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Posted Date: 15 December 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202512.1231.v1

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Article

Let's Write About It: Rethinking Sexual Consent Through Therapeutic Writing With Women in Chile

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Abstract

As high rates of sexual violence worldwide have increasingly been met with educational initiatives promoting sexual consent as a core preventive strategy, it becomes crucial to understand how consent is actually conceptualized in specific sociocultural contexts. This study examines how adult women in Chile conceptualize sexual consent and how their understandings align with, expand or diverge from the definition promoted by the World Association for Sexual Health (WAS), one of the more wide-spread accounts. Using a therapeutic writing methodology designed to support emotional safety and reflective depth, 34 women completed a collective writing workshop. For this paper, the main writing exercise was analyzed through thematic analysis. Results show three overarching themes: *sexual consent* as a self-directed and desire-aligned experience; the intricacies of *giving in* to sexual encounters as shaped by social expectations, emotional pressures, and relational considerations; and the tensions when differentiating *consent* from *giving in*, a distinction experienced as meaningful yet fluid and learned over time. Together, these findings reveal that Chilean women's conceptualizations of sexual consent extend beyond normative international models, highlighting the need for attuned consent frameworks and educational approaches designed to prevent sexual violence.

Keywords: consent; sexual violence; sexual violence prevention; therapeutic writing; thematic analysis

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1. Introduction

Sexual violence is recognized as a global public-health crisis: according to recent estimates, more than 370 million girls and women worldwide — approximately one in eight — have experienced rape or sexual assault before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2024). To address this issue urgently, international health and human rights bodies have defined sexual violence as a sexual act or attempted act carried out without consent (WHO, 2022), and attempted to integrate these normative notions of sexual consent into legal frameworks and rights-based preventive approaches (Contos, 2023). However, how sexual consent is understood and enacted within the relational dynamics of everyday life does not always align with these normative frameworks, often going beyond or even contradicting them. For instance, Chile is a country that has undergone significant social transformations over the past decade regarding the normalization and contestation of sexual violence (Zerán, 2018), and thus the question of *what consent is* has appeared in public conversations around prevention, revealing tensions between normative definitions and everyday life experiences. But, how can prevention efforts be realistically designed and implemented without knowing how sexual consent is currently understood and experienced in the Chilean general population? This study investigates how adult Chilean women use language to describe embodied experiences of sexual consent. To do this, we used therapeutic writing techniques to create a safe environment for them to freely name their own

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doi:10.20944/preprints202512.1231.v1

experiences of consent, aiming at informing models of sexual consent based on realistic and culturally situated evidence.

1.1. What Is Sexual Consent?

The conceptual boundaries of sexual consent remain unsettled, in part because of the diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. As Muehlenhard et al. (2016) note, existing scholarship frames consent variously as an internal state of willingness, an explicit communicative act, or a set of behavioral cues interpreted as willingness—an ongoing tension visible both within professional fields and in wider public discourse. Despite the lack of consensus on how to define sexual consent and the wide range of theoretical debates about the concept, two main, normative frameworks have achieved exceptional international visibility and institutional uptake: the World Association for Sexual Health's (WAS) definition and the Planned Parenthood's FRIES acronym. Both circulate extensively in sexual education materials, public health programming, NGO interventions, and international advocacy (Beres, 2020; Cañaveras et al., 2024). Their prominence means they increasingly function as de facto normative standards in global conversations about sexual consent.

According to the WAS (2023), sexual consent is grounded in the principle of permission: no person is entitled to touch another's body or initiate intimate contact without that person's explicit agreement. Although this applies directly to sexual interactions, WAS stresses that consent is equally necessary in a broader array of interpersonal situations—for example, initiating a hug or sharing food. Framed in this way, consent becomes a fundamental expression of bodily autonomy and a skill relevant across the entire lifespan. Rather than treating consent as a one-off decision, WAS emphasizes that it is a dynamic process that unfolds through ongoing verbal communication.

To delineate what constitutes *valid* consent, the WAS highlight that consent must be intentional, affirmative, and depending on context. To do this, WAS (2023) incorporates the FRIES acronym, which stands for Freely given, Reversible, Informed, Enthusiastic, and Specific (Planned Parenthood, 2024). From this perspective, consent is valid when is freely chosen, meaning it cannot be extracted through pressure, emotional coercion, or impaired judgment caused by substances. In addition, it should be reversible, allowing anyone to pause or stop an activity at any moment, whether in casual encounters or long-standing relationships. Likewise, consent is valid only when it is informed, so that there is transparency regarding the conditions under which sexual interaction takes place and all parties can understand what they are agreeing to, including any relevant boundaries, expectations, or conditions. Moreover, the emphasis on enthusiasm signals the importance of mutual desire and active engagement, distinguishing genuine willingness from resignation or compliance. Lastly, consent must be specific: saying yes to one form of intimacy does not authorize other activities.

These frameworks exert wide influence even as they are sharply critiqued by scholars and researchers. A central concern is that they rest on a distinctly liberal conception of the sexual subject: one imagined as coherent, rational, self-knowing, and capable of generating desires untouched by social influence (Brady et al., 2018; Gilbert, 2018). Within this imaginary, consent appears as an individual act of autonomous choice, granted or withheld by someone presumed to possess continuous self-awareness and stable control over their boundaries (Saketopoulou, 2023). Such a figure aligns with neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities that valorise self-management, confidence, and assertive agency (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Gill, 2017). Yet this formulation obscures the extent to which desire and decision-making are socially produced rather than internally generated (Srinivasan, 2021), thus neglecting the intricacies of real, situated relational dynamics that unfold in everyday life interactions.

Treating consent as a straightforward expression of autonomous will obscures how power operates across the structural, interactive, and contextual conditions that shape sexual decision-making. Feminist research consistently shows that what people "freely" want, and what they feel able to express, is shaped by heteronormativity, gendered sexual scripts, classed and racialised inequalities, and fears of relational or reputational consequences (Brady et al., 2018; Bragg et al., 2020; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Cense, 2019; Fanghanel, 2020; Holmström et al., 2020; O'Connor & Begun,

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2025; Setty, 2021). From this perspective, the idea that consent must be “freely and willingly given” depends on an implausible fiction: a subject imagined as insulated from the social forces that shape desire and constrain choice. This gap between the ideal and lived practice is well documented — empirical studies with young people show that sexual decisions rarely unfold as isolated acts of autonomous will (Cañaveras et al., 2024; Whittington, 2021).

