

How Do Differences in Sex Education Alter Perception of Consent?—A Multistate Mixed-Methods Analysis

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Introduction

The following research was conducted to answer the question: how do differences in sex education alter perception of consent? As of 2021, only 7 states and the District of Columbia mandate comprehensive sex education policies that include consent education, and in contrast, 17 states do not mandate comprehensive *or* non-comprehensive sex education (“Sex and HIV Education” 2021). Because sex education in schools is where a large proportion of young adults receive all of their instruction on sexual topics, it can be inferred that the lack of sex education would constitute a lack of consent education as well (Deluna 2019; “Section 33—1608” 1970). These differences in consent education suggest a difference in consent knowledge and therefore perception. To examine this possibility, a survey was administered to two samples of university students over the age of 18 from two different states. By administering a revised edition of Humphrey’s Sexual Consent Scale-Revised (SCS-R) to each sample, as well as a qualitative analysis differing definitions of consent, the respondents’ consent perception was measured. Statistical comparisons were then employed to test three posed hypotheses.

Method / Data Source(s)

Two samples combining to 225 respondents were drawn from two public universities. One sample of 111 respondents was drawn from Arkansas, as it was determined to have the least comprehensive, non-mandated sexual education, and one sample of 114 respondents was drawn from California, as it had been determined to have the most comprehensive, mandated sexual education. Both were administered the SCS-R, a published Likert scale measuring consent attitudes, for quantitative analysis as well as posed the pre-test question: “how do you define consent” for qualitative analysis. Statistical comparisons between the response distributions per subcategory of the SCS-R will indicate whether one sample responded with more positive or negative perceptions of consent, on average. These subcategories include: (1) Lack of Perceived Behavioral Control, (2) Positive Attitudes Toward Establishing Consent, (3) Indirect Behavioral Approach to Consent, (4) Sexual Consent Norms, and (5) Awareness and Discussion. Qualitative comparisons between definitions will be conducted by coding for the following code words or synonyms: voluntary, verbal, sober, enthusiastic, clear, and mutual.

Hypotheses

- H1:** As sex education policies increase in comprehensiveness, positive perceptions of consent increase.
- H2:** As sex education policies increase in comprehensiveness, awareness of consent increases.
- H3:** As sex education policies increase in comprehensiveness, negative behaviors related to consent decrease.

Qualitative Results

Below are the distributions of the number of codewords used per definition in each sample.

Number of Code Words used within California Sample Consent Definitions								
Number of Code Words Used	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Number of Definitions	15	44	36	10	7	2	0	6

Number of Code Words used within Arkansas Sample Consent Definitions								
Number of Code Words Used	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	N/A
Number of Definitions	11	43	32	14	3	0	0	6

The samples appear similar. Below are the frequencies for each codeword in single-codeword definitions; these indicate that Arkansans most often perceive consent as clear while Californians most often perceive consent as mutual.

Count of Each Code Word Used in Single Code Word Consent Definitions-California Sample						
Identified Code Word	“Voluntary”	“Verbal”	“Sober”	“Enthusiastic”	“Clear”	“Mutual”
Count	4	9	8	3	3	17

Count of Each Code Word Used in Single Code Word Consent Definitions-Arkansas Sample						
Identified Code Word	“Voluntary”	“Verbal”	“Sober”	“Enthusiastic”	“Clear”	“Mutual”
Count	4	12	0	1	16	10

Quantitative Results

After conducting the Independent Mann-Whitney U comparison test, the response distributions between the two samples of 5 of the 39 total SCS-R items were deemed to be significantly different. The significance values of those 5 items and their corresponding subscales are listed below:

Significant Results of Independent Mann-Whitney U Comparing Arkansas and California Sample’s Distribution of Responses Within Each Subscale		
Subscale	Question Number	Significance Value
1	4	.006
2	13	.033
2	17	.041
3	25	.007
3	26	.033

As the above table indicates, 1 response distribution from Subscale 1, 2 response distributions from Subscale 2, and 2 response distributions from Subscale 3 were deemed significantly different. By analyzing the average responses per state sample within each question, the sample which indicated more positive answers per question were determined.

Quantitative Results (Continued)

The following value labels were used to measure the respondents’ answers on a Likert scale: {1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Somewhat Agree, 4=Neutral, 5=Somewhat Disagree, 6=Disagree, 7=Strongly Disagree, 8=NA}. Within questions 1, 25, and 26, the respondents’ agreement with a negatively charged statement regarding consent was measured. Higher averages within these questions indicate disagreement with the statement and therefore indicate a more positive perception of consent. Within questions 13 and 17, respondents’ agreement with a positively charged statement regarding consent was measured. Lower averages within these questions indicate agreement with the statement and therefore indicate a more positive perception of consent. The California sample reported lower averages, indicating that respondents in California were more likely to agree with both the positive and negative statements measured below.

Means Report for Each Significant Response Distribution By State						
		Q4	Q13	Q17	Q25	Q26
Arkansas	N	111	110	109	111	109
	Mean	6.50	1.44	1.58	4.95	5.22
	Median	7.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	5.00
	SD	.980	.761	.955	1.986	2.170
California	N	114	113	113	106	108
	Mean	6.03	1.85	1.97	4.20	4.62
	Median	6.00	1.00	1.00	4.00	5.00
	SD	1.423	1.338	1.404	2.162	2.099

Implication(s)/ Limitations

The results of the qualitative and quantitate analyses between the two samples indicate rejection of H2. The Mann-Whitney U found no significant difference between the responses of the two samples within Subscale 5. Furthermore, the qualitative did not indicate a significant difference in distribution of positive language used. Furthermore, the results indicated partial rejection of H3. The Mann-Whitney U indicated that the California sample was more likely to agree with the negative statements from Subscales 1 and 3. However, these were only 3 items of the numerous others. The results of the quantitative analyses indicated partial support of H1. Two items did indicate significance in response distributions between the two samples in Subscale 2, but only 2 items of 11. In conclusion, this study was severely limited by its sample size, and would ideally have included numerous samples from varying states for comparison. However, the sample used did find partial support of H2, though it is weak support. Furthermore, the qualitative analyses of single code word definitions indicates a cultural difference in perception, which should be investigated further in replications of this study. This study will be expanded to include the addition of a 6th subscale, and a factor analysis performed on the new scale created from this addition.

*Paper copies of references available upon request of Hannah Stone.

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