

# It's time to change the study of consent, says researcher

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For many years, philosophers and legal scholars have wrestled with understanding and defining consent, while psychologists have mostly conducted domain-specific research on the subject—most commonly

studying informed consent and sexual consent. Associate Professor Vanessa Bohns argues that psychologists should embrace consent—specifically, the subjective experience of consent, or what makes someone feel as if they have actually consented rather than merely complied—as a core topic of study.

In a forthcoming *Perspectives on Psychological Science* article, "Toward a Psychology of Consent," Bohns contends that [psychologists](#) should construct a psychological definition of consent that is generalizable across domains and describes the subjective experience of consent.

To test her theory that consent is under-researched by psychologists, Bohns and her research assistants conducted a literature review of a pre-established sample of "important psychology journals" and searched those journals for the word "consent" as either a keyword or a title word within an unlimited timeframe. Their search uncovered just five results across the five journals.

"This is not to say that psychologists do not study consent," Bohns wrote. "To be clear, many do ... However, these researchers most often do so within specialized areas ... Each of these areas tends to be siloed, publishing and presenting at conferences in their own specialized areas. This makes it difficult to observe the similarities and differences in the underlying conceptualization of the psychology of consent across these different domains, and to construct a broad definition of consent that can be applied, and then modulated, across contexts."

In the article, Bohns illustrates the tenets that have come to comprise the legal understanding of consent:

- Competence—an individual must have the capacity to consent;
- Knowledge—an individual must be appropriately informed;
- Freedom—an individual must consent voluntarily.

While the legal definition of consent serves the specific function of determining liability, Bohns argues that psychologists, in addition to using these three criteria, should "ask a different, complementary question: What makes an actor feel like they have consented?"

"That is, what makes an actor believe they have the capacity to consent, believe they are adequately informed about what they are getting into, and feel like they can refuse or walk away from the situation?"

Bohns continues, "a psychological definition of consent is meant to shed light on a part of consent that has largely been ignored as a serious topic of study by legal scholars and [philosophers](#), and has only been examined in very particular domains among psychologists."

Bohns's article concludes, "Ultimately, a better understanding of subjective consent will inform both psychology and law."

**More information:** Toward a Psychology of Consent, [www.researchgate.net/publicati... sychology\\_of\\_Consent](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/351111111_toward_a_psychology_of_consent)

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