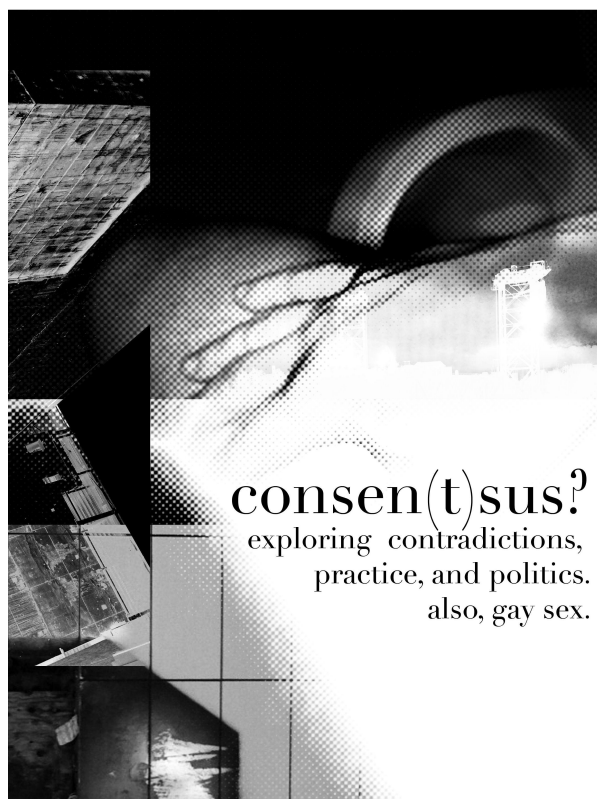


consen(t)sus?

exploring contradictions, practice, and politics; also, gay sex

Eric Levitt and Jonathan Valelly



October 2014

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**exploring contradictions, practice, and politics
also, gay sex**

First edition, October 2014

Edited by Eric Levitt and Jonathan Valelly

Introduction (Eric)

My thoughts on consent have, until recently, been relatively set. What I mean by this is that my first introduction into the use of active verbal consent some years ago had been formed primarily through some fairly benign first sexual experiences where I tried to communicate my desires pretty unsuccessfully. How many of our first sexual experiences were not awkward in some capacity? This relative lack of experience plus trying to come to terms with having sex with men, as a man and trying to negotiate that space internally, in my head, years after first coming out was a frustrating experience. I eventually got better at practicing verbal consent through, well, practice and as I started taking advantage of the Internet for sex. I realized that a form of consent was already taking place within the confines of online cruising with questions such as “what are you into?” These kinds of questions are actually a key part of what I would later come to understand as “pre negotiating”, a key tool in my soon to be expanded understanding of active consent.

A little later on I came into contact with my first consent zine and my semi formal education began with the introduction of theory to support an action that, to a small extent, I was already beginning to use. The first consent zine I had was called “learning good consent” and I realize now that it is the same primer that everybody else has. Within the pages of this zine was a piece written by Nick Riotfag who, as far as I can tell, was the only person in the zine writing about gay or queer sex between men. It was refreshing to read material that directly spoke to what I was experiencing and also bringing into the fold some themes that permeate gay culture such as fatphobia, femphobia, body fascism, racism etc. His own experiences were important for me to learn about my own. That is what made my understanding of consent more nuanced (and concrete) as well as realizing the importance and joy of its consistent use.

However, now I am curious of the narratives that surround the use of consent and its direct applicability to the gay and larger MSM community. In no way am I trying to cast doubt on active consent, or the politics that surround it, rather, I am interested as to the ways in which the gay community can take the specific aspects of our culture and sex and tie it in to the larger politic of consent. After Nick’s piece I have found nothing that discusses the intricacies of our culture and how it relates to consent. How does a bathhouse complicate the use of consent when you may not be able to fully see your partner(s)? How does HIV status affect ones use of consent? How does benefiting from certain privileges affect your own use of consent?

Surely, there have been many conversations had between friends, intimate partners, random thoughts at two in the morning, talks with random dudes at even more scandalous times in the night around how we have sex as autonomous faggots. This zine, as I imagine it, hopes to add a certain concrete element to these conversations by collecting a plethora of our perspectives on consent as it relates to the abundance of our lived experiences. I hope you find it illuminating if you are either just starting out with your rad gay experiences or have been around the block a few times to have a physical collection of our stories told by us and for us.

Enjoy.

Eric Levitt.

P.S. As I was writing this little introduction I quickly googled to see if learning good consent was still available and it is! You can find a free PDF copy at phillyspissed.net under the “documents” section. Nick’s piece starts at page sixteen but it is all good stuff.

Introduction (Jonathan)

There are a lot of reasons that I think it's important to write and compile a zine about consent for queer guys. I think the primary reason is that I've read lots of stuff about consent, and it mostly seemed to be written by women. I think a lot of the practices, rules, questions about consent that they propose seem really good and on point. For instance, they outline the kind of consent that involves asking permission each step along the way of a hook up, and finding a way to normalize that. However, it just doesn't seem to ring true with my experience as a gay man. I've had sex with many men without exchanging more than a few words or grunts. I've had sex with people with whom I didn't share a language. And I feel that I was able to consent to each of those encounters, and hope that the other parties felt that they were consenting as well. So the question of non-verbal consent or negotiation feels unexplored or neglected by the consent literature out there that focuses on verballity.

