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Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Epistemologies of Consent in U.S. BDSM Communities

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Sociology

by

Cierra Raine Sorin

Committee in charge:

Professor Tristan Bridges, Co-Chair

Professor Laury Oaks, Co-Chair

Professor Beth Schneider

Professor Verta Taylor

June 2024

The dissertation of Cierra Raine Sorin is approved.

Beth Schneider

Verta Taylor

Laury Oaks, Committee Co-Chair

Tristan Bridges, Committee Co-Chair

May 2024

Epistemologies of Consent in U.S. BDSM Communities

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by

Cierra Raine Sorin

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One of the many pieces of wisdom I collected in my Feminist Epistemologies course my first quarter of graduate school was a simple edict: *Always read the acknowledgements*. I have since come to understand these sections as a rare place within academia to share vulnerability with others in our social spheres in a way that is not usually permissible otherwise. Acknowledgements are a sort of love letter to the community that supports us as both creatives *and* scientists as we see a project through from “start” to “finish.” And that is how I have approached *this* acknowledgements section. Though I have been slowly writing them since I began this project, I likely have missed someone; I apologize in advance for this oversight, and please know that it is anything but intentional.

First, a huge thank you to every single participant who shared their time, their energy, their pain, and their laughter with me over the last eight years. It has been an absolute honor to represent your struggles and triumphs, your successes and your failures, and I hope that you feel this work represents you and your communities kindly, fairly, and truthfully, even in the dark ugly places. My wish for us is that the discourses and practices of consent that *can* make BDSM spaces so wonderful slowly bleed into broader American sexual culture. I genuinely believe we will *all* be better for it.

My love for research and commitment to social change both took hold while I was a community college student at Cerritos College. Monica Bellas, I am so grateful that I opted to take your physical anthropology class instead of biology - without your class, and your passion for anthropology, I do not know that I would have become a social scientist. Thank you, too, for your Anthropology of Sex and Gender class, for simultaneously inciting my feminist rage while giving me words for so many experiences I could not name before then. Thank you for helping me find my path of doing sex and gender research. Thank you for letting me be probably *the* most annoying student, for your never-ending patience, and for fostering my sense of self at a particularly difficult time in my life. I know firsthand the impact that the belief of a single teacher can have on a student in need.

Mark Abbruzzese, thank you for showing me what it means to be a loving, compassionate, fun teacher, *and* one who expects the best from every student. Without all of those Anthro Club trips to San Diego, I would never have fallen in love with the city, and likely would have gone somewhere “better” than UCSD to finish my Bachelor’s, a possibility I can hardly imagine at this point. Thank you, also, for encouraging me to make decisions for *me* and not for anyone else - I needed someone to tell me that was a choice I was entitled to.

Amy Holzgang, thank you for taking a chance on the quirky kid wanting to do *something* to deal with the enormous amount of pain I was carrying, even if I could not articulate it at the time. Thank you for the informal introduction to sociology - I laugh that it took another two years to realize that it was more of an academic home for me than anthropology - and thank you for the off-the-books research methods class. Thank you for driving to San Diego to see me present my senior honors thesis at PSA. Thank you for giving me your Sun God when I decided to go to UCSD; I still have it, and look forward to hanging it in my own faculty office soon. Thank you for coming to my dissertation defense! Thank you for the opportunities to sometimes re-visit Cerritos, and thank you for your kind and gentle approach to life, work, and balancing between the two.

After I transferred to UC San Diego, I struggled with my major of anthropology, and following some particularly bad experiences and bureaucratic nonsense that limited my ability

to double-major, I did something absolutely unhinged: I changed majors immediately prior to my final year, choosing to take classes full-time all summer to graduate on time. By some absolute miracle, I was accepted into the Sociology Honors program despite having completed *none* of the core sociology courses yet, due to this last-minute major change. I am forever grateful to Christena Turner for the role you had in that decision, as our honors cohort advisor for the year. I am also grateful for your immense support in applying to graduate programs, and your broader empathy and belief in the research on sexual violence that several of us pursued in our theses. Thank you for showing me what a collegial and collaborative research environment *should* look like - and for imbuing in me the desire to one day be a mentor to an honors thesis cohort.

