"Going with the Flow": How College Men's Experiences of Unwanted Sex are Produced by Gendered Interactional Pressures

Forthcoming in Social Forces

Jessie V. Ford

New York University
295 Lafayette St, 4th Floor
New York, NY 10012
jvford@nyu.edu
404-408-0021

Running Head: Heterosexual Men's Accounts of Unwanted Sex

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Abstract

While scholars are giving greater attention than previously to sexual assault against women, they have ignored the fact that men report unwanted sex as well. This article examines 39 heterosexual men's narratives about their experience of unwanted sex in college. My analysis of these data shows how unwanted sex with women is interactionally produced through a process where men seek to save face and to make sense to others. Unwanted sex relates not only to interactional processes, but also to the content of what is considered acceptable behavior in heterosexual interactions. That is, cultural norms governing gender provide the content for what allows a man to save face, and for his actions to make sense to a female partner. In particular, men consent to unwanted sex because accepting all opportunities for sexual activity is a widely accepted way to perform masculinity. Findings also show that men conduct their sex lives in the shadow of presumed gendered reputational consequences. They fear ridicule if stories are told portraying them as the kind of man who does not jump at any opportunity for sex with an attractive woman. Moreover, it seems that women, as arbitrators of men's sense of self, may play an important role in policing masculinity and upholding gender expectations, at least in undergraduate sexual cultures. Amidst current attention to sexual assault on college campuses, I argue for a closer look at the importance of interaction and the implicit gendered rules of what is considered acceptable and masculine in heterosexual interaction.

Introduction

Decades of research have left us with well-developed frameworks for understanding women's unwanted sexual experiences, but few useful tools to interpret men's accounts of unwanted sex with women. Depending on how survey questions are phrased, somewhere between 7% and 27% of heterosexual men report an unwanted sexual incident during college (DiJulio et al. 2015, Flack et al. 2007, Ford and Soto-Marquez 2016, Peterson et al. 2011). Although far below equivalent estimates for women, these numbers indicate that contrary to common assumptions, some straight college men do have unwanted sex.

Why would a man have unwanted sex with a woman? To date, little research has focused on understanding heterosexual men's unwanted sexual experiences (Peterson et al. 2011, Weiss 2010). Similar research on women shows that their experiences occur along a continuum of

increasing severity ranging from unwanted sex to maintain a relationship, to instances of verbal pressure, to sexual intercourse obtained by incapacitation, threats of force, or use of physical force (Muehlenhard et al. 2016).

While some of these same factors, such as verbal pressure, may push heterosexual men towards unwanted sex, it is also likely that the experiences of men—who are often more physically powerful and more powerful in terms of social status—may differ from women's experiences in important ways. In this paper, I interrogate how it is that men come to have unwanted sex with women. Using a framework that includes theories of interaction and theories of gender, my findings suggest that men are motivated to have unwanted sex through a process where they try to avoid embarrassing themselves or their partner and seek to behave in interpretable ways. These findings also show that women, as arbitrators of men's sense of self, may play an important role in policing masculinity and upholding gender expectations, at least in undergraduate sexual cultures.

Unwanted Sex and Sexual Assault

Scholars argue that there is a meaningful difference between sex that is "unwanted" but not an assault (hereafter just referred to as unwanted), and "sexual assault" (Flack et al. 2007, Muehlenhard et al. 2016, Peterson et al. 2011). With sex that is unwanted but not assault, an individual makes a volitional choice to have sex, but perceives that they could have stopped it. By contrast, with sexual assault or rape, the sex is both unwanted and one perceives they could *not* have stopped it. The men interviewed in this study fall into the former category.[1] Respondents reported that they believed they could have stopped the encounter, but did not for various reasons (e.g. it was awkward, they were drunk) described below.

This difference between sexual assault and unwanted sex that does not rise to the level of sexual assault intersects directly with gender. When women describe experiences of sexual assault, they sometimes recall the situation moving very rapidly from feeling they could trust a man, to thinking that he might kill them (Harned 2005, MacKinnon 2006). This complete feeling of powerlessness is linked to negative outcomes after the assault, such as stress, anxiety and depression (Boyle and McKinzie 2015, Flack et al. 2007). Men who are sexually assaulted by other men also report adverse effects, presumably due to a similar experience of powerlessness, combined with emasculation (Peterson et al. 2011, Weiss 2010). Studies of unwanted sex, however, suggest the consequences can be milder due to individuals' perceived volition in the matter (Flack et al. 2007, Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson and Anderson 2003).

Gender becomes important because is it rare for men to describe sex with women where they felt they could not stop the woman (Muehlenhard et al. 2016, Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson and Anderson 2003). In accounts of unwanted sex, heterosexual men frequently describe women using verbal or psychological pressure. Struckman-Johnson et al. (2003) concludes that women "generally use gentler or less exploitive tactics than men when confronted with a sexual refusal (p. 84)." This finding is important for situating men's experiences along a continuum of coercion. That is, heterosexual men, including those in this study, tend to experience unwanted sex, not sexual assault, and as a result, they often experience less traumatic effects (Peterson et al. 2011).

Theory

Saving Face

When individuals enter into a social interaction, their actions and appearance convey certain information about them (Goffman 1983). We perceive the other, but are also aware of

how the other may perceive us. Goffman (1983) termed this domain of face-to-face interaction the "interaction order." In the interaction order, people use strategies and interaction rituals to save face both for themselves and the other.