I also want to write this zine because I was assaulted, and it took me a long time to call it that. There were so many things about the experience that seemed like I consented, and the thing that was a violation involved unprotected sex, money, and that fact that I liked the guy. I think unprotected sex has its own particular connotations with gay men, for many reasons, and sexual health and its attendant negotiations have different histories and practices associated with them.

I also want to write this zine because I think that the promiscuity, cruising, hook up culture, and general sex positivity of gay men's communities is all really amazing. I actually love it, and I want to acknowledge that we have something special there. And with that comes an added task of creating ways of being together that feel good, natural, and sexy, but that also hold each other accountable and bring us together as a community of lovers.

And with that, I think there needs to be an admission that people have sex for all sorts of reasons, and that this complicates consent as a concept. I've had sex for money, for a ride home, because I felt bad for someone, because I had done it before and didn't mind doing it again, because I thought it would make them happy. I think that by many people's model of consent, some of those reasons would mean that I hadn't consented properly or by the books, but I don't feel violated.

I want to compile this zine and solicit other submissions because there are obviously things about this topic that I haven't thought about at all— there are definitely different cultural approaches to consent, different approaches to negotiating consent, different ideas about what consent is and I don't think we have a language for that. There are experiences that I could never speak to, experiences that have to do with race, gender, class, ability, embodiment, that I simply can't and won't claim to know. Even the experiences I do know have resulted mostly in more questions and a lot of half-baked mini-essays dotted throughout this zine. Forgive me this.

We don't have a language for all of the feelings about sex that are related to violation or assault— regret, discomfort, acceptance. Nor have we developed a way of talking about consent that gets at all of the nuances that dance around between, and inside of YES and NO. Maybe we never will. But it's worth talking about.

Eleven Things I Thought About When Thinking About Consent.

1. Should I be able to choose how to manage and communicate my consent? When you touch me without invitation or permission, is it ok for me to enjoy it?

2. In bathhouses in Tokyo, you will see men who want to be fucked lying face-down in rooms full of beds, pretending to be asleep. Tops come along and just start touching, fingering, fucking the bottoms they're interested in. If any of the bottoms don't like the particular top who's interacting with them, they bat him away. No one speaks. It only gets confusing in the early morning hours, when some people are actually sleeping.

3. Is consent a cultural construction? Does what constitutes consent differ from place to place, from situation to situation, and, if so, is that ok?

4. We joke that, for the gays, sucking cock is like shaking hands. On one level, we're supposed to be offended - but what if we're not? What if our vision of utopia is one in which we fuck each other in the subways, jerk off along the boulevards, and fellate new acquaintances at the office?

5. Is sex even a thing? Where does it begin and end?

6. Do you own yourself? Do you own images of yourself? Do you own anecdotes about yourself? Do you own metaphors of yourself?

7. In Vegas, after a few hours of drinking generously poured gin-and-tonics, my husband and I go with this guy back to his hotel room. The guy is rubbing his cock against my ass and I am so fucking turned on. My eyes meet my husband's. Rubbing, rubbing, and then my husband nudges the guy forward and he slides into me, bare. Until then, we'd always used condoms when we played with other guys - we'd discussed the matter, and that's what we decided we were comfortable with. I think I wanted his raw cock in me. I think he and my husband were also on board. We used condoms for the second round, though.

8. Does continuous, affirmative, vocalized consent place risk at the centre of sexual practice? How do we feel about that?

9. I am in the park. I saw this guy walking near me in the dark, and now we're walking beside each other. We reach a tree; he leans against it and pulls out his cock. I make a noise with my throat, and grab my package. We make eye contact, and hold it for a moment. I crouch down and start sucking him off. Two other guys have approached, and are standing a couple metres away, watching, grabbing themselves through their pants. The guy tenses and begins to breathe in a way that tells me he's about to come. I keep sucking.

10. Does sex in groups, in public, offer kinds of safety that sex in private lacks? What would Jane Jacobs say?

11. That time when I met that older guy on Growlr, and went to his place without much discussion. How did he guess how rough he could be with me? How much of my enjoyment of that encounter had to do with how well he was able to read what I wanted without me having to say?

The Progression of Touch

By Jonathan Valelly

My lover gets reasonably upset when, at a bar or in the bath house, people don't obey what he calls the Progression of Touch. Although men don't often use words to negotiate each step of seduction, there's a fair way of slowly escalating touching that allows for mutual interest to be established. First, a touch on the shoulder, arm. Maybe a few of these over the course of a little while if the context is conversational or in a group setting. Then perhaps you put your hand on someone's hip or chest. If there's no push back from this, maybe you start rubbing, maybe you move closer, maybe now's when you kiss, if you're into that. At some point one of you might start feeling on the other's butt or package. You can kind of see where this goes.

