**"It's Just What You Do in a Relationship":**

**A Linguistic Analysis of Sexual Consent Discourse**

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## 1. Introduction

The details of what specifically constitutes the presence or absence of sexual consent in any given situation is a contentious topic, despite its deceptive 'yes or no' simplicity. Consent takes on a myriad of different definitions and conceptualizations through interpersonal interactions, romantic relationships, culture, and law. In this paper, I examine both existing literature on consent and original survey data through the lenses of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and discursive constructivism (Butler 1993). I investigate how recurring conceptual metaphors may contribute to heteropatriarchal, allonormative discourses surrounding sex and sexual consent. *Content warning: this paper contains explicit references to and discussion of sex, sexual consent, sexual assault, and rape that may be upsetting to survivors of sexual violence.* ***You are not alone: call the National Sexual Assault Hotline 24/7 at +1-800-656-4673, or chat online at <u>online.rainn.org</u>.***

## 2. Background

### 2.1 *English Language*

This paper examines metaphorical language used to talk about consent in the English language. English is a West-Germanic language of the Indo-European family originating in England. It is the dominant language used in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and various island nations in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. It is an official language of over 50 countries and has approximately 1.3 billion speakers worldwide (Crystal & Potter 2025). The scholarship I review in this paper is all written in either Standardized American English or Standardised British English, but the original responses I collect use whatever variety of English in which participants chose to respond. The study is conducted in the United States and thus assumes a U.S. social context.

### 2.2 *Sexuality and Asexuality*

I approach this study with sexual minorities in mind: of course, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer people, but especially asexual people, who are too often completely left out of the discourse surrounding sexual diversity, let alone sexual consent. Asexuality is loosely defined as a lack of sexual attraction and desire, but in reality is more of a 'spectrum' that encompasses a vast diversity of non-normative sexual identities, some of which may experience more sexual desire than others (Carvalho & Rodriguez 2024; Nimbi et al. 2024; Scherrer 2008). The opposite of asexuality is allosexuality, referring to those who do experience sexual attraction and desire. There is also a distinction to be made between asexual and aromantic, the latter being a lack of romantic attraction and desire. Some asexual people are also aromantic, but some are not and do experience desire to have romantic (but not necessarily sexual) relationships (Van Houdenhove et al. 2014).

While asexual people generally do consider themselves to be part of the queer community at large, asexual identities have not always been welcomed with open arms into queer spaces: The LGBTQIA+ community has a reputation for being extremely sex-positive and

allonormative (privileging allosexual experiences), so asexuality and sex-repulsion do not cleanly fit into homonormative values of sex (Hart-Brinson et al. 2024). At the same time, the queer community is also a sanctuary for any who experience sex and romance in non-normative ways, and has become a community for many asexual people. Still, the queer community's initial uneasiness with the asexual community suggests that asexuality in particular is deeply unsettling to the sexual status quo in our (American) culture. In this paper, I use 'queer' as an umbrella term that encompasses all non-normative sexual identities, asexuality included.

Perhaps the most common response to asexuality is a pathologizing one; that is, one that positions asexuality as a deficiency in need of fixing. The idea that a human being might not experience sexual attraction and desire destabilizes American capitalist society, where sexual-biological relationships (i.e., cisgender male and cisgender female) are privileged as the primary family and kinship institution (Gressgård 2014). Asexuality is thus a deep threat to heterosexual norms, even more so than allosexual queerness, because it unsettles both the *hetero-* and the *-sexual* (Iraklis 2023). Thus, in this study, I especially consider the asexual experience in relation to dominant sexual consent discourses, as it is a sexual community historically marginalized by both straight and queer communities.

### 2.3 *Sexual Consent*

What is sexual consent, anyway? There are many, many popular understandings of what specifically constitutes sexual consent. Muehlenhard et al. (2016) explore some of these popular understandings in their overview of sexual consent discourses circulating college campuses. To start, we could conceptualize consent as a behavior someone interprets as willingness (often referred to as 'implied consent'). This could be any sign, action, or inaction (including silence) that creates a reasonable assumption that the person in question has given their will. Alternatively, consent could be conceptualized as an internal state of willingness, in which consent is not something that is directly observable, but instead whether a person was actually willing to participate or not. Consent may also be either a discrete event, where it is assumed after it is initially given unless the person does something to retract it, or it may be a continuous process, where sexual partners are constantly evaluating and reevaluating the other(s)'s comfort and will.

We can also conceptualize sexual consent as an act of explicitly agreeing to something, similar to the legal concept of verbal or written demonstrations of an "accession of the will of the individual giving it" (Block 2004: 51, as cited in Muehlenhard et al. 2016: 462). This definition likens sexual consent to a legal document, or even a performative speech act (i.e. "I consent.") as defined by speech act theory (Austin 1975). Beyond its conceptualization, there are many ways people express sexual consent or a lack thereof. Perhaps the most infamous is the 'just say no' approach to consent, where if a person does not wish to have sex, they should 'just say no' to establish their lack of consent (Kitzinger & Frith 1999). This approach suggests that consent is assumed until actively revoked, placing the burden of saying 'no' on the person who does not

consent, as well as positioning other culturally normative means of refusal as inadequate (Burkett & Hamilton 2012; Kitzinger & Frith 1999).

**2.3.1** *Consent and Gender*

Stereotypically, and in most literature cited here, the person refusing sex is assumed to be a woman, and the person initiating sex is assumed to be a man (Kitzinger & Frith 1999; Muehlenhard et al. 2016; Burkett & Hamilton 2012; Beres 2007; West 2002). The 'just say no' approach to sexual consent is theoretically grounded in female empowerment and feminist values—women can say no to sex!—but when considered in practice within a broader sociocultural context, it fails to live up to these values.

Neoliberal feminist understandings of consent such as the 'just say no' approach valorize female-empowered individual choice: when women consent to sex, it is good sex; when they do not, it is bad sex. But these approaches do not take into account the social forces that weigh into women's decisions about whether to consent to sex or not, nor the 'postfeminist sensibility': the contradictory ways in which women are assumed to be liberated and empowered, despite the fact that gendered power dynamics persist, but should not exercise that increased empowerment at the expense of men (Burkett & Hamilton 2012). Heteronormativity and the postfeminist sensibility, then, may influence a person's decision to consent to sex.

West (2002) criticizes the neoliberal reification of 'individual choice' above all else, encouraging us to consider the harms of consensual sex. Indeed, consent can be understood as distinct from desire, and an agreement to sex does not necessarily presuppose an internal desire for sex (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Our society which reifies capitalism and individual liberties tends to conflate 'consensual' with 'always good' and 'non-consensual' with 'always bad', since the exercise of individual choice is a celebrated practice. In reality, though, these relationships can be much more nuanced and complex: consider the BDSM community, where certain kinky types of non-consensual sex (termed "consensual non-consent") are carefully mediated by consenting adults, with female masochism and submission sometimes actually deconstructing heteronormative sexual expectations (Dymock 2012). Consider further women who consent to undesired sex, and the injuries they must sustain to their senses of self-assertion, self-possession, autonomy, and integrity (West 2002). Sex being consensual must then be disentangled from sex being good, as we recognize the larger social forces affecting how real people navigate the nuances of sexual consent.

Another popular poststructuralist critique of standard conceptions of sexual consent is that it must be given both freely and independently from coercion or threats (Beres 2007). Is this possible? Certainly, at face value, this is a well-intentioned stipulation; still, some scholars argue that heteropatriarchal dynamics prevent the possibility of women ever consenting to men freely (Beres 2007; West 2002). Pressures to have sex in marriage and romantic relationships often lead women to consent to unwanted sex to preserve these relationships: sex is normatively expected in marriage, even by law. Patriarchy operates such that women are systemically subjugated by men and therefore cannot consent freely, since "they are not free subjects" (Beres 2007). We thus

should not consider consent as a 'solution' to bad sex when women consent to bad sex all the time: the reality is that compulsory sexuality is so deeply ingrained in our culture that women are not the free consenting agents that neoliberal postfeminism paints them to be (Osuna & Gutiérrez 2024).

