



**Anita Kwok:** Welcome to the SCSG Podcast. My name is Anita Kwok, an intern at SCSG. Today, SJ Dodd, our founding director, will discuss Understanding Consent Among Emerging Adults: Wrestling with the Social Construction of Gender, Sexuality, and Salient Social Categories with Doctors Adrienne Baldwin-White and Candace Christensen. Content warning - there are mentions of sexual assault

**SJ Dodd:** I have with me today the writers of Chapter Twenty-Three. I'm gonna let Adrienne Baldwin-White and Candace Christensen introduce themselves.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** Hi, I'm Dr. Adrienne Baldwin-White. I'm an Assistant Professor at Virginia Commonwealth University. My research primarily focuses on gender-based violence prevention specifically assault.

**Candace Christensen:** I'm Candace Christensen and my pronouns are they/them. I'm an Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Texas - San Antonio, and much of my work is focused on sexual assault prevention. But I focus on violence prevention broadly, including white supremacy and homo and transphobia.

**SJ Dodd:** One of my first questions was how did you come to end up working together on this?

**Candace Christensen:** Yeah, that's a great question. Do you want to start Adrienne?

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** So I have seen Candace's name on publications that I was using, things like that. But I actually didn't meet in person until a social work conference that we both attended.

**Candace Christensen:** Yeah I remember meeting Adrienne through my colleague Heidi Rueda because both of you got your PhDs through Arizona State University. And Adrienne, I think you've done collaborations with Megan Lindsay Brown as well. I actually was an MSW student with Megan at the University of Utah, and so I started seeing you at SSWER and started seeing your presentations. And then I received SJ's announcement for book chapter solicitations. And I was like "Oh my gosh!" You know, I focus on campus sexual assault prevention and I think consent would be a really useful contribution to the collection. So it just seemed like a great fit to you on that chapter, Adrienne.



**SJ Dodd:** That's great! And actually, the other piece of it that I thought was really good for the volume was the fact that it focused on emerging adults because that's a population window whereas social workers, we need to be attuned. We need to be equipped to work with and to turn some attention to in terms of sex ed and consent ed and other things -- that emerging adult piece. And I felt like it was important to add to the volume. So it was both. It was the consent piece I was drawn to but also that emerging adult piece too. So the title of the chapter is *Understanding Consent Among Emerging Adults: Wrestling with the Social Construction of Gender, Sexuality, and Salient Social Categories*. One of the things that struck me when I read the chapter was, when you think of consent, we're often talking about negative consequences. But actually, I love that you framed it around healthy sexual communication. I just thought that that notion of healthy sexual communication is actually when we're talking about consent, that's the umbrella, I think, some of the umbrella we're talking about.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** Right. I think that part of that framing for me came from wanting to sort of help fight -- I don't want to say tradition, but we have a tendency to not really give comprehensive sex ed. We tend to not give people the tools to talk about sex. I've had students tell me that they don't really know if they do or don't want to have sex because they've never really had the opportunity to figure that out for themselves because of the shame and the stigma attached to it. And I also didn't want to contribute to the stigma that sexual desire is a bad thing. And so consent should be about both if you do or do not want to participate in sexual activity and creating healthy relationships between people so they know that whether that relationship be temporary one night or it be something more long-term and dating.

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**Candace Christensen:** Adrienne really brought the healthy communication concept to the table in this chapter, which I think is a powerful antidote to concerning views of sexual violence. And one we discuss is miscommunication theory, which has been a historically common way of viewing why sexual assault occurs. And in the chapter, we share our concerns with that framework, that it really tends to victim blame and it tends to minimize contextual factors, macro-level factors like gender norms that contribute to the problem. So, so talking about, you know, what does healthy sexual communication looks like is just a much more useful way of understanding how we can educate folks on



communicating consent, on reading, consent cues, on understanding the nuances and complexities involved with giving and sharing consent.

**SJ Dodd:** Right. And the notion of miscommunication is that it says, Hey, the person who maybe has been assaulted, for example, just wasn't clear enough. They didn't say no clearly enough. And that's the way in which it becomes victim blaming is because you're saying, well, you, you should have been clearer with the way you communicated, that you didn't want to engage in these behaviors.