What's important about the Progression of Touch is that with each phase there is ample room for each person to respond negatively if they aren't comfortable with where this is going — by recoiling, by pushing the hand or body away, or by saying something. There is also a norm of extended eye contact during this kind of interaction, and one's experience in body language and expression through eyes develops over the course of many of these kinds of exchanges.

Yet, as my lover says, there are many people who don't follow this protocol — who simply grab what they feel like grabbing or squeeze what they feel like squeezing, which can result in discomfort, pain, and perhaps even trauma.

Making explicit this mode of moving closer together, touching each other with more intentionality and responsiveness, I wonder if we can create a culture where people learn to control their urges to grope and grab, and rather include pauses and responses. I don't know. But it would be nice if we can at least appreciate that this is one valid way men negotiate the initiation of sex and touching.

An acrostic poem about gay consent

By Your Friendly Neighbourhood Power Bottom

Condoms, respect my decision to use them and remember that they aren't just my responsibility. Consider taking time to learn how to use them properly and to make sure that you have some available so that I don't always have to worry about bringing them.

Oppression is not okay. You cannot treat me like shit if I'm feminine, trans, bi, disabled, short, fat, poor, 'in the closet,' from a particular ethnic or racial community, from another country, less educated than you, much older or much younger than you . . .

'No' can look and sound like a lot of different things: not saying anything, not being 'into that,' looking uncomfortable, not saying 'yes' in a direct, confident way . . . If you see me doing any of these things, note that I'm not okay with what you're asking for and talk with me so that we can figure out an alternative or go our separate ways.

Statuses and identities related to HIV (and other STIs), gender, sex, sexuality, and relationships are personal. I'll be the one to decide if I want to have that information about me shared with others and in which contexts.

Enjoying sex and dating is something we all have a right to. If I'm not happy or satisfied, I should be able to leave a situation or relationship without having to ask for permission and without feeling guilty or afraid of being harmed so that I can enter into a new arrangement that I'm more content with.

Negotiation is constant. Just because we do something (like have sex without a condom) once doesn't mean that's okay the next time around. Let's chat and check-in with each other on a regular basis so that we know what goes and what doesn't and when.

Topping doesn't mean you get to decide on your own about what we do. Talk with me so that, together, we can figure out who, when, where, and how we'd like to fuck.

The Curious Case of the Cripple and Consent

By Andrew Morrison-Gurza

As a Queer man living with a Disability (Queer Crip*), when I get to experience my sexuality by having sex, it is like winning the lottery. You know those commercials with the people doing cartwheels and freaking out with joy because they have won the lottery? I have the same kind of reaction when I get to be considered a sexual being (unlike the commercials, the sex has never transported me to a tropical location). It is a rare treat that I dive right into, and savor every last drop (puns intended).

Male-Seeking-Male hook up culture has programmed Queer men to believe that we should be able to access our sex anytime, anywhere and with anyone. It has been packaged as an aggressive, primal, male-on-male adventure where each partner knows intrinsically what to do, and consent is simply implied. As quickly as the bodies come together, wrapped up in the passion and heat of the moment (I almost typed 'head of the moment'), they disentangle and part ways. It sounds kind of hot, right?

Living with a disability that requires the use of a wheelchair, access to the above-mentioned scenarios is a rarity (I know you're thinking: "even without a disability it is rare"). The fact that the majority of spaces where men engage in sex with men are not accessible, coupled with the fact that disability isn't something that we have openly discussed in the culture, can leave Queer Crips starving for their sensuality.

When that homo-hunger is finally satiated (if anyone else is picturing a lot of blow job double-entendres due to the use of the word hunger, you're awesome) it can be overwhelming and amazing all at once. This can make issues of consent for the Queer Cripple altogether confusing.

"This is my one chance to feel sexy": Being that my sexual encounters have been sporadic at best, when the opportunity arises (along with other things), I have felt the need to grab it by the horns and ride it out, literally, no matter what happens. So often, Persons with Disabilities are touched by their care workers in a quasi-medical fashion; the chance to be a completely sensual being is relished and revered. As a result, even if you weren't necessarily into what was happening with your partner, you may not want to stop it because it may not come around again for a while (insert ejaculatory pun here).

Moreover, I understand that for the majority of my sexual conquests (yes, I am indeed that good), bedding me is an entirely new process. There is a level of apprehension that I am acutely aware of in these situations. I know that my body configuration and my needs are completely different than anything he's ever tried before. In those moments, I am trying to accommodate for his comfort level over and above anything else I may want or desire sexually. My tastes fall to the wayside because I want to make sure that my disability doesn't deter him too much. Nobody wants the guy leaving thinking, "So, I had sex with this crippled guy, and it was so weird..." Comfort and consent are very often vying for position here, and more often than not my idea of consent is very fluid to ensure that he doesn't flee.

