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Myth #6: Written guidelines keep CI spaces safe (Part 1 of 2) - Contact Improvisation Blog

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11–14 minutes

I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but in 2020, written guidelines alone are not sufficient for contact improvisation (CI) communities to uphold a standard of intolerance toward sexual transgressions on and around the dance floor.

No matter how painstakingly well-written they are (and readers, take not for granted the sweat and blood poured into those guidelines!) if we are to take active steps toward consent culture¹ in CI, teachers and facilitators must find ways to **verbally discuss ethical sexuality**.

When I say *verbally discuss ethical sexuality* I mean (1) teachers and facilitators need to normalize mentioning ethical sexuality more often, for example in opening circles, classes, etc. And (2) they need to work with their CI communities to have in-depth discussions in order to better understand and support consent culture in CI.

Post-#metoo, the topics of consent and ethical sexual conduct are very present in social discourse, yet despite this, it can still be difficult to start these conversations within our own social spheres.

Yet knowing what we know in 2020, it's time to be proactive about addressing ethical sexuality. This means coming out from hiding behind written guidelines and having conversations.

In this Myth, I am addressing teachers and facilitators in CI,² while raising concerns that affect everyone. In Part 1 of this article I will break down why written guidelines are not enough by themselves and why it's therefore important to verbally discuss ethical sexuality. In Part 2, I'll further address facilitators' doubts about initiating these discussions in CI spaces and give some tips for how to start conversations.

Let's begin by breaking down why written guidelines aren't enough by themselves....

Written guidelines alone aren't effective

Simply stated, it's too easy for participants at CI events to gloss over written protocols about ethical sexuality. This is because:

- Guidelines include a variety of topics, so it can be difficult for readers to focus on the sections about sexual conduct.
- Without more participatory ways to engage with the content, reading words can have no effect on the experience of dancing.
- It can be hard to digest complex topics when reading in a distracting public space (like a CI jam).
- Guidelines that profess intolerance of sexual misconduct may be seen as hollow and obsolete unless verbally reinforced.

On the other hand, verbal conversations naturally engage CI participants and humanize the discussion. When we speak directly, our words inspire others to actively listen and reflect. By taking this step, facilitators can help bring CI into this present era, one in which competency about consent and awareness of power dynamics are important in every context.

Furthermore, it's important to model breaking the silence

When teachers and facilitators talk, we model breaking the silence. I'm referring to two kinds of silence: (1) the literal verbal silence in CI spaces, and (2) the cultural silence that makes discussing sexuality and sexual violence difficult.

Breaking the literal silence

When addressing ethical sexuality, teachers and facilitators often ask CI participants to speak up about their needs. We stress the importance of using words—for example, saying “No” or otherwise verbally expressing boundaries—in order to stop interactions that have become uncomfortable.

Not only is this not easy to do (See [Myth #3, “Saying ‘No’ is easy.”](#)) but if we really want dancers to be comfortable breaking the standards of this traditionally non-verbal form and using words when needed, we should be willing to model raising our own voices.

We need to acknowledge that it is more difficult to raise one's voice, in order to verbally set or negotiate a boundary, if one is disrupting a silent space.

For some, this presents a dilemma because many people prefer dancing in a quiet environment.

Personally speaking, I can get distracted by chatter in the dance space, but I recognize that there is a big difference between chatter and verbal communication that is a part of a dance. Moreover, my own discomfort with additional sound in the dance space is not the point. If practicing consent culture inevitably requires that we get more comfortable with exchanging verbal feedback while dancing, it's worth embracing.

Breaking the cultural silence

There is also a cultural silence, both in CI and in our wider culture, that discourages open discussion of sexuality and sexual violence. This silence can affect everyone

in the space and create a lot of shame.³ It may discourage those who have complaints about sexual behavior from speaking up; keep those who want guidance on how to act from asking for help; and even give encouragement to those who engage in predatory behavior.

So be a model

Verbally discussing ethical sexuality in contact improvisation communities is not only a way to disrupt unethical behavior but also a way to actively enrich the level of trust, transparency, and quality of listening among dancers.

When CI teachers and facilitators speak up, they explicitly model doing this work, making it easier for others to get on board. And despite our resistances, integrating ethical sexuality in CI is important and valuable work for every community.

“But our community doesn’t need it”

You may think your community is the exception, where sexually inappropriate conduct never happens and never will happen. But the #metoo movement effectively implicates *all* social institutions, including un-official, semi-anarchistic, sub-cultural organizations like CI, to become responsible about the sexually inappropriate conduct that is, and always has been, taking place.⁴ #metoo has made it clear that sexually inappropriate conduct happens in every group. Your community is NOT the exception.