**Candace Christensen:** Exactly.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** Right. And I think it's putting miscommunication as the center of it also misses what Candace pointed out in that the person who's asking for consent has responsibility on really understanding what the other person is trying to communicate. I talk about the fact all the time that in non-sexual situations, we completely understand people's indirect communication. If Candace were to say, Hey, Adrienne, would you like to go have lunch? And I'm like, well, I've got a lot to do. I'd have to get someone to watch my youngest child. Things are just piling up. I'm not sure. They understand that to be no. I don't want to do that. I don't wanna have lunch. But in sexual situations, all of that gets clouded. Like all that indirect communication that we understand outside of sex fades away. And I think it's what Candace mentioned, those norms around sex and gender and relationships just kind of cloud people's judgment and what they see. And probably common sense is in the back of their head, they know, is someone saying, I'm not sure about this, or I don't want to participate. They're not really following that instinct that they have to just like pull back and wait or ask more questions, right? And so like if it were just about miscommunication, it would be really easy to stop it, but it's not.

**SJ Dodd:** Well, it's that notion of token resistance that you mentioned, right? That's the social norms and social cues that you're supposed to put up some resistance, and then somehow the script is that that resistance gets ignored. It's all interlinked, right? In this case, they're talking about women, predominantly. Women are communicating clearly. The voice just isn't being heard, or the communication isn't being taken seriously enough.



**Candace Christensen:** That does tie into the sexual scripts theory that, that you mentioned SI. Yes. That the gender socialization falls on the binary of, you know, women and men and doesn't even consider anything beyond those binaries. Unfortunately, masculinity very much tied to sexual aggression and having power over the feminine role is to be submissive and to be dominated. That's, that's the harm of decontextualizing what happens within what we call miscommunication is we have to remain aware of that broader socialization context.

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**SJ Dodd:** And I think you talk about the way in which those sexual scripts and the communication scripts are racialized or embedded in cultural norms that aren't just U.S. broadly cultural norms, but their subsets of those norms as well. And how that plays in.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** Right. So culturally, especially when we're talking about, for example, the assault of white women, historically, a lot of black men have been falsely accused. Emmett Till is probably one of our most well-known examples of someone who was accused of assault, and they said he whistled at her. Turned out he didn't even whistle at her. He didn't do anything, but that's what he was accused of. We have to remember that the racial dynamic affects how people communicate in their relationships. And also whether or not people feel like they can communicate. If you are a person of color and you are with a white person who is being coercive or manipulative, or if you're a person of color who's undocumented and the person with you is threatening to tell that you're undocumented. Race and culture definitely play a part in whether people give consent and whether they actually feel like they can be enthusiastic participants and whether or not they just have to say yes, whether they have to give permission because there's some other threat to their lives or their livelihood.

**Candace Christensen:** Similarly, the existing research focused on emerging adults who identify as Latinx. They do speak to cultural factors that could influence how consent is read, interpreted, given. In the research though, really emphasizes that the gender binary is consistent across communities and cultures. However, for a project outside of this chapter, I interviewed women who identify as Latinx. These are college women. And something they really emphasized as a barrier to talking about sex-related topics is they believe that virginity is prized above all else for women in their community. And so talking about anything to do with sex or being sexually active or sex



having happened, including an assault is very taboo. They said that is just very taboo. So that means that they believe conversations about consent aren't even happening. Like that's, that's so far removed from the table of what's being discussed.

**SJ Dodd:** So those are really ingrained social norms, right? Dominant, sort of binarized thing, and then the subsets under that. But then there's also this notion, and you say at one point, skills of consent require deciphering nuances of communication. And yet it goes back to the point Adrienne was making earlier that we don't even provide comprehensive sex ed. And if we do provide comprehensive sex ed, it often doesn't address consent. And so we're not breaking through that social norm. We're not unlearning that social norm through K through 12 education or even at higher education. Susan Hillock has a book out that looks at sex ed in higher ed. And points out that that's a great opportunity for some of this to happen in that moment, but we are missing that opportunity as well. And I often say in my classes that everything else, we think we give people as much information as possible and let them make a decision. We look at consumer reports, we Google, we Yelp, we whatever we do. But then when it comes to sex, we think if we give you no information at all, you'll make good decisions. And so it's like the absolute opposite. We give you as little information as possible, but then expect you to make good decisions. We can't disrupt any of those patterns, the scripts, the cultures. We are not giving people the information to make those choices for themselves, even if they want to adhere to the cultural scripts that they've been socialized too. They're not choosing that because they have information to make those choices.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** Yes but withholding the information, we're actually taking away their power to actually make a decision. We're just saying you shouldn't be having sex. The end. Right, and we all know that that doesn't work. And we think that by only focusing on abstinence, we're actually gonna reduce sexual activity. And we, we all know that's not true either. We have a really hard time talking about sex. And sexual assault is not sex. It's violence.