Another group of critiques argue that the principles of informed, specific, and enthusiastic consent fail to capture the unpredictability and intersubjective complexity of sexual encounters. Expecting individuals to, first, know in advance what they want and, then, be able to communicate this with clarity and enthusiasm ignores the ambiguity, ambivalence, and improvisation inherent in erotic life (Butler, 2011; Clark, 2019; Gilbert, 2018; Saketopoulou, 2023).

Enthusiastic consent, in particular, reduces desire to a singular, spontaneous impulse. Accordingly, the idea that consent must be enthusiastic contrasts with evidence that many women experience responsive rather than spontaneous desire, so that arousal and contextual conditions such as trust, emotional connection, and safety often precede wanting (Basson, 2000). In this regard, Angel (2022) cautions that turning responsiveness into a prescriptive standard risks new essentialisms, while demanding clarity and certainty transforms sexual self-knowledge into a moral obligation—one invoked to judge women’s credibility or responsibility for preventing their own coercion and abuse.

Parallel critiques challenge consent’s reliance on verbal communication and on the “miscommunication myth” (Beres, 2020; Berger Correa, 2024; O’Connor & Begun, 2025), emphasising that sexual harm often stems not from misunderstanding but from entitlement and disregard for autonomy (Angel, 2022; Nussbaum, 2021; Setty, 2021). By over-relying on individual responsibility and communicative precision, these models risk reinforcing hyper-responsibilisation and enabling victim-blaming narratives (Cense, 2019; Fanghanel, 2020; Pérez Hernández, 2016), while diverting attention from the structural power asymmetries in which sexual decisions take shape.

In sum, while sexual consent is widely promoted through influential normative frameworks such as the WAS definition and the FRIES model, these approaches rest on assumptions about autonomy, clarity, and communication that often fail to capture the complexity of real-world sexual interactions. Critical scholarship shows that desire, agency, and decision-making are shaped by social norms, power relations, and contextual dynamics, making consent far less straightforward than these models suggest. This gap between prescriptive ideals and lived practice underscores the need for culturally grounded understandings of how people actually make sense of, and navigate, sexual consent.

1.2. *The Present Study*

The tensions between global consent frameworks and lived sexual cultures become especially visible in Chile, where recent legal, social, and feminist transformations have reshaped public understandings of sexual violence. Although Chile’s Penal Code does not yet centre consent in the legal definition of sexual assault, several sectorial laws enacted since 2019—including legislation on street harassment—have progressively positioned lack of consent, or the impossibility of consenting, as key markers of sexual violence. Yet these normative shifts have not translated into decreased rates of sexual assault: national surveys indicate that while psychological and physical violence have declined since 2020, sexual violence has remained stagnant (Ministerio de la Mujer y Equidad de Género, 2024). In 2024, one sexual assault was reported every 25 minutes, with women representing 86.3% of victims (Red Chilena Contra La Violencia Hacia Las Mujeres, 2025).

What makes Chile particularly revealing for examining sexual consent is not only this partial legal alignment with international standards but also the profound cultural reconfiguration around gender-based and sexual violence over the past decade. Beginning in 2016, school and university female students challenged entrenched sexism (Errázuriz Besa, 2019), culminating in the feminist university occupations of 2018, which demanded institutional protocols that explicitly incorporated consent (Zerán, 2018). These mobilizations were followed by the 2019 viral performance *Un violador*

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en tu camino by LASTESIS—whose refrain "and the fault wasn't mine, the rapist is you" resonated globally—cementing Chile as a symbolic epicentre of feminist denunciation in Latin America (Sepúlveda Eriz, 2021). Critically, this broader feminist awakening has intersected with the expansion of digital public denunciations known as *funas*. The term *funa*, derived from Mapudungun and meaning "rot" or "rotten" (Villena Araya, 2017), originally referred to actions in the 1990s aimed at exposing perpetrators of human rights violations who had evaded legal accountability. While historically tied to transitional justice, contemporary usage centers on the public shaming of individuals accused of sexual violence—what scholars now call "feminist funa" (Larraín Matte, 2023). Since at least 2015, these practices have intersected with school and university-based feminist mobilization, where they have been used to contest sexist cultures, denounce harassment and coercion, and challenge the normalization of men's overt sexualized behaviour and the pressures placed on women (Barrientos & Silva, 2014; Rincón Aponte, 2014). Within this landscape, consent has entered everyday discourse through slogans such as "no means no," "the fault wasn't mine," and "sister, I believe you," signalling its emergence as a culturally charged and relational practice rather than a fixed legal threshold (Errázuriz Besa, 2019; Moreno Standen, 2024).

Despite the prominence of affirmative and enthusiastic consent in this process of cultural reconfiguration, little empirical work has examined how women in Chile conceptualize sexual consent or how their understandings converge with—or challenge—normative definitions such as the WAS model (but see Berger-Correa, 2024 and Moreno-Standen, 2024 for related work). Global frameworks like the WAS definition and the FRIES model become analytically useful—not as universal benchmarks to measure deviation from, but as reference points for understanding how Chilean women's meanings of consent converge with or depart from dominant international framings, and therefore allowing for a more nuanced understanding of how consent is culturally produced, negotiated, and imagined in Chile. Furthermore, analyzing both points of convergence and areas of divergence with these definitions will advance ongoing international debates about the limits of normative consent frameworks, providing culturally grounded insights relevant for sexuality education, sexual rights advocacy, and gender-based violence prevention efforts in Latin America.

In this context, the present study explores how adult women in Chile make sense of sexual consent and how their meanings align with or diverge from the WAS definition. Given the sensitivity and emotional complexity of the topic, we adopted therapeutic writing as a methodological approach. Therapeutic writing is grounded in the idea that structured, intentional writing can facilitate emotional processing, cognitive integration, and meaning-making (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016; Pennebaker, James W. & Evans, 2014). Its core principles—emotional expression, narrative organization, reflective insight, and autonomy within a non-judgmental space (Bolton, 2011; Bolton et al., 2006)—make it especially well suited for eliciting nuanced reflections on intimate, relational experiences. Because therapeutic writing affords privacy, emotional safety, and freedom from real-time interaction, it enables participants to explore embodied sensations, contextual influences, and internal negotiations that may be difficult to articulate in interviews or group discussions. As a result, the data generated using therapeutic writing techniques are particularly rich, introspective, and emotionally grounded, offering access to implicit meanings and complex ambivalences that often remain unspoken through conventional empirical methods.