During sex, both men and women face certain social expectations. People tend to follow sexual scripts, which dictate sequential events during sex (Gagnon and Simon 2011, Masters et al. 2013). Studies on women's unwanted sexual experiences show that some women describe feeling unable to stop a sexual encounter after it has progressed beyond a certain point (Harned 2005, Hlavka 2016). In one woman's account, she recalls, "*I said no to sex, but he didn't listen, and I finally just went along with it*" (Harned 2005 p. 387). While social expectations embedded in an encounter may push women to go "*along*" with sex, feminists argue that women also have unwanted sex because of an ubiquitous, familiar and sometimes subconscious fear that men can overpower them (Hlavka 2016, MacKinnon 2006). If such a fear is not as pronounced for men, is it possible that interactional expectations are more important than fear in pushing men towards unwanted sex?

Research indicates that even during sex—a very intimate interaction—men and women try to avoid embarrassing ourselves or the other person (Goffman 1983). In order to save face, actors seek to smooth over interactions when they become uncomfortable. Such smoothness exemplifies what Goffman (1959) called the communicative morality of interaction: the general rules about how one is supposed to conduct themselves during interactions. Although this morality is not completely binding—people can still be strategic in certain ways—it nevertheless provides a general map for the "lines" people take up in interaction (Goffman 1967).

This notion of communicative morality applies to men having unwanted sex because once a sexual encounter begins, interactional pressures may make it difficult to stop the

encounter without breaking general rules, i.e. by causing disruption or embarrassing someone. One important point that is often missed in Goffman's work is the idea that normative expectations constitute an important part of communicative morality (Goffman 1959, Goffman 1967). That is, communicative morality implies a more substantive morality, and when the interaction at hand involves heterosexual sex, this is inevitably informed by social norms around gender. For example, turning down a sexual opportunity may make a man lose face precisely because he is a man (Gagnon and Simon 2011, Pascoe 2011).

Making Sense to Others

In addition to acting in ways that save face, during sexual interactions, just as in the rest of social life, actors are also motivated to act in ways that make sense to others. To do this, people generally conform to what is expected (Garfinkel 1967), and in so doing, accomplish upholding a sense of social order in situ.

One specific instance of in situ sense making relates to the notion of "doing gender"—the idea that gender is performed during interactions, and that this performance is assessed based on social norms about gender. West and Zimmerman (1987) argue that, like many features of social order, gender is not a given, but something accomplished in everyday interactions. Individuals cannot prevent the fact that others will hold them "accountable" to behave in ways that "make sense" for their gender. Therefore, people perform gender in order to make sense and be understood. This involves "managing such occasions so that, whatever the particulars, the outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender-appropriate" (West and Zimmerman 1987 p. 135). From this perspective, even if a man does not want to have sex, he might still have it because his behavior will make more sense to the woman, and to others who may hear about the interaction, if he proceeds to have sex.

While West and Zimmerman (1987) describe how people are accountable to their gender, they spend less time discussing the content of the cultural norms governing gender. They do not flesh out what these norms say about how a man should act in order to perform successfully. Importantly, a sexual encounter is a context where gender norms have particular implications for men and women. To understand what men are expected to do during sex, I turn to gender norms.

The Content of Gender Norms

Gender norms are a set of social expectations and ideas about what behaviors are considered acceptable, appropriate or admirable based on a person's actual or perceived gender (Pulerwitz and Barker 2008). As many sociologists of gender have argued, gender is salient and omnipresent in most interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987). In the prior section, I emphasized the processes of saving face and making sense. Of course, these processes can operate in a gender-neutral way; it can be embarrassing if one person suggests something, and the other rejects the suggestion. Thus, either men or women may sometimes go along with unwanted sex because, in a generic sense, it makes more sense to continue the line of action that already started. However, in reality, these processes are usually not gender-neutral. This is because, in addition to whatever generic pressures there may be to continue a line of action, much of what it means to save face or to be understood depends on one's gender.

In many ways, the rules for acceptable behavior are much more rigid and narrow for men than they are for women (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Notions of manhood call for men to be virile and sexually dominant. When (attractive) women provide an opportunity for sex, men should pursue it, driven by their sexual urges, which are presumed to be greater than those of women (Fleming 2017).

While norms of masculinity imply male readiness for sex, these norms also imply that women should want sex less than men. Women are generally expected to be reluctant to have casual sex, and a gendered double standard leads women to be judged more harshly than men when they do have casual sex (England and Bearak 2014, Gagnon and Simon 2011). For a man to turn down a woman's sexual invitation has particular implications. Due to the gendered content of norms, saying no to a woman may make her look "easy," and could be seen as a rejection, or a reflection of her inadequacy as a sexually attractive woman (Schatzel-Murphy et al. 2009, West and Zimmerman 1987).

Much work on hegemonic masculinity suggests that men's behavior is shaped by the desire to impress other men. Boys police each other into acting like men, beginning in early childhood (Pascoe 2011). This policing usually consists of making fun of boys or men that display behavior that could be perceived as weak, cowardly, feminine or gay. The literature often suggests, explicitly and implicitly, that women's opinions of men are of such little value, that there is no need for men to care what women think of them (Carrigan, Connell and Lee 1985, Pascoe 2011, Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Rather, it is the opinions of other men that matter most. Hence, some men may have sex, even when it is unwanted, because of their realistic fear that other men will stigmatize them if they do not.

On occasion, the literature on masculinities discusses the ways that girls and women police the expressions of masculinity among boys and men (Kimmel and Mahler 2003, Pascoe 2011, Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). However, in these studies, men are generally seen as the primary and most consequential audiences for policing masculinity. By underestimating the role of girls and women in policing masculinity, the literature often overlooks women's role in the resiliency of gender inequality. If it is true that boys/men care what girls/women think, then

women's support for diverse performances of masculinity could also challenge hierarchies of masculinity.

