



Consent in Institutional Sexism

The term consent means that “permission is given” whether that permission is for sex, or any other form in which two parties agree. Is consent, consent when one party has power over the other? No it is not. To change the social acceptance of a rape culture, one has to change the institutional sexism. That teaches that our society accepts a certain amount of masculinity /femininity dichotomy, and male power. So ingrained in our society that often it is not even recognized as that, however in very subtle ways it is victim blaming. My experience with it and my discussion with a friend after my experience found me listening to her state “well why didn’t you get up and walk out. It was not that bad, you did not get raped for Christ sake.” Even though she went on to say that many students have had issues with this professor. The classic “ he is the professor and has the freedom to teach therefore he has power and can teach anyway he chooses and you as a student have to accept that power”.

This is what occurred that I considered sexual harassment. I was sitting in the front row of a class, and believed I was in a safe environment. The class a low level Ethnic studies class. Specifically designed to teach students about diversity, ethnicity and develop a more rounded education. Their words not mine. During the first hour, I began to hear words of power, and the claiming of power over the students with in the first 20 minutes I knew full well this was going to be one of those situations. I recognized the power/powerless dichotomy, easily because of my experience as a woman. I languished a bit about whether I should stay in the class in the first 20 minutes. But sat there with pen and paper taking notes. Laughter spread across the room as the teacher began to joke about sexual prowess and his masculinity. I blushed a bit and looked around the room. Several students were from Africa, Asia, and other areas. Their religious affiliations were very diverse in this class of hundred students. I recognized many of them; some of the women wore serapes, many were Muslims, Jewish, Buddhist, some from very conservative backgrounds. Two of the women I knew had their head down, and a look of shame crossed their face. The rest of the class period was spent hearing about an indigenous tribe that believed women’s vagina’s had power over their weapons, and they were not allowed to walk over weapons as they would suck the power out of these weapons. The laughter increased when the teacher ask “did you women know your vagina was that powerful?” I began to gather my books, and after class looked to see if I could transfer to a different ethnic studies class.

This class was mandatory and one of the last classes I would have to take to graduate. I soon discovered all five classes offered were taught by him. Although in this situation consent was not asked. He did not say do you give me your consent to discuss my version of “my power, my masculinity, my sex and sexuality?”. That was not even a blink of a thought as the teacher took power over every female and male in the room. It was his right to do so. Under the freedom to teach act. Little could be done or would be done. Institutionalized sexism allowed this to occur. He knew and even stated that any student that did not like his stories could complain, but it would do no good as others had and nothing ever happened to him, he had tenure.

I chose to continue in the class in hopes of making it through so I did not have to blow another 1200 dollars to get my degree. Wednesday morning I joined the class. This time sitting farther back and in the corner near a door. The beginning lecture started with, “the book you will buy is written by me. All the assignments are on the CD that is with the book. You will not hear a lot



of the stuff gone over in class, all assignments are given and expected ____ now who wants to hear more about my trip to ____ . “As I was saying this tribe believes this about women’s vaginas. You could see the smile on his face as he looked around the room. You could almost smell the power. He continued his story with:

“I told the tribe elder I had a dream and I knew where the elk would be, so I was to lead them to this place. When we got there elk was in the area I had said they would be. “ We began to hunt. I killed a female elk and when I walked over to her, I stood with my legs over her neck and I took my knife out and slit her throat. At this point he took the stance of a hunter pulling the neck of the elk up and the slicing motion it would take to slit her throat. In the mists of this he stated “This is not the first women to die between my legs.” Oopps have I gone too far?” His laughter filled the room.

I tell you this story because it is common knowledge that the teacher has power over his students and if you have been in college long enough you know that in order to survive a class you have to accept the teacher as the authority. His statement “Oopps have I gone too far?” implied he knew exactly what he was doing; he knew that he could assert his power and claim his right to the throne. His statement “Anyone of us could complain, but that there were no consequences, in which he would receive.” Told me that he also knew that institutionalized sexism was a reality. He did not have to ask for consent to talk about his power, sexuality, sex or masculinity. He did not have to maintain a safe environment for his students. I believe that he felt as long as we set there as his students he had the power to do as he wished. So my coming to class was implying I agreed and gave consent for him to have power over me. But what consent did I give? Was it really implied consent, was it consent at all. That meant I had no recourse or ability to stop what was occurring in that hour long classroom according to him did not mean I gave consent to him.

I walked out of class that day and went straight to my advisor. During class I wrote down everything he said. The support of the advisor and subsequently the other professional who took my complaint was welcoming at first. I had not consented to this type of treatment they agreed it was sexual harassment. I was a victim and it was certainly not a optional class that I could choose to take or not. Signing up and paying for this class was not a choice, it was demanded of me if I wanted to complete my education. The answer to what happened after all of this. Well let me put it to you this way, he is still teaching, he is still doing what he does and he is still sexualizing himself and his power. Yes he did have consequences; he was removed from campus for a short period. The remarks I heard from fellow students, was that it was a “witch hunt.” That he was innocent and someone was just making trouble. The entire campus or most of it knew of the incident whether they knew it was me or not did not matter. Students had taken his side and had accepted his power. Of course looking back on it like me none of them had a choice it was a mandatory class for many students. I had to walk past these students, I had to walk past him, I stood my ground but lost my footing. I had become a trouble maker. His master’s student would stare at me on the bus to the college. Even visiting the office where I wrote up the initial complaint gave me little other than a “what do you want” attitude when I went in to check on the status of my complaint. The person in charge of the case told me I would never be told what happened to him or if disciplinary actions were taken because he had the right to privacy. Really! I gave up pursuing it when I received a letter



saying it was sent to the dean of the school for review. That was a year ago. I never received a call to tell my side of it, I never received anything more than that simple letter.

Do I live with the consequence of that, yes I do, what was once a safe place became unsafe. Where, once I felt that I had control over my life, left me in an uncontrollable situation. Where I believed I had a choice to give consent or not turned into no choice at all. I pulled out of school that semester and had to retake many of the classes, because being on campus even talking to my advisor meant being in close proximity to his office and his area. Most of my classes were in the same building, most of the events I attended were in his field of study or one closely associated to it. My minor was his field of study. No it was not rape or was it? Yes it was due to accepted institutionalized sexism, acceptance of the male power that allowed this teacher that type of control. No I had no power to consent or not to consent. Even the premise of consent was not there.

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