We invited 34 women living in Chile to participate in one of five 90-minute sessions of a therapeutic writing workshop about sexual consent, where they had the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and appreciations of consenting to participate in sexual interactions, in opposition to the experiences of '*giving in*' to sexual interactions. We decided to use the term *give in*[1]

[1] We translate **ceder** as **"give in"** to reflect the colloquial, relaxed language participants used. In Chilean Spanish, **ceder** is a neutral, flexible term that can describe yielding under pressure but also willingly accommodating someone

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doi:10.20944/preprints202512.1231.v1

(*ceder*, in Spanish), and do not explicitly talk about sexual violence, to allow for participants to freely choose to mention (or do not mention) experiences of abuse. We analysed these written data using thematic analysis of participants' answers to identify emerging themes around sexual consent (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Participants

34 adult women who were Chilean (N=32) or had permanent residency (N=2). Participants' age ranged from 18 to 77 years old; however, their mean age is not reported because no identifying information was formally collected at any point, allowing a fully anonymous data collection.

3.2. Instrument

The data were generated through a therapeutic writing workshop on sexual consent designed collaboratively by the lead author, a clinical sexologist, and a high school teacher. This interdisciplinary design aimed to ensure that the workshop simultaneously supported participants' emotional well-being while yielding rich, conceptually meaningful data. A central design objective was to create a pleasant and emotionally safe experience for participants, aligning data collection practices with trauma-informed principles and participatory ethics (Follete et al., 2006).

The workshop design combined mindfulness-based imagery, therapeutic writing exercises, and structured reflective prompts, drawing on established expressive writing methodologies (Bolton et al., 2006; Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016; Pennebaker, James W. & Evans, 2014). Consistent with these approaches, participants were constantly invited to write freely without judgment, focusing on spontaneous associations and embodied responses. All exercises were designed to approach sexuality and consent from a positive, general, and non-intrusive perspective, ensuring emotional safety and avoiding the obligatory elicitation of detailed accounts of potentially distressing experiences. This was implemented primarily through *expressive writing*, a modality that enhances emotional regulation through self-expression (Pennebaker & Smyth, 2016). Importantly, the depth and complexity of the writing excercises increased gradually throughout the session.

The workshop was piloted with 10 women meeting the study's inclusion criteria to refine flow, timing, clarity, and emotional safety. Overall, participants' self-reported assessment of their experience during the workshop was highly positive and the data collected was rich enough to conduct the planned analysis. Consequently, no modifications were made to the script and the data collected in the pilot session was included in the main analysis. The final version of the workshop comprised a total of 7 individual therapeutic writing tasks (in chronological order): acrostics, associative lists, free-writing prompts, a reflective letter addressing past versions of themselves, and a collective poem (for full details and to download the workshop script, see Supplementary Materials available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EZQWF).

3.3. Procedures

Participants were recruited through social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp; see Figure 1). Five 90-minute sessions were delivered in person by the lead researcher, the clinical sexologist and the highschool teacher, each lasting approximately 90 minutes (Session 1, N=9; Session 2, N=2; Session 3, N=6; Session 4, N=10; Session 5, N=7). Participants completed an online consent form before arriving at the workshop. Workshop venue varied across sessions to promote participation of participants from diverse demographic groups (e.g., age, social class, etc.). Nevertheless, in all cases, efforts were made to create a warm and safe environment for participants

else. The phrase "give in" captures this ambiguity without assuming coercion or negativity.

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(see Figure 2): food and non-alcoholic drinks were offered, and after each session there was a time for bonding between participants and the research group, (if participants were interested). At the beginning of each session, the lead researcher introduced the purpose and structure of the workshop, explained the principles of therapeutic writing, and reassured participants that all data would remain fully anonymous, even if they chose to share their writing aloud during the workshop. No personal information, including names, age or contact details, was recorded at any point, in order to contribute to a sense of safety and freedom of expression.

Figure 1. Example of flyer used in social media for participants' recruitment.

Figure 2. Example of writing workshop setting.

The workshop began with a brief guided mindfulness-based imagery exercise led by the clinical sexologist, to help participants access emotionally safe states and regulate their nervous system, fostering relaxation and emotional safety. Participants then engaged in a sequence of 7 individual therapeutic (hand-written) writing exercises facilitated by the lead researcher. All exercises related to themes of sexuality, bodily sensations, and the distinction between "ceder" (going along or giving in) and "consentir" (affirming willingness), following the structure outlined in the workshop script (see Supplementary Materials at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EZQWF). After the first two exercises (i.e., acrostics), participants had the option to share their written work anonymously; no other exercises could be shared since it was difficult not to reveal personal information when reading aloud. Crucially, the last two exercises invited participants to reflect on their experience of sexual consent

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(writing prompt was *When I consent, my body feels…*) and the difference between consenting and giving in (they wrote a letter about this difference to a "past self"). The workshop concluded with a second mindfulness-based guided imagery exercise led by the clinical sexologist and a short collective writing activity aimed at generating connection and closure.

Special care was taken to maintain anonymity of data at all times and thus protect participants' privacy and sense of emotional safety. When participants decided to share their writing, the procedure involved reading aloud without revealing authorship, or contributing to a collective written product (e.g., the closing "collective poem"). During the collaborative writing excercise, participants were anonymously assigned a number and then wrote only next to their assigned number on a folded accordion sheet, ensuring they could not identify others' contributions.

3.4. Data Analysis

This paper reports the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) conducted on one of the main writing exercises, where participants wrote a letter to a "past self" about the difference between consenting and giving in (i.e., **Consent vs Give in Writing**).

3.4.2. Data Processing

At the end of each session, hand-written sheets were physically collected and manually transcribed into a .CSV file comprising 9 columns. From left to right, the first two columns were Session Number and Participant Number; the following columns corresponded to the 7 writing excercises in chronological order: Acrostic 1, Acrostic 2, Associative List 1, Associative List 2, Pleasure Writing, **Consent vs Give in Writing**, and Collective Poem. Rows corresponded to participants' writting for each exercise. All data were anonymised if necessary (e.g., names of third parties were deleted).