Below, I produce descriptions and accounts of a specific event, unwanted sex, using in-depth interviews. I interrogate how it is that men find themselves having unwanted sex. For comparison, I also provide accounts of negative cases, where men are able to successfully avoid unwanted sex. My findings suggest that gender norms combine with generic interactional processes, such as saving face and making sense to others, to lead some men to go along with unwanted sex.

Data and Method

In-depth interviews were conducted with 39 college men at one private university in the northeast who reported unwanted sex with a woman. To identify participants I used two recruitment strategies. 1) Men who reported experiencing unwanted sex in a screening survey conducted in two introductory sociology courses (~250 students each) were recruited for a follow-up interview. 2) Recruitment flyers were placed around campus. These flyers said, "Unwanted sex—Wanna Talk About it? Be part of a study and get paid 25$ for your participation in an interview." In smaller print, the flyers had more detail on confidentiality and eligibility criteria (age 18-25 current/recent student with experience of unwanted sex in college).

Five questions on the in-class survey taken verbatim from the Online College Social Life Survey [2] were used to identify men who had had unwanted sex with women. These included: *Since you started college…*1) *Have you had sexual intercourse that was physically forced on you?* 2) *Has someone tried to physically force you to have sexual intercourse, but you got out of the situation without having intercourse?* 3) *Has someone had sexual intercourse with you that you did not want when you were drunk, passed out, asleep, drugged, or otherwise*

incapacitated? 4) *Have you had sexual intercourse that you did not want because someone verbally pressured you?* 5) *Have you ever performed oral sex or hand stimulation of a partner to orgasm mainly because you didn't want to have intercourse?* [3] Men taking the survey who said yes to one of these questions, and indicated that the experience was with a woman in a subsequent question, were considered eligible. Men recruited via the flyers completed an abbreviated version of the survey before the interview to determine how they would characterize their unwanted sexual experience.

Of the 39 men interviewed, 16 were recruited from the in-class survey and 23 from campus flyers. The average age was 20.08 years old. The modal year in school was sophomore. Sixteen men identified as White, seven as Asian, seven as Latino, four as Black, five as mixed-race or other. Three respondents identified as bisexual (although one had not done anything physically with a man); 36 men identified as heterosexual (two of which reported having had oral sex with a man).

Using an interview guide, I conducted 38 interviews in person and one by phone. Given that I am a white woman in my early 30s, I spent the first 10-15 minutes of interviews trying to build rapport. This involved reassuring the men that interviews were completely confidential, asking questions about their social life, laughing with them if they said something humorous, and generally trying to make them comfortable. I found that most men were eager to talk about their experiences and that my difference in age and gender was not a barrier to frank, open discussions. All interviews were conducted in a private office in the sociology department. The interviews lasted 45 minutes on average with some lasting as long as 2 hours.

Interviews were recorded digitally, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Atlas TI. My coding scheme emerged inductively, using grounded theory as an analytic strategy (Charmaz

2014). Interviews were first carefully read to develop key codes, noting how men accounted for unwanted sex. Next, interviews were repeatedly scanned and coded for emergent themes based on these codes. Themes evident in the primary data were synthesized to produce second-order interpretations within and across interviews (Charmaz 2014). Through this process, theory emerges inductively, so that initial codes generate broader themes and the meaning intended in original interviews is preserved.

During interviews, respondents were asked explicitly about how the unwanted sex unfolded and what made this experience unwanted. Men in my sample almost exclusively used the term "*sex*" to refer to vaginal intercourse. No one in my sample reported unwanted anal sex with a woman. Therefore, throughout this paper I will use the term sex to refer to vaginal intercourse. To ensure confidentiality, I use pseudonyms and have removed any identifying information from the passages quoted.

Findings: College Men's Accounts of Unwanted Sex

College campuses today are much more than a place to get an education. Many institutions now organize academics and extracurriculars in a way that accommodates social life as well as studying (Armstrong, Hamilton and Sweeney 2006). The men I interviewed frequently emphasized the role of "*partying"* when I asked them about their life at school. Several men described binge-drinking alcohol until they "*blacked out,*" or did not remember parts of the night.

Men described positive sexual experiences as those that were fun, spontaneous, comfortable, or where there was chemistry or a connection. Respondents emphasized a sense of freedom in college: to have sex, drink alcohol, be adults, and do what they wanted. Most

participants recalled feeling pressure to lose their virginity by freshman year. Two men in the sample lost their virginity during unwanted sex at college.

What qualifies as unwanted sex for college men? Given the importance of partying and sex in college, I initially suspected most unwanted sexual experiences might be the result of binge drinking and regret. However, the stories that emerged were more subtle and ordinary than expected. Only seven out of 39 men reported being drunk when they had unwanted sex. More often, men had unwanted sex because it seemed easier than saying no. Some men did not want to have sex because they did not feel "*a connection*," it was late, there was no condom, [4] or they wanted to do something physical other than intercourse. Unwanted sex most frequently occurred with women the men did not know well. In my sample, 8 men reported unwanted sex with girlfriends/dates, 9 reported it with a friend or someone they knew well, and 22 reported it with an acquaintance, such as a friend-of-a-friend, that they did not know well.

Interactional Processes and Unwanted Sex

Notable throughout my interviews were the ways men accounted for unwanted sex as something necessary to avoid a problematic interaction. Men gave different reasons for having unwanted sex—some men emphasized not wanting to confuse or hurt women while other men emphasized what others might think of them. Nearly all men, however, explained that being face-to-face with a woman who wanted to have sex created a situation that had to be addressed. Having unwanted sex was one way to manage such a situation. By describing unwanted sex as something that happens to manage the interaction, the men provide insight into the importance of interactional processes during sex.

You said you felt pressure to keep going?

Definitely.

Was that from her?

Yea. I kinda felt...it was me too, based on the situation. Felt like I had to go all the way, it was just necessary.