Discourses of compulsory heterosexuality pressure people to consent to sex under the guise of maintaining 'normalcy'. (Hetero)sexual romantic relationships are the hegemonic norm; therefore, especially within relationships, a desire to live up to these standards may subconsciously influence a person to consent to sex (West 2002). Sexual consent is overwhelmingly assumed to be given by a woman to a man, leaving out discussions of men giving consent to women, women receiving consent from men, or how gay, lesbian, non-binary, and (gender)queer people navigate consent (Beres 2007).

Problematizing compulsory (hetero)sexuality raises the question of how queer people, sex-averse/repulsed asexual people in particular, navigate allonormative discourses of sexual expectations. Allosexual hegemony leads asexual people to self-pathologize, make reluctant compromises to appease their partners' sexual needs (e.g. allowing partner to sleep with other people when they would prefer a monoamorous relationship), or even abandon the hope for romantic relationships altogether (Van Houdenhove et al. 2014). Allonormative discourses conflate romance and sex such that healthy romance cannot exist without sex, reinforcing a narrative that asexual people are incapable of having fulfilling romantic relationships. Neoliberal postfeminist sensibilities fail, then, to account for the heteropatriarchal and allonormative discourses that are still actively and systemically disempowering (asexual) women and gender minorities[1].

### 2.3.2 *Consent and Law*

With the rise of third wave feminism and the #MeToo movement, sexual consent has become increasingly difficult to conceptualize outside of its legal ramifications (Beres 2007; Kitzinger & Frith 1999; Bergen 2006). Legally in the United States, no state explicitly defines 'consent' itself (RAINN, n.d.), though some states do provide definitions for what constitutes a lack of consent, thereby defining the criteria for rape: for example, physical force, incapacitation of the victim, or failure to stop after hearing a refusal that a "reasonable person" would understand as a lack of consent (New York Penal Law §130.05, as cited in RAINN, n.d.). Only one state, California, requires affirmative consent (saying 'yes'), and only California and Illinois require that consent be 'freely given' (RAINN, n.d.), leaving space for coercion under the law.

Though as of 1993 marital rape is technically illegal in all fifty U.S. states, thirty states offer some legal exceptions for husbands, most of which exempt husbands from prosecution if they do not have to use force to obtain sex from their wives (whether she is incapacitated or simply reluctant), or require that the victim prove the use of physical force (Bergen 2006). In this

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[1]While I highlight the experiences of gender minorities, it is important also to recognize the unique marginalization of asexual men, whose masculinity is socially compromised by being asexual. Because of our societal entanglement of masculinity and the constant desire for sex, being an asexual man is more subversive of hegemonic gender roles than is being an asexual woman (see Tessler & Winer 2023 for more).

way, heteronormative ideologies around sex and consent are not only codified in law, but marital rape is positioned as 'less serious' than other types of rape, reinforcing the narrative that women owe their bodies to men in romantic relationships.

While legal definitions and conceptions of consent and sexual practices are different from how consent is navigated in reality (there is no actual contract present when consenting to sex in the moment), the legal dimension of consent heavily influences how we think about and talk about consent in our personal lives. In their 2012 piece on psychoanalysis and law, Butler argues that legal language cannot adequately account for the nuances of consent, such as how bad sex and rape differ, how sex may become rape in retrospect, though that could not hold up in court, or how the complicated reasons one may choose to say 'yes' don't always lead to positive or unproblematic sexual experiences. With regard to negative sexual encounters, they write:

> "Now, it may be that the contract was broken, but it may also be that sexuality has a way of breaking contracts, rendering them tenuous, or exceeding their terms, and that we make a mistake by confusing the juridical model of consent with the kind of 'yes'-saying and 'no'-saying that happens in the midst of sexual encounters and dilemmas." (Butler 2012:22)

Here, they make the uncomfortable but necessary observation that the black-and-whiteness of the law does not nicely align with the grayness of human sexuality. Therefore, the well-intentioned legal language we often rely on has the potential to misconstrue sexual experiences, both in the eyes of the law and in our own minds.

**2.4** *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) is a theoretical framework which posits that certain types of metaphor use in language are not purely linguistic phenomena, but are instead primarily motivated by cognitive patterns (Lakoff & Johnson 1980); in other words, the metaphorical language we use to talk about certain topics reflects the metaphorical way we actually think about those topics. CMT holds that language pertaining to certain **concrete, tangible 'source' domains of experience** (such as **buildings** or **journeys**) is applied to other *abstract, intangible 'target' domains of experience* (such as *theories* or *life*), and these linguistic metaphors reflect the metaphorical mappings we hold cognitively (Kövecses 2016; Gibbs 2011). Likewise, the linguistic utilization of metaphor then reinforces the conceptual metaphorical relationships they reflect, thereby discursively constructing them as conceptual metaphorical realities (see §2.4.1) (Kövecses 2016).

One popular example of a conceptual metaphor is the THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS metaphor, using language about **buildings** as a **source domain** for discussing the *target domain* of *theories*, such as in sentences (1), (2), and (3):

(1) Your *theory* has a **solid foundation**.
(2) Without more **supports**, this *theory* will **collapse**.
(3) Her *theory* is **well-constructed**.

Statements (1), (2), and (3) all reinforce the conceptual metaphor THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS, using language pertaining to buildings (concrete and tangible) to discuss theories (more abstract), and CMT scholars would argue that this language reflects the way in which we actually think about theories. We conceptualize theories as being carefully constructed, as having a foundation and supports, and as being either weak or solid. Another example of a conceptual metaphor is the LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor, as shown by sentences (4), (5), and (6):

    (4) He's lost his **sense of direction**.

    (5) I've decided to **take a different path**.

    (6) She didn't **get as far** in *life* as her parents wanted.

Statements (4), (5), and (6) exemplify using journey-related language as a **source domain** for discussing the *target domain* of life. Likewise, we conceptualize life in these metaphorical ways: we set goals, try to reach those goals, prepare for obstacles, explore different paths…the list goes on (Kövecses 2016: 16). The conceptual metaphors I focus on in this paper are laid out in §3.2.

       CMT is controversial: many scholars believe it to be founded on insufficient or unconvincing evidence (e.g. Cameron & Maslen 2010). One of the main concerns with CMT is that it is subject to a high degree of confirmation bias due to its empirical inconsistencies. CMT literature tends to use examples of metaphorical language that are simply thought up by the researcher themself, making the theory both questionably applicable to natural discourse and extremely difficult (if not impossible) to disprove (Deignan 2005). To address these concerns, my analysis in this paper examines metaphors that surfaced in an anonymous survey. The survey makes no mention of metaphor whatsoever, making the responses minimally influenced by confirmation bias, hopefully helping to dispel notions of CMT analysis not being based on 'real' linguistic data.

       This concern aside, CMT as a theoretical framework is cross-linguistically and -culturally consistent (that is, conceptual metaphors have been analyzed in many different languages; see Luporini 2021), and is supported by psycholinguistic and nonlinguistic evidence (Gibbs 2009; Gibbs Jr. 2011). Moreover, it provides a way to quantify findings from discourse analysis, which would otherwise yield solely qualitative data. It should be noted that I do not seek to argue in favor nor against the empirical validity of CMT, but instead explore the fascinating implications of its application to sexual consent discourse.

       It would be irresponsible to work with CMT without also considering the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, as it first posited a dependent relationship between language and thought. Unlike CMT, though, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis gives primacy to language, arguing that the language we use influences the way we think about the world (Koerner 1992; Kay & Kempton 1984). The hypothesis has a 'weak' version, that language *influences* thought, and a 'strong' version, that language *determines* thought. The strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is, to be blunt, not taken seriously by the broader linguistics community, but the weak version is significantly more plausible.

