

the gray
area of
negative
sexual
experiences

a zine featuring the stories of UCSB women

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a note from the author

I am a product of the system. Growing up, my mother pointed out things about me that "my boyfriend would like one day." My hair, the dimples at the bottom of my back, the way I walk. As a self-proclaimed ugly duckling throughout my middle school and high school years, boys did not show any interest in me. As my friends all entered relationships in the seemingly most crucial years of our young lives -- being 16 and 17, obviously -- I really thought something was wrong with me. As the only one of my friends who showed up to our Senior Prom single, I would say this was where my self-esteem felt the lowest it had ever been. I truly put all of my self worth and confidence in whether or not boys desired me or saw me as sexually worthy.

Even though I am about to share my own story, tell the stories of women who are my peers, and discuss the complexities of the difficult issue of sexual gray zones (a topic I have spent months researching and deeply thinking about), I am still a product of the system. I can read endless books, articles, and essays on feminism and gender studies, be fully aware of disguised structural misogyny, rape culture, and inequalities affecting women of all groups, yet I still succumb. I prefer to look very feminine, I choose to cross every single t and dot every single i to ensure perfection before a date with my boyfriend, I dedicate a lot of time in the shower shaving every last inch, and I even get flattered when random guys approach me on a dancefloor and ask if I want to dance. I care about the opinions of men and they do affect my day to day choices.

However, the crucial truth that leads this confession astray from the path you may think it is going down is that considering and caring about men's opinions does not mean I value them more than my own. I view it, rather, as complementary to my own opinion, along with the opinion of my friends and family. I like to believe my rather strong and assertive self-confidence came to me simply through the rite of passage we know as maturity, but I have one too many emotional battle scars to know this is not the only explanation for my fearlessness. I know it came from learning how to empower myself in the face of pitfalls, heartbreak, and disrespect at the hands of men. You are no longer afraid once something you fear becomes reality. As much as we want to say it doesn't matter to us, we all have individual realities and it's not so easy to let go of things we are socialized to value from a young age.

Going into this project, I wrote the interview question, "Has this type of [gray zone] experience led you to change the way you approached future situations or behave in ways that were cautious, self-critical, or fearful in future intimate scenarios?" I expected most of the interviewees to say yes -- that they dressed differently, didn't drink as much on their nights out, or didn't flirt so freely. I thought that a bad experience or two would likely veer them towards greater caution in their sex lives. I will admit, it did for me after the first time I felt taken advantage of. However, almost all of them responded along the lines of perceiving these negative situations as learning experiences, something that awoke their once timid inner voice, and an opportunity to realize their sexual desires and assert them to future partners. Almost every single woman looked ahead with a sense of empowerment and assertiveness in their sexual identity despite experiencing uncomfortable or traumatic moments. The solidarity and resilience of women was something I felt intensely from the second I began this project to right now as I write these words.

introduction

Over the course of two months, I interviewed six female UCSB students about personal experiences that they perceived as existing in a sexual gray zone. In these interviews, I would often find myself holding back tears as a sense of perfect understanding for the things they described washed over me. These weren't stories of women who were violently attacked, stranger raped, or held against their will in the type of sexual assault scenes that come to mind for most of us. But that's the point. Emotional trauma is emotional trauma, whichever way we experience it. A cake is still a cake if you bake it in a cake pan, a bundt pan, a mug, make it vegan, chocolate, vanilla, and the list goes on and on.

A sexual gray zone is defined, for purposes of this project, as **sexual or intimate experiences that cannot be classified as completely non-consensual, but also do not feel 100% comfortable, controlled, or fully decided on by both parties.** Anna Cahill (2016) makes the distinction that "in gray area situations, the woman's sexual agency is to a certain extent pursued," while "in assault situations the woman's sexual agency is negated" (Cahill 2016, 758).

Women in this project have experienced it with boyfriends, hookups, and even friends they did not even engage in sexual activities with. At the end of the day, who wants to accuse someone they know, maybe even someone they care about deeply of rape or face the reality that it happened? Many women are afraid of the stigma that accompanies speaking up.

Everyone knows the popular, widespread, and often criticized #MeToo movement that swept the internet recently to spread awareness about

the prevalence of sexual violence. A 2010 Swedish Twitter campaign under the hashtag #TalkAboutIt focused on sexual gray areas and "sought to lessen the perceived gap between experience and discourse and work towards an adequate sexual language encompassing difficult sexual situations presented as residing in the gray area between choice and coercion" (Karlsson, 2018). This campaign asked the question: as the definition of rape has expanded over the course of time while the definition of consent has narrowed, what language exists for us to talk about uncomfortable scenarios without being polarized? While #MeToo was a household name, it focused on the hidden abuse women endure and the pressure to keep personal stories private. #TalkAboutIt focused primarily on abuse women endure that they may not even be aware of.

Magnusson (2010) argues that language available to describe sexual assault often leans towards stranger rape attacks in ominous public settings where the perpetrators and victims are clear as day, which leaves little to no room to voice negative sexual experience within a relationship which began with consent. Victims' available discourse revolves around participants fitting into strict categories of victim and perpetrator, which is far more limiting than it seems at the surface. Gunnarsson (2018) contrasts and discusses tensions between "hegemonic discourses that dualistically juxtapose rape and sex and the more continuum-like and ambiguous realm of experience." Something that seems as simple as

recognizing the act of rape has been affected by language, "The one committing an assault is a psychopath-monster who ravages so recklessly that the only thing that remains, we imagine, is sobbing rubble. So powerful is this collective image that when we touch upon someone else's boundaries, or our own, we don't understand what is about to happen" (Magnusson, 2012, p. 18). The difficulty in considering someone close to us as a "psychopath monster" can make it difficult to even realize that a gray zone encounter occurred, since we are hesitant to place them into that role. People never want to view themselves as actual victims, which may rule out women who are unable to view their experience as *bad enough*. The campaign foremothers were adamant that the changes in language they hoped to invoke were primarily intended for a cultural level rather than a legal one. Talking about this issue is not designed to send more men to jail, severely persecute, or blame those involved in gray zone scenarios, but instead make them empathize and understand. These stories are real and common. The bottom line: we've all been assholes unknowingly from time to time, and it's acting differently at the next chance we get that defines us.