I think it is also important to note that People with Disabilities are never, ever taught about sexuality through a lens they can identify with. Their bodies are never represented in health class or in porn (the place where we all really learn what sex is all about). Without representation, or an understanding of how their body works, cripples may not really know what it is they are consenting to. I remember a few years ago, I had a suitor assume that I would be into BDSM - I am not (no matter how many times I listen to Rihanna, whips and chains are simply not my thing). We were making out and then

he grabbed and twisted my junk, HARD. When I yelled in pain, he said: “C’mon, I know you like it.” Needless to say, he was not welcome in my bed ever again.

The above scenario raises questions of the presumption of consent on the part of my partner. Would or should my partner assume that I will consent to anything sexual on offer because they are “helping me out”? In other words, because I am a cripple, consent goes out the window. I have certainly had partners who attempted to try this, but I have always stood my ground (I do hope the irony of that last statement was not lost on any of you).

With all the writhing, moaning, prodding and posing going on, Queer male sex culture doesn’t leave a lot of room for conversations around consent. It isn’t sexy; it breaks the mood and removes the spontaneity. When you have a disability though, this conversation is crucial, not only for your safety, but so you can rest assured that your partner understands the differences your disability brings to the table. So, how do we make it feel fun and not forced for all involved?

One of the ways to discuss disability and consent is through what I like to refer to as “storyboarding your sex”. This is where yourself and a prospective playmate will sit down together and openly converse about what you like and don’t like and what is physically possible or impossible for you both. It may not sound hot (and I wouldn’t recommend doing it right after the guy knocks on your door... I learned that the hard way), but it can teach you a lot about the person you are about to sleep with. Imagine that as you go to bed with this Colby Keller-esque lover, you both know what gets each other off, and you’ll never have your eggs squeezed so hard they almost crack. unless, you like it that way.

Consent is, and will always be a tenuous issue to navigate in the bedroom, particularly when we never see our favourite porn stars stop and say: “Hold on a minute. Does that feel okay for you?” but it is a critical component to sex as a Queer Cripple. As a Queer Cripple I have to say, gaining sexual consent through conversation about my crippledness and what that actually means is extremely sexy.

So, while getting the opportunity to have sex as a Cripple can certainly cause a tingling in my nether regions and butterflies in my chest, knowing that my disability can start a dialogue on consent, providing us new opportunities to truly explore one another is better than any lottery jackpot out there.

On public touching

By Jonathan Valelly

I feel very conflicted about public touching. I think it ties into my pride in gay men's long tradition of sharing in a widespread sexual culture that includes cruising each other on the streets, hook ups, anonymous sex, and promiscuity— in short, a sex positive gay culture, that, though certainly not without its hang ups and problems, admits itself to be full of horny dudes. I think that's awesome.

Yet, as with many of these blurry, weird practices and categories, I both like and dislike public touching — depending on the place, the person, my mood, and the kind of touching. There's a lot of random, unwarranted touching that happens in gay bars, at Pride, on the dancefloor, and in other not-explicitly-sexual spaces that people pass off as "in good fun." Indeed, the "in good fun" flirtation and touching that men engage in at gay bars and in other spaces can be really titillating, arousing, and, yes, fun. But it is constantly teetering on the edge of really uncomfortable, upsetting, and unwelcome.

One of the moments that inspired me to start writing about consent and compiling this zine was having a conversation about exactly these kinds of encounters — being grabbed, touched, surprised by hands — and how they are often really upsetting, even though sometimes they make us feel good. Literally in the midst of us each taking turns sharing stories of people who went too far with unwelcome touching, a creepy dude sitting behind the area we were standing in reached over and grabbed my ass. I said "no thanks," only to have it happen again a few minutes later. Shifting my position to another part of the table, the man took this as an invitation to join our table, and even though we froze him out and ignored him, he didn't get the idea for a good few minutes to step off.

What is it that makes men feel entitled to each other's body in certain scenarios? In a section about cruising spaces and consent, I posit that people often view their agreement as being with a cruising space rather than the people there — but at a bar or on the street, that seems less convincing. And although I sometimes long for a world where we've all shed our hang-ups and where we're all touching and fucking all the time, I see people attempt uninvited feels all the time and very often it results in discomfort and anger and, well, potentially trauma.

There's something hot and perhaps liberating about being bold and forward, but how does that pan out in a way that respects people's dignity, agency, and safety?

How I Reclaimed my Bodily Autonomy and Agency through Gay Online Hookup Apps.

By Eddie Woah

Tw: rape, substance use, lots of talk and details about sex

I was raped by my ex partner many times throughout our relationship of about three years. Depending on the occasion, coercion was used in either the form of shame, guilt, force or manipulation. Sometimes while it was happening I would shut my eyes and go far away out of my body. Other times I would just lay there limp and motionless, crying silently, tears streaming down my face wondering if he would ever stop and notice. After finally ridding this person from my life (about a year and a half too late, I'd say. An issue of lost time that I still grapple coming to terms with) I somehow fell into multiple relationships and dating scenarios. I tried to have sex with these people but all of a sudden things would happen like I would panic, or I would disassociate without realizing it, or I would feel fear for my life. This would happen even though I really cared about these people and was romantically invested in them. There were a couple of times I pushed myself into having sex with these people as a way to 1. Convince myself that I was fine and 2. Out of fear that I would lose these people if I didn't, because we are still so engrained to believe that 'healthy' romantic relationships cannot exist without sex. I eventually had to admit to myself that this approach was doing additional harm and that I needed a break from sex to face my trauma.