Necessary?

Yea.

Why not stop it?

It would have felt weird to me. I can't see myself...I don't know. I wouldn't have done that.
-Jeff, 25 year-old senior

Once an interaction has started, interactional processes tend to propel people forward. For Jeff, it seemed "*necessary*" for him to have sex once the interaction progressed in that direction. He could not imagine stopping the sex; it would have been "*weird*" to do so. During sexual encounters, men often described trying to avoid doing things that might be perceived as weird or trying to avoid awkwardness.

I didn't really, like I didn't want to be in that position because it [sex] still was something that was kind of an emotional thing for me. But then, I also didn't want to say anything because I thought it would just be kind of weird.

Weird?

It would make the situation awkward. It would probably deescalate into nothing. That was my perception, correct or incorrect. But, it continued for five or so minutes until she finished and then, it was late at night, so I just went back to my dorm.
- Tyler, 18 year-old freshman

Tyler describes not wanting to necessarily have vaginal sex, but also not wanting to say or do anything that might be perceived as "*kind of weird*." During interviews, I probed to find out what the men meant by weird. For Tyler "*weird*" meant saying something that might make the situation awkward or might make it end abruptly. To avoid making the situation weird, Tyler has unwanted sex.

It was common for men to say that leaving abruptly or stopping the hookup would have created a bad situation. Goffman famously made the claim that people try to keep interactions going smoothly (Goffman 1967). People try to avoid doing things that are embarrassing or upsetting. Moreover, smoothing interactions minimizes the loss of face for all parties involved. When describing sex, male respondents did not talk about uncontrollable biological urges, or powerful female seductresses so much as they described a normative commitment to keep the interaction going smoothly.

What if you'd stopped it?

Yea. She might think I was a little strange.

Strange?

Like she got rejected…I think she would feel weird or surprised.

- Jack, 19 year-old sophomore

Frequently in interviews, men emphasized, as does Jack, that stopping the sex would just be "*strange*." In line with Garfinkel, acting this way would not make sense. It would be surprising to their partner. But, in accordance with Goffman, stopping sex could also be construed as a rejection, resulting in her loss of face. Men consistently described a situational pressure to not make things "*weird*," by "*going with the flow*" or "*riding it out*." This desire for unbroken interactional flow, which seemed so obvious to participants, facilitated not only the coordination of action during the encounter, but also men's participation in unwanted sex.

Markedly, the men that I interviewed often had a good idea of what they wanted to happen sexually during interactions. For example, some men only wanted the interaction to involve kissing, touching, or oral sex. Other men became aware that they did not want to have intercourse, but were unsure how to direct an in-progress sexual encounter to achieve this goal.

While it is true that people often have a general idea of what they would like to happen in an interaction, it is also true that they adjust these goals in the face of disruptions, making ongoing readjustments to smooth social relations (Goffman 1959, Tilly 1996).

> *So, that's when I told her told her like yo…I wasn't that into last night. She says, yeah I could tell but that's what I thought you wanted so I thought I might as well. I said wait, you thought I was pressuring you? She says, Yeah. No I wasn't. You were pressuring me!*
>
> **Was that sex unwanted?**
>
> *I don't think either of us wanted it, but we were in a situation where we didn't communicate. It wasn't rape, but it was unwanted.*
>
> -Jeremy, 18 year-old freshman

In this extreme version of interactional smoothing, it appears that both participants had sex for the other. Jeremy recounts that he did not want to have sex with her, and she did not want to have it with him. The sex was mutually unwanted. As she says to him, "*I thought you wanted to, so I thought as might as well*." If interactional pressures are indeed responsible for unwanted sex, this exactly the kind of "ad absurdum" that we might expect to see. It suggests that once an interaction has started, the desire to keep the interaction running smoothly may be substantial enough that both participants end up doing something unwanted.

Across interviews, two main interactional processes—saving face and making sense—were common features of unwanted sexual experiences. Some men had unwanted sex to save face in an encounter that was becoming uncomfortable. Other men had unwanted sex because it made sense to do so in a progressing sexual encounter. For 21 year-old Adam, it was a case of the former. Unwanted sex begins unfolding after a party. During this party, he kissed a woman who continued to "*hang out*" after the party had ended. At this point it is late at night, and he recalled being tired, somewhat drunk and ready to clean up after the party. In Adam's account, he initially tries to avoid this woman by going downstairs to his room. She proceeds to follow

him downstairs. Next Adam tells her, that the "*party is over*" and "*everyone's left*." In both of these gestures, Adam attempts to strategically and perhaps politely, end the interaction. He recalls, "*She just wouldn't leave.*" Adam did not want to have sex because he was currently interested in another woman. He was also tired from hosting, and it was late.

Their interaction becomes "*generally uncomfortable*" in Adam's words, as she continues to stay. She eventually starts kissing him. She tells him out loud that she "*really wants to have sex*." Adam calculates his options, then makes a conscious decision to "*go through with it*" rather than stopping the interaction. When I ask him why he did not more overtly ask her to leave, Adam says, "*I could have told her to leave, but I didn't. Because, I guess I didn't want to be rude. Yea. I'm not very confrontational. I can't imagine telling her to her face I want her to leave. That would have been harder for me to do [laughs] than going through with it and possibly damaging her. It's kinda shitty when I think about it."* Asking her to leave would have been harder than having sex with her. He thinks this, despite his worry that he may have hurt her feelings by not contacting her afterward. I argue that Adam goes through with unwanted sex because of expectations embedded in that interaction. He cannot imagine asking her to leave or explaining that he does not want to have sex—which might cause them both to lose face—so he has sex to smooth the interaction. Instances where people still try to sustain interactional smoothness, even when sustaining it is disadvantageous to their broader goals, have been documented elsewhere (Gibson 2011, Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). Here, we see it operate to produce unwanted sex.