The elephant in the room needs to be addressed. Many of the experiences described in this project may meet certain definitions of rape. However, the point of this project is that these women did not feel comfortable categorizing these experiences as rape and did not perceive them as rape. Being sensitive to the perspectives of victims has been valued above all else throughout my work. Creating a new space so as not to take up space from those that do identify as victims is the focus. I do not mean to disrespect anyone's preferred definition of sexual assault or rape, or to invalidate anyone who has had experiences

similar to these and does consider themselves a rape survivor.

Talking about sexual harassment, assault, and violence can be difficult. On one hand, you can talk in a clinical way that fails to shock your audience and make an impact. On the other hand, detailed descriptive accounts can cross the line from a discussion to a dramatic scene which entertains, even if it does not intend to do so.

Some feminists deny the existence of a gray zone of rape altogether, referring to gray rape as a myth. The idea that rape can be accidental is heavily denied across the discipline, and rightfully so. However, we need to create a space that can adequately help those who have experienced gray zone sexual encounters to tell their story without being forced into the category of the victim. Rape culture disguises the gray zone while our current discourse shoves it down further into the darkness, deeming those with experiences they do not consider sexual assault to a position of *not important enough*. We must be open to these conversations whether someone considers themselves a survivor or not. Every experience is valid, even if some are more physically and emotionally intense than others.

The overarching purpose is to explore this issue in the context of our Isla Vista community, and to understand that experiences which may be comfortable to one person may cause discomfort for another. With that said, please also note that this project is not meant to place blame on anyone. We are not blaming the men in these stories, we are simply trying to make them empathize with the storytellers. Realization is crucial in fixing one's behavior, because if you never see that you're acting in a harmful manner, how can you ever fix yourself?

a man's game

We all remember how our guardians bring up or don't bring up sex for the first time. Felicity*, a third year transfer student from Orange County, recalls her dad using the "classic birds and the bees" method. She remembers, "He said 'One day, a man's gonna want to have sex with you.' I never forgot that and how awkward that was and kind of victimizing me as a woman and saying okay, so, one day, not the fact that you'll want it, but some guy is gonna want it."

Curiously, I ask Felicity why she chose to interview with me. She says something that echoes in my head: "I actually think this has happened with maybe every boyfriend I've had." Her definition of a sexual gray area?

offered to survivors.

Felicity and I reminisce about our teenage years leading up to now, and we both acknowledge that our own uncertainty paired with a partner's potential *certainty of desire* often leads to situations where blame cannot be pinpointed, due to a lack of communication. She recalls certain times after having sex, "I didn't know how I felt... and there was [that] post-sex feeling of regret and feeling dirty that you gave yourself to someone that doesn't deserve you."

Felicity and I agreed that women are expected to perform and entertain in the bedroom. I tell her my own experience of a constant, lingering pressure to

"It's painted to a lot of people that it's a man's game and you're just a pawn in it."

"There's not one way of easily putting it. It's not straight up assault that's a dictionary definition. It's not that, and it's not fully verbal consent. It's kind of that non-verbal slimy feeling post-sex where you're like, 'Was that ok on either party's end?'"

We start talking about the limitations of the typical conversations surrounding negative sexual experiences, and Felicity brings up an interesting idea: the problem of rape is presented as a uniquely *female* burden to us from an early age. "When you get introduced to [the idea of rape], by whatever means, it's kind of a female's problem," she says. She remembers sexual assault being presented as a series of clear steps and signals of threatening behavior rather than a personal experience that differs for every victim, "It's not custom [to the person experiencing it.]" It is presented as a protocol, from the events all the way down to the resources

perform in both sexual and non-sexual ways for men in all contexts, which is accompanied by not only a sense of expectation, but also a feeling of satisfaction and even pleasure to do so. Felicity agrees with me, and I feel relieved. Finally someone who feels the duality of the pressure and the gratification, and is willing to admit it! She admits that before sex, she often thinks, "How do I feel? How do I look? If I don't look great, then I don't want to have sex because this isn't gonna be fun for [him]."

Sex is centered around the male experience. "It's well understood that females give men blowjobs and that comes before [sex]. And it's like, oh, did he finish? And you know [if] he finished. Even to this day, even despite my partner and I having open communication, his finishing is always before mine," she admits. With men, the physical evidence is there.

*name changed for confidentiality

With women, not so much. Often times, men do not prioritize a woman's sexual pleasure until after their own is satiated (unless it can offer an ego boost). We are so often an afterthought, even in healthy, satisfying, and loving relationships.

Despite this, Felicity is forgiving, "I know we are a complex circuit board, but there's never equivalent focus on the female-male. I am just starting to [break down] the stigma of sex, but even me, someone who reads a lot about this, I can't imagine how other females feel."

"We aren't really taught this, we aren't taught that it's supposed to be a give and take, equal experience for females and males. It's painted to a lot of people that it's a man's game and you're just a pawn in it."

As someone who definitely felt the pressure to be cool as a teenager, what Felicity shares next brings me both relief and sadness. In high school, she knew a guy who she thought was cool and attractive. When things became physical between them, the pressure to

impress set in. "He put his hands down my pants and I thought, 'This is the hottest guy, I've always wanted to hook up with him.' But I wasn't personally ready," mentioning, "I was into it because that's what he wanted me to do. It was this game we were playing but there was never like, 'Oh, is this okay?'"

This experience is something so many girls fall into. When you are very young and invested in social approval, it can be easy to be taken advantage of and not even see the underlying fault of the situation until years later. You convince yourself in the moment that it's the right thing for you if it means you *fit in* or look cool. This is an important example of a common gray zone experience where boundaries are being crossed because one is too young to truly understand what their boundaries are *until they are violated*. This is coming of age in a culture that normalizes and downplays sexual assault.

While assault in relationships is fully understood as domestic violence, what about behavior that



"I actually think this has happened
with maybe every boyfriend I've
had."