Many thanks also to Kevin Lewis - you had a third of our cohort as honors mentees that year, but still found time to read every single draft, to help me navigate data collection problems, and to mentor me seriously about graduate school. Thank you for not making me feel bad for spilling my *entire* cup of coffee on your desk when we first met and thank you for making me apply to more PhD programs than I wanted to. Thank you, more than anything, for reaching out to John Mohr to try to figure out why I had not heard from UCSB when everyone else had already received acceptances or rejections! I absolutely believe that helped move me off the waitlist to be accepted into my top-choice program, and for that I am eternally, immensely thankful.

At UCSB, I have been fortunate to receive mentorship and guidance in many ways from numerous faculty; I would like to thank a few in particular.

Jenn Tyburczy, thank you for nurturing my determination to study BDSM, for your incredible intellectual generosity, and for giving me a pass the one time I needed one and could not ask for it; I will never forget that moment of compassion, as a reminder that sometimes academia will not swallow you whole for also being a person.

Zakiya Luna, thank you for teaching me about how to do research, thank you for teaching me about the necessity of boundaries, and thank you for the reminder that “*You have to meet people where they are at.*” I am certainly a better researcher, activist, and teacher for this advice.

Elena Raymond, thank you for modeling love and compassion for students in a time and place where it can be so much easier not to; you really demonstrate the humanity in teaching that I hope to emulate myself, and the classes I TA’d with you – including that wild quarter when COVID-19 struck – are some of my favorite teaching moments in graduate school.

Tara Tober, thank you for the respect, curiosity, and kindness you always showed me in our working together; you always treated me like a peer and that helped me more than I realized in the moment. Thank you for making the only 8am class I have ever had also one of the most entertaining (let alone during the rainiest three months of my life! truly wild for a born-and-raised Californian), and thank you for all the advice and support in balancing pregnancy and new motherhood as a graduate student. I hope I get to be as cool as you are one day!

A great deal of thanks to Alicia Cast, who passed away unexpectedly this year. As my first-year advisor in the program, you were a warm and steady source of support that difficult first year. And your black-sharpied “NO” on a sheet of printer paper above your office monitors, though a lesson I still have to master, is some of the sagest advice I have garnered here at UCSB. Thank you also for being a model of softness, for reminding me that sharpness

is unnecessary for success in academia. I will always fondly remember the Halloween we both dressed up for class and none of our students did; you knew how to embrace the fun in life, even in its more serious moments.

I also would like to thank Mireille Miller-Young, Constance Penley, and Paul Amar from the New Sexualities research group for your feedback on an early part of my research; thank you for pushing me to not only embrace, but deepen, my interdisciplinary roots, at a time when I felt torn between “proper” disciplines.

Thank you to Leila Rupp, John Mohr, Sarah Thébaud, Cate Taylor, Maria Charles, Victor Rios, Hannah Wohl, Lisa Hajjar, and Denise Segura for your various forms of support and mentorship throughout the program as I learned how to be a sociologist, a mentor, a writer, a teacher, a colleague, and a leader. Thank you also to Lisa Blanco, Sharon Applegate, Madhu Khemani, Christine Gorgita, Melissa Martinez, Erika Klukovich, and Monica Gascon; you all made navigating the bureaucracy of graduate school a lot easier, especially in difficult moments, and I am grateful for the random snacks, the immense amount of laughter (and insider knowledge), and bonding over our kiddos.

I *finally* started a practice of co-writing during those lonely lockdown days early in the pandemic. Thank you Heather Prentice-Walz for being my writing buddy for two years, in addition to the too-multitudinous-to-name other ways you have shown up for me since we first met. Somehow, I always manage to find and make friends with the cool anthropologists, and I am so glad you are one of them.

