

Plot Twist's

Consent Culture Notes

(Or how to people at Burning Man)

Why do we talk about consent?

I think it's very important to remind people that we talk about consent not because it's simple and everyone is stupid (or bad), we talk about consent because it is complicated... so complicated that we don't even know what a fully consenting culture looks like.

How do we talk about consent?

I think it's super important to approach consent in a sex positive*, body positive and touch positive perspective. It's also extremely important to approach the listeners as people sorting out ideas instead of people that need to be told how not to be monsters. This is information to help people figure out their own consent and how to respect others consent it's not a talk that tries to (or can) stop assault or sexual assault.

Platonic

(or OMG you guys we are so fucked up about touch)

-humans need touch. We die without it. You can live and thrive without sight, without hearing, with very limited mobility... but we can't live without touch. Baby humans die without it. It's fundamentally important to survival. And in our culture there are only two kinds of approved touch. Sexual touch and professional touch. So in the culture that burning man is responding to and enveloped by, is one without platonic touch.

-people come to burning man and explore platonic touch. It's great! And awkward! As fuck! Pushing social cultural boundaries is part of what we are exploring out here. Which is why we need to try and hold ourselves to impeccable consent when it comes to touch.

-so impeccable consent is **always** asking before touching someone. Have you ever tried this? It's hella awkward. "can I put my arm around you?" "Do you want a hug?" "Is it alright if I hold your hand?". It can be pretty uncomfortable. Because our culture teaches us that rejection is shameful and wanting touch is humiliating. So countering the culture is awkward. It's brave and silly and awkward.

So while a lot of us know how to make sure that someone wants our touch non-verbally at burning man even with our friends, maybe

especially with our friends and family it's worth it to practice impeccable consent. Which also leads to fun conversations like "Hey you can always hug me" or "Wrap your arm around my waist anytime I like it when you touch me". Or "I love it when you jump on me! Please do it anytime I'm not so high I think you are a sentient series of LEDs."

-If you are dying for some platonic touch there are a lot of places on playa that are there to help you explore and experience. There are message camps, the hug deli, the human carcass wash, I'm sure there are cuddle parties out there, just a lot of ways to explore touch if that is something you are desiring.

-Platonic touch is beautiful and important and well worth exploring. And the best way to take care of consent around platonic touch is to know your own boundaries. Understanding the ways you like to be touched and the ways you like to touch is the best way to take care of yourself and everyone around you. Personally? I sexualize platonic touch very easily. Product of my culture. So I try to be aware when things become sexual for me. I know message is sexual for me so I have to feel very safe with someone to do receive it. I know hugs are basically the west coast hand shake and I can do that naked without even noticing.

And that brings me around to the next topic of consent and really the only one our culture acknowledges in the least:

Sexual

(Or OMG you guys we are so fucked up about sex)

Enthusiastic yes.

So this sounds so simple. Just fuck people who really want to fuck you. But it's not simple. Because our culture has taught us this bizarre mating dance of pursue and pursue-y? We are taught to not be up front about attraction. That seduction is persistence. We've been taught so many awful scripts about attraction.

So that's why we need the enthusiastic part of the yes. Because we don't know what is happening in inside each other's heads. And some, many or most of us are a bit fucked up around connection, sex, desire and release. And we are all capable of being compelled towards sex for not fully consenting reasons. Sex is god damn complicated. I wish I could go back in time and shake 18 year old Beth and say "Hey only fuck people you like and people who like you". We all have external sexual pressures and internalized motivations that are often unclear even to ourselves.

Which is why the best way to take care of everyone's sexual consent is taking care of your own. Know what you are up for. And check in with yourself before you change your mental state.

Personal tip: Don't have sex with someone for the first time until you check in with a sober version of yourself. Knowing that sober you feels like this sex is something that you want and something that you find fits your morals around connection, saves a LOT of heart ache and a LOT of relationships.

Pink eye is an STI so wash your fucking hands.

Cultural

(wat?)

- This is where it gets even more complicated. So I'll start with the easy stuff. Stuff. We hull out tons and tons of stuff to the empty wasteland and despite ourselves our stuff is an extension of us. So full cultural consent would extend the idea of bodily consent to all our things. Ask before you touch someone's body and ask before you touch someone's stuff. A big example of this in my camp last year was using other people's infrastructure to tie down. ASK. Ask before you grab someone's beers. ASK before you borrow clothes. Ask before you enter personal spaces.

-Because this is our home. Not in some hippie "welcome home" kinda way. In a real particle tangible way. We all live here. We play here. We sleep here. We fuck here. This is our home. I don't know how many of you have been in abusive relationships but -nothing- feels worse then being unsafe in our own home.

-So how do we protect each other and ourselves? Past our bodies? Past our stuff? How do we create an emotionally consenting culture?

-Conversational consent. So a lot of topics come up at burning man. I for one love talking about all the oozing, chafing, squirting bodily realities out there. I know more about my team's digestive tracts then my brother's kids. But that doesn't mean everyone wants to listen to the detailed description of what happened when I blew my nose this morning over lunch. Our conversations affect each other. Being aware of that helps everyone. I LOVE the intense personal conversations that happen out there but I also know I need to walk away from conversations about childhood sexual assault. There is more than enough room for us all to talk. And we can give and make space for any conversation with our feet.