Existing research suggests that some men exploit the difficultly of disrupting interactional expectations in order to sexually assault women—sometimes very deliberately, or sometimes less consciously (Armstrong, Hamilton and Sweeney 2006, Humphrey and Kahn

2000). For example, work on sexual assault in fraternities shows that men give each other tips (e.g. "working a yes out") on how to create situations where women will be trapped unless they are willing to be rude (Sanday 1990). Of note, most men in this study did not understand that women might have deliberately taken advantage of interactional expectations to get sex. The few men (5 out of 39) who did suspect this were more likely to see the situation as akin to sexual assault. That is, those men who suspected that a woman manipulated the situation (e.g. "*she was in control"*) described feeling "*confused*," "*pissed off"* or even "*emotionally vulnerable"* afterward. Alternatively, men who described the unwanted sex as a result of miscommunication (e.g., "*she didn't know*") reported feeling less affected emotionally. This suggests that an honest misunderstanding feels very different from the realization that one has been maliciously manipulated. Alternatively, if the women in these situations genuinely believed that all men want sex all the time and that little communication is needed to ensure consent, this suggests a need for improved sexual education for young women.

On my paper questionnaire, Adam checks the item indicating he had sex he "did not want" because "someone verbally pressured" him. He describes the sex that night as "*unsatisfying*, "*impersonal*" and "*meaningless*." He says, "*I mean I even faked an orgasm. That was a first. I didn't think guys ever had to do that….even physically like it just wasn't, it didn't feel good enough to make me climax. There was just like nothing there for me*." It appears that to smooth the interaction, Adam feigns the most polite exit of all: a proper climax. This serves to save face for Adam and his partner. By doing this, he ends the sex in an acceptable way—an action in line with traditional sexual scripts, which dictate that sex ends with male climax (Gagnon and Simon 2011).

For Tyler, an 18-year old freshman, it is the third night of school shortly after meeting a woman at a party, that he has sex he describes as unwanted. When he arrives at the party, Tyler is introduced to another freshman woman and they begin making "*small talk*." There is eye contact, flirtation and close sitting. Tyler can tell she is interested. They decide to leave the party together.

Back in the dorm room, the hookup unfolds quickly. Tyler recalls entering the hookup "*thinking I would go down on her, she would go down on me, things would kind of naturally fizzle out, I would go back to my dorm, I would say "it was nice meeting you," maybe get her number."* During the hookup, he reports, "*she just kind of climbed on top and that's when I looked up like "is this happening?" She wasn't looking at me. If there was some eye contact then I might have said something or gestured "can we not do this?" But, her eyes were closed. I was [thinking] "I don't really want to be doing this right now, this wasn't what I had in mind" because I'd only had sexual intercourse twice previously and one of them was with a girlfriend I felt close to.* As the interaction moves from oral to vaginal sex, Tyler has trouble finding a space to communicate that he does not want to do this, especially since her eyes are closed.

When I ask Tyler directly what saying no might have meant, he states that it would be "*weird"* because it would be incongruent with the "*signs*" he had given before.

How do you think she would have interpreted it if you'd said no?

Primarily she would have thought it was weird.

Weird?

Because she would think "this doesn't follow the signs I got before." Beyond that, she might think I never had sex before. I wouldn't want her to think that if it wasn't true. Some of it is posturing.

-Tyler, 18 years old

Since Tyler signaled interest earlier, saying no now might not make sense. It could be confusing, contradictory, or perhaps upsetting to her. Saying no could shift him into a category of "*virgin*," a label he does not desire. Therefore, Tyler does "*posturing*" as someone wanting sex because it makes sense, and also because it saves face for him, as a man, to not be viewed as a "*virgin*."

Tyler's account describes a situational pressure that constrains the options he has during this interaction. It is not clear to him how he can successfully avoid sex without his partner making certain assumptions about him. Importantly, this is not simply a matter of facilitating a pleasant interaction, this is also a loaded interaction. Saying no, or stopping the current interaction could have consequences. Tyler could be perceived as "*weird*" because there could be "*stories*" told about him at school:

> *So I just let it continue. Physically, I thought, this isn't hurting me, I'm not so absolutely averse to it that I am going to shut this whole thing down, and in the back of my mind I'm thinking about this girl telling weird stories about me to her friends. I don't want to be "that guy" where she's like "that guy is weird, I thought we were going to have sex and then…." There's also, it's hard to tell if this was something I was actively thinking of before, but I think it's an undercurrent to my thought-making, is that guys are supposed to enjoy sexual intercourse under any circumstances.*
>
> *I even said "thank you" afterwards even though I didn't really want to have sex. I was still playing the role of someone who wanted to be in that moment. I didn't want to let her...I didn't want to give off any impressions of weirdness. I wanted to stick to the conventional script.*
>
> - Tyler, 18 years old

Tyler also points to the role of gendered expectations for men to always enjoy sex. Objecting to sex risks being seen as abnormal or emasculated. To avoid this, Tyler "*play[s] the role of someone who wanted to be in that moment*" to avoid any "*impressions of weirdness*." He later describes the vaginal sex he had that night as "*unwanted*" and "*non-consensual*" during the interview. On my paper survey, he checks an item indicating that this sex was verbally pressured.

This excerpt hints at a central feature of interaction that I elaborate on in the next section. The substance of what is necessary to save face and to make sense is gendered in profound ways.