This marks several cultural shifts. For one, we must now acknowledge that no space is “safe” from sexual violence. It’s erroneous to think that the values of CI—for example listening, leaderlessness or fluid leadership, no fixed roles—can absolve us from the work of having to create awareness about things like intersectional power dynamics, abuses of power, sexual coercion, and other issues that contribute to problematic sexual behavior.⁵ For people in leadership positions—CI teachers, facilitators, organizers, etc.—this means taking a hard look at how you’re using your power.

It should now be basic that you be willing to use your voice to (1) make it clear that you don’t tolerate sexual violence, and (2) invite a dialog about consent culture in your community.

Conclusion

Written guidelines were the solution from another time in CI history. And though I’d argue that they are still necessary, today written guidelines are not enough.

In 2020 there are some risk factors that are no longer appropriate *not* to discuss.

I say this, not because today there is *more* sexual confusion or transgression than in earlier times. I say this because we are now living in a society that is starting to value addressing these problems.

We can no longer ignore that transgressions have been happening despite written guidelines, because people who have experienced sexual transgressions in CI

(survivors of sexual violence in CI) have been bravely coming forward. It is time to listen.

Because as a community we have long avoided this, we have a lot of work ahead. We need to do better at questioning ourselves, reflecting upon the effects of social power-dynamics, and articulating the grey areas in CI in which problematic and transgressive behavior happen.

So CI teachers and facilitators....it's time to roll up our sleeves. It's time to begin mentioning ethical sexuality often, in opening circles, classes, etc., and making time and space for CI communities to discuss ethical sexuality in greater depth. It's time to normalize and encourage conversation.

But what if CI teachers and facilitators are afraid to use their voices?

Read [Part 2 of this article](#), "[It's just not my thing'—addressing facilitator doubts](#)," coming later this week, in which I'll discuss how to get past your hesitations and start speaking up, as well as begin to break down the (problematic) idea that teachers and facilitators shouldn't be saying what's right or wrong.

Footnotes

1. "Consent culture" has a lot of different connotations, but roughly speaking, I use it to mean a culture that normalizes asking for and receiving consent, actively opposes rape culture, and is intersectionally conscious of ways that inherent power dynamics affect one's ability to consent. For more, see [Cliff Pervocracy](#), "[Consent Culture](#),"; [Dylan Wilder Quinn](#), "[Consent Culture: time to get into bed with liberation](#)"; among others.
2. Leadership varies in CI; it's often ambiguous who is a leader and what that entails. While communities may strive for organizational structures that don't include "leaders," an important part of social change is identifying the existing power structure. This includes acknowledging when we ourselves are in positions of power. In CI this could look like being a teacher, a facilitator, an organizer, a person contributing to writing the guidelines, a well-known or veteran dancer, a well-integrated community member, the person who is in charge of logistical tasks such as opening the space, taking money, updating the Facebook page, etc.
3. I'll discuss this further in Myth #7, "It's not my place to get involved."
4. Martin Keogh wrote about a problematic man in the 80s in "[101 Ways to Say No to Contact Improvisation: Boundaries and Trust](#)"; in the 90s, Karen Nelson wrote about a man who had violated three women at two different events, "Dear CQ," *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 19, no.1, (Winter/Spring 1994), p.76; Keith Hennessy wrote about how "many women, lesbians, and gay men do not feel safe at open Contact jams" due to inappropriate behavior by straight men, "Love & Sex, Touch & Weight: 11 Notes on Sexuality, Sex, Gender, Community, & Contact Improvisation," *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Winter / Spring 1996), p. 69; Katherine Marx and Charlie Mosey, with Heather Egan, wrote about dancers in New York City who "consistently made other people feel uncomfortable through touch perceived as inappropriate, forced and sexual," "Community Safety Report" *Contact Quarterly*, vol. 22, no.1, (Summer/Fall 1997), p.75; in 2014, SK reported an "unwanted sexual advance by a festival organizer" in CQ, "[Contact Improvisation: One Experience](#)," Contact

Quarterly, vol. 39, no.1 (Winter/Spring 2014), p.34–35; in early 2017, pre-#metoo, the Montreal community published a zine documenting 16 women’s experiences of feeling unsafe: [Respecting Boundaries/Coexisting Genders: Women’s Experiences of Feeling Unsafe in Contact Improv](#) (Brooks Yardley ed.); in April 2018, Eroca Nicols crashed the opening circle at the Ontario Regional Contact Jam to ask that people present who were banned from other jam communities be identified; in July 2018, Cookie Hearst and others staged a #metoo protest at the West Coast Contact Improvisation Jam; Michele Beaulieux, [“How the First Rule Brought #MeToo to Contact Improvisation”](#); Kathleen Rea, [“Twenty Years of Coming to Terms: Shifting from Disempowerment to Activism and Systemic Thinking”](#); and many more.

5. Keith Hennessy discusses how oppressive dynamics are still reproduced in social circles whose values contradict these very oppressions in [“Questioning Contact Improvisation”](#): “Progressive and regressive practices can be happening at the same time, in the same room, at any given jam.”