I wrote zines and participated in trauma counseling as the primary methods of my recovery. During this time I barely had a sex drive and sexual intimacy with people was pretty much impossible without alcohol. I eventually realized that sex would never be the same for me again, given what had happened to me. I lost all ability to assert my sexuality and to articulate my desires. I didn't believe that anyone actually cared about what I wanted or what I was comfortable with. I didn't trust that anyone wanted anything more than just to use me for my body, and so I removed myself from sexual situations all together.

Eight months into my trauma counseling and a year and three months into my recovery, I felt something. What was this? A sensation between my legs? A desire for sex? SEXUAL INTEREST IN PEOPLE? A familiar sensation that had become so foreign to me all of a sudden returned with a vengeance. My sex drive was back and for me, this was a huge. I talked about these feelings with my best bud and about my desire to reintegrate sex into my life, but in a way that kept it at arms length. I didn't want relationships and I didn't want to date people. Part of this was because I am very into my single life, but also because sex with strangers seemed less scary in terms of relearning how to find and use my voice in intimate situations. I guess you could say that I wanted a certain amount of anonymity, but also situations where I didn't have to be extremely vulnerable. To me, dating and sex with people I am romantically involved with requires a lot of vulnerability, which I am not sure I am capable of giving at this point in my recovery. My bud would often talk about using this gay hook up application, Grindr, which he used for casual sex quite often. I identify as trans* masculine non binary person and about 1/3rd a gay man so I figured, I'd give it a shot. I downloaded the app, made a profile and username (transflesh, a play on 'manflesh', a term for the flesh of men used by the Uruk-hai in Lord of the Rings) and thus began my journey into the land of gay app sexual hook ups.

I have used Tinder, Grindr and Scruff applications and have had varying levels of success with each one. My favourite one so far has definitely been grindr. Though grindr prescribes to a lot of normative cis gay culture, I did find some other trans and non binary folks to talk to. My first grindr hook up was with this really adorable genderqueer person; he was the first person I ever messaged. I like grindr because conversational chatting is not required. It is really openly understood that the app is mostly used for hooking up, though you do have the option of selecting 'what you are looking for' from a dropdown menu which includes things like, dating, relationships, right now, etc'. I like grindr because you can get right down to business and skip the small talk if that's what you so desire. My conversation with the first person I messaged on grindr consisted of picking a time and place, followed by a pre-emptive breakdown of what we were into and what our boundaries were. He came over, we fucked while listening to pop punk and he left shortly afterward. He was super friendly, respectful of the boundaries we had set, and we still used active consent the entire time. It was a really good first experience.

One of the largest obstacles in my recovery has been relearning how to articulate my needs to people. Grindr has helped me tell people what I want and don't want. It has let me say, no to people I'm not interested in or who want to do things I am not into. It has helped me jump over the hurdle of shame that came with getting raped. Articulating your interests and desires via typing to one another on grindr, I found, was a great way to reassert my voice without physically having to use it. This made me feel a lot more comfortable when I would go to have sex with these people, because they already knew what I wanted, because we had already discussed it. This meant I didn't have to talk or direct as much during sex which made everything feel less overwhelming, and let me focus on the acts at hand or at saying smaller, shorter and more directional things like 'yes', 'that feels really good', 'don't stop' etc, etc.

Tinder I have found to be a little too confusing and vague. It seems like everyone on tinder is using it for a different reason and it seems like most of those reasons do not involve hooking up. Tinder makes me pick a gender and choose which genders I want to view, which is really obviously limiting and exclusionary. Tinder is also not a specifically queer application so there are many straight people on it that you have to kind of sort through. Chatting with people on tinder has been good for being upfront about my intentions and also sticking to my needs. When people want to chat, I tell them that I am not interested in having conversations on tinder or using it as a tool for making friends or dating, that way, if that's not what they want, we can go our separate ways. I have gotten some hot tinder messages, and I have had some really positive experiences hooking up with people, but it definitely took a lot more effort to find folks on it who were queer and looking for the same things as me.

Scruff has been my least favourite of the hook up apps. They list you people from all over the place, which to me defeats the purpose of meeting people who are near you. I joined Scruff because I was told it had more queer identified people on it, but I don't know how true I find this to be. Grindr and scruff are both mostly cis gay men looking for other cis gay men. It is slim picking for us non passing trans or non binary folks, but it is definitely possible. And yes, what you have heard is true; there are a lot of dick pics. Anyway, no successful hookups from Scruff yet but we'll see. I haven't given up on it but it has been pretty underwhelming thus far.