The thematic analysis focused exclusively on the column **Consent vs Give in Writing**, which was loaded into *ATLAS.ti* (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2023) first and then analysed collaboratively and manually in *Microsoft Word* and *OneDrive* (Microsoft Corporation., 2023). All relevant *Atlas.ti* reports, codes manually modified, and the anonymised data analysed here are available in Supplementary Materials at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EZQWF. When reporting the analysis, extracts of text are presented translated into English, trying to preserve lexical use, register and emotional tone.

3.4.3. Thematic Analysis

The analysis followed six collaborative steps conducted by two researchers, inspired by feminist thematic analysis methods (Holland et al., 1998), and comprised two main steps. First, we used *ATLAS.ti* to identify codes, categories and themes. Second, we conducted a manual cleaning of ATLAS.ti final reports to address the research question rigorously.

First, one researcher organized the data by workshop and writing excercise on *ATLAS.ti*. Second, in collaboration with a second researcher, an initial familiarisation phase took place, which comprised reading the full dataset and identifying preliminary meaning units that were assigned provisional codes. Throughout this phase, the two researchers compared impressions, had to make explicit their interpretation processes, discussed emergent patterns, and reconciled differing interpretations. This stage resulted in a first analytic memo and a preliminary code list. Third, the researchers collaboratively refined and reorganized the coding structure, producing a second analytic memo and an updated list of codes. Fourth, thematic categories were constructed by grouping related codes. Finally, these categories were synthesized into overarching themes that captured the conceptual content of participants' constructions of sexual consent. The final output of this analytic process in *Atlas.ti* consisted of a definitive code list, a thematic map illustrating relationships among themes, categories, and codes.

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Lastly, one of the researchers involved in the *Atlas.ti* phase worked collaboratively with a third researcher in identifying the main themes, categories, and codes that were pertinent to address the specific research question of the present study (*¿To which extent do Chilean women's sexual consent conceptualizations align or diverge from WAS definition?*).

4. Results

The thematic analysis generated three overarching themes that illuminate how adult women in Chile conceptualize sexual consent: (1) Consent as an active, intentional, and self-directed process, (2) The intricacies of giving in, and (3) Tensions when differentiating consent from giving in. These themes encompass multiple subthemes that reflect participants' reflections on autonomy, desire, obligation, relationality, and the socio-cultural contexts in which sexual decisions are made. Tables 1–3 summarize the themes, subthemes, and corresponding citation frequencies.

Table 1. Consent as an active, intentional, and self-directed process.

Subtheme	***Code***	***Data Extract***	***Citations (n)***
Autonomy & Desire	*Consent as enacted agency*	"Knowing that I have both the right and the duty to myself to respect what I want and what I desire." *["el saber que tengo el derecho y el deber conmigo misma de respetar lo que quiero y lo que deseo."]*	*7*
	Consent is without obligation	"NO ONE can force you to do something you DON'T WANT to do." *["NADIE puede obligarte hacer algo que TÚ NO QUIERAS."]*	*5*
	Consent relies on self-knowledge	"Consenting to something pleasurable is sometimes having spent time exploring on your own so you can later share it with others." *["Consentir algo placentero es algunas veces haber pasado tiempo tu misma explorando para luego compartir con otros."]*	*4*

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	Consent AS desire	"Consenting is something you like it is wanting yourself to do it" *["consentir es algo que te gusta es desear por ti misma hacerlo"]*	*4*
Embodied Clarity	*Consent follow your body*	"When you consent to do something pleasurable you feel tickles" *["Cuando consientes hacer algo placentero, se sienten cosquillas"]*	*3*
	Consent bodily disposition	"when you consent, your whole body is decided to give and receive pleasure, you feel the electricity that runs across all your skin at their kisses, and not fearing giving yourself over" *["cuando consientes, todo tu cuerpo está decidido a dar y recibir placer, sientes la electricidad que recorre toda tu piel ante sus besos, y no temer entregarte."]*	*2*
	Consent is easy to recognise	"In contrast, when consenting with pleasure, there is not much to think about, the option flows and feels right. It feels pleasant and you do not have to convince anyone, there is less mental work" *["En cambio, al consentir con placer, no hay mucho que pensar, la opción fluye y se siente adecuada. Se siente agradable y no tienes que convencer a nadie, hay menos trabajo mental"]*	*2*
Pleasure & Social Norms	*Consent is pleasurable*	"and you share the pleasure and the good moment you are living with the other and you are also giving pleasure and receiving	*7*

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		pleasure and it feels full in body and soul." *["y comparte el placer y el buen momento que estás viviendo con el otro y tú también estás dando placer y recibiendo placer y se siente pleno en cuerpo y alma."*	
	Pleasure restrained by social norms when consenting	"(except if you are cognitively trying to avoid that situation because of social parameters "it can't be because of the age" for example)" *["(excepto si estás intentando cognitivamente de evitar esa situación por parámetros sociales "no puede ser por la edad" por ejemplo)"]*	*5*

Table 2. The intricacies of giving in.

Subtheme	***Code***	***Data Extract***	***Citations (n)***
Social Expectations	*Giving in towards social expectations*	"giving in is giving up your space boundaries and value scale even in something that does not make you feel comfortable but you believed you had to do it because you could look bad or they could label you as boring etc." *[ceder es entregar de tu espacio, límites y escala de valores inclusive en algo que no te hace sentir cómoda pero creias debias hacerlo porque podías quedar mal, o te podían tildar de fome,* etc.]	*8*
	Giving in due to obligation	"There will be many people who will make you believe that the only way is to give in so	*7*

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		that they are satisfied but without asking if you want to, only insisting.” *[“Habrán muchas personas que te harán creer que la única forma es ceder para que ellxs estén conformes pero sin preguntar si quieres, solo insistiendo.”]* “And giving in doing something I do not like is something very unpleasant forced and sometimes even disgusting.. It is feeling forced” *[“Y ceder hace algo que no me gusta es algo muy desagradable obligado y a veces hasta asqueroso.. Es sentirse obligado”]*	
	Should not give in to pleasure others	“not stepping over myself so that the other has moments of enjoyment or pleasure at my expense” *[“no pasarme a llevar para que el otro tenga momentos de goce o placer a costa mía”]*	*7*
Emotional Distress	*Giving in is distressing*	“When giving in the feeling that is generated is guilt for not putting myself first and failing my being, my essence.” *[“Al ceder el sentimiento que se genera es de culpa por no ponerme como prioridad y fallarle a mi ser, a mi esencia.”]* “you will give up your desire and your body will notice it, because even if you thought you wanted to receive it, your body, never truly felt comfortable”	*10*

