences led me to want to understand those of others and I began working with sexually abused children before moving on to study victims of sex trafficking and working with commercially sexually exploited youth. I have done a considerable amount of healing on this journey and now much of my work centers on sex worker rights, consent, agency, desire and pleasure but I continue to be interested in and concerned about sexual violence in all its forms.