Using these various apps has helped me put myself out there and get over my fear of rejection. It is hard to feel the pain of rejection on grindr or tinder, (or at least, for me) one of the most superficial ways of meeting people on the Internet. I have done some consensual 'sexting' if you will, on grindr, both in text and photo form. That's been silly and fun, and also a great way for me to get back into contact with my body and head simultaneously, because after sexual assault there is often such a disconnect between the two.

Your head loves to leave your body when it is triggered, and your body becomes this alien form that is confusing to you. In the earlier stages of my recovery, my way of coping with this was to protect my brain and body by barely ever letting anyone touch me unless I had had a few drinks in me. I still do usually need a drink or two before a hookup, but it is definitely not like before where I would need to be drunk. Setting up hookups through these applications has made me feel very in control of my agency

and reintegration of sex into my life. Sending and responding to messages is all done in my own time; I can choose to respond or not respond to users who've contacted me. The fact that there won't be any face-to-face contact unless I choose to pursue it has made me less fearful. I feel like these apps have provided me with lots of space and time to explore my feelings, and therefore I've felt safer exposing myself slowly, more and more over time.

I've gotten a couple of my other trans and non binary pals to join some of these apps, as well. They've all had varying levels of success, but what made it really important for me was that it provided us with opportunities to talk about our experiences on it; what we liked and didn't like about the applications, and also to openly talk about our hook ups and sexual desires. I had repressed all my sexual desires when my traumatized body shut down its sex drive. But now, here I am, with my friends, talking about eating ass, sucking dicks, sitting on faces, getting pegged. It may be weird to say that it was that moment that made me realize the giant leap I had made in my recovery, but it was. I really didn't have any expectations when I first downloaded these apps but they've really had a huge impact on me. I could talk about the problems with these apps, all the racism, body shaming, and fuckedupness that I see on people's profiles, but that is for another article (or you should really just go check out Eric Levitt's zines from Gay For Pay; he writes a lot about body fascism and racism within gay culture, one specifically targeting grindr). As a way to attempt to filter out the shitty people, I made a detailed profile that expressed that I was trans*, only looking for hookups, and that I had no interest in meeting people with racist, transphobic or body shaming politics. In my own experience, I have had a lot of success with finding respectful people to fuck, a lot more than negative encounters. Everyone's recovery takes its own path, and six months ago this would not have been the path I would have foreseen myself taking, and though I recognize that this wouldn't be accessible or helpful to a lot of people going through trauma recovery, I cannot describe how helpful it has been for me.

Eddie is a white trans masculine queermo living in Toronto. They are an aries, adult punk, and baby organizer. They write the perzine doom clouds and are part of the sticks & stones zine distro. For more of their writing, you can email them at eddiewoah@gmail.com.*

If you can't hear it does it still exist?

By Eric Levitt

I am very curious about this question and how it relates to the verbal/nonverbal consent dichotomy. Can I say that? If there is no verbal consent does it then not count as active consent? Are you doing it wrong? Well, until recently, I would have answered with a resounding yes. "There is only one kind of active consent and it is verbal." That last quote by the way, was from my brain in a conversation to myself. I still mostly believe that statement to be accurate. I think that our bodies are good blunt indicators of consent, and reading those body signals is important. If the body is a blunt indicator than words are a sharp point in that it cuts through our bodies' potential ambiguity. There is a new question I am beginning to ask myself though, (and full disclosure, this article is mostly me thinking aloud) is if no verbal consent is taking place, does it still exist? Is consent still taking place?

This thought takes me to a specific place. In the world of public cruising, usually in poorly lit places, or in parking lots or generally somewhere that is trying to be inconspicuous lies a culture of silence. A culture of silence that possibly extends far beyond the particular setting, it follows some men home and back to their families, wives, closets etc. It can also be a situation where the particular dude may not actually believe himself to be a part of the larger MSM (men who have sex with men) community even though he is having gay sex and he may not even have the vocabulary to speak to his desires. I think it is also fair to say that many of us who are out have an experience where we have slept with a dude who doesn't think himself to be gay in the slightest way. How then, does verbal consent intersect this possibly poorly lit, closeted space?

If there is no room for verbal communication can a culture of consent take place? I think that it can. I believe that even if there is very little to no talking in these spaces there is still a physical consent that can take place. What I think ties any politic of consent together is the idea of reciprocity and responsibility, I also think that they happen in tandem when having good sex that uses good consent. I really do believe that this is the case. My ability to express my autonomy/responsibility and to give/get pleasure, balanced with another (or groups) use of autonomy/responsibility and ability to give and get pleasure. It is sort of funny for me to try to write down what, at least for me, makes the conditions for good sex but sometimes a little awkwardness is good. Also, no words are going to be able adequately explain good sex. It is just not possible.

Does this reciprocal pleasure and responsibility model require verbalized consent? Well, I think that it is ideal, but it can still apply to even the most discreet of hook-ups, and even with men who may not consider themselves to be gay. How does this work? Well, why does it require words? Are we not able to intuit the feelings of others? I think that we can, and as I said above our bodies are good blunt indicators, but combined with an idea of reciprocity and responsibility there can still be a framework created to best utilize our bodies and their ability to show how we are feeling. It also looks very similar to the model presented in Learning Good Consent.