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		["cederás tu deseo y tu cuerpo lo notará, porque aunque pensaras que querías recibirlo, tu cuerpo, nunca se sintió verdaderamente cómodo"]	
Self-Betrayal	*Giving in is not being yourself*	"Doing what we do not like is the closest thing to not being ourselves." *["Hacer lo que no nos gusta es lo más parecido a no ser nosotras mismas."]* "Giving in is a bit denying yourself from being who you are" *["El ceder es un poco negarte a ser quien eres"]*	*5*
	Giving in is self-betrayal	"giving in to doing something I do not like can feel like self-betrayal sometimes." *["ceder a hacer algo que no me gusta puede sentirse como auto-traición a veces."]*	*5*
Giving in for other reasons	*Giving in is not always bad*	"giving in can bring you happiness and satisfaction even if it feels uncomfortable" *["ceder si te puede traer felicidad y satisfacción aunque se sienta incómodo"]*	*4*
	Giving in for the sake of collective good	"I have also given in to doing things out of will and love. Things that initially do not interest me, but that in the end are still an important gesture for others. So I still see it as a gesture of Love." *["También he cedido a hacer cosas por voluntad y amor. Cosas que inicialmente no me interesan, pero que finalmente es un gesto importante igual para*	*3*

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		otros. Así que igual lo veo como un gesto de Amor."]	

Table 3. Tensions when differentiating consent and giving in.

Subtheme	Code	Data extracts	Citations (n)
Boundaries & Self-Care	*Drawing the line between consent and given in implies self-care*	"it's a process that in recent years has allowed me to feel that I can leave places and relationships that harm me, where I may now have more self-care tools that make me feel stronger." *["es un ejercicio que me ha permitido en los últimos años sentir que puedo salir de lugares y relaciones que me hacen mal, donde tal vez tengo más herramientas de autocuidado que me hacen sentir más fuerte."]*	10
	Difference implies knowing your own boundaries	"there are other moments when I still feel shy and insecure about what I want and about my own boundaries" *["hay otros momentos en que me sigo sintiendo tímida e insegura de lo que quiero y de mis propios límites"]*	8
Ambiguity & Embodiment	*The line is blurry*	"I have given in believing that I am consenting. I have dissociated the moment." *["He cedido creyendo que estoy consintiendo. He disociado el momento."]*	4

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		"Above all in the sexual, keep in mind always that the boundaries are thin, the line is fine, and it disappears." *["Sobretodo en lo sexual, ten presente siempre que los bordes son delgados, la línea es fina y desaparece."]*	
	The body feels the difference	"How to recognize giving in before doing it? Reconnecting with your body, feeling again, listening, seeing." *["¿Cómo reconocer el ceder antes de hacerlo? Volver a conectar con tu cuerpo, volver a sentir, escuchar, ver."]*	4
Learning & Achievement	*Difference as something you learn*	"that today a big difference that they did not explain to you, that with the passing of many years you had to learn, idk. reading, looking for information.." *["que hoy una gran diferencia que no te explicaron, que con el pasar de muchos años debiste aprender, nose. leyendo, bucando información.."]*	8
	Learning the difference is an achievement	"It has been a long path, the past me always and used to think about everyone. Today although it has changed, the feeling, doing and placing myself in another place, has been a challenge, an achievement and a difficult work to carry out." *["Ha sido un camino largo, el yo del pasado siempre y acostumbraba en pensar en todos. Hoy si bien ha cambiado, el sentir, hacer*	8

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		y colocarme en otro lugar, ha sido un desafío, un logro y un trabajo difícil de realizar."]	

4.1. Consent as an Active, Intentional, and Self-Directed Process

Participants' accounts conceptualized consent as an active, self-directed process grounded in three subthemes: (1) autonomy and desire, (2) embodied clarity, and (3) the pursuit of pleasure despite social constraints (see Table 1). Together, these subthemes illustrate that consenting is experienced not as passive agreement but as an intentional act rooted in self-knowledge, bodily alignment, and a sense of personal agency.

The first subtheme emphasized autonomy and desire as central to consenting. Women described consent as an exercise of their right—and responsibility—to honor their desires and decisions. One participant framed this explicitly as "the right and the duty to myself to respect what I want and what I desire," highlighting the moral and personal agency embedded in the act of consenting. Consent was also depicted as fundamentally free from obligation: "NO ONE can force you to do something you DON'T WANT to do." These reflections position consent as incompatible with coercion, pressure, or emotional imposition. Moreover, women linked true consent to self-knowledge, suggesting that the capacity to consent pleasurably often emerges from prior personal exploration, which enables them to understand and communicate their desires. In this sense, consent was not merely permission but a manifestation of wanting: "Consenting is something you like—it is wanting yourself to do it."

The second subtheme concerned the embodied clarity associated with consenting. Participants consistently described consent as something that *feels* clear, recognizable, and aligned with the body. Several evoked visceral sensations—such as "tickles" or "electricity running across the skin"—to illustrate the bodily disposition that accompanies genuine willingness. The body, in these accounts, does not hesitate: it is open to giving and receiving pleasure without fear. Consent was therefore portrayed as flowing naturally, without internal negotiation or doubt. As one participant wrote, "there is not much to think about… it feels pleasant and right," highlighting that consent emerges with ease and minimal "mental work" when aligned with genuine desire.

A third subtheme highlighted the connection between pleasure and social norms. Participants associated consenting with shared pleasure, describing it as a mutually fulfilling encounter that feels "full in body and soul." Sexual pleasure was framed not only as an outcome of consent but as an indication of its authenticity. Yet women also acknowledged that social norms can interfere with this clarity. At times, cognitive attempts to suppress desire—due to age norms, moral expectations, or other social parameters—complicated the experience of consenting. These reflections underscore the tension between embodied desire and socially conditioned self-monitoring, revealing how social norms can shape, restrain, or cast doubt on the process of consent even when desire is present.

Overall, participants depicted consent as an intentional, embodied, and pleasurable form of agency, distinguished by internal coherence, bodily attunement, and self-knowledge. Rather than a mere verbal or cognitive act, consent emerged as a holistic process in which desire, autonomy, and bodily sensation converge to guide sexual decision-making.