       Multiple studies grounded in both linguistics and cognitive science have found that language does at the very least influence cognition. When it comes to the categorical perception

of color, users of languages with more and fewer color terms tend to perceive color boundaries differently (Regier & Kay 2009); while the authors ultimately reject the strong version of Sapir-Whorfianism, more studies still point toward the legitimacy of a weak version of the hypothesis that accounts for the ways in which language does indeed appear to influence perception and cognition (Regier & Xu 2017; Davies et al. 1998). Beyond color perception, one study found that users of languages with only absolute directional terms (*north*, *south*, *east*, and *west*) and no relational directional terms (such as *left*, *right*, etc.) do tend to conceive of direction absolutely, while those with relational terms conceive of direction relatively (Majid et al. 2004). All of these studies point towards a legitimacy of some weaker version of Sapir-Whorfianism where, while language may not *determine* thought, language certainly has a non-negligible *influence* on thought. It is with this same mindset that I utilize CMT for analysis purposes in this paper: while I do not believe CMT to be a perfect theory, nor do I believe it accounts unconditionally accurately for all metaphorical linguistic data, I do believe it offers important insights into how certain types of metaphor might reflect our thought patterns.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and CMT might at first glance appear to oppose each other, since Sapir-Whorf argues that language influences thought, while CMT argues that thought influences language. However, CMT scholars hold that the two theories actually reinforce each other; CMT scholars simply maintain that conceptual metaphors originate with thought patterns (e.g. using language pertaining to buildings to discuss theories *because* one thinks that metaphor makes sense; therefore, that language becomes fossilized), not arbitrary metaphorical language (e.g. we as a society use language pertaining to buildings to discuss theories; therefore, one has been conditioned to believe that metaphor makes sense), giving primacy to the conceptual nature of metaphor (Kövecses 2016). Still, CMT scholars argue that using metaphorical language then reinforces those same, pre-existing conceptual patterns, as would be argued by Sapir-Whorf (Lakoff & Johnson 1980; Grady 2005; Kövecses 2016).

**2.5** *Butlerian Discursive Constructivism*

An additional theoretical framework to consider is Judith Butler's theory on discursive constructivism (1990, 1993). They problematize sex essentialism, claiming that the categories of both gender and sex are not naturally occurring but socially constructed, imposed onto people through discursive practices. To Butler, both sex is but a pathway to gender, defined as a collection of normalized attributes that materialize by being forcibly reiterated by society. Bodies become fully formed when they assume a sex: the assumption of sex "shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he'" and brings that child "into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender (Butler 1993:7; see also Austin's 1975 speech act theory). Binary norms of sex and gender are then reinforced through the violent exclusion of non-traditional manifestations of gender, such that bodies that do not assume a traditional sex are deemed abject and do not materialize. In other words, sex is a process of regulatory norms which both materialize a body (bring it into the realm of societal existence) and qualify it for mattering in a culturally intelligible way.

Of course, there remain abject bodies that do not conform to the regulatory norms of sex and gender, and those bodies are disidentified: that is, they constitute a necessary 'outside' which serves to reiterate and further constitute 'insider' subject beings. Butler stresses that abject disidentification is equally crucial as subject identification in the gender binary economy, which constructs through erasure and bounds norms through exclusionary criteria. Since these norms are constructed through exclusion, in the binary economy of sex, the 'feminine' is positioned as the constitutive 'outside' and subordinate class of the masculine/feminine binary opposition. Therefore, Butler argues that the 'feminine' represents not just women, but also the 'elsewhere' of the gender binary, uniting women and gender minorities in a shared battle against misogyny and toxic masculinity (1993).

Furthermore, Butler explores how queerness 'de-genders' people, as it subverts the expectations of the heterosexual matrix. Performing queerness fails to fulfill the prescribed norms of binary gender; thus, queer people become marked as abject. Asexuality in particular disrupts these norms profoundly: hegemonic discourses of consent such as the 'just say no' approach create the burden of having to say 'no' rather than 'yes', while asexuality rejects the assumption that consent is present until revoked. Asexual people are thus ostracized as abject and immaterial and are excluded from these discourses, and their exclusion from popular discourse only reinforces their immateriality (Gressgård 2014).

As a theoretical framework, Butler's theory on discursive constructivism suggests that the language we use to categorize and discuss things constructs certain societal realities. It also offers analysis grounded in gender theory, making it optimal to account for gendered and heteronormative linguistic patterns used to discuss sex and sexual consent.

## 3. Scope of the Study

Many scholars have explored the various hypocrisies and double-standards of prevailing sexual consent discourses (Burkett & Hamilton 2012; Beres 2007; West 2002), as well as how they undermine gender minorities and exclude asexual people (Van Houdenhove 2014). These scholars' arguments do not, however, utilize analysis informed by any linguistic theory. This paper analyzes popular sexual consent discourses through the lenses of Conceptual Metaphor Theory and discursive constructivism, looking for specific metaphors that surface frequently in the way real people discuss sex and consent. Rather than rely entirely on secondary accounts of consent discourse, I will analyze responses gathered through an anonymous survey.

### 3.1 *Positionality*

In terms of my own positionality to this research, I am a 19-year-old white, cisgender woman. I identify as a lesbian and am still figuring out where I fall on the asexual spectrum. I undertake this project with Boveda & Annamma's (2023) framework of positionality as methodology in mind, understanding and considering how my identity and personal biases might impact each step of my data collection and analysis. Especially when considering the dangers of cherry picking in discourse analysis and misrepresenting the language of my participants, I

actively examine my positionality to this research not only as I write this statement, but during every part of my analysis.

### 3.2 *Metaphors for Analysis*

In reviewing sexual consent literature, I chose three frequently recurring metaphors to analyze: CONSENT IS A CONTRACT, SEX IS A TRANSACTION, and EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS. I argue that while these metaphors themselves are not necessarily harmful, the language they lend themselves to reflect gendered, pernicious conceptions of sex which ostracize and devalue gender minorities, queer people, and asexual people. I also argue that even 'progressive' views of consent fall back on these language patterns which, according to the tenets of CMT, suggests deep, internalized metaphorical conceptions of sex and sexual consent. In an effort to be as methodologically sound as possible, I did not consider any metaphors outside of the three I set out to analyze in the beginning.

### 3.3 *Research Question*

This paper seeks to answer the question: *how do recurring conceptual metaphors in sexual consent discourse reinforce heteropatriarchal, allonormative hierarchies of sex?*

## 4. Findings in Literature

Using CMT-informed discourse analysis that critically examines the language used in the sexual consent literature cited in this paper (namely Muehlenhard et al. 2016; Burkett & Hamilton 2012; Beres 2007; West 2002; Van Houdenhove et al. 2014), I identified three possible conceptual metaphors worth exploring. First, that CONSENT IS A CONTRACT: using legal language as a source domain for conceptualizing the abstract nature of consent. This metaphor is reinforced by the legal conceptualization of consent, where consent is an act of explicit agreement (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). This metaphor can be identified in statements such as "in consensual [BDSM] relationships, consent is often *negotiated explicitly*" (emphasis added, Muehlenhard et al. 2016:462) and "demonstrate that [men] *obtained* women's consent" (emphasis added, Beres 2007:102), where contractual terminology such as *explicit negotiation* is used to discuss sexual consent, and consent is something that is *obtained* or 'acquired'.

Another prominent metaphor in sexual consent discourse is SEX IS A TRANSACTION or ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS, both of which fall under a larger umbrella metaphor of DATING IS AN ECONOMY. These metaphors construct romantic relationships as transactional, using market language as a source domain for conceptualizing romantic and sexual relationships. Some examples of these metaphors are when sex is positioned as "a normal way of *'paying dues'* for [women's] flirtatious behavior" (emphasis added, Burkett & Hamilton 2012:823), a woman "allow[ing] her partner to have sex with other women, so she would not have to engage in sexual behaviors" (Van Houdenhove et al. 2014:273), or referring to being single as being "on the market" (Fetters and Tiffany 2020). In these cases, sex is positioned as something that is owed in exchange for attention, romantic love, or respect; relationships are

constructed as inherently allosexual and transactional, and people are framed as commodities to be purchased and used. The SEX IS A TRANSACTION metaphor suggests an "'economy of sex' in which women exchange sex for the intimacy, love, and commitment" they seek in romantic relationships, offering sexual access to their bodies in exchange for the emotional satisfaction of their partners (Gavey 2005, as cited in Burkett & Hamilton 2012:825-826).