Full disclosure: the model I am about to present is from myself recalling hook-ups where it has been helpful. These were hook-ups that for the most part took place in public and were not particularly intimate, but to me they were consensual, I felt that we communicated even though words may not have been exchanged or, as many as I would want now. I also want to say that this framework is not ideal, but for a lot of us the ability to meet under ideal situations is not a reality. This framework is solely for the purpose of proposing something that may work, and has worked for me.

I just want to present something, because currently there is nothing that communicates directly to the experiences I have had.

A thought: when you are just starting out and our culture raises you to think overwhelmingly negative thoughts about your own desires, and your first hook-ups may take place on the “down low” in “inconspicuous places” and outside of the private sphere it would make sense that you may have conflicting feelings about your sexuality and how to verbalize it. In fact I can see how this would promote and even further perpetuate gay shame.

Another thought: on recalling these hook-ups and where/how they took place, it seems I have quite a storied past to draw from. Oy vey. But I digress.

What does this framework meant to facilitate discrete faggy hook-ups ask of us when we are engaging with it? It first presents a statement: “at any point you may stop, you are not required to have sex with this man or men.” Autonomy fully intact, and with the parties moving past that point, it than asks you to be present with yourself and ask some continuous questions: “am I enjoying this?” “Is he?” “Do I want this to continue?” etc. These questions do not have to be verbalized if the setting does not permit it as they can be mental check ins. How then can I move from one type of physical engagement and take it up a notch? If the situation permits verbalization, than take advantage of it by asking. If not, look. Look, at the person, see his expression, see if he looks comfortable etc. Eye contact in this situation (granted there is ample lighting) is really fucking important. I think that before you take it up a notch you can look and nod, some sort of indicator of where you are. If you feel uncomfortable or you believe he does than stop. This step I think can be repeated indefinitely. And as you continue with this model you can add on your own steps until it is your own model.

On silence

By Jonathan Valelly

It almost troubles me to admit that silence can be a turn on for me: with my lover, on dates, in cruising spaces. There is something about two (or more!) men simply going at it, without prefacing it or asking permission, that give me this sense of confidence about men's primal, natural urges to touch, feel, suck, and fuck each other. Of course, this goes against so much of what I know about sex. Sex is anything but uncomplicated, and although it is natural and primal, desire and sex are hopelessly caught up in societal and cultural baggage that many of us can't seem to shake or acknowledge. But for that same reason, I see my fantasy of men's natural ability for mutually understood desire as being a normal reaction to a troubled sexual-cultural landscape, and therefore valid as long as I keep my eye on it.

And I will say, I'm definitely not the only one who is turned on by silence, and not the only one who depends on it or expects it in many instances of man on man sex. Go to any cruising washroom, bath house, back room, or last-call dancefloor, and you'll see, not hear, people making the leap to touch or be touched.

As Nick Riotfag so rightfully points out in his piece on gay/ bi men and verbal consent, verbal consent is simply, maybe unfortunately, not the norm for a lot of us, and definitely not the kind of step-by-step, constantly-checking-in, affirmational verbal consent that a lot of feminists, survivors, and other people who write about consent say we ought to practice. Although I think that that kind of never-too-safe approach is, for me, the most complete way to establish or revoke consent, I think we have to make an acknowledgement that it isn't the only way to do so, and sometimes may not even be — or feel — possible.

After all, I've had many sexual encounters where I did not say a word. Many encounters where I didn't speak the same language as someone. I've had encounters where I was really, really fuckin' drunk or high. And I don't feel like I didn't or wasn't able to consent to those encounters — I would not call any of them assault, unlike my experience of assault, wherein my verbalized "no" was not respected.

We can talk about normalizing explicit, verbalized, affirmative consent in gay communities, sure. But we also must address the reality of non-verbal sex practices.

There are lots of valid reasons men don't speak to each other during sex. If it's in a public place, perhaps there is a risk of getting caught. Perhaps you don't speak the same language as each other. Perhaps you just don't know what to say. Maybe you don't want to scare them away. Maybe you're ashamed of your desires, and putting words to it would be a bit too raw for you — uttering your secrets into an audible, textual existence might make you confront something you don't like about yourself. This could be because you're in the close, you don't consider yourself gay or queer, you don't like the fact that you're going about sex the way that you are, or a whole host of other hang-ups.

In this way the spectre of compulsory heterosexuality and the violence of a homophobic world is often negatively present during gay sex and it can affect the way we communicate. Keeping this in mind might help us understand the reasons people stay silent while they fuck.

Can we figure out what some of the unifying features, best practices, and safety measures of these kinds of encounters are? Can we take something of a harm reduction approach to a continuous disregard for verbal consent? And can we even learn new, more complete or more useful ways to talk about consent by putting aside the obsession with talking?