**SJ Dodd:** Power and violence, right.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** Even if you have a problem with comprehensive sex ed, that is just the way that it is. But consent is about preventing violence. It's not about



preventing sex. If you care about student safety, you should be able to have this conversation about consent, because sexual assault is violence.

**SJ Dodd:** Yeah, it's not sex ed. It's violence prevention, actually.

**Candace Christensen:** I'm so curious, Adrienne, do you think that's why many institutions of higher education have shied away from the comprehensive sexual education and focused more on creating affirmative consent policies? It's too much to tackle the Sex Education Beast, and we know consent's important. So...

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** *\*laughs\** So many buts there right? I think that colleges and universities, and I'm not sure why, because we all know about FERPA, they're still afraid of like parents and people outside the university and what they'll say if you provide sex education. They're also aware that their children might be more likely to participate in sex when they're not under direct supervision from them. And again, this belief that by giving knowledge, you're giving permission, which is not true. It's like law school. They learn about the law, and they learn what murder is, and homicide is, and burglary is. That's not telling all these law students to go out and do those things. It's only with sex that we think knowledge means permission, right? So I think schools, even though these are adults, they are supposed to be able to make decisions on their own, have their own privacy. I think schools are just afraid of the response from the people that actually pay the bills that this isn't appropriate for my child to hear or to understand.

**Candace Christensen:** I was part of an initiative at my university to implement a campus-wide sexual assault prevention strategy, and I did suggest requiring sex education as part of the strategy, and it was shot down immediately. Like, well, there's a class people can sign up for if they really want that. You know, so it's, it's interesting, like, you know, and to your point, SJ, like, if we can't even talk about sex, like, it's so hard to get into those conversations and education about consent, but it, it absolutely, it has to happen. I mean, it has to happen if we're going to address the problem of campus sexual assault or sexual assault among emerging adults.

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**SJ Dodd:** A perfect segue into Dr. Baldwin-White has a college student's Pathways to Consent framework. I wanted to just see if you would tell us what is the college students' pathways to consent and just a little bit about it so that people can go look it up if they're interested.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** One pathway is actually a pathway to consent. And if you look at the framework, one side is very complicated, very complex. People's decisions are influenced by gender norms, influenced by relationship norms, influenced by norms around college. This idea that they're supposed to be, yeah, um, participating in sex, there's a lot of noise on one of those pathways. And it kind of keeps people from being able to act on what they truly feel. I like to take some of that blame out of the person because it keeps us from paying attention to systemic issues we have in terms of gender norms, racial norms that affect how people respond in sexual situations. And so it's not just about them. The complicated pathway that doesn't lead to consent isn't just about the individual, but all of those things that they are taught, that's reinforced, that actually makes saying yes or no more difficult. And also, hearing that yes or no, and believing the yes or no. Whereas the other path is just being able to block the noise, which I wish was a lot easier than it is. But being able to block all of the noise that you hear about how you should be and how you should behave as a person, and then being able to decide on your own, based on what you want, what you believe, what feels right to you. Whether or not you want to participate in sexual activity, I want students to be able to get rid of the noise, but I know it's harder than it seems for me to be able to magically create this prevention program that gets rid of 17 to 18 years of reinforced harmful norms. That is really, really challenging. That's the goal.

**SJ Dodd:** If I'm understanding right, one of the pieces that makes somebody more able to shut out the noise is this idea about self-efficacy and that having self-efficacy contributes to your capacity to have agency and make those decisions and sort of close out some of the noise.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** I think one of the issues we have about consent is that sometimes people aren't sure whether or not they are understanding what their partner wants to communicate. And so instead of backing away, they're like, well, I should know this. I should be able to understand what they're saying. We haven't taught them that being an agent, having that agency, means that you can also be... you back away. If you don't know, if you're unsure, that's okay. It's okay if you don't know, you're 18 years old



and you're 19 years old. If you don't know, it's better to just back away rather than continue the behavior. Self-efficacy is important, but I think as I've sort of developed my research agenda, I don't want people to interpret self-efficacy as certainty. Because that's where you get into like dangerous territory that you have to just know. Sometimes you don't know. So just stop, pause, walk away, or make sure the person's okay and leave.