The Role of Gender in Interaction

Although I have argued thus far that interactional processes of saving face and making sense are imperative for understanding men's experiences of unwanted sex, it is important to understand that gender is deeply embedded in the interaction order. As the accounts above imply, men frequently drew upon gender expectations and hegemonic ideals of masculinity as an explanation for unwanted sex. These included expectations for men to want sex, to always be ready for it, and to amass sexual experiences with attractive women. In my sample, men described having unwanted sex to project an image, to keep up a reputation, and to take advantage of a sexual opportunity. Men worried that disrupting an encounter could result in them being viewed as a "*pussy*," "*virgin*," "*jerk*" or someone who is "*gay*." It is notable here that these terms are very different from the kinds of terms (i.e. "tease," "prude") applied to women who say no to sex. Men also worried what women thought about them. This finding challenges the assumptions of some gender scholars who argue that women's opinions are of little value to men (Armstrong, Hamilton and Sweeney 2006, Armstrong, England and Fogarty 2012, Pascoe 2011). It suggests that women play a role in adjudicating men's statuses within social groups.

Some men described examples of overtly performing their masculinity through sex. For example, several men reported difficulty maintaining an erection during unwanted sex. Rather than stop the sex however, they reported trying to "*focus*," "*rise to the occasion*" or manually stimulating themselves in order to continue their sexual performance. In an extreme example, one participant fully lost his erection two times, at which point he finally stopped the sex. He explained to me that "*even if I saw this girl again and she told her friends "oh that guy*

couldn't even keep it up," I could live with that more than her saying like "that guy is gay, he didn't even wanna fuck me." For this participant, it was less a failure at masculinity to lose an erection than to turn down sex, which he associates with being "gay."

During a sexual encounter, certain behavior is considered appropriate for a given actor when he is a man. For 19 year-old Max, unwanted sex unfolds as he leaves a party. He is leaving at the same time as a female friend from his dorm, so they leave together. Max explains, "*I did not want to do this [sex]. Not at all. She was a really nice girl. But, I didn't think she was that hot. I'd say she's really attractive…But it just wasn't that type of relationship…it was more like a sister relationship. I never had a sister, but like I would give her advice and stuff, apply for things together. So it was...yea...I dunno, just that*." Contrary to the stereotype that men want sex from women whenever they can get it, Max explains that he was happy with their relationship as friends. Although Max describes her as not "*that hot,*" he tells me she was objectively "*pretty cute*" and "*All of them [his friends] would have had sex with her if they could have but she didn't like any of them*." In the elevator back at the dorm, she begins kissing him. The encounter progresses into sex, which Max describes as "physically forced" on my paper questionnaire. When I probe further, Max clarifies that although the woman did not use physical force, the sex felt as if it were forced on him by the situation.

You said you have had sex forced on you...was it this time?

Yea that was that time.

What do you mean?

I feel like it was just so many people that had been saying it [that he should hook up with her] for so long that I was like this is not gonna stop so I might as well. Then kind of just because she wanted it. I couldn't really shrug her off or something once she started kissing me in the elevator. That would've been weird to me.

-Max, 19 years old

While Max references peer pressure and her feelings, he also explains that rejecting her would be "*weird*." When I probe further, Max explains that the reason it would be "*weird*" has to do with gender norms. He says, "*when a girl comes on to you you're just like "ok, I'll accept this" because that almost never happens, in my experience at least. So I guess that was a lot of why I went ahead with it*." Men are typically the pursuers and women the gatekeepers. Because this "*almost never happens,*" Max may fear being perceived as "*weird*" if he does not "*go ahead with it*." The substance of what it means to be "*weird*" is informed by gender.

Studies of hegemonic masculinity and gender norms suggest that men are often policed or nudged into behaving in certain ways (Pascoe 2011). Max explains that their friends had been trying to set them up. "*All of her friends and my friends thought we should hook up. They were always trying to make it happen, the entire year. I was like "nah, no, no." But eventually it did happen and that night everyone was saying "this is so perfect, you guys should head back, this party sucks…blah blah blah*." According to Max, the peer pressure was "*not gonna stop*." He decides to "*go ahead with it*," perhaps to save face so that his friends will stop policing him and because once she begins kissing him it becomes difficult to leave.

Importantly, these accounts from men also show that men seem believe that women's reports will be credible to other men and women. This implies that women's interpretations of events have consequences for men's sense of self. If it is critical that men perform masculinity respectably, even in private dyadic contexts, this underscores women's role in policing masculinity, and in upholding gender expectations.

It's hard for men to say no?

Yea. It's uncomfortable.

How is it uncomfortable?

> *Because first I don't really like to make people feel bad about themselves. Also there is this social pressure that men like sex a lot and women can choose yes or no. So I guess it makes you unmanly if you don't want to have sex. Maybe, probably. Unconsciously honestly. I was not thinking that at the time. Yea looking at it maybe that's one reason.*
>
> -Greg, 20 year-old sophomore

Greg articulates how gendered content works jointly with interactional processes to facilitate unwanted sex. For Greg, saying no to sex is uncomfortable. In a generic (non-gendered) sense, it can make someone "*feel bad*" if you turn down their invitation. She could lose face; he could lose face and this action might not make sense. Next, gendered content is layered onto generic interactional pressures such that turning down sex becomes "*unmanly*." Women, in particular, may "*feel bad*" if their sexual invitation is rejected, due to sexual double standards. In the context of gender norms and hegemonic notions of masculinity, interactional processes push men toward unwanted sex. With these pressures combined, some men have unwanted sex.

Negative Cases: When Does Saying No Work?

Thus far, I have focused on the interactional and gendered forces leading men to have sex, even when it is unwanted. However, during interviews, men also talked about situations where they were able successfully to avoid unwanted sex. Examining these situations sheds some light on the processes encouraging sex. For men, it was easier to sidestep women's advances in public places, e.g. at a party. Sometimes men did this by pretending they did not notice her advance. It was more difficult to avoid women's advances in confined quarters without losing face. However, a few men were willing to say no, even in a confined space. For example, Brent describes how he avoids sex with women.