Re: HIV/AIDS

By Shakir Rahim

HIV/AIDS has recently started to become a subject of greater conversation among my gay friends, I think partly because of the publicity around PrEP and the release over the past few years of more films related to the early AIDS epidemic in the United States. In that spirit, I wanted to pen a few words about young gay men and HIV to respond to a common trope I hear repeated, among some activists, other gay men, and public health researchers about young gay men not caring anymore about HIV. The idea goes that there was a time when young gay men were good vigilant protectors of their sexual health and that time has changed, possibly as a consequence of the longevity and life that HAART has provided those who test positive. I think this is patently wrong. The conversation we need to have around HIV is not one of how to stem the reckless abandon of young gay men, but rather one of how can we ensure that the moment HIV comes up, the answer is not one of fear and exclusion.

Ask any young gay men about some of the most common lines they see on an online hook up or dating profile. DDF or drug and disease free. Neg, you be too. Clean. These words have a ubiquitous prevalence, offline and online, that indicate to me that young gay men are trying harder than ever to avoid HIV. Rather than seeing HIV as a manageable life condition, they see it as such a threat that they must exclude meeting anyone who is positive. The problem is that young gay men are putting so much energy into a strategy that does not work. The decision to have condomless sex is not happening on the basis of evidence-based strategies to prevent transmission. Instead, there is an ever greater reliance on two things: sociocultural serosorting and trust.

By sociocultural serosorting, I refer to the reliance on assessing what someone looks like, who they are, how they dress, how they present themselves, and other personal attributes to assess their HIV status. That assessment, which may envision an HIV-positive person as someone who has a lot of sex (which there is nothing wrong with of course) or as the stereotype of an emaciated man, does little to actually indicate who is positive or not. Most failingly, it asks the question, does this person look like me? And if the answer is yes, they must be negative. Because HIV exists in an atmosphere of such vilification and stigmatization, we can never conceive ourselves as the HIV-positive man, and by extension, few we associate with either.

Second, is the reliance of young gay men on trust to protect themselves. The CDC recently highlighted how infection rates are increasing among young gay couples. Because HIV has been constructed as a bogeyman, a virus that inhabits the body only of those so reckless and irresponsible that they would never be our lover or even our friend, the men we fall in love can often only be seen as negative. Instead of waiting three months and taking a test together, or exploring other options to protect each other, once intense attraction takes root, sex based on the assumption of mutual HIV-negativity takes hold. The question is “Do you trust me?” instead of “What do we need to do to protect each other?”.

The above phenomena of course are not true for all of us, and they may not be the dominating trends in the epidemic. But they are very real realities for many young gay men as anyone who has a Grindr profile can tell you. So let's shift the discussion away from young gay men not caring about HIV, we have been and are scared of the disease. Scaring us more won't work. We need to humanize the discussion around HIV. Bring back the person attached to the disease. And start having a conversation about how we can have sex with HIV-positive people, protect ourselves, and protect our community while doing it.

On cruising spaces and consent

By Jonathan Valelly

It is my experience in cruising spaces — tearooms, parks, cinemas, etc — that people do not feel a particularly strong obligation towards the needs, desires, or pleasures of the other people in that space.

Often, these spaces are full of people you'd rather not touch or be touched by, though they may want to touch you or be touched by you. Yet you stay, in the chance that you find someone with whom you would like to exchange sexual pleasantries. Or, in my case, you find yourself trying out new things and exchanging feels or looks with people you might not normally think to. Indeed, I think that Samuel R Delany's claim in "Time Square Red, Times Square Blue" that cruising spaces are unique settings for unexpected cross-class and cross-cultural contact to be very true to my experience.

The truth is that, even if you are open to many different people or experiences, in a cruising space, you may be touched, groped, or approached in a way that makes you uncomfortable. And because of the norm of silence in these spaces, it can be hard to negotiate. One must remember that your advances may be unwanted as well.

What I find interesting about these spaces though, particularly because they are often unofficial, and sometimes illegal locations used for public sex, is that they offer a spatial mode for consent. You enter the space with an idea of what might go on, perhaps knowing that there may be people you aren't interested in there, and you equally have the ability to exit the space. In many occasions, I've seen men do what I've done, which is simply zip up when you begin to feel uncomfortable, and exit. Now, there are times when someone will follow you, or times when you feel trapped in a space— these are uncomfortable and may be the grounds upon which an assault happens. But also, the fact that exit is a norm in these spaces can make backing out of a situation much easier than if you are alone in somebody's room, or your own. And, when you've shot your load, no one's gonna be surprised when you book it out of there quickly.

Indeed, I've often wondered if, in cruising spaces, the primary working contract is with the space itself and only secondarily with the others around you. I'm not arguing that this is a better practice than negotiating with the actual individuals you're fooling around with— I'm just observing that in sex spaces, where many interactions are furtive, fleeting, and very low stakes, people seem to have a better hold on getting in and getting out as an easy way to get off on one's own terms.

[Contact]

consen(t)sus? is an ongoing project. This is its first edition.
We are always looking for more submissions from men who have sex with men about their experiences
of negotiating consent.

Please contact jvalelly@gmail.com or eric.levitt123@gmail.com for more information or if you are
thinking of submitting.
we also welcome feedback, suggestions, ideas, questions, hate mail, etc.

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