The last metaphor I will introduce is not only found in sexual consent discourse, but is also attested to throughout multiple sources as a primary conceptual metaphor (Gibbs 2011:536; Grady 1997a:17; see also Lakoff & Johnson 1980:127): EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS, or simply INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS. This metaphor uses language relating to physical proximity as a source domain for discussing or justifying emotional intimacy, such as in the statements "having sex with her partner [is] a way of *showing her love* for him" (emphasis added, Van Houdenhove et al. 2014:271) and "engag[ing] in sexual relations *out of feelings of love* because…'it's just what you do' in a relationship" (emphasis added, Burkett & Hamilton 2012:825). Sex is the closest people can physically get to each other, and this larger degree of physical closeness is almost inextricably conflated with a higher degree of emotional intimacy. Of course, although these are often understood similarly, they are not the same, as we can see from hookup culture and asexual romantic relationships. The INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS metaphor influences people to consent to undesired sex because of the supposed increased emotional intimacy it fosters, even when, for a sex-averse or -repulsed person, this may actually have "diminished their feelings for a partner" (Van Houdenhove et al. 2014:274).

## 5. Methodology

To investigate my research question, I formulated and distributed an anonymous survey, via Qualtrics, to elicit how individual people conceptualize and discuss consent. The survey began with an informed consent page explaining that the questions would contain sensitive content pertaining to sex, consent, and assault: participants could stop participating at any time and were not required to answer any questions they did not wish to answer. Participants were required to select that they understood this information and wished to continue twice before the survey progressed.

This led to a series of ten multiple-choice questions and six free-response questions (see Appendix). Each multiple-choice question included a statement about either sexual consent or the nature of sex followed by a 7-point Likert scale, asking participants to rate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the statement. These questions were meant to gauge the range of beliefs about consent going into the free-response section, as well as focus participants' attention on the content of their beliefs (rather than the language they use to describe it). Additionally, I supposed that putting a series of lower-effort questions at the beginning of the survey might increase respondent submission rates: opening a survey to a series of longform free-response questions might prompt a potential respondent to click away, while they may be more inclined to finish after already progressing through one portion of the survey.

After the multiple-choice section, participants were shown six free-response questions about either sexual consent or sex in relationships for which they could write as little or as much as they desired:

1. How would you define sexual consent?
2. What is the role of sex in a romantic relationship?
3. How is consent navigated in the context of a romantic relationship?
4. How do you navigate communicating your own consent and understanding others' consent?
5. Would you say people of different genders have different ways of communicating consent? How so?
6. Would you say people of different sexual orientations have different ways of communicating consent? How so?

With these questions, I aimed to qualitatively analyze how people discuss sexual consent in their own words. In this paper, I will use these responses to analyze the metaphorical language respondents used, not to analyze the content of their understandings of consent.

The final section of the survey consisted of demographic questions: namely the participant's age, gender, sexual orientation, and whether or not they are currently a student at Swarthmore College. I did not ask for participants' specific educational background, sexual experience, or anything more in the interest of the survey feeling truly anonymous. At the time the survey closed, I had received 116 responses. The age range of respondents was 18-76 years old, though ages were highly concentrated around college-age. 22% of respondents identified themselves as men, 53% as women, and 25% as non-binary or gender non-conforming (GNC); 26% of respondents identified as sexually straight, and 74% as non-straight. 50% of respondents were current students at Swarthmore. Finally, of the 116 total respondents, 97 chose to respond to at least one of the free-response questions.

To analyze this data, I performed the same CMT-informed discourse analysis I used to analyze literature on the responses I received for the survey's free-response questions. This time, though, I took methodological inspiration from Luporini's 2021 study on conceptual metaphors in news publications, where she used specific code words for each metaphor to speed up the process of hand-analyzing large amounts of data. As such, I coded for the italicized and isolated words under each metaphor in §4:

Code words for CONSENT IS A CONTRACT
- negotiation
- parties involved
- explicit agreement
- obtain/acquire
- revoke/withdraw

Code words for RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS
- give/receive or description of giving and receiving
- exchange or description of exchange

Code words for EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS
- equating sex with love
- bonding/trust

This strategy was simply used to speed up the process; I still reviewed each response to make sure that the code word was used in a metaphorical way, and reviewed those that did not use the code words to check if they referenced the metaphor in a different way. I then isolated responses which exemplify the conceptual metaphors that I identified in literature.

I then recorded the number of participants that referenced each metaphor *at least once across all six free-response questions*. This metric is not a perfect measurement: for participants who answered all six questions, there exist six separate entries for them to have referenced the metaphor, while for participants who only answered one question, there is just one. This is just one method of quantifying the prevalence of these metaphors.

## 6. Findings in Data

**6.1** *General Findings: Multiple-Choice Questions*

Multiple-choice responses were fairly consistent across the board, and also generally in line with perspectives of sexual consent informed by the tenets of the #MeToo movement (see Fig. 1). With the exception of a few outliers, most participants reported that:
- Not saying no **is not** consent for sexual intercourse. (98.3%)
- Flirting with sexually explicit dirty talk **is not** consent for sexual intercourse. (95.7%)
- Saying 'yes' **is** consent for sexual intercourse. (77.4%)
- Going home with someone **is not** consent for sexual intercourse. (99.1%)
- Consent **must** be given at each step of a sexual encounter. (87.9%)
- Romantic love **does not** warrant sex in return. (81.8%)
- If you are dating, you **do** have to obtain consent every time you have sex. (86.2%)
- Sex **is not** the most important part of any romantic relationship. (87.9%)
- Consent for sex one time **is not** consent for future sex. (97.4%)

However, for one question, there was no clear consensus:
- Sex is vital to a healthy romantic relationship. (34.5% agree; 46.5% disagree)

This discrepancy is likely because of differences in interpretation: it's possible that some participants interpreted the question in terms of their own preferences, and others interpreted it in terms of relationships in general.

This data positions the majority of my participants as having so-called 'progressive' views on sexual consent; that is, they reflect the affirmative perspective on consent that has become a vital aspect of third wave feminism (Beres 2007; Bergen 2006). This suggests that any metaphorical language they use in the free-response questions is not a consequence of explicitly androcentric perspectives on consent, but instead likely reflects underlying systemic inequalities in social discourse at large.
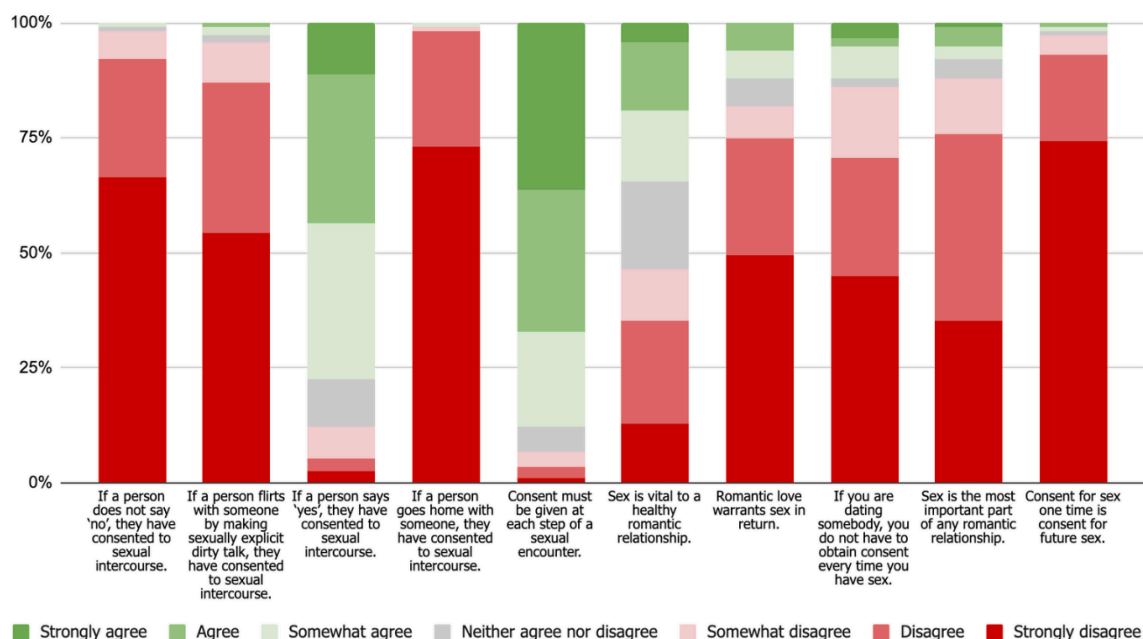
**Figure 1. Aggregated responses to multiple-choice questions.**

**6.2** *Findings by Metaphor: Free-Response Questions*

Using CMT-informed discourse analysis, I recorded the number of participants that referenced each metaphor. In the end, I found that 77% of respondents referenced CONSENT IS A CONTRACT, 64% referenced RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS, and 73% referenced EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS at least once across all free-response questions. Selected examples can be found in the following three subsections, which are presented by metaphor.

**6.2.1** CONSENT IS A CONTRACT

CONSENT IS A CONTRACT was the most prevalent among the three conceptual metaphors, referenced by a staggering 75 out of 97 respondents. Even in the context of an informal survey, where many respondents used no punctuation, texting abbreviations, and even emojis, 77% of respondents used formal, contractual terminology to discuss sexual consent at least once. Below are selected excerpts of some responses that reference CONSENT IS A CONTRACT (emphases added), all responding to free-response question 1, "how would you define sexual consent?":

> "Depending on pre-existing boundaries, [consent is] a **verbal contract agreed upon** by both **parties** to engage in certain levels of sexual activity"
> *-21 year old, nonbinary, queer*

> "Sexual Consent is when both **parties** have agreed to let either **party** to give the **sexual act**. As well as both **parties** understand what **sexual acts** with be done."
> *-19 year old, cis woman, straight*

"Enthusiastic, non-coerced, freely given **affirmative** to a **sexual act** with an understanding of what is happening or will happen, which can be **revoked** or changed at any time"

*-21 year old, cis woman, bisexual*

"A **firm and unequivocal** positive response to a **direct question/offer**"

*-21 year old, nonbinary, queer/asexual*

"The **willingness** of all **parties involved** to **conduct** a **sexual act**"

*-20 year old, cis man, gay*

These responses (and many others) use explicit contractual and legal language to define sexual consent. Though the vast majority of participants did reference this metaphor, 23% did not. To illustrate this, and the difference between a response that does and does not reference a given metaphor, below are selected excerpts of responses that do **not** reference CONSENT IS A CONTRACT:

"An enthusiastic yes, but I think there are also nonverbal cues that when someone has a consistent partner they can pick up on"

*-19 year old, cis woman, queer*

"Yes or na"

*-19 year old, cis man, straight*

"A definite yes with full conscious awareness of saying yes"

*-22 year old, cis man, gay*

"Open dialogue throughout the experience. If no comes up at any moment, from kissing to intercouurse [sic], no means no."

*-56 year old, cis woman, bisexual/pansexual*

"An enthusiastic yes to having sex in the moment"

*-18 year old, genderqueer, lesbian*

These responses do provide working definitions of consent (mostly), but do not use any legal terminology or contractual metaphors to get that point across. It is therefore worth investigating why 77% of respondents might have chosen to use legal and/or contractual language to define consent, even if their definitions of consent are what many would refer to as 'progressive'.

**6.2.2** RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS

Though I did not find any specific references to DATING IS AN ECONOMY (such as 'on the market'), 62 out of 97 respondents referenced the sub-metaphor RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS. 64% of responses thus used transactional language to describe sex or romance in relationships. Below are selected excerpts of responses that reference RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS (emphases added). Unless otherwise specified, responses are from free-response question 2, "what is the role of sex in a relationship?":

> "A **consummation** of the relationship; pure intimacy and trust, alongside pleasure and sexual release."
>
> *-20 year old, cis man, bisexual/pansexual*

> "Sex in a relationship is **a means of further maintaining and establishing** intimacy. It serves to **reach mutual pleasure**, and help create a sense of closeness."
>
> *-20 year old, cis woman, lesbian*

> "Sex for many is **a tool for expressing love**, ie [sic] physical affection."
>
> *-21 year old, nonbinary, bisexual/queer*

> "I talk about consent and try my best to communicate **what I want and what the other person wants**."
>
> *-20 year old, cis woman, lesbian*
> *FRQ 4, "How do you navigate communicating your own consent and understanding others' consent?"*

> "It's a way for people to **connect and serve each other**"
>
> *-20 year old, cis woman, lesbian*

> "it's an **activity that can help create** intimacy, bonding, stress relief, and **other social benefits**"
>
> *-21 year old, genderqueer, asexual/queer*

These responses use transactional language to describe sex in relationships, whether expressing that sex is a tool or means of establishing love in a relationship, balancing wants on either end of a transaction, or even a necessary expense in order to legitimize a relationship (i.e. "consummation"). In the same fashion as with §6.2.1, below are selected excerpts of responses that do **not** reference RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS (again, all responding to "what is the role of sex in a relationship?") to demonstrate the 36% of respondents who did not invoke such language:

> "Pretty important. It is such a great way for intimacy and I think that having a relationship be deprived of it is a major turn off for me."
>
> *-19 year old, cis woman, straight/queer*

"Totally dependent on each individual relationship."

> *-53 year old, cis woman, bisexual/pansexual*

"Bonding + for children"

> *-26 year old, cis woman, straight*

"sex is beautiful and emotional and fun -- it's a source of joy and closeness. make you feel connected, relaxed, happy in your body, allows you to explore parts of yourself and your inner life with the help of a partner."

> *-20 year old, cis woman, lesbian*

"Fun"

> *-48 year old, cis woman, bisexual/asexual*

These responses once again answer the question with similar information, but do not use transactional language in their descriptions. The responses that do reference RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS do not necessarily paint conservative viewpoints of sex in relationships; in fact, many describe sex as a process of emotional and physical exchange in a way that positions each partner as equal and deserving of enjoyment. Still, these explicit descriptions of sex and relationships as sites of exchange continue to reference a metaphor that has long been used in androcentric contexts, such as the classic trope of women giving sex to men in exchange for emotional support and romantic love. This is not to say that the participants using this language are necessarily practicing sex in androcentric ways, but rather that androcentric language is the widespread norm for discussing sex.

### 6.2.3 EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS

Finally, as suggested by the literature reviewed, respondents did tend to associate and conflate sex with increased emotional connection, reinforcing the metaphor INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS. 71 out of 97 respondents (73%) described sex or the purpose of sex in terms of the increased emotional intimacy it fosters. Because this metaphor is deeply ingrained in the way we societally think about sex and romance, these references were typically quite explicit, with respondents very directly conflating sex with emotional intimacy. Below are selected excerpts of responses that reference INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS (emphases added), all in response to free-response question 2, "what is the role of sex in a relationship?":

"sex is a pleasurable but trustful experience. it's an act that **validates physical and emotional trust** in each other."

> *-20 year old, cis woman, straight*

"it really depends on the role of relationship [sic] and how important sex is to each person in the relationship. but i think mostly for fun and as a way of **deepening the emotional bonds** between people"

*-18 year old, trans man, gay/bisexual/queer*

"Sex is **a form of intimacy**. Same as holding hands if kissing. It's a way to show the parties are **romantically connected**. It also should feel good to have sex with your partner as a **bonding experience**."

*-19 year old, cis woman, asexual*

"If people interpret sex as an important part to them, it's their opinion. However, sex could be interpreted as a way of **increasing the level of a relationship**"

*-22 year old, cis man, gay*

"An **intimate** role that **defines trust, love and gratitude** with one another"

*-19 year old, woman, straight*

These responses describe sex as an inherently emotionally intimate activity, or at least as one that carries connotations of emotional intimacy. Even a respondent who identifies as asexual stated that it "should feel good to have sex with your partner as a bonding experience," suggesting that sex (physical closeness) and emotional intimacy are deeply internalized as one and the same, or as one necessitating the other. This association is not universal, and is not reflected in every participant's responses: see the following selected excerpts of responses (all responding to free-response question 2) that do **not** reference INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS:

"can be important and crucial to relationships or not a part of romantic relationships for some people"

*-19 year old, genderqueer, lesbian*

"It depends on the relationship - for some it may not be a part of the relationship at all whereas for others the only thing linking them may be that they participate in sexual activities with each other."

*-19 year old, cis woman, bisexual*

"an activity the couple might enjoy partaking in, much like puzzle completion or movie night."

*-22 year old, nonbinary, asexual/queer*

"sex is as important to a relationship as it is to its members. as an allosexual person, i desire sex and would like sex to be part of relationship for me, but it does not define a relationship, isn't necessary, and my experience is not universal"

*-19 year old, cis woman, lesbian*

"Either u tryna get some action, or you're tryna make a kid. Or u jsut [sic] really into eachother [sic] or horny at the time and just start goin HAM"

*-19 year old, cis man, straight*

These responses leave the relationship between sex and emotional intimacy ambiguous, either by framing sex as an activity done for enjoyment's sake or reproduction, or as something whose role simply cannot be broadly defined because it varies so heavily from relationship to relationship. This illustrates how, despite our cultural associations between physical closeness and emotional intimacy, they are not one and the same; the fact that they are so often thought of as such may have isolating consequences for those who fall outside of normative sexual bounds, or even for those who simply do not experience sex and emotional intimacy as necessarily being hand-in-hand.

## 7. Analysis
### 7.1 *Themes for Analysis*

Overall, 77% of respondents referenced CONSENT IS A CONTRACT, 64% referenced RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS, and 73% referenced EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS at least once across all free-response questions. Now, I examine the breakdown of how respondents of different genders and sexualities responded differently to the free-response questions, paying extra attention to the differences between allosexual and asexual respondents (see §7.3.3). While no statistically significant differences were found ($p > 0.005$ for all identity groups compared against the aggregated percentages), it is still worth examining where discrepancies arise, especially considering the small (and thus less statistically reliable) scale of this study. Given that none of the differences were significant, though, my analyses are preliminary and attempts at explanation should these differences emerge significant in a future, larger-scale study.

Additionally, I present responses from the final two free-response questions, which asked participants for metacognitive commentary on how they think perspectives on consent may differ across different genders and sexualities. I then compare these metacognitive responses against the differences in metaphorical language use to see if patterns arise.

### 7.2 *Gender*

Given that the three metaphors reflect gendered and heteronormative perspectives on sex and sexual consent, one might anticipate significant differences in metaphorical language use across gender categories. I found that when comparing the percentages of women, men, and non-binary/GNC participants who referenced each metaphor, CONSENT IS A CONTRACT was referenced much more often by non-binary/GNC participants and women, RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS was referenced slightly less often by women, and INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS was referenced much more often by women (see Fig. 2).
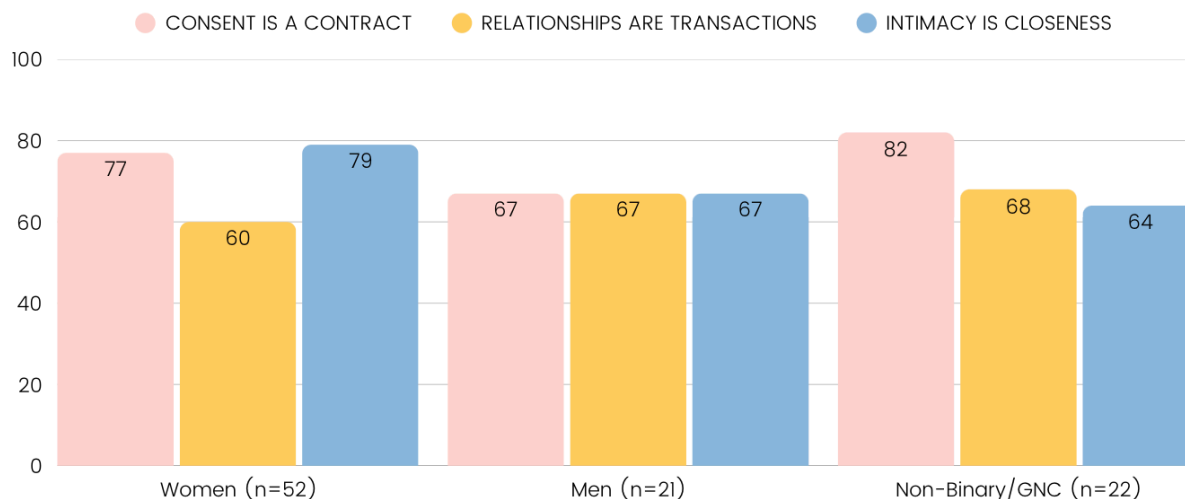
**Figure 2. Percentage of participants who referenced each metaphor, separated by gender.**

For free-response question 5 ("Would you say people of different genders have different ways of communicating and understanding consent? How so?"), participants responded as anticipated, invoking the binary gender stereotypes that men are aggressive and presumptuous when it comes to sex, while women are not (leaving out discussions of non-binary or GNC genders):

> "yes, i think consent is assumed based on flirting / being forward more often for men"
>
> *-21 year old, trans woman, bisexual*

> "Yes. I would think males tend to be the aggressor and not really caring about consent. While females would want to be asked."
>
> *-cis man, straight*

> "Yes. I find that men are generally unaware of consent and think talking or flirting or even eye contact suggest consent and wanting "more". They also seem confused when consent is revoked and don't understand that they should stop. Women are generally more understanding and aware of consent and changing ones [sic] mind"
>
> *-21 year old, cis woman, lesbian*

> "Yes. Women are more direct. Men tend to make assumptions."
>
> *-76 year old, cis woman, straight*

When it comes to men and women, the free responses align well with the normative stereotypes regarding heterosexual relationships. The overrepresentation of women compared to men for the CONSENT IS A CONTRACT metaphor may be explained by women's (perceived) directness or concern and awareness about consent (Beres 2007). Meanwhile, women's underrepresentation and overrepresentation for RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS and

INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS, respectively, aligns with the stereotype that women want love and connection in relationships, while men want sex (Tessler & Winer 2023); therefore, women may be socially conditioned to idealize relationships as less transactional than men do and have a stronger association between sex and emotional intimacy.

What is more difficult to fit into the picture are non-binary/GNC participants' responses, given their absence from the metacognitive free-response questions (simply because, despite the fact that the question was open-ended, none of my participants referenced their conception of non-binary/GNC sexual perspectives). Specifically, it is interesting that they align with women in their overrepresentation for CONSENT IS A CONTRACT, but with men in their over- and underrepresentation for the other two metaphors. The former case is accounted for nicely by Butler's discursive constructivism, where hegemonic norms are maintained through exclusion and othering (1993); to them, 'the feminine' is constituted not just by women, but by those who are not included under normative conceptions of 'masculine'. Therefore, non-binary and GNC participants may relate to women's experiences with sex and consent not because they are similar to women, but because like women, their genders are disidentified simply as 'non-men'. In this way, contractual definitions of consent may also serve to protect non-binary and GNC people from being taken advantage of during sex.

For RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS and INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS, however, this logic seems to fail, since non-binary and GNC respondents do not align with those of women. A possible explanation for this is the fact that more women participants than non-binary/GNC participants identified themselves as sexually straight (16 versus 0, respectively). It is possible that the experience of heterosex in particular has a pointed influence on how participants might invoke these two metaphors, especially because both metaphors deal more directly with the experience of sex within romantic relationships. The specifics of how sexuality and metaphor use interact are elaborated on in the following section (§7.3).

**7.3** *Sexuality*
**7.3.1** *Straight versus Non-Straight*

Much like with gender categories, there is reason to anticipate a difference in how those with different sexualities might utilize metaphorical language differently to discuss sex and sexual consent. My findings reveal that, comparing straight versus non-straight respondents, non-straight respondents referenced all three metaphors at an elevated rate (see Fig. 3).
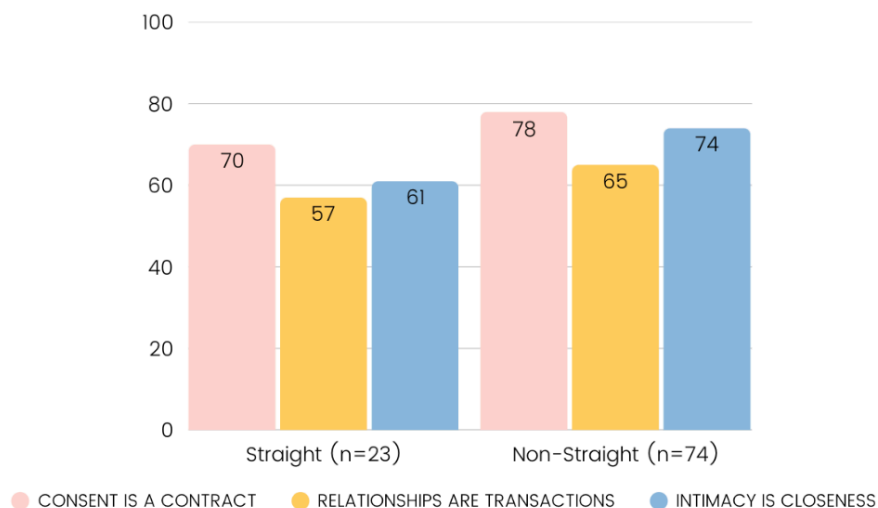
**Figure 3. Percentage of participants who referenced each metaphor, separated by straightness.**

For free-response question 6 ("Would you say people of different sexual orientations have different ways of communicating and understanding consent? How so?"), I hypothesized that respondents would answer along similar stereotypical lines as for the first question, this time reflecting the stereotype that queer people have more nuanced definitions and conversations surrounding sexual consent than straight people. And for queer respondents, this was the overwhelming response I received:

"i think queer people have a more nuanced relationship to sex and consent. queer sex seems less clear on what it is, which means communicating what happens might feel more important."

*-19 year old, cis woman, lesbian*

"in my experience straight people are less likely to ask for / explicitly grant consent"

*-21 year old, trans woman, bisexual*

"Stereotypically, I'd say queer people are better at understanding the nuance of consent and accepting a wider range of relationship models with different degrees or types of sex."

*-21 year old, cis woman, bisexual*

"i would think lgbtq+ people would be more focused on consent than the average straight person"

*-20 year old, cis woman, bisexual*

"Yes. Generally queer people have a different idea of consent due to the large amount of discussion about sexual health and wellness within the queer community, which is something that straight people generally do not see as often."

*-21 year old, non-binary, bisexual/queer*

Interestingly, though, none of my straight respondents identified a strong difference between queer and straight consent communication. Instead, respondents wrote either that there is not a difference or indicated that they are unsure:

"I am not sure, but I think consent is generally the same for all sexual orientations."

*-18 year old, cis man, straight*

"I don't feel that I have enough knowledge to speak on this."

*-20 year old, cis woman, straight*

"Yes?"

*-19 year old, woman, straight*

"No"

*-57 year old, cis woman, straight*

"I have no clue, I am a girl who has only ever had sex with straight (as far as I know) men"

*-19 year old, cis woman, straight*

"Don't know."

*-60 year old, cis woman, straight*

It seems, then, that queer respondents had strong feelings regarding the differences between straight and queer understandings of consent, while straight respondents either did not feel strongly, had never taken the time to consider that there might be a difference, or truly did not know. In terms of conceptual metaphors, non-straight respondents referenced all three more often than straight respondents (see Fig. 3). While this makes sense for CONSENT IS A CONTRACT since queer people (are perceived to) approach consent more explicitly than straight people, it still seems counterintuitive for the second two metaphors.

One theoretical possibility for this finding is that non-straight respondents may have more experience with discussing sex and sexual consent, exposing them more directly to normative consent language, while straight respondents may not think or talk about it often (as suggested by their free-response answers). Because they experience the heterosexual matrix as dominant, subject beings, straight people generally do not have to consider their positionality toward sex at all; non-straight people, on the other hand, constitute the abject and have no choice but to experience the othering nature of queerness (Butler 1993). As subject beings are materialized via the disidentification of the abject, abject beings become necessarily aware of the terms of what constitutes the subject. In other words, queer people are well aware of how they do not fit the norms of heterosexual culture, prompting them to discuss sex and sexual consent in more detail

and depth than those who have never had to think about it. Therefore, non-straight utilization of the second two metaphors may be an example of using dominant language as an attempt to linguistically legitimize queer and non-normative sexual experiences by bringing them into the dominant domain of understanding.

**7.3.2** *Allosexual versus Asexual*

When comparing allosexual versus asexual respondents, I found that asexual respondents are overrepresented in referencing CONSENT IS A CONTRACT and RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS, but underrepresented in referencing INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS (see Fig. 4).
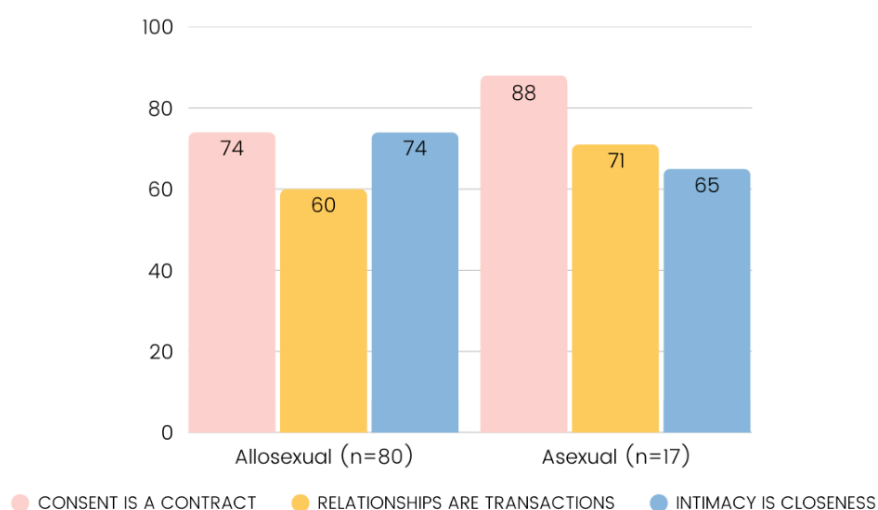


**Figure 4. Percentage of participants who referenced each metaphor, separated by asexuality.**

It is likely that asexual respondents referenced CONSENT IS A CONTRACT more than allosexual respondents because they may better understand the importance of recognizing the refusal of sex: legal conceptions of assault and rape are meant to protect those who do not consent to sex, such as (some) asexual people (Butler 2012). For RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS, sex is more likely to be viewed as a reluctant part of a transactional romantic relationship for asexual people who do not get enjoyment out of sex themselves (Van Houdenhove et al. 2014). And, for INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS, asexual people likely have a decreased association between physical closeness and emotional intimacy from personal experience, since they understand that sex and romance can be disentangled from each other in relationships (Nimbi et al. 2024).

It's true that asexual respondents did still reference the same metaphors at a similar rate as allosexual respondents—although it was a lower percentage, almost two-thirds of asexual respondents still referenced the INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS metaphor. However, many used additional discursive strategies to maintain a distinctly asexual identity within the context of their responses. In particular, asexual respondents tended to (1) qualify their responses by mentioning they are asexual, (2) depersonalize their responses with 'most/some people…', and (3) use

partner-first language, prioritizing their partners' desires in describing sex and romance. Examples of each of these strategies in action are below (emphases added).

*Strategy 1: Qualify response by mentioning one's asexuality*
"**As an asexual person**, I consider sexual intercourse to have a fairly small role in a relationship..."

*-23 year old, genderqueer, asexual/queer*

"**As a sex-averse aroace individual**, I interpret sex in a relationship as a means to connecting with another person (or persons)."

*-31 year old, cis woman, asexual*

*Strategy 2: Depersonalize response with 'most/some people…'*
"**For some relationships**, [sex] provides intimacy, closeness, pleasure, and fun between people."

*-27 year old, cis woman, lesbian/asexual*

"[Sex is] something **some people** do for their own satisfaction and the satisfaction of their partner"

*-cis man, asexual*

*Strategy 3: Use partner-first language, prioritizing partners' desires*
"as an asexual [sex] is about communicating with **the allo persom [sic] using their love language**"

*-24 year old, genderqueer, asexual/bisexual*

"Most people are sexually attracted to their romantic partner, so they would want to have sex with them to **satisfy their sexual needs without turning somewhere else**"

*-29 year old, cis woman, asexual*

The use of these discursive strategies can be interpreted as an act of resistance against the hegemonic normalization of metaphors such as EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS. Indeed, if we have the power to discursively construct certain metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson 1980) and social (Butler 1993) realities, asexual respondents demonstrate the ability to simultaneously assert themselves as competent members of our compulsorily sexual society through the use of normative language, while still subtly distancing themselves from a personal affiliation with such values (Hart-Brinson et al. 2024).

## 8. Discussion
Overall, the language used in the responses to the survey were extremely consistent with the conceptual metaphors I identified in literature. While some respondents did not reference any of the conceptual metaphors I investigated, most respondents referenced at least one metaphor,

and some respondents referenced all three. The prevalence of these metaphors among casual sexual consent discourse is significant, and it is worth considering the implications of what the widespread use of metaphorical language suggests for how people conceptualize sex and consent.

The CONSENT IS A CONTRACT metaphor was the most prevalent in my findings, with 77% of respondents referencing it in some way across the free-response questions. Even in the context of an informal survey, respondents very frequently used formal, contractual language to discuss sexual consent, which correlates with the increased degree of nuance women began demanding about definitions of consent during the rise of third-wave feminism (Muehlenhard et al. 2016; Beres 2007; Kitzinger & Frith 1999; Bergen 2006). Using formal, legal terminology to discuss consent, even outside of legal contexts, reinforces the need to take consent seriously, as well as leaves less room for misunderstanding. Referencing CONSENT IS A CONTRACT may have thus evolved out of a need to better protect women who do not consent to sex and are too often not believed by men and failed by the legal system (Butler 2012; Kitzinger & Frith 1999; Beres 2007). In this way, CONSENT IS A CONTRACT reinforces the normative gendered power dynamics of heterosex, such that (1) women give consent to men and (2) men do not take non-legal definitions of consent seriously.

Similarly, the RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS metaphor, referenced by 64% of respondents, plays into the heteronormative transactional romantic relationships stereotype that women 'give' sex to men in exchange for love and emotional support. The idea that sex is expected in exchange for the non-sexual benefits of a romantic relationship is tacitly supported by the infamous 'just say no' approach to consent, where consent is assumed until actively revoked. Because relationships are conceptualized as transactional, a 'yes' to sex is expected when a partner expresses love and affection, and the burden of saying 'no' or vocalizing discomfort is placed on those who do not consent to sex, even though that discomfort may be difficult to verbalize due to allonormative discourses of consent (Van Houdenhove et al. 2014; Gressgård 2014). These transactional dynamics are reinforced by the societal reification of capitalism; the so-called 'sexual economy' thrives because pervasive capitalistic narratives are heavily ingrained in how people think about meeting their needs: material, financial, and also sexual (Fetters & Tiffany 2020; West 2002). Although many respondents acknowledged both that sex is not essential to all romantic relationships and that consent to sex is not guaranteed solely because people are dating, normative assumptions prevail, namely that (1) consent exists until revoked and (2) sex is an integral part of dating and is exchanged for love and affection. This positions asexuality as a 'failure of gender', such that asexual people fail to perform to the expectations of normative men and women in transactional, heterosexual relationships (see §2.2; Butler 1993; Gressgård 2014).

Finally, the EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS metaphor, abbreviated here to simply INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS, was referenced by 73% of respondents, reflecting its intense permeation in everyday speech. Indeed, the terms 'intimate' and 'close' could in many cases be accepted synonymously; 'being intimate' with somebody may even suggest having sexual

relations with them (Merriam-Webster), which attests to the pervasiveness and linguistic fossilization of this metaphor. Despite its ubiquity, the use of this conceptual metaphor is still allonormative, suggesting that the more physically close a person is to their partner (with sex being the closest one could possibly get), the more emotionally close they must be as well. The notion that emotional intimacy cannot exist without physical contact, or that the deepest emotional intimacies cannot exist without sex, supports the hegemonic exclusion of asexual people, many of whom have deeply fulfilling romantic (or platonic) relationships without sex. Yet, 73% of all respondents referenced INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS, including 65% of asexual respondents. Asexual women in Van Houdenhove et al.'s study exhibited a similar cognitive dissonance of the need for sex to legitimize a romantic relationship versus their desires to have one without it (2014). Thus, the notion that INTIMACY IS CLOSENESS points toward a pervasive allonormative rhetoric that systematically excludes asexual people from who is allowed to have fulfilling romantic relationships.

## 9. Limitations

This study is limited both in its size and scope. While I am satisfied with the number of responses I received in terms of the intellectual labor I was prepared to undergo with this project, 116 total participants severely limits the generalizability of my findings.

Additionally, I did not control for (sexual) educational background beyond whether or not respondents were current students at Swarthmore College. It is possible that people who received comprehensive sex education in middle/high school, students at liberal arts colleges, or students in higher education in general may have been taught more nuanced definitions of consent than others. This may have inflated the number of responses referencing CONSENT IS A CONTRACT, since contractual terminology is likely correlated with more recent feminist perspectives on consent, and deflated the number of responses referencing RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS, since transactional perspectives on relationships are problematized in recent comprehensive sexual education curricula.

Finally, the majority of my free-response questions did have a clear focus on sex in relationships, which may have inflated the number of responses referencing EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS. It is not unreasonable to suspect that sex might be associated with emotional intimacy in the context of a relationship, but not outside of one. The reason I chose to focus on romantic relationships in my free-response questions is because I was interested in exploring the tensions asexual people in particular experience when navigating (lack of) sex in romantic relationships. This goal could have been met further had I included questions that explicitly gauged attitudes about the legitimacy of non-sexual romantic relationships.

## 10. Suggestions for Future Research and Applications

A possible continuation of this research could be to explore its application to something tangible, such as sexual consent education curricula. While this study focused on the discussion of sex and consent at large, not necessarily within the context of sexual education, the same

frameworks (CMT and Butlerian discursive constructivism) and research question might be applied to sex ed curricula. There already exist multiple Butlerian analyses of sex education, finding that heteronormative perspectives on consent do indeed infiltrate education (Hayes et al. 2024), and that realistic teachings of sex and consent would need to be much more nuanced to account for queer, marginalized, and traumatic experiences of sex (Wright & Greenberg 2024). Even baseline discussions of gay and lesbian sex and consent often falls back on heteronormative sexual dynamics of top/bottom, dominant/submissive, and giver/receiver (Phonkaewkate & Piayura 2023). Thus, it would be fascinating to see how this research may influence the understanding or revision of heteronormative sexual education curricula so that they may be more widely applicable to non-cisheterosexual populations.

## 11. Conclusion

While there is ample research available on both Conceptual Metaphor Theory and sexual consent discourse, I have been unable to find any scholarship combining the two (though see Tursunovich 2022 for a more traditional CMT analysis of gender roles). This study attempts to adopt a CMT lens to analyze popular discourses of sexual consent, as well as individuals' own discussions and conceptualizations of sex and consent. I ultimately found evidence in both literature and original survey data for the conceptual metaphors CONSENT IS A CONTRACT, RELATIONSHIPS ARE TRANSACTIONS, and EMOTIONAL INTIMACY IS PHYSICAL CLOSENESS. I argue that these metaphors reinforce heteropatriarchal and allonormative hierarchies of sex through their acceptance of and adherence to gendered, heteronormative dynamics of sex and their systematic exclusion of asexual people from romantic relationships.

If CMT does indeed have merit as a theoretical framework, the idea that people normatively think about consent and sex in these metaphorical ways is both fascinating and useful to understand. That said, even if after reading this paper, one is still unconvinced by the *weak foundation* of CMT, these findings are still relevant and worth investigating. From a Butlerian perspective, whether or not sexual consent discourse is metaphorical doesn't necessarily matter; the language my participants used reflects deeply internalized gendered, hetero- and allonormative perspectives on sex and sexual consent.

## Acknowledgements

**Appendix**

*Multiple-Choice Questions (all of which warrant an answer on a 7-point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, and were presented in random order):*

1. If a person does not say 'no', they have consented to sexual intercourse.
2. If a person flirts with someone by making sexually explicit dirty talk, they have consented to sexual intercourse.
3. If a person says 'yes', they have consented to sexual intercourse.
4. If a person goes home with someone, they have consented to sexual intercourse.
5. Consent must be given at each step of a sexual encounter.
6. Sex is vital to a healthy romantic relationship.
7. Romantic love warrants sex in return.
8. If you are dating somebody, you do not have to obtain consent every time you have sex.
9. Sex is the most important part of any romantic relationship.
10. Consent for sex one time is consent for future sex.

*Free-Response Questions (presented in set order):*

1. How would you define sexual consent?
2. What is the role of sex in a romantic relationship?
3. How is consent navigated in the context of a romantic relationship?
4. How do you navigate communicating your own consent and understanding others' consent?
5. Would you say people of different genders have different ways of communicating consent? How so?
6. Would you say people of different sexual orientations have different ways of communicating consent? How so?

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