**SJ Dodd:** It's interesting because I interpreted self-efficacy, not as sort of, you were definitely gonna say yes or agency, but more as being more in tune with actually what you do want. Whether that's a yes or a no, or a maybe, but just having that self-awareness and self-assuredness and that capacity to tune into what is my gut saying right now, and can I communicate that whichever direction that's going in. So that's interesting because that was how I understood it.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** I think the sex ed piece really fits well into that. I think if we provided that, then people would feel confident in saying yes or no, but I think the complexity of that is that even if you do have that self-efficacy, even if you can't clearly communicate it, it's also upon the other person to receive it and to hear it. And then to act on it. And so I think that this framework that I developed, I dunno, four years ago maybe now, is a lot more complex than I thought it was. And that those pathways, even the pathway to consent, is a lot more nuanced and complex than I even thought. Just through my continued research and continued discussions with college students and emerging adults.

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**Candace Christensen:** One thing coming up for me is when we first wrote this chapter, that was pre-pandemic and it feels like so much has changed in the world of sexual violence, intimate partner violence, all of that with the pandemic. It would be fascinating to do like a follow-up chapters, you know, kind of evaluating how it has changed our understanding of consent for emerging adults and just as a concept in general.

**SJ Dodd:** I do think there's this nuanced communication that we keep coming back to it. It's the nuance of communication, but how has all of the electronic communication complicated that and the fact that what were children and adolescents who were the, the





current cohort of emerging adults have spent so much of their life communicating electronically? And how that complicates this?

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** That's a really complicated question, but I think that one of the things that I believe it has done is that one of the things you cannot communicate and text, and it's probably gotten us into trouble a time or two or 20, is you cannot communicate tone. Right?

**SJ Dodd:** It gets lost, yeah.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** It gets lost in text message, right? We try to, I think especially emerging adults and young people try to fix that through emojis. Like they try to use emojis to let people know that I'm being sarcastic or I'm being funny, or I don't really mean this, I'm just trying to make a point. But that gets lost in the communication. And I've also noticed sometimes when they over rely on text when they communicate in person, it's really challenging for them. Yeah. Also, they don't want to, but in a sexual situation, you have to, you have to be willing to say something either through your voice, through your body, through whatever it is. You have to be willing to communicate that to the other person. And because they're used to communicating through text, it is. Those things are really learned that well, and they may be even afraid to do it. I've had college students tell me that they don't even like talking on the phone to customer service, like they'd much rather just text customer service than actually talk to someone, and I get it. There's anxiety there. There's fear of judgment there. I think that sort of comes into other relationships that they have with people that they don't really feel confident in how they communicate and choose not to communicate if they feel that they're gonna make a mistake or they're gonna be embarrassed. And that's the last thing you want is for someone to not communicate at all when they don't want to have sex.

**Candace Christensen:** That makes me wonder about the role of conflict avoidance and effective consent communication. You know, I, I just, I, I don't know the research on this, but I would think that's probably a powerful variable.

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**SJ Dodd:** I wanna switch a little bit to, first of all, to what are the key takeaways, if you wanted to make sure social workers or mental health providers knew the one, two, three things that you were communicating in the chapter or just about this topic in general?

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** For me is that you have to be willing to have these really tough conversations. We tend to be open about conversations about race and conversations about gender identity and sexual orientation, but when it comes to violence, it's just not there. And so I think we have to be more active in this area of mental health and violence prevention than we are now because it's so important. The rate of sexual assault and gender-based violence is so high. One in three experience intimate partner or dating violence. One in five experienced sexual assault. And we know those numbers are probably very low and inaccurate, right? And so because this affects such a large part of our population, we have to be willing to put it on the forefront. And I just don't think that it is. I don't think that social work is ready to really talk about it yet. And what's really interesting is that we can talk about child abuse.

**SJ Dodd:** Yeah.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** Even sexual abuse. But when it comes to the assault and abuse of adults, we really have a hard time focusing on that.