Deciding to have a baby during graduate school is not for the weak of heart, and as someone who struggles to ask for help, I am immensely grateful to be in a community that could see when I (we) needed it. Thank you Megan Spencer, Ocean Spencer, and Emma Schuster; thank you Sara Tyberg and Sophie Meyers; thank you to the Fiddler family, Katie, Michael, Nora, Tobias, and new baby Moses; thank you Stephanie Arguera and Hermon Farahi; thank you Naomi Joseph and Karen Rice; thank you Katie von Wald.

Coming back to work post-baby was a very lonely experience, and I am so grateful to two friends who invited me to join their writing group. The flexibility, grace, space, and accountability you offered me, Naomi Joseph and Laura Halcomb, helped me hold it together on the days I really did not think I could. Thank you for seeing me when I felt invisible and incapable. Thanks also to Andy McCumber for crashing our writing group from time to time, and for daydreaming with us about “grown-up things” like in-home washers and dryers and windows in our bathrooms. Navigating the job market this year has been a nightmare made more pleasurable through the solidarity of going through it with y’all, Laura and Andy - we made it!! And Naomi, it’s your turn next!

The UCSB Graduate Student Association occupied a significant amount of my life for many years; I am grateful for your camaraderie and your commiseration, Jennifer Selvidge, Carlos Nash, Heath Pennington, Azucena Trincado Murugarren, Pedro Craveiro, and Heather Prentice-Walz. I also am fortunate to constantly be surrounded by peers and colleagues who fight to make academia more inhabitable, more interesting, and more inclusive here at UCSB, and now in many other universities as well. There are too many of you to name everyone, but thanks in no particular order to Marisa Salinas, Fatima Suarez, Jasmine Kelekay, Alexandra Ornelas, Kendall Ota, Sekani Robinson, Isabella Restrepo, AP Pierce, Kimberly Soriano, Megan Spencer, Emma Schuster, Katie von Wald, Jenn David, Sara Tyberg, Emily Fox, Ryan Decarsky, Stephenson Brooks, Stephanie Kaylor, Andrew Johnson, Pratik Raghu, Vivian Shaw, and Ednie Kaeh Garrison. Some people come into our lives to help teach us who we

are, and only stay that long; thank you Sarah Devoto, Zachary King, Matthew “Fritz” Fritzler, and Amanda Rodriguez.

I could not have asked for a more supportive, creative, eclectic, and (sometimes) scary committee, and I would like to thank each of them individually:

G. Reginald Daniel, I still can hardly believe you are gone. Your professional development class that first quarter was a rude awakening to how brutal graduate school would be for many of us. Your frank honesty about it - in tandem with your recommendation of Chili’s as the best cheap drinks in town - made that first quarter survivable. I felt so out of place in the department, at UCSB, and in academia, and all the time Jasmine and I spent in your office hours that first year was the balm I needed to soothe those wounds and keep moving forward. You were so surprised when I asked you to be on my committee, but you always were willing to learn, to engage the “weird sex stuff” I was studying, and I so appreciated the random emails with news stories and videos you thought might be relevant to my work. I am so angry that you are not here, that you never got to meet Coraline and talk about her birth chart with me, that you did not get to see me finish this project, that we never got to write together like you made a point of doing with all your students. I miss you every day, Reg, and I hope you would be as proud of this dissertation as I was of getting to learn from you.

Beth Schneider, one of my biggest regrets of graduate school is that I was too intimidated by you to seek out your wisdom and mentorship - even though I knew I should - until I took your Sexualities course in winter of my third year in the program. I remember at the fall department kick-off in 2018 having a conversation about where you bought your necklace. It was such an out-of-body experience: how could I be having such a normal, everyday conversation with *the* Beth Schneider? That was the start of my fourth year in the program, I had already defended my MA, and still, it was the first time I really felt like maybe I had made it. Thank you, Beth, for both witnessing and giving me the space to fight my own battles, and for quietly checking in afterwards; you have only ever made me feel more capable, and more powerful, as a queer woman in academia. Thank you for the raised eyebrow and bemused incredulity at all my wild hopes, plans and dreams. Thank you for the anchoring back to Planet Earth, too. Thank you for keeping me just scared enough to keep everything moving forward. And thank you, most of all, for asking me after my proposal defense why I had not asked you to be on my dissertation committee - I laugh now when I think about the panic I felt in that moment, and the confusion, too. I cannot tell you what an honor it is to be your last graduate student, and so I thank you for that, too.