4.2. The Intricacies of Giving in

The second theme reflects participants' nuanced understandings of giving in. Their accounts revealed four interconnected subthemes surrounding the experience of *giving in*: (1) social expectations, (2) emotional distress, (3) self-betrayal, and (4) relationally motivated forms of giving in (see Table 2). Together, these themes show that giving in is understood not as a single act but as a complex practice shaped by social pressure, internal conflict, and varied relational meanings.

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A central theme concerned the pervasive social expectations that encouraged women to normalise their boundaries being crossed. Many described giving in as something done to meet external expectations or avoid negative judgments, such as being perceived as "boring" or difficult. In these narratives, giving in meant relinquishing one's "space, boundaries, and value scale," often to maintain social harmony or fulfil perceived obligations. For some, this pressure took the form of insistence from others, where compliance was expected without genuine consideration of their own desires—experiences that participants described as uncomfortable, forced, and at times "disgusting." These pressures coexisted with an emerging counter-discourse among participants, who emphasized that giving in "so that the other has moments of pleasure at my expense" should not be expected or normalized.

Alongside these social dynamics, giving in was closely associated with emotional distress. Women frequently described feelings of guilt, discomfort, and bodily dissonance, noting that even when they tried to convince themselves they wanted the interaction, their bodies "never truly felt comfortable." For many, giving in involved failing to prioritize themselves and generated a sense of internal conflict that lingered beyond the encounter. This emotional unease was often tied to a broader experience of self-betrayal. Participants framed giving in as an act that moved them away from their authentic selves—"the closest thing to not being ourselves". Some explicitly described giving in as a form of self-betrayal, an internal rupture that occurred when they acted against their desires or boundaries to satisfy external demands.

Yet, participants' reflections also revealed nuance: giving in was not always described negatively. A smaller subset of women narrated situations in which yielding could lead to positive outcomes, including relational satisfaction or mutual care. In these accounts, giving in was framed as a voluntary, emotionally grounded gesture—something done "out of will and love," not obligation. These narratives positioned certain forms of giving in as acts of generosity or collective wellbeing, meaningful insofar as they emerged from a desire to contribute to the relationship rather than from pressure or fear.

Overall, these subthemes illustrate how giving in operates across a spectrum—from coerced or guilt-laden compliance to intentional, relationally motivated gestures—and highlight the complex interplay between social expectations, emotional labour, authenticity, and relational ethics that shape how women understand the act of giving in within their sexual and interpersonal lives.

4.3. Tensions When Differentiating Consent and Giving in

Participants' reflections revealed three overarching subthemes that shaped how they differentiated consent from giving in: (1) boundaries and self-care, (2) ambiguity and embodiment, and (3) learning and personal achievement (see Table 3). Together, these themes highlight that distinguishing between consenting and giving in is not simply a cognitive judgment but an evolving, embodied, and relational process.

A first set of accounts emphasized the centrality of boundaries and self-care in making this distinction. Many women described the difference between consenting and giving in as inseparable from the practice of protecting their emotional and physical wellbeing. For some, the ability to recognize when they were giving in—rather than genuinely consenting—had emerged as part of a long-term process of cultivating self-care skills. One participant explained that this work had enabled her to "leave places and relationships that harm me," suggesting that discerning the difference is fundamentally tied to strengthening one's capacity for self-protection. At the same time, several women noted that this distinction can remain difficult to grasp in practice, acknowledging moments of lingering shyness, insecurity, or uncertainty regarding their own desires and boundaries. These reflections underscore that knowing where the line lies requires an ongoing dialogue with oneself, particularly in contexts shaped by gendered expectations and relational pressures.

A second subtheme concerned the ambiguity and embodied dimensions of distinguishing between consent and giving in. For some participants, the boundary between the two felt thin, unstable, or even imperceptible. Women described instances in which they believed they were

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consenting, only later recognizing that they had been giving in, often accompanied by experiences of dissociation or emotional detachment. As one participant reflected, "the line is fine and it disappears". In contrast to this ambiguity, several women emphasized that their bodies often registered the difference before they could articulate it cognitively. Reconnecting with bodily sensations—"feeling again, listening, seeing"—was framed as essential for recognizing when giving in is occurring, pointing to the corporeal dimensions of agency and discomfort that verbal reasoning alone may fail to capture.

The third subtheme highlighted learning and achievement as central to differentiating the two experiences. Participants described understanding the difference between consenting and giving in as knowledge they were never explicitly taught and instead had to acquire gradually through personal reflection, exposure to information, and lived experience. This learning was often portrayed as a hard-won accomplishment, especially for those accustomed to prioritizing others' needs over their own. For several women, the ability to identify their desires, set boundaries, and resist giving in marked a significant personal transformation—"a challenge, an achievement, and difficult work to carry out". These narratives illustrate how distinguishing consent from giving in is both a developmental process and a form of empowerment, reflecting shifts in self-perception and relational positioning.

Taken together, these subthemes demonstrate that differentiating between consent and giving in is a nuanced, embodied, and dynamic process shaped by self-awareness, emotional history, and sociocultural norms. Participants' accounts reveal not a fixed boundary but an ongoing practice of self-care, corporeal attunement, and personal growth through which the difference becomes legible over time.

4.4. Summary of Results

Taken together, these themes reveal that women's understandings of sexual consent are dynamic, relational, and deeply shaped by sociocultural norms. Participants described consent as an active and intentional process grounded in autonomy, desire, and bodily clarity, while giving in was depicted as a complex experience marked by social pressure, emotional discomfort, and feelings of self-betrayal. Yet across narratives, the distinction between consenting and giving in emerged not as a fixed or self-evident boundary but as something learned over time through reflection, experience, and growing self-awareness. Importantly, participants' accounts contained productive contradictions: some portrayed consent as easy to recognize—felt clearly in the body and aligned with desire—while others emphasized how easily this clarity collapses, noting that the line between consenting and giving in can become thin, unstable, or even re-interpretable in retrospect. These tensions underscore that discerning consent is not simply a matter of internal certainty but an ongoing developmental process that requires cultivating self-knowledge, attending to bodily cues, and unlearning gendered expectations that normalize self-silencing. Overall, the findings point to the limitations of prescriptive, universalized frameworks of consent and highlight the importance of grounded understandings that capture the lived complexities, ambiguities, and learning processes through which people make sense of their sexual decisions.