**Candace Christensen:** That's a very good point, Adrienne. Social work seems like the discipline to take this on in many ways because it sits at intersections of the importance of human relationships, social justice, worth indignity of individuals. And yet, like you said, Adrienne, that unwillingness to talk about violence, and I would say even a social worker that unwillingness to talk about sex and sexuality comes into play too.

**SJ Dodd:** So then the corollary question is, what do you want social workers to do? And I hear one of those things is to have the conversations to bring it up. But are there other things, other places we should be advocating, other things we should be pressing for? What should social workers be doing?

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** One of the things that I really focus on doing is actually empowering students to affect change, right? So I tell my students all the time, the university pays me. So they don't care, but you pay them so they care a lot. So use your voice, use the power that you have as a student to affect change on campus. And so I try



to empower students - give them the tools. We can definitely give them the tools to fight for change.

**Candace Christensen:** I love that framing of students having more leverage. I think there are a couple of things I would love to see social workers do. Since federally funded organizations are unwilling to provide comprehensive sex ed and therefore consent education, I think the community needs to start doing that and it may even need to be outside of organizations and be more of a mutual aid grassroots effort where members of our communities who have the knowledge and the comfort with this education, or like, they are like the neighborhood educator, right? Like, okay, you're 10 years old, or whatever. You know, whatever education is appropriate for whatever stage of development folks are in to just make it a communal experience if possible. And this is from Hersh and Kahn's sexual citizens book. They talk about the importance of giving emerging adults space to explore and experiment. And they believe that a lot of issues with consent and situations that create the risk for assault is just because emerging adults don't have access to private spaces, right? They often have roommates, or sometimes they're living at home.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** I think one thing we also need to do is just embrace how complicated consent is. Like we're social workers, we're problem solvers. We like to be like, okay, this is the problem. This is a solution. It's easy. We're done. But consent is really complicated. The more I research it, the more complicated it gets. And so just being comfortable with the idea that teaching about consent isn't easy and that we're human and that means we have to work a little harder to make sure that we are responding to what people need. I have four children. And they love the TV show Bluey. There's a really good episode where this youngest child -- people keep asking if they can do stuff, and she says yes, but you can tell that she doesn't mean it. And at the end of the episode, the mom asks, after seeing how upset she is, the mom asks, "Does your inside voice say no? When your outside voice says yes." And I thought that was so powerful because that's exactly how it is for a lot of people who are in these situations. Those two things are fighting each other and we as social workers have to give them the tools to really understand which voice is actually their voice and which voice is actually the voice of society and norms and all these sort of external pressures that tell them what they should be doing.



**SJ Dodd:** Excellent. So now what are you currently working on or invested in, or what can we look for in the future?

**Candace Christensen:** Adrienne and I are working on a bibliographic entry for Oxford Publishing. And it's focused on gender-based violence on college campuses. More recently, I did a critical ethnography with an organization that supports sexual and gender minority youth. And I was looking at ways that violence emerges at the organizational level. And so what I did see, are instances of white supremacy and anti youth norms emerge as part of organizational processes. So that's a project I'm working on. Hopefully a book will come from that.

**SJ Dodd:** Great, we'll be looking out for that. Thank you.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** Right now my primary focus is on program development -- developing a video game to be used as sexual assault prevention on college campuses. So that's where most of my effort is going now. Right now I realize that most of our prevention programs are focused very much on sort of a heteronormative white, cis female experience of sexual assault and relationships. So I am currently developing a project to talk to sexual, racial and gender minorities, just about their relationships and relationship violence and their norms around sex and consent and communication so that their experiences can be included in the game.

**SJ Dodd:** You're doing the content. Are you also like a programmer? Like are you...

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** Oh, I wish I had that skill. *\*laughs\**

**SJ Dodd:** Oh ok, I was in awe for a moment. Wow, that's fantastic. Thank you both very much for giving us your time today. I really, really appreciate it. Thank you.

**Adrienne Baldwin-White:** Thank you.

**Candace Christensen:** Yes, thank you, SJ. We appreciate this opportunity.

**Anita Kwok:** Thank you to SJ Dodd, Candace Christensen, and Adrian Baldwin-White for this enlightening conversation. For more information about the Silberman Center for



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