-This is where it gets really tricky. Because thanks to the realities of capitalism we don't live in a consenting culture. In a fully consenting culture you could walk away from anyone. Unfortunately most of us have this tricky thing called employment. Where our time and energy and our freedom to walk away are held hostage by our ability to survive.

-So burning man has done us a huge favor in creating a culture of consent because ideally no one is being paid. On playa we are only doing what we consent to do. Which means you can always walk away. It doesn't matter if it's the lead of your camp. Your best friend. A random stranger. A spouse. You can walk away. This fundamental reality is so startling to many of us that we forget it's an option.

-But how the hell do we know when to walk away? Now we are getting into the rarely explored. Barely acknowledged idea of **emotional consent**. And like all the other kinds of consent the way to best take care of the people around us is to understand our selves.

-Burning man is hard. It's hard on your body. It's hard on your sleep. It's hard on brain. It's hard on your emotions. This is a place where a conversation can suddenly and unexpectedly cut straight to your biggest insecurities and fears. So even if you are someone who does emotional consent it can be really tricky to know what you need or want.

- We've all had it happen. Someone we like, or someone we've fucked, or someone we are technically biologically related to comes storming up and says "HEY CAN I TALK TO YOU!". This is the moment where we can practice emotional consent. Are you up for interacting with this person and their emotional expression?

- I struggle with emotional consent. I get wound up in other people's feelings pretty easily and I'm pretty slow out here due to all the sun, beer, sex and lack of eating right. Last year I ended up yelling at a teammate like she was my ex girlfriend. Because I completely failed to check in with myself before walking into an emotionally charged situation.

All of this is hard to sort out. But burning man is a place where we can try. We can be awkward. We can mess up. We can fail. And we can keep trying to build a fully consenting culture. Because what we do out there is exploring the edges of community, of family, of intimacy. We want to play with touch, with sex, with space. We want to push each other and ourselves and that is why we have to be so fucking good at consent.

A few quick notes about this talk: I wrote this while drinking and stoned. I'm also dyslexic so... you know, do your own spell checking. If you are giving this talk I recommend you use personal stories of your own consent (good or bad). I would also recommend you do it in the shade and ask everyone to take off their sunglasses so you can look them in the eyes. Keep it under ten minutes.

Any questions, thoughts, concerns or comments? Feel free to e-mail me:

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Want to hear people ramble about burning man? Check out my podcast:

Accuracy Third: An Oral History of Black Rock
<https://accuracythird.com>

Our end of year piece (2018) is about consent at burning man. If you want to hear experiences from a bunch of different burners around consent check it out.

``*Sex-positivity is:

- a way to acknowledge that human sexuality is diverse and broad. There is no one definition of "normal."
- non-judgmental, or in any case it asks us to be aware of (and be in control of) own our judgements.
- a foe of shaming others about sexual (and gendered) matters, including children.
- a way to acknowledge that we should have certain sexual rights, including the right to comprehensive, appropriate, pleasure-inclusive, positive sex education.
- a construct that invites us to acknowledge that pretty much any fully consensual behavior might be right for someone, and pretty much nothing is right for everyone.
- an idea that can't be fully expressed outside of an atmosphere/context of consent. Informed, non-coercive consent. CONSENT.
- a term that can include anyone, including virgins, asexuals, people who have been abused, people who have never had pleasurable or even good sex-because it does not describe the sex they do/don't have, it describes their attitude about sexual diversity and people's sexual rights. (And of course it may be a tool to open the door to much more positive sex-but only if it's what they want.)
- more than anything, a way to critique our current culture-which clearly is not sex-positive. I express the critique like this: What would it take for our culture to be fully sex-positive? What are the elements that would get us there? (I invite you to think about that question-it is a valuable lens in a personal context and in activist work.)
- a notion that gives us access to true respect for other people's sexualities.

Sex-positivity is NOT:

- a phrase that means "I love sex!" (Though if you do-that's great! Yay, you!)
- a phrase that means "I'm kinky or experimental; I'm not vanilla." (Vanilla people can be just as sex-positive as kinksters, and in fact, not all kinksters are sex-positive!)
- a phrase that can EVER be used this way: "If you were really sex-positive, you'd have sex with me/do that kinky thing I want to try/open our relationship/etc."
- to be used as a source of judgement or shaming of other people-including heterosexuals, asexuals, non-kinky folk, celibate people, or anybody else.

-a way to judge others for not enjoying sex enough.
-a new norm about what people should do in their sex lives.
-a license to assume that your sexual response, experience, desires, and feelings are or should be shared by everybody else. I can't stress this enough. If anyone, no matter how sexually frisky and happy they are, tries to use the notion of sex-positivity to judge someone else's sexual orientation, gender expression, sexual choices, or sexual response, they are not behaving in a sex-positive fashion. Period. (And they're misusing the term.) When you are sex-positive, you get that you are not like everybody else, and that's all good. As in:
-I'm attracted to people who are like this, and others may be attracted to people who are like that.
-I have orgasms this way, and other people have orgasms that way.
-I like this sex toy and other people might not (and vice versa).
-I like this kind of sex, so other people get to like their kind of sex.
-I want a certain kind of relationship, and others get to want the kind of relationship that works best for them.
-I respond this way to this sexual thing, but other people might respond a different way.
-I grew up with beliefs, experiences, in a particular cultural context that affects my sexual feelings now; other people grew up within other cultural contexts."

~Quoted from Dr. Carol Queen on the good vibrations blog
<https://goodvibesblog.com/sex-positivity/>