5. Discussion

This study examined how 34 adult women in Chile conceptualize sexual consent, addressing a critical gap between global, normative consent frameworks and the lived realities of sexual decision-making. In a national context marked by heightened public attention to sexual violence and sustained feminist mobilization, understanding how consent is actually experienced and articulated is essential for developing culturally grounded efforts to prevent sexual violence. To access these experiences, we used therapeutic writing, which offered participants a private and reflective space to narrate embodied sensations, ambivalences, and relational complexities that are seldom captured through more conventional qualitative methods. Writing allowed participants to pause, revisit memories, and articulate contradictions, particularly around the blurred boundaries between consenting to sexual

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encounters and giving in to such experiences, without the pressure of real-time, face-to-face interaction. In this context, participants' accounts of sexual consent aligned, expanded and contradicted the core principles of normative definitions, underscoring the complexity of sexual interactions, highlighting the need to rethink consent beyond prescriptive, universalist models, and thus grounding future prevention and education efforts in the lived and culturally situated experiences of women.

Regarding the similarities with normative definitions, participants framed consent as an active, intentional process grounded in autonomy, the recognition of one's desires, and the clear absence of obligation, resonating with the WAS emphasis on freely given, intentional, and self-directed agreement. Their descriptions of bodily attunement and internal coherence echo the model's insistence that valid consent requires genuine willingness rather than resignation or submission. Likewise, the view that consent is dynamic, context-dependent, and responsive to emotional and relational conditions aligns with the WAS framing of consent as a process rather than a single moment. In these areas, participants' accounts affirm core principles of the global framework, indicating that its commitments to autonomy, intentionality, and the importance of desire retain practical resonance for women navigating sexual decision-making in everyday life.

At the same time, participants described dimensions of consent that exceed and complicate these normative definitions, revealing forms of complexity that the framework cannot fully accommodate. In particular, the first theme described consent as an **embodied**, self-directed form of agency. Participants described consenting as a process rooted not only in decision-making but also in bodily attunement, desire, and internal coherence. Sensations such as "tickles," "electricity," or an intuitive sense that the interaction "flows" illustrate how consent emerges as an embodied alignment between wanting, feeling, and acting. This aligns with research with young people were "consent as to feel with (*con-sentir*)" is emphasised (Whittington, 2021) and contrasts with prevailing models of consent that prioritize verbal articulation and cognitive clarity as the primary markers of willingness.

Moreover, even when consent felt pleasurable or agentic, women acknowledged the influence of broader sociocultural scripts, particularly moral judgments, age norms, or relational expectations that could guide or constrain what they felt free to want and, therefore, consent. These insights complicate the assumption, implicit in normative models, that consent can be understood simply by asking whether agreement was "freely given". Instead, they highlight how desire is socially produced and how embodied clarity often coexists with internalized pressures, reaffirming feminist critiques that desire and consent are not purely internally generated but also shaped by social norms, relational histories, and gendered expectations (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Srinivasan, 2021).

In addition, the second major theme described the intricacies of giving in, providing crucial insight into the sociocultural forces that shape women's sexual decision-making and, again, exposing the limitations of normative consent models that rely on the ideal of a freely willing subject. Participants described giving in as deeply entangled with gendered social expectations: feelings of obligation, fear of disappointing others, or concern about being perceived as "boring" or "difficult" often led them to acquiesce despite internal discomfort. As such, experiences of consent frequently revealed tensions with relational and reputational pressures that made it hard to identify "pure" willingness, illustrating that sexual decision-making is often a social, not purely individual, process. This resonates strongly with feminist critiques that what people "freely" want, and what they feel able to express, is shaped by heteronormative scripts, gender socialization, and sociocultural inequalities (Brady et al., 2018; Bragg et al., 2020; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Cense, 2019). Once again, our findings substantiate the critique that desire is not insulated from social pressure, and that purely autonomous, self-determining consent is a fiction.

Crucially, the fact that giving in was linked to significant emotional distress (guilt, bodily discomfort, and a sense of failing oneself) reveals a perceived moral obligation of being able to clearly identify when consent is taking place or not. These accounts also echo scholarship arguing that enthusiastic consent norms risk imposing a moral expectation that individuals should know and thus communicate their desires consistently and confidently (Angel, 2022; Berger Correa, 2024). When

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there is ambivalence and exploratory hesitation in sexual encounters or desire is responsive rather than spontaneous (Basson, 2000), as is common for many women, giving in may serve as a relational strategy rather than a manifestation of unique desire; yet, consent normative frameworks leave little room for this nuanced complexity.

Interestingly, while many accounts of giving in highlighted pressure or emotional conflict, participants also described instances in which giving in was a deliberate, relationally motivated choice, rooted in care, reciprocity, or emotional connection. These examples underscore the relational ethics embedded in sexual decision-making and challenge universalist assumptions that any deviation from enthusiastic internal desire is necessarily harmful or coercive. Instead, they illustrate a spectrum of motivations ranging from self-silencing to generosity, complicating the binary distinctions that inform many global consent models.

Furthermore, the third theme explored the tensions involved in differentiating consent from giving in, offering one of the most theoretically significant contributions of this study. Participants described the boundary between these two experiences not as fixed or easily recognizable but as shifting, ambiguous, and learned over time and often only identified in retrospect. Descriptions of the boundary as "thin," "fine," or "disappearing" underscore how sexual decision-making is shaped by intersubjective dynamics, emotional histories, and embodied cues that are not always consciously accessible in the moment. Some women reported instances in which they believed they were consenting, only later recognizing that they had been giving in, a finding that aligns with critiques that sexual encounters are inherently unpredictable, improvisational, and marked by ambivalence (Butler, 2011; Clark, 2019; Gilbert, 2018; Saketopoulou, 2023). Embodiment again emerged as central: some participants emphasized that their bodies signaled discomfort even when their minds attempted to override or reinterpret those cues. Others noted the importance of reconnecting with bodily sensations as a way of distinguishing between consensual desire and reluctant acquiescence. These accounts highlight both the potential and the limitations of embodied clarity, revealing that intuitive bodily signals can guide decision-making but can also be difficult to interpret. Once more, these reflections challenge the assumptions that individuals are self-knowing agents that can always access their desires and that consent is a stable inner state that can be articulated with precision at the time of the encounter.

Perhaps most importantly, participants framed the ability to identify consent as something that is learned over time. This learning required cultivating self-knowledge, practicing boundary-setting, and recognizing the emotional and bodily cues that accompany both discomfort and pleasant experiences. Several described this process as a hard-won personal achievement, resulting from years of reflection, relational experience, and the unlearning of gendered scripts that previously normalized self-silencing and compliance. This emphasis on learning directly challenges normative models that assume individuals —especially women— are inherently capable of identifying and asserting their desires with clarity and confidence. On the contrary, this ability emerges as contingent, context-dependent, and shaped by developmental, relational, and often contradicting sociocultural realities.

Moreover, the emphasis on embodied cues to navigate the blurred boundaries between consenting and giving in exposes the narrow focus on verbal communication embedded in normative frameworks (Beres, 2020; Berger Correa, 2024; O'Connor & Begun, 2025). This ambiguity emerges from the abovementioned tensions and not from misunderstandings in communication (Beres & Farvid, 2010; Fanghanel, 2020; Setty, 2021), reinforcing feminist arguments that sexual harm stems less from "miscommunication" than from entitlement, structural power, and disregard for autonomy (Angel, 2022; Nussbaum, 2021; Setty, 2021). In other words, overreliance on clear communication risks placing disproportionate responsibility on individuals to clearly signal their desires, facilitating victim-blaming when harm occurs (Cense, 2019; Fanghanel, 2020; Pérez Hernández, 2016).

Together, these findings illuminate the profound limitations of frameworks that require enthusiastic, informed, and specific consent as stable and explicit indicators of willingness. They highlight that ambiguity is not a failure of communication but an intrinsic feature of sexual life, which individuals need to learn how to navigate. They also point to the need for models of consent that

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incorporate this process of learning, positioning self-knowledge and reflexivity as central components, acknowledging that the capacity to discern one's boundaries is not a given but a skill cultivated through experience, support, and cultural change. Importantly, these results also highlight the need to work towards conceptualizations of concept that do not transform self-knowledge into a moral obligation, thus moving away from victim-blaming cultural norms.

The present study not only offers a critical perspective on dominant consent frameworks, but also points to concrete implications for sexual violence prevention in Chile. While rights-based frameworks have contributed to raising public awareness, they risk oversimplifying sexual decision-making and inadvertently reproducing hyper-responsibilizing narratives if implemented without attention to sociocultural realities (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Cense, 2019; Fanghanel, 2020; O'Byrne et al., 2006). In a society continually reworking its responses to sexual violence, an effective prevention agenda must compassionately embrace the internal contradictions and ambiguities that characterize real experiences of consent. This includes integrating skills for navigating ambiguity, recognizing internal and external pressures, cultivating embodied awareness, and building relational practices that support mutual care rather than formulaic compliance with prescriptive consent rules, in which the prevention of sexual violence relies mainly on womens' sexual self-knowledge and their ability to defend their boundaries.

Going forward, future research should include a broader range of genders, sexual orientations, ages, and sociocultural backgrounds to capture a wider spectrum of understandings of consent. Our sample consisted solely of 34 adult women who chose to participate in therapeutic writing workshops, which may reflect a group already relatively comfortable with introspection or with articulating emotional and embodied experiences. Research that includes men, gender-diverse and disabled participants is especially needed, both to understand how gendered norms shape consent across different groups and to avoid reinforcing the assumption that consent is exclusively a women's issue. Moreover, while therapeutic writing was particularly valuable for eliciting depth and nuance, it may privilege certain forms of expression and self-reflection. Complementary methods, such as interviews, ethnography, or digital diaries, could help triangulate these findings and illuminate how consent is negotiated in real time or across different relational settings. Longitudinal approaches would also be useful for capturing the developmental dimensions highlighted by participants, particularly the ways boundary-setting and embodied awareness evolve over the life course. Finally, in light of Chile's rapidly shifting sociocultural landscape and the growing influence of ultraconservative and far-right actors in public discourse, future research should continue investigating how understandings of consent are being reshaped within these competing currents, so as to more effectively resist and counter the re-normalization of sexual violence against women and marginalized groups.

6. Conclusion

In sum, this study showed that while Chilean women's descriptions of consent share commonalities with normative definitions, they extend beyond the boundaries of such frameworks, thus highlighting the need for sexual violence prevention efforts to incorporate the real complexities of situated notions of sexual consent. In particular, consent was described as embodied, relational, emergent, contextually situated, and, importantly, as something learned through practice. These descriptions emphasize the development of bodily intuition, emotional attunement, and the ability to identify tensions with social expectations and gendered norms. Importantly, the complexity of these notions revealed that conceptualizations of consent are linked to a moral obligation of sexual self-knowledge as a protective device against sexual violence, replicating victim-blaming cultural dynamics. Ultimately, this study invites a more grounded, culturally attuned, and socially responsible approach to consent: one capable of informing prevention efforts that truly address people's reality in a context of constant and often contradicting cultural change.

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Supplementary Materials: All supporting information can be downloaded at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EZQWF.

Author Contributions: "Conceptualization, Anita Tobar-Henríquez; methodology, Anita Tobar-Henríquez; formal analysis, Sofía Monsalves, Anita Tobar-Henríquez, Bárbara Berger; investigation, Anita Tobar-Henríquez; resources, Anita Tobar-Henríquez; data curation, Sofía Monsalves, Anita Tobar-Henríquez; writing—original draft preparation, Bárbara Berger, Anita Tobar-Henríquez; writing—review and editing, Bárbara Berger, Anita Tobar-Henríquez, Ernesto Guerra; supervision, Anita Tobar-Henríquez, Ernesto Guerra.; project administration, Anita Tobar-Henríquez; funding acquisition, Anita Tobar-Henríquez.

Funding: This project was funded by ANID Postdoctoral Fund (3230101 2023) and ANID/PIA/Basal Funds for Centers of Excellence (FB0003).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities, University of Chile (06/2023).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original data presented in the study are openly available in OSF at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EZQWF.

Acknowledgments: We gratefully acknowledge the professionalism, and ethical and emotional involvement of ***Carola Fernández*** (clinical sexologist) and ***Beatriz Palma*** (highschool teacher) during the design and implementation of the therapeutic writing workshops. Additionally, we acknowledge the important work of the transcriber, ***Francisca García***, who anonymised all hand-written data and digitalised them, protecting participants' identity and privacy. We also acknowledge the work of ***Paulette Neveu***, for her work in initial thematic analysis of digitalised, raw data.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

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