Verta Taylor, you are the reason I dreamed of doing my PhD at UC Santa Barbara so badly that I held out until the week before decisions were due, when I finally received my offer, dropped literally everything, and drove up to make sure that UCSB sociology was, as I have since lovingly described, “the right kind of crazy” for me. I could not envision what graduate school would look like except that you would be a part of it and I would do some very exciting work on sexuality. I am beyond pleased that those two hopes both came true, albeit in unexpected ways. Thank you for your continued mentoring, including some of the harder truths. Thank you, more than anything, for telling me in that first qualitative methods class in 2016 that I would not get a job with a BDSM dissertation. For many years, I internalized that as a problem with me not being good enough, and not a reflection of how far the field of sociology *still* has to go - despite you, of all people, being one to bring sociological studies of sex and gender to where we are now. Thank you for giving me the fire to keep going, to see if I could actually accomplish what felt in many moments to be an impossibility. You helped me

push myself to be the best scholar I could be, for this project and for myself, and while I still have much to learn, I am grateful for everything you have taught me so far. Really, truly, thank you.

Tristan Bridges, I will forever thank my lucky stars that you came onto my MA committee when you did, and quickly thereafter agreed to be my dissertation co-chair. I had so many doubts about my place in sociology before your arrival at UCSB, floating around without an anchoring point to the discipline and wondering if I was in the “right” place. Your mentorship and scholarship has been a constant reminder of how powerful it can be to straddle the line between the humanities and social sciences; it has also been a reminder that I am not alone in the ways I think, and research, and write. Thank you for the continued edict to do what you say, and not what you do; I promise, I listen to every word, and I *do* hear you, even if I do not act on every piece of advice. Thank you for giving me the space to do my own thing when I needed it, and thank you also for the hand-holding when that is what I needed instead. Thank you for showing me what it is to prioritize your kiddos over work; I have been so grateful for your modeling of care and love. Thank you for always pushing me to work harder, to dig deeper, to be a better scholar. Thank you for making some of the hardest, loneliest years of my life a little less hard, and a little less lonely. I really do not know how I could have finished this dissertation without the compassion, patience, and provocations you have offered me over and over again. I hope I one day get to pay it all forward with my own graduate students. Thank you for everything!!

Laury Oaks, it took me *weeks* and many tears to write this acknowledgement, because I could not figure out how to distill everything simply, adequately, accurately. After much consideration, I have landed on the following: as seriously and undramatically as I can convey, you have saved my life time and time again. I have spent so much of my time at UCSB trying to prove to the people around me that I deserved to be here, that I belonged – and really, in the end I realize, proving that to myself – and never once did you make me feel anything but capable of accomplishing everything I have ever dreamed of. The waves of trauma I experienced over the course of this PhD threatened to derail me so, so many times, and you were *always* there to meet me with kindness, and care, and compassion, and sometimes rage on my behalf, too. Thank you for the quietly ongoing reminder that I deserved more, and better, and it was out there for me to find. Thank you for never giving up on me, especially in the moments when I was closest to giving up. In true Capricorn fashion, you have also been such a functionally helpful advisor, too. Thank you for teaching me how to be a better writer, thank you for teaching me how to be a better teacher, and thank you for teaching me what it means to be a good mentor. Thank you for catching *every* pun I have ever written, especially those I wrote unaware; your edits make me laugh every time! Thank you for your wry sense of humor, and thank you for the always well-timed reminders to take care of me. Thank you for being my confidante outside the department - I really do not think I could have survived without that, in particular. Thank you for being a constant interlocutor in my undisciplining and for helping me find the courage to forge *my* path instead of one decided for me by others. Thank you for teaching me what “good enough” is, and how that is not failure, but success. Thank you for always being open to talking about working motherhood, having no examples of this myself. Thank you for living your politics, thank you for leading with care and compassion in all that you do. Thank you, too, for your absolute adