

Research Ethics Proposal

Title:

Young adults' consent to heterosexual casual sex

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Introduction

I am seeking ethics approval for my dissertation research project on sexual consent to heterosexual casual sex among seasonal workers in Banff and Jasper Alberta. The study is a qualitative study using a modified grounded theory approach and textual analysis.

Sexual consent plays a pivotal role in discussions and debates about sexual violence. Most often the absence of sexual consent is the defining characteristic of sexual violence (sex without consent). However, sexual consent has received relatively little attention from social science researchers and theorists. Few researchers have attempted to understand what consent consists of or how consent is communicated.

To date, research on sexual consent has focused on the types of behaviours used by university students to indicate consent. Results suggest that consent is most often communicated nonverbally, although little is understood about the type of nonverbal communication, when and how it occurs, or how relationship and situational context influence these nonverbal cues. It is likely that expectations and expressions of consent may be different in established relationships compared with casual sex. Established partners are likely to have established ways of communicating and may be better able to read one another.

In contrast, consent to casual sex may be more contentious and unclear than consent to a regular partner. Partners may be less likely to openly express themselves and less able to read one another's cues. In addition, casual sex often takes place with the use of alcohol, which may affect people's abilities to read and respond to cues from another person and to make well-thought-out decisions. The contentious nature and

“cloudiness” of consent to casual sex relationships make these relationships an ideal place to study sexual consent.

Young adults seem more likely to engage in casual sex while they are away from their home environment (Burrows & Olsen, 1998; Herold, Maticka-Tyndale, & Mewhinney, 1998). Eiser and Ford (1995) refer to this as situational disinhibition, where people feel freer to do things they may not do otherwise while they are out of their regular environment, and away from regular responsibilities and friends. Thus, these types of settings provide good opportunities to study consent to casual sex relationships. In particular, the environment of seasonal workers in Banff and Jasper provides a particularly unique and interesting opportunity to examine this issue. Many young people take summer jobs in Banff and Jasper to experience something new and meet new people over the summer. For many this is the first time they are away from home, and are experiencing new freedoms (Burrows & Olsen, 1998).

The purpose of this research project is to study the culture of seasonal workers in Banff and Jasper to develop theory about sexual consent to heterosexual casual sex, including defining sexual consent, its function and the ways it is communicated. Studying seasonal workers in Banff and Jasper provides a unique opportunity to become involved in an environment conducive to casual sex. This will enable me to gain an understanding of the environmental and situational factors that support and/or promote casual sex and how these factors influence the meaning and communication of consent.

Methods and data collection

I will be using a modified grounded theory approach for this study. I am interested in exploring the different ways that consent is perceived and communicated among young adults. The project is exploratory and inductive in nature.

Data collection will occur in two ways, (1) participant observation and (2) in-depth interviews. Participant observation will include getting to know some people working in Banff and Jasper for the summer and spending time with them during their time off. Each day I will write field notes describing my experiences, observations and conversations including information about the setting and the atmosphere. The field notes will be confidential, although not anonymous. I will likely be spending time with the same people throughout the summer and it may be helpful to follow them through the summer. Pseudonyms will be used during analysis and reporting. If I interview anyone after observing some of his or her behaviour I will not refer to these observations during the interview. I will disclose to participants that I am a researcher and what my research interests are.

I plan on interviewing seasonal workers as well as people who work in various health clinics with seasonal workers. Interview participants will be recruited through my contacts in Banff and Jasper. Interviews with seasonal workers and health professionals will be open-ended and in-depth with a conversational style. The style of the interviews will be similar to the style outlined by Hollway and Jefferson (2000). They use what they call “free association, narrative” interviews. This type of interviewing technique recognizes that the data is co-constructed by the interviewer and interviewee. The focus is on eliciting narratives that are meaningful to the participant. The researcher’s role is

ask open questions that are focused on story telling (For example, “Please tell me about your experiences while working in Banff?”), and to listen to the narrative. Probing questions use the language of the participant and are presented in the order that the narrative followed, preserving the flow and meaning making of the participant.

It is expected that the interviews will take between one and two hours. I will start the interviews with seasonal workers with broad questions about their experiences in Banff, friends they have made, activities they have participated in and partners they have hooked up with. Through conversation I will elicit stories related to their sexual hook ups including their intentions prior to having sex, how they chose a partner, if and how they communicated their intentions to their partners, and how they read their partners’ desires or intentions.

Interviews with health professionals will focus on how they view casual sex among the seasonal workers, how they perceive the culture of the seasonal workers including how it may contribute to casual sex.

The interviews will be tape recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. I might conduct multiple interviews with a single participant throughout the summer.

Ethical Considerations

1. Assessment of harm

a. Observations

The risk to participants in the observation phase of the study is minimal. I will be conducting observations and recording field notes. I will only be observing in places that are public, where there is no expectation of privacy (for example, in

bars, or other public gathering areas). I will record my thoughts, and ideas about the atmosphere as well as some of the types of behaviours I witness.

b. Interviews with seasonal workers

The risk to seasonal workers during the interview is also minimal. Participation in the interview will be completely voluntary. Participants are not required to participate, nor are they required to disclose any specific information. I will not pressure them into providing details they are not comfortable with and they are free to refuse to answer any question. I will explain the voluntary nature of the study to the participants prior to asking for consent to the interview (see attached consent form).

I will be asking participants about their experiences as a seasonal worker including any sexual experiences that occurred while they were in Banff or Jasper. I am only going to ask about their consensual experiences, however, there is a possibility that someone may disclose an experience of sexual violence. This disclosure may be emotionally difficult for them. My work and volunteer experience at a sexual assault centre will enable me to respond in an empathic and understanding way, although I will not attempt any counselling or therapy. Should someone become emotionally upset during the interview, I will stop the interview and I will not leave the person while she or he is distressed. I will subsequently refer the person to a counselling service. I will provide all participants with a list of support organizations to take with them should they become upset after the interview.

While it may be possible for someone to experience some emotional distress during the interview, it is not likely that anyone will experience any physical, social or economic harm during the interview, or as a result of the interview.

c. Interviews with health professionals

The risk to the health professionals I interview will also be minimal. I will not ask them about their personal sexual experiences. I am interested only in their observation of others while working as seasonal workers and their perspective on how casual sex takes place in this environment.

d. Researcher's safety

Steps will be taken to ensure researcher safety during the interview process. Interview locations will be chosen carefully so that the privacy of the participants will be guaranteed while ensuring that I am not in an unsafe situation.

2. Informed and voluntary consent

a. Observations:

Observations will take place in public places, where there are large groups of people. I will not record any information that may potentially identify anyone. I will inform people I'm talking with of my role as a researcher. However, it will not be possible to inform everyone of my role in the public places. It is likely that some of my observations will include people who do not know I am a researcher.

b. Interviews:

Participation in all interviews is completely voluntary. Participants will be given an information page before the interview explaining the purpose of the study (see attached page). I will explain the consent process to each participant at the beginning of the interview and she or he will sign a declaration of informed consent (see attached page).

All participants will be over the age of 18. It may be possible that some people under 18 may be on the working in Banff and may volunteer for the study, however they will be excluded.

3. Anonymity and Confidentiality

Observations:

All observation field notes will be kept strictly confidential. I will be the only one with access my to field notes. I may write down names for continuity, but I will use pseudonyms for all analysis and for writing up the results.

Interviews:

Participants will be guaranteed confidentiality. I will use pseudonyms throughout the analysis process and in any written work or presentations resulting from the research. The results will be an aggregate of all the interviews and data, although it is expected that short quotes from the participants may be used.

Also I will not be linking any of my observations directly with people in the interviews. It is possible that my observations may include the same people that I will interview. I will not create links between these. I will not bring up the observations in my interviews with these participants.

4. Researcher is knowledgeable, trained, and competent

I have various training and experience that has contributed to my ability to conduct this research in an ethical manner. I have taken or audited six research methods courses including three qualitative methods courses. Each of these courses included an ethics component.

I volunteered at the University of Alberta Sexual Assault Centre for four years, for two of the four years I also coordinated the education program. Each year I attended a 48-hour training program that covered issues including how to listen and support someone who has been sexually assaulted. This training provided me with basic crisis intervention skills and the sensitivity to deal with issues of sexual violence.

Finally, as a research assistant I have participated in various research projects with human subjects. These included several studies where I video recorded interviews with participants, and analyzed data from interviews and focus groups.

References

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