> *I do it pretty nicely I'm like, oh, I have to go back to my room, or I'm really tired and sometimes they're like you're a pussy – well they don't say that. … but I don't know verbatim what they say but their reactions are something like "wow that's sad."*
>
> -Brent, 20 year-old junior

Brent says women may judge him for not hooking up with them, even if they do not express this out loud. Despite what women may think, he leaves the situation anyway in order to avoid sex. This suggests that although Brent knows there is an expectation for him to want sex in this interactional context (Fleming 2017), he cares less what others think about him than some men. However, even if Brent is less constrained by saving face, he still says no "*pretty nicely*," suggesting that interactional smoothing is necessary even during a rejection. Notably, Brent reported a higher number of sexual partners than nearly all other participants. He also had a girlfriend at another college, although he had sex periodically with other women. This suggests Brent might have been in a unique position to turn down sex, with his girlfriend as a ready excuse for declining sex, and because he had already amassed enough sexual experience that saying "*no*" would not cause a substantial loss of face.

Andy—who views sex as something special to be done with serious girlfriends—avoided sex by being more direct. However, he chooses his timing carefully.

> *I'll straight up say "there's something you should know, we're not gonna have sex tonight." I'm not gonna wait until they try to do it and be like "no" because then if you say it in the moment then they feel bad, like "oh god I'm sorry," or upset. I don't want it to be a surprise really. But in the end it is a bit of a surprise because they were expecting it in the first place. I guess in most cases I did want to be with them, but just not intercourse.*
>
> **So, you think it's a surprise?**
>
> *They're definitely a little surprised by it that a 20-year-old guy is turning away sex but I feel like I would rather surprise them as little as possible with that.*
>
> -Andy, 20 year-old freshman

Although he frequently hooked up, Andy reserved sex only for "*very special*" people. During hookups, he communicated that sex was not happening, usually during kissing before clothes came off and before the women tried to have sex. He had learned this strategy through experience. While sexless hookups were inevitably a "*surprise*" to some women, it was best that

this "*surprise*" come earlier to lessen the shock of this disclosure from a man and to minimize the loss of face for both parties.

Two clear ways that men could avoid unwanted sex and still save face with little fear of reputational consequences emerged across interviews. These were 1) if the woman was not attractive enough and 2) if the woman was intoxicated. Men were less likely to have sex with women who they did not find attractive. As one respondent said, "*I was just not gonna have sex with someone I don't see as physically attractive, as superficial as that might be."* This may be because men do not necessarily gain status by having sex with unattractive women. Therefore, men do not lose face by turning unattractive women down.

Social norms also allowed men a legitimate exit when women were intoxicated:

> *This one girl, we were talking and she was perfectly nice, but then it got to the point where she was grabbing me, grabbing my tie, pulling me in to kiss me. At one point I was sitting down and she just sat on my lap straddling me. I had to grab her and be like "stop, get off me." She was drunk. And that was the other reason I didn't want to hook up with her because I feel like I need to be equally drunk. I would never want to get with someone completely more messed up than I am.*
>
> **How come?**
>
> *I don't know. I've heard of things in high school of kids doing stuff... I don't want to get in trouble. I don't think it's right to do either.*
>
> -Connor, 19 year-old sophomore

Connor successfully avoids an unwanted sexual encounter with this woman by telling her to stop and physically removing her from his lap. He succeeds by, "*resort[ing] to physical force*." Connors explains that sex with someone more "*drunk*" is not desirable because he could get in trouble and it is not right. This came up frequently in interviews. Given the emphasis on sexual assault on campus, men were wary of sexual advances from women who appeared intoxicated. Therefore, one credible way to avoid unwanted sex was by acknowledging that she was intoxicated.[5]

Finally, unwanted sex could also be avoided when an interaction was interrupted abruptly. For example, Luke did not want to have sex with a woman but ended up having it anyway during a party. When they were interrupted midway through, he was able to stop the sex.

> *At that point when the vibe was killed I was not feeling her [after being walked in on]. I just did not want to have sex.*
>
> **What changed?**
>
> *I just wasn't feeling her at that point. After she got caught by my family and wanted to continue I was like I'm not leaving my party again.*
>
> **Do you think if they hadn't walked in you would have finished?**
>
> *Yea. Cuz it was already happening. I'm not gonna tell her we're done. Yea so...I kept on going but when the opportunity arose for us to stop I took advantage of it.*
>
> -Luke, 20 year-old junior

Luke is "*ashamed*" when his cousin walks in on them during sex. He recalls no longer "*feeling her*." When she asks him whether he wants to resume the sex somewhere else, he finally says "*no*." Up until this point, avoiding sex had been difficult because the interaction was already in motion. However, when the interaction is broken, an exit becomes possible. This shows that once a certain line of action is set in play, interactional pressures tend to keep the line going. Notably here, the presence of gender norms becomes less important because the power of the disruption is substantial enough to end the entire encounter, gendered content and all.

Discussion

To understand how unwanted sex occurs for men, I argue it is necessary to understand the power of interactional expectations, and how they are gendered. I find that, for men, unwanted sex with women is interactionally produced through a process whereby men seek to save face and to make sense to others. Unwanted sex relates not only to interactional processes, but also to the content of what is considered acceptable behavior for men in these sexual

interactions. That is, cultural norms governing gender provide the content for what helps save face and what makes sense for men.

My analysis produced evidence showing that interactional processes (saving face and making sense) have real consequences. Sometimes, disrupting the interactional flow is so costly, that it becomes easier to have unwanted sex than to make the encounter awkward or embarrassing. There is a tendency—one that probably applies to women as well as men—that once a sexual interaction starts with a partner who seems to want sex, interactional smoothing tends to propel it forward. This commitment to keeping the interaction smooth facilitates unwanted sex.

Importantly, I find that theories of interaction explain some of my results. However, they are not sufficient to explain all that I observe. Men's accounts showed that, sometimes, interactional dynamics only pushed toward unwanted sex because gender norms informed the content of: 1) how men were expected to act; 2) what men were expected to want; and 3) what actions might make men lose face with their partner or others. For example, men feared being made fun of by others and considered a "*wuss*" if they turned down a sexual opportunity. Therefore, I argue that some of what occurs to produce unwanted sex for men can be explained by gender-neutral theories of interaction, but much of what occurs cannot, because what saves face or is expected depends on a person's gender.

As reviewed above, Goffman posits that general social rules constitute what he calls the communicative morality of interactions. My findings here provide evidence supporting an idea of Goffman's—one that is often overlooked—that communicative morality cannot work without being overlaid with the normative (Goffman 1983). That is, communicative morality inevitably implies a more substantive morality, which in this case is informed by gender norms. What

college men's accounts of unwanted sex make clear is that gender tends to attach itself to substantive morality so that the rules of interaction are gendered in important ways.

The discovery that men sometimes have sex because they fear what women will think of them informs our understanding of gender, power, and masculinity. Existing research suggests that men are often advantaged in sexual interactions because women care *more* about preserving the flow of these interactions than men (Armstrong, Hamilton and Sweeney 2006, Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The assumption is that men's opinions of women, particularly women willing to hook up, are so low and their assessment of women's credibility in reporting on sexual interactions so low, that there is no reason to be polite in private interactions. These data pose a direct challenge to these assumptions. My findings suggest that women have more power than is otherwise understood because women's accounts have consequences for men's sense of self. Findings also show that men believe women's reports of the interaction will be credible to others.

Studies on women's accounts of unwanted sex show that women also sometimes engage in interactional smoothing to avoid awkwardness, and this leads to unwanted sex (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). In women's accounts, however, interactional smoothing often combines with something more pernicious (e.g. fear that he is bigger, could "snap," etc.) and this leaves women with more constrained options (Boyle and McKinzie 2015, Flack et al. 2007). In other words, for women, unwanted sex becomes a space where the interactional meets the structural (i.e., men's physical and social "superiority") whereas for men, unwanted sex is almost exclusively about the interactional. My findings suggest that this difference has implications. Although more research is needed, men's accounts reveal a common perception that they had unwanted sex by their own

volition. As a result, they did not frame these encounters as sexual assault and reported few traumatic effects.

My results have indirect implications for a debate in the literature on women's sexual victimization as to whether the men who commit assault are malicious or confused. One side argues that men understand women's refusals, but deliberately force sex anyway (Lisak and Miller 2002, Sanday 1990). The other side argues that men are young, drunk, and clueless, and that much sexual assault results from miscommunication (Abbey et al. 2014, Tannen 1991). Against this claim, Kitzinger and Frith (1999) provide evidence that men are able to read social cues about refusal in other situations. Therefore, it is implausible that men cannot do so in sexual situations. Importantly, the men interviewed here are clearly skilled interactional actors. The level of sophistication that they showed in managing interactions suggests that explanations of men's perpetration that attribute it to inept social skills may be improbable.

Conclusion

In this qualitative interview study, I have explored what it means for a man to have unwanted sex and the processes by which it happens. My findings indicate that with sex, as in other areas of life, as theorists argue, interaction proceeds by all parties trying to accomplish normalcy. No one wants to lose face or to make no sense to others when it comes to sex. What is striking is that, although these college men's experiences involve sex, which we sometimes assume to be a largely biologically driven affair, these men report deploying the same tactics for the same reasons that a person tries to keep the banter going when talking to someone at a dinner party. People try to fulfill interactional expectations, even when the cost is high.

I find that gender-neutral processes of interactional smoothing, though important to my analysis, were not sufficient to explain men's accounts of unwanted sex. At least in the context

of heterosexuality, gender is also key to the expectations and policing that men face. What allows a man to save face or make sense is substantially informed by gender. Moreover, men conduct their sex lives in the shadow of presumed gendered reputational consequences. They fear ridicule if stories are told portraying them as the kind of man who declines sex with an attractive woman.

While much research has been conducted on women, more research comparing men and women is still needed to understand the gendered content of norms in sexual contexts. For example, men claim that rejecting or avoiding sex is "*weird*" or "*strange*." Do women draw upon similar language, or are there differing ways that women account for unwanted sex? Does the expectation that men want sex more than women, and the existence of a double standard where women may be judged more adversely for casual sex than men, give women more freedom to stop events from leading to unwanted intercourse, such that when they do have unwanted sex, more coercion has been involved? Further comparative detailed accounts of women and men's sexual experiences are needed to increase our understanding of the gender of sexuality, and how it is layered onto interactional processes.

Notes

[1]Four men described unwanted sex while extremely intoxicated. These men explained that if the same experience happened to a woman, they would consider it sexual assault.

[2]http://www.nyu.edu/projects/england/ocsls/

[3]OCSLS shows that 22% of straight college-age men (1,423 out of 6,393) check at least one of these five items indicating an experience of unwanted sex.

[4]Two men did not want to have condom-less sex due to concerns about sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Several men were concerned about STIs after unwanted sex; several of whom reported getting tested.

[5]Research also shows that some men deliberately get women drunk to facilitate sex.

About the Author

Jessie V. Ford is a PhD candidate at New York University. Her interests include gender, sexuality and public health. She is particularly interested in the ways that gender inequality is embedded in the sexuality of young adults.

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