-Felicity, pg.4

"Getting drunk, hooking up is so
normalized. I didn't really realize
it. So I am sure someone else feels
that way [too]."

-Lana, pg.24

"I've found that guys feel like
if you're doing one thing, you're
ready to do it all."

-Sara, pg.15

someone does not recognize as assault but rather as *not fully comfortable* in an otherwise happy relationship? Felicity's story invokes this question. She shares, "The first time, I was young, I think I was 15 or 16, I had a boyfriend and, you know, I was a virgin and he wasn't." Despite talking about waiting and understanding that sex was a big step, the alcohol and atmosphere of a hot and boozy Fourth of July afternoon changed that.

"One thing led to another and all of the sudden all I could remember was he was on top of me and we were having sex. I think about that moment a lot, or not a lot, but it's defining as a woman. I just think... there was never a yes or no, it was kind of like oh, clothes are coming off. This has happened before and you're comfortable with this and then ... *new territory*. As a younger female, I was really unsure of myself. Being 15, I don't know who I am, I don't know how I identify as a person, so a lot of other people's opinions form your own self identity. So I was like, I'm just gonna go with this because this what cool girls do. So, that relationship lasted about 8 months. I was a teenager, but my libido was low, I didn't want to have sex as often as we did. I never finished with him. I had never really initiated the sex and so it was just kind of one sided. That was a total gray area for me."

Frankly, to some this encounter might be viewed as sexual assault. What is important is Felicity did not *perceive* this experience as rape, but rather an uncomfortable sexual encounter with someone she thought she could trust with intimacy.

Felicity recalls engaging in performative behavior at this age, but not being aware of it at the time, recalling, "I was almost pretending to be this wild creature he wanted me to be." This relationship set the tone for Felicity, despite ending with being cheated on.

"I [thought] this is how this is supposed to be done. Sex is supposed to be our main driver in all [relationships]." She explains that this flawed

understanding followed her for years, adding, "From then on, it kind of framed my idea of sex. I thought, 'This is a man's game and we are here to lay down and do what they want.'"

In retrospect, Felicity does not think her boyfriend knew that pushing her into sex was wrong, saying, "I can almost guarantee that my first boyfriend, he most likely doesn't know, and he was the most frequent offender of that gray area. I think it was just kind of a part of his upbringing." While I am hesitant to blame society with a capital S, it is true that values such as masculinity, power, control, and gender roles being taught to and pushed on males from a very young age is to blame. In situations where the discomfort is not premeditated, men are often unaware that their behavior is harmful because it seems normal.

Despite being a victim of the discomfort that negative sexual relationships and encounters can place on us, Felicity uses these experiences as fuel beneath her.

"I think that now, looking at all of this in front of me, it's changed my direction, especially with sex. I am an advocate for people being open and honest. Especially with my sexual experiences, I always make it apparent to my partner. I took his virginity and I wanted him to have a very healthy sexual experience. Just because we are partners doesn't mean that every move we make or sexual experience that I prompt has to go out, like you can stop it at any time. My experiences made me more cautious and sensitive."

a tinder date

Events in popular culture can and have surprised us, while also impacting the lens through which we see and understand sex. Norah*, a Philosophy and Feminist Studies student from Los Angeles, shares that this was the case for her with discovering the sexual gray zone, noting the Aziz Ansari scandal, "He was really relatable and a self-proclaimed feminist and he had some really good opinions. So it was kind of a shock for me." She remembers hearing about



the scandal and acknowledging that the situation in question wasn't stereotypical, dictionary sexual assault, but something was off and couldn't be ignored.

"The miscommunication between sexual needs and sexual experiences, I think, is about rape culture in the U.S. There's blurred lines -- like the song Blurred Lines-- the lines are so blurred that you think... you kind of consented but also felt super pressured. But, isn't that coercion? Isn't that sexual assault? But guys have an issue with that. They are trained in their mind, in society, that 'I don't experience sex with a girl, I take sex from a girl, I fuck

her, I get it from her, that's the goal."

Norah was a late bloomer to the dating world. Her parents rarely talked about sex, and a Catholic background meant tiptoeing around the topic. Instead, Norah used Wikipedia to teach herself the ins and outs. She mentions that things she saw through media made her question herself, saying, "I was watching a lot of, like, Gossip Girl in high school, and it has a huge impact! The show Skins too. So I was wondering, 'Why am I not having crazy wild sex in high school?'" Things changed once she left high school, "I was going to community college, had a car, in a big city, and I just thought, 'Fuck it, I might as well lose my virginity, so I went on Tinder.'"

Tinder is an interesting and especially relevant aspect to the gray zone, particularly in the context of Isla Vista. Tinder is viewed as the gold standard hookup app, and while it may indeed be commonly used for seeking out casual sex, this assumption creates dangerous scenarios for users. If two people meet up from Tinder, one expecting sex due to the nature of the app, and the other expecting a simple date, couldn't it likely lead back to the "she was asking for it" debate? Wasn't he or she supposed to know what they were signing up for? The assumptions and associations that we slap onto things can contribute to these gray area experiences in this exact way. While people often talk via direct message before meeting up, there is plenty of room for deception on either end.

Norah found herself tangled in this after her friends told her to join Tinder a few days after turning 18. After matching with a guy named Jackson, she recalls, "He was really chill, really nice, I remember the conversation not being too sexual, [but] it was definitely flirty."

*name changed for confidentiality

A few days later, they met up. She says, "We were just smoking in his car, driving around LA, chilling, having a good time." They ended up returning to his house, where they watched TV for hours. She got nervous when things took a turn.

"He tried to make a move on me, he tried to put his arm around me, but I'm pretty weird and awkward and I guess I made a face that he thought I didn't like it. So, he didn't make a move for the rest of the night."

After offering to drive her home, she became confused, saying, "I thought it was a little weird, cause I thought he was going to try and kiss me or something. But, I was like, 'We can make out a bit if you want,' and he was like 'Oh, really? Ok, cool.'"

Jackson got up and walked to his closet, coming out with something in his hand that Norah later realized was a condom. The situation continued to

by someone who *did* understand their own. Here, desire was used as a slippery slope by the other party involved to somehow think that wanting to make out equates to desire for sexual intercourse.

Norah says after that Tinder date, her and Jackson dated for months. In so many cases of gray zone experiences, the other person involved is or becomes someone we trust and are close to, someone who we would never want to believe could be hurting or taking advantage of us. This makes these situations difficult for both parties to recognize as mutually harmful. Norah says that the thrill of having a boyfriend blinded her to the negative aspects of their relationship.

"I thought, 'Wow the first guy that's interested in me is this super tall, skater, rich kid whose parents don't care that I am at his house, like, that's pretty

"First time I kissed a dude, and then seconds later he's reaching for my pants and I am like....I didn't mean *that*."

escalate, "We were making out and then he started going for my pants, and I kind of froze up. I didn't know how to say that all I wanted to do was makeout. It's the first time I kissed a dude, and then seconds later he's reaching for my pants and I am like....I didn't mean *that*." As Norah found it harder and harder to speak up about her boundaries, things advanced, "What he got out of the closet was a condom. And then we had sex. And I wasn't saying anything, but I wasn't fully in it. I was conscience. I had just smoked weed. I was really just in shock. My body failed me in a way. And that's how I lost my virginity."

Combining a lack of experience, communication, and verbal consent, along with expectations about how the night was *supposed* to go, this situation went wrong in many ways. Norah, young and unsure of her sexual voice or desires, was taken advantage of

sick.' I kind of accepted it because I didn't think anyone else was gonna like me. Like, I didn't think there was gonna be anyone else who was going to like me like this. Who was going to be as good as this."

Norah, like so many of us, did not understand the harm in this situation or recognize she was coerced until years later, "No, I didn't realize it right away. I think it was education, once I got more into [Feminist] studies and learning what an abuser is." She says her relationships that followed this one were often "toxic" due to the "not so stable" prior relationship, which she viewed as normal for years. Later down the road, with time and education, she came to realize something was off about that first relationship, "I feel like there is more of an effort to talk about sexual assault in media. And the Aziz Ansari thing, too. I realized, no, my encounter was

really fucked up, that was not a good time, that was a gray area."

What does she think of her ex-boyfriend's conscience today, years later? She says, "I do not think he thinks it was wrong or a gray area, cause I guess when I said I wanted to makeout, it was like [a signal]. But, I don't understand, because I [only] said we could *make out*." Reflecting on that night she says, "I am very surprised his initial reaction was to go to the closet and get a condom. Looking back now, I wonder, how does he not think that was wrong? I legitimately think he does not think that was wrong. I dated him after, he would probably say, 'If that was so wrong, why did you date me?'"

Despite going through this negative sexual experience and the repercussions it had for her life and relationships, Norah is self-aware and carries herself with strength as she aims to heal.

"I think it made me different, but not more cautious. It made me aware and like, forward. Now, I am very open about sex. I talk about it with my housemates, with my friends. If we don't talk about it, it's not fine."

Nowadays, she is more sexually liberated. "Now I feel like, I am vibing with this guy, I know I just met him today, but let's have sex. If guys are going to treat it like this, I am going to, too. It's not going to mean much to me. I have come to an epiphany lately, cause I was struggling with that realization after, and it was definitely not a good transition, but now that I am realizing what I am doing and being more self-aware, it feels better. I'm living life intentionally and I give consideration to each action, even if it doesn't exactly fit what is deemed acceptable," she says.

"it was just a little fun"
"consent is just a yes or no"

Consent looks different for everyone. Talking to your partner about what makes them feel comfortable is important. Be sensitive with others and their needs.

"cmon, you're so sexy"
"it was just a hook up"

prude!

Let's talk about a different type of sexual stereotype. First there is the *slut*. We know her well... or at least the way she is painted across our culture in music, movies, television, and just about everywhere else they can stick her.

But what about the *prude*? The woman who doesn't really like or want sex all that much? She is a forgotten voice in popular media, usually only painted as a nun or a woman who undergoes a transformation to come out on the other side with a new found love and enjoyment for sex. For Sara*, a Political Science major from Laguna Beach, this stereotype is something she has struggled with for years.

"I grew up with so much exposure [to sex], but if I am being honest, I grew up not [to be] a very sexual person."

Sara grew up in a mixed household, explaining, "My dad was raised in a very Christian home, and in his home, he was expected to not necessarily talk about sex and not have sex before marriage and sex was just strictly for procreation." Despite these strict views of sex, her parents decided they would be open and honest with their kids, and encouraged comfortable conversation.

However, no method of sex education is perfect because it is a different maze for each child. Sara mentions, "I have friends who love to talk about [sex], love to do it. And me? I don't, you know, I have noticed I am far less sexual than a lot of my friends. I don't know, maybe it's because I was never [sexually] oppressed. People think it's the opposite."

Many people think the pressure to have sex ends with high school. But in college, there is a pressure to "live your life while you're young", not get "tied down", and use college as your excuse to be reckless. That attitude combined with Isla Vista, a beast of its own,

and you get young people with a lot of pressure on them to act a certain way. "I found myself to just not be so sexual of a girl, not that I think it's a bad thing, my friends tended to be the opposite, if they were opposite they were one or the other. Either very very sexually active or came from strictly religious backgrounds where they thought it was a bad thing. So I never found that balance. I would say I came from a really healthy background, you know, I talked to my mom before I lost my virginity, and there's no secrets," she says.

Sara offers her insight about the gray area: "If you use the word rape, it's assuming they knew they were doing that." She shares that growing up, she learned that boys were supposed to chase girls, saying, "First of all, the girls don't go after it, the boys do. And you give it, *finally*, when they've tried hard enough. You can see how those lines start to turn into a guy is really really pushing you until it goes from you didn't want to in the beginning and then you're like, I guess. It's always this thing of the women should hold it for as long as they can. What does that teach boys? That they should push, they should work. They aren't getting it because they aren't working hard enough. And then they are thinking to themselves, oh, I could just get it if I just worked a little harder. And then we just pushy, we get aggressive, we have *this*."

"It really is a gray area and you really don't know, because no one really sat me down and sort of, told me what to call that and how do you even know when to call it that? Not only do you first have to realize that it's a thing, but then you have to define it."



For her, the gray area is “a feeling of being too nervous, stressed, embarrassed, or shy to say no, even though you want to say no. There’s reasons, societal expectations, expectations from friends, or [expectations] that you put on yourself.”

Growing up, Sara says she was always called a prude, which puts more pressure on her.

“I [feel like I] am not being a normal 21 year old. You know, normal 22 year olds have more sex. So then, you put pressure on yourself to have more sex. Then you’re in a situation where you are feeling all these pressures from something else besides actually wanting to, and you don’t want to, but you’re doing it. To me, is that consent? No, that’s a super negative experience. Did that yes come from me? Absolutely not. I was the only one saying no, the yes came from everybody else. The yes came from my friends telling me to do it, and society and pressure telling me to do it, and the guy telling me to do it. It didn’t come from me, but did I do it, completely aware? Yes.

So then, do I feel bad saying anything accusatory about this guy? Yes. It complicates the word consent, because that implies you *know* what you want and you’re brave enough to *assert* what you want. Anybody else would [say] those are superficial details and you should’ve just said no if you didn’t want to. It’s honestly not that simple, it’s so much more complicated than that,” she says.

One night her freshman year, Sara was with a guy from the same dorm floor as her hanging out when he started to undress, prompting her to leave out of fear. The next morning when she ran into him, he told her, “I had to finish myself off in the shower because you didn’t want to.” She says that this disgusted her and she regrets not telling someone else, because the next year the same student was expelled for sexually assaulting another girl.

“When I heard that, it was that [internal]

“They think, ‘This is sex, that’s the game, that’s the flirtiness of it, that’s college life, that’s a drunk party night.’”

conversation like, 'Well, he might not even have known he was overstepping boundaries.' But in saying to me, 'Oh, haha, I had to finish myself off because you kept saying no.' What are you talking about? Can't he hear himself? I kept saying 'No.' Yes, you should have gone and taken care of yourself. If someone is saying no, you shouldn't be forcing." She adds, "I've found that guys feel like if you're doing one thing, you're ready to do it all."

Being honest with yourself about negative sexual experiences can be difficult and coming to terms with these situations is never instant. Gray area situations which teeter more towards the side of sexual assault are often those where someone might not even *realize* the experience they had is actually sexual assault. The truth is, sexual assault is a situation where we think, "That could never be me." This is partly due to the mainstream portrayal of sexual assault as the stranger rape. Although we have all heard the statistic that three out of four sexual attacks are committed by an acquaintance, we are not taught to think it will happen to us in the form that it often *does*. It can be immensely difficult to even identify as a victim when our situation does not fit into our mental schema of sexual assault.

Pinpointing where to place blame is complex. Sara still has a forgiving stance, saying, "We suffer from how we are taught. A lot of these boys, if they had known, they wouldn't [act this way] by any means. You know, that bad word, that bad rape word, [they say], 'I would never rape a woman!' They're taught weird things. Even in Disney movies, when does the prince ever ask for consent before he just sweeps her off her feet? And she loves it! She is giggling and smiling, so then you have girls giggling and smiling. And they were taught, brainwashed, since birth that giggling and smiling means, she wants you to put your face on her face and your body on her body."

Sara struggles to wrap her head around the male culture here in Isla Vista, mentioning that when she didn't want to sleep with someone right away, they would feel rejected, saying, "I have been asked, 'Do you not like me?' I'm like, who taught you, you poor thing, that I need to literally have sex with you the day I meet you in order for it to mean I find you cute? Isla Vista is a hyper sexual environment. I've had a bunch of guys' friends come up to me [asking], 'Don't you like him? You told us you liked him.' I do like him, but who taught you that [sex is] what signifies that? Like, you have to get that sex. Do you even want to have sex without even knowing someone? Or did someone just teach you? I think a lot of them don't, and they're just doing it [because of pressure]," she explains.

Sara sees a scary reality about the gray area: it disguises itself. Women, she says, often may think "this is sex, that's the game, that's the flirtiness of it, that's college life, that's a drunk party night." As mentioned before, the pressure to fulfill one's college years with partying, sex, drugs, and overall recklessness is a rampant belief. However, it can be far more dangerous when it enables sexual assault to go completely undetected because it is sheltered by rape culture.

Despite seeing dark situations and battling her own frustration, Sara speaks with passion. Reflecting on these experiences, she finds light in the darkness.

"The last two times I have gotten intimate with someone, I've had a lot of confidence and courage and stopped things when I was ready."

Her final thoughts? "You never hear about a guy saying, 'Well, I was just too drunk, and she took advantage of me.' They never have to worry about that. They never have to say, 'Boys, I need to take it slow tonight because I don't want anything to happen to my body,'" she says.

just friends

Megan's* story is a little different from the others. Her's is about the gray area friend and sexual advances. Nothing sexual occurred in Megan's experience, but that doesn't mean something wasn't off. What struck me about this story was that it involved a friend. A friend is someone who is supposed to offer platonic support, positivity, and trust. For Megan, this person lacked all of these fundamentals. But that begs the question: how do we talk about predatory behavior involving a friend? Even though this situation might be viewed as not that bad, it created negative and uncomfortable memories for Megan and offered a perspective outside of strictly sexual context within the gray area.

Growing up in a "fairly stereotypical" home, Megan grew up in Murrieta, California with one brother. Things became difficult for her family when her father committed suicide when she was 16. This emotional hurdle made her vulnerable, leading to "poor decisions in [her] personal life" and allowing the wrong people into her life. She says, "They were these guys. They knew I wasn't into guys, and I made it clear I wasn't into guys. They didn't really care, so they decided that I was into guys." For the next two years, these guys made physical advances at her which she says were persistently ignored. When Megan emphasized their relationship was platonic, they would assure her that they understood that.

Megan thinks the space for women to talk about these things is too emphasized on protocol, saying, "There are so many cut-out reports of what happened but not 'This is what

happened to me. Or this is what it feels like when this happened or this is why I think this happened."

"[The gray area is] that whole range of these extremely personal and estranged experiences whether you have to live with this person, or if you'll never see them again. [For me], a lot of my experiences have been very very gray. I was never exceptionally willing in any situations I have been in. It seemed, situationally, I had to follow these guidelines even though I made it clear at the outset that I didn't want sexual advances from this person. It made it feel that my experience was still consensual, but didn't belong in this very polar world of sex is great or it's not sex, it's rape. The language is very very harsh and it's part of what prevents the moderates who are afraid to speak out from having any sort of input into what happened."

Megan recalls when she was a senior in high school. She met up with a friend to travel to an orchestra performance that a mutual friend was performing in. Being friends for a couple of years, she saw the day going smoothly. Her and the male friend enjoyed the long drive on a sunny day while listening to music. The concert went well until he asked her if she wanted to move to the upper tiers in the orchestra hall. She says her thoughts began to mediate the situation, making excuses for why she shouldn't be afraid or uncomfortable.

"We go up there and I am [thinking], 'Okay, he just wants to be able to talk a little bit louder;' like trying to *logic it out*. He wants to hear what I am saying. I am trying to ignore that this is a guy who has lowkey been trying to get at me. He broke up

*name changed for confidentiality

with his girlfriend when he realized I wasn't dating another guy. I was like, 'He's my friend, he's my friend, he's my *friend*.' We go up there and he's sitting really close, the arm of the chair is up and he's pretty much sitting in my seat and I start to think, like, 'Alright this is getting weird.'" Trying to keep ourselves calm and tell ourselves someone isn't coming on to us because we're just friends is a common feeling. Making excuses for someone else's behavior because we trust them or because we are trying to talk ourselves out of a panic is a bleak reality for many women.

After the concert, he suggested they take a trip to a nearby beach. "Not knowing how to say no to my ride home, I said, 'I mean, you know you have a flight early in the morning, we really should head back.' He's like 'No no no, let's go to the beach.' I was like '.... alright.' At the beach, Megan tried hard to keep her physical distance from him, despite his repeated requests to stop and sit. She remembers feeling trapped, "This has been a guy who has sort of been [pushy] like this for awhile, and I know that he's my ride home, it's the middle of the night, I am far away [from home]. We do this game for half an hour. He wants to sit, I want to walk. Going back and forth."

After the tide forced them to retreat, she is forced to sit with him. Visibly freezing, he offers her his jacket, "I am trying to say no, because I know whenever someone gives you their jacket there's always an expectation. That sort of thing is always one thing leads to another and I didn't want one thing to lead to another." After a while, he starts to give up, "Eventually he gets the message: she's too cold for this, but *not* she doesn't want this. I had been telling him for years that I don't want this, I am not into dudes, I don't want this."

Finally they head back to the car and head home, a two hour drive back. During this car ride, Megan suggested they take a windy highway back, hoping it would keep his attention on the road and off of her. Despite this attempt, he continued being persistent, "He drives with one hand on the gear shift, he starts trying to reach in my romper. I wonder, how much more clear can I be? I try to say, 'I don't think this is safe, I don't want this to go farther, I want to make sure that you're driving and have a clear head for this, why don't we turn on some music so we don't fall asleep?' He keeps saying things like, 'If you don't want me to fall asleep, let me hold you, keep me awake.' After trying to be so clear and him just not

listening, I kind of gave up. I was like 'Well, this is where his hand is going to be. Unless he is shifting gears, this is where his hand will be. There's not much farther away I can get, I am all the way to the door, leaning on the door, and he is just reaching. There was no out. For awhile, I know that it was like, alright, we are just messing around, I was cold, we were on the beach, nothing creepy, nothing



weird, I don't have to tell him no yet, he knows, I've told him before. And then he decided he *didn't* know, he pretended the next day and every time after that night that it hadn't even been weird. He would mention to me in passing, 'Remember when we went to Laguna?' Yeah, I remember you being creepy and not listening and not caring that I was uncomfortable with this. I remember being afraid that you were going to leave me in Laguna."

Looking back on this time in her life, Megan says she has struggled with how to justify it, mentioning she often goes "back and forth about blame and fault." She reveals "Half of me is like well, I was in a bad place, and then the other part of me was like, well, I still did this. And another part of me is like, well, they should know they know what was going on with me. There are so many ways that you can sort of try to place this idea of blame in situations like that."

“After trying to be so clear and him just not listening, I kind of *gave up*. I was like well, this is where his hand is going to be.”

a tale of two parties

What can men do as our allies with gray zone issues? What is the ideal way for men to act as an ally while still communicating effectively with other men? I talked about this with Mimi*, a Statistics major from San Jose, California.

Mimi tells me about her history with sex education, saying, "I'm Asian and [in terms of] sexual recreation ... we don't really talk about it. But because my mom is also a nurse, when I started hitting puberty she would borrow me books and let me read into it, which was how I started to learn about it." In college, an administrative justice class opened her eyes to the legal details of certain sexual encounters, sparking her interest in the discourse around

"I think rape is something that happens when sex takes place and you didn't want it and you've tried to express that, and it still happens against your will. The gray area is whether or not your desire to have it is muddled. I wasn't ok with all of it, but I wasn't totally not down. No verbal communication indicated that I wanted to have it or didn't want to have it. Your feelings about it were kind of in the middle, communication didn't really take place about whether or not you wanted to proceed or stop."

Miscommunication was a repeatedly mentioned issue with every girl I sat down with. The lack of both initiative on the other partner's end to make sure comfort and trust was

"He tried to tell her he didn't have condoms, but she found the condoms."

sexual violence. "As of now, we are not doing a really good job of defining the area. There's too much gray area and I think that's kind of a problem," she says.

"What the gray area consists of is very subjective... and how you felt in the moment. Like I didn't say no, but I didn't really want to. But I guess, if it comes down to it, the language, [I think] women in general are timid when it comes to speaking out [about assault]. Especially in cases like this, you don't want to ruin anybody's life. I think that we need to work on being better about it, that it is both a social construct and personal struggle. As a kid you're afraid to speak out about anything. As you grow older, that shifts into this setting of oh, how do I speak out about this?"

established, along with emotionally-based hesitation on their end mixed to create a situation which was originally *intended* to be a positive encounter that turned negative. Something that stood out to me in Mimi's interview is her empathy and understanding for others involved in her story. She did not want to blame anyone, but instead look at the issue from a removed standpoint and understand what happened and *why* it happened.

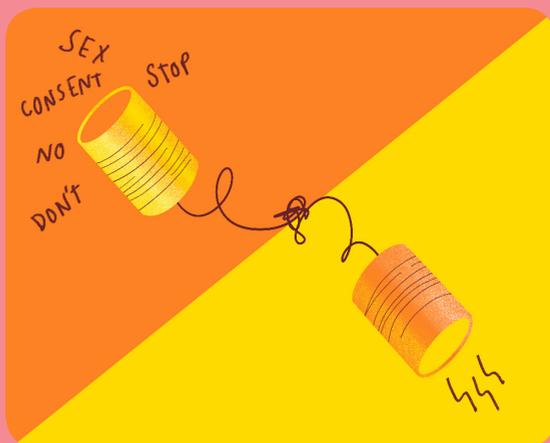
Mimi also brought a fresh perspective to the issue: men with gray area experiences. She explains, "I think it even extends to men in these contexts, especially with men actually. If they go through anything it's really hard, you know, *what is a negative sexual experience for a man?*" Mimi recalls a male friend who had mentioned to her

that he struggled to avoid sex with a girl who wanted it, "He tried to tell her he didn't have condoms, but she found the condoms. The way he tried to avoid it was the only way he knew to avoid it and it didn't end up working for him." Women are not the only victims in gray area situations, and both parties can make choices during these encounters that lead to discomfort for one or both partners. The pressure put on men to act a certain way or to fulfill a certain image is important. Do men actually want sex all the time, or are they just expected to want it? While we already touched on the topic of a prude, what about the topic of a man who doesn't want or enjoy sex? We don't even have language for it because it is thought of something that does not exist in the eyes of our culture, which is a very damaging truth.

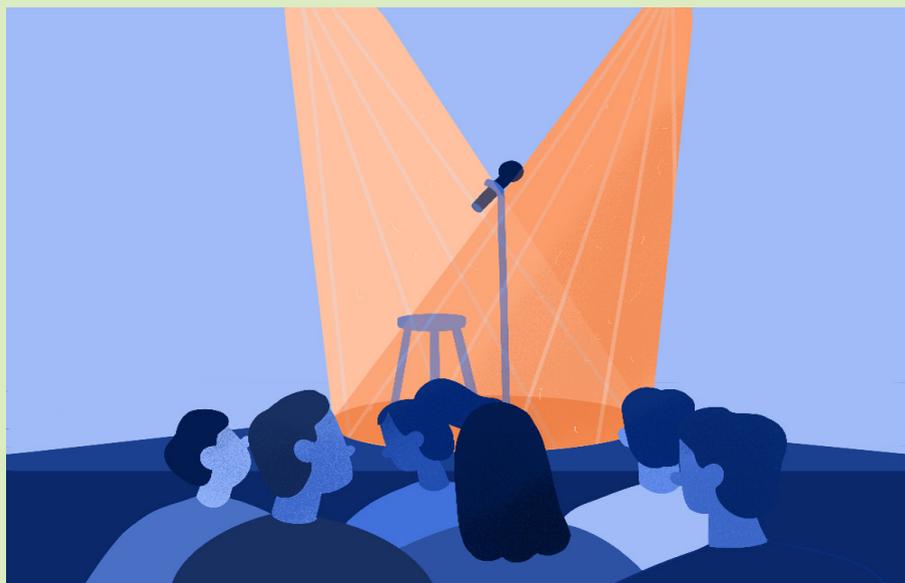
One night her freshman year, Mimi headed out to a party with her friends. After dancing for awhile with a guy she had met, things advanced without any signal from her. "He took it really far and started taking his fingers in places that they shouldn't have been, so they did go in my vagina. I do remember that [I felt indifferent]. I did make out with him because at the time I was kind of like, you know, up that body count, the mentality as a freshman." After this, he invited her back to his place, to which she declined. "I said no, and he was really nice about it. He was clearly respectful, but I never said it was okay to finger me. I didn't feel creeped out necessarily, but I don't remember saying that was okay," she explains.

A similar instance occurred at another party. While Mimi was very drunk, a guy started to lead her back towards his room away from the party. Her friends noticed her exit and immediately called her, urgently demanding she leave the party. Once she returned, her friends confronted

the guy who had pulled her away. She clearly remembers his reaction. He covered his head in shame. "It was very uncomfortable because I hadn't even talked to him that entire night and he tried to make something out of it. I sometimes wonder if my roommates weren't there, like, what would've happened? Would I regret it? Because I don't know, I don't have to think about those things, because it didn't happen," she says. What differentiates this situation from the other is signals. She explains, "The other guy who fingered me, we were dancing and we made out a little bit, there were some signals. But in this instance, there were absolutely none. I do think a part of him does think that he should not have done that. I think [something] most guys don't realize is that because of rape culture, you are taught to protect yourself. Why not just teach your kids not to be dicks? I almost want [to say] you can't blame them. I think a good example would be that guy at the party, because after I told him I didn't wanna go back with him, he was like 'Oh that's totally fine, that's cool.' But I don't think he thought that fingering me was not okay, like he was not aware. You can tell he had that mentality of not ever wanting to be that guy, he would be shocked if someone came forward and accused him."



just a joke



It's a Friday night. A freshman student is thrilled by newfound freedom and the sudden onset of readily available alcohol at every turn. For Political Science student Lana, a seemingly fun night out with her friends turned into an experience that was increasingly haunting to her as the haze wore off and time sunk in.

She sits in front of me, she is small framed but has a contagious smile to her face. Growing up in what she calls a "really conservative, traditional Mexican" home in San Diego with "a very Catholic upbringing," she says that sex was always viewed as sacred and *absolutely not* meant to come before marriage. Lana says her mom didn't mention sex much, but did teach "how to protect yourself from having sex, not necessarily the risks behind [having] sex." She says her mom told her, "You have to wear certain clothing, you have to cover your breasts, cover your curves,

your hair can't be too long...all these things to avoid guys thinking of you as someone who would want to have sex."

Lana shares with me that she thinks the topic of sexual assault is very stigmatized, and this prevents women from coming forward, saying, "Some people don't come forward with allegations because they're scared of ruining someone's life, and they don't know what is sexual assault and what is not. We need to destigmatize that. I remember when I went through this I didn't want to talk to anyone about it, I just wanted to keep it to myself." Looking back on her own experience, she says, "I didn't know what to call it. I didn't know enough about sex and sexual intercourse and sexual assault. I just don't think I knew enough to be able to say this is what it is."

I sense some uneasiness in her soft-spoken voice. She recalls, "It was my first year and I was new to

*name changed for confidentiality

“Whenever I talked about it with my close friends back then, they would tell me it was consensual and there’s no fault.”

drinking, new to partying.” After heading out with her roommate and friends to go party-hopping (a regular Saturday night for many students), she recalls getting to one party and talking to a few guys. After spending some time dancing and making out with one guy, her memory goes into a blackout. She recalls, “I did remember telling this guy, ‘Let’s go find a room.’”

What happens next could easily be seen as a typical hook up, and it was supposed to be. When Lana regained her consciousness, she says she was on the floor of a laundry room, pants down, and the guy from the party on top of her. She immediately realized something was off. Her hookup had started anal sex without her permission. When she realized what was going on, she told him she was not okay with this change. After this she recalls, “He said, ‘Oh okay.’ He laughed it off. He was very drunk. We were both very drunk. We continued. I blacked out again.” After the encounter ended, he walked her home, even talking to her roommate before they both put her to bed.

“The next morning, I could not remember this guy’s face. I remembered his shoes, his clothes, and his voice. I remember everything. I was trying to find him on social media and I found him. I remember telling my friends the next day, ‘Oh my god, I hooked up with this guy. I can’t believe I did this!’”

She describes as the day went on, the onset of pain “physically, mentally, [and] emotionally” lead her to tell her friends. Her friends, including the same roommate who had put her to bed that night, all gave her a similar answer: you were drunk, you said yes, you went with him, you consented, you’re fine. Lana

explains her friends’ reactions, “It was like a joke, it was honestly just humorous at that point.” Despite her friends’ responses, Lana says, “Within those 24 hours, thinking about it and trying to find him and figure out why it didn’t feel right...within 48 hours I completely figured out that I was not completely okay with that.”

She ended up contacting the guy from that night, thinking, “I want to know what happened. I need to know what happened,” while she also “really wanted to put a face to him, to remember his voice. After texting for a bit, she confronted him about that night, “Once I told him he put it in my anus, he said, ‘No, I didn’t.’ I said, ‘Yes, you did.’ That’s when he realized that there was something wrong. When we met up, he was very uneasy. He realized, when he saw me, I was holding myself, he realized I wasn’t okay with what happened. He was trying to figure out why I was upset. He didn’t understand that there was something wrong. It was also his first time, so I guess he didn’t want to associate a negative experience to his first time. He wanted answers too.” His confusion continued, and she told him, “We need to figure out what happened because I am not okay with this, and you were okay with this up until I texted you. We need to figure out why that is.” Following this encounter, she cut off contact, telling him, “I’m sorry, but I’m dealing with something. And you’re part of it. I need to just disassociate myself with you because everytime I think about you, I think about something I do not want to remember.”

In the weeks that followed, Lana says she “reflected a lot” and blamed her drinking habits. Citing a recent breakup as fuel to what she saw as “really reckless”

behavior, she emphasizes, "I was so vulnerable." The reflection did not stop there.

"After a couple of months and years, honestly, of just thinking about it, so hard about it, I realize that it's a little bit easier to talk about."

The experience transformed her habits and behavior, saying, "It made me way more cautious when I go out, way way more cautious. I don't like being vulnerable and I don't like finding myself in situations where I feel taken advantage of."

Looking back now, nearly four years later, Lana recalls what hurt her the most: "Whenever I talked about it with my close friends back then, they would tell me it was consensual and there's no fault. I think that's what made me feel so bad for so much longer than I should have. Instead of confronting my emotions and trying to find a solution, I think I went to the wrong people and found the wrong answers and that's what made me feel like complete crap for so long." She says this type of encounter is common among women her age, saying, "Getting drunk, hooking up is so normalized. I didn't really realize it. So I am sure someone else feels that way [too]."



afterword

The similarities across these stories bring me both a sense of togetherness and sadness. The truth is that these similarities lie deeply embedded in our culture. While each of these women could identify that something within their story felt *off*, none of them could grasp in the moment what happened to them nor find the correct words to say it. The sexual gray zone is a learning experience, one that catapults us into so much discomfort we store it away and refer back to it as “*just a bad night*” or “the time I drank too much” or “when I thought I might be ready but I really wasn’t,” and the list goes on with ways we blame ourselves. We make excuses for why these experiences aren’t that bad. We are trapped by a language that doesn’t allow us to be in between pleasure and violence, but rather *stuck* in a place where we ourselves cannot even recognize or understand when things aren’t right.

I hope from reading these stories that you can reflect inwards and ask yourself, “Have I acted in ways like this?” or “Could I approach my next sexual encounter with more caution for the other person’s comfort?”

As I and many of these women stated throughout these pages, these stories are not about placing blame or persecuting anyone, but rather to make people aware that a gray zone does exist and we all must be aware of it. Not every negative experience is an attack. We need a separate space within the discourse which allows for stories that do not have straightforward roles of the villain and the victim. Creating a new space will allow for all voices and stories to be heard without stripping importance or power from experiences which do have these roles.

I would like to thank every woman who came forward and shared their stories with me, whether the stories made it into this zine or not. You are brave, strong, and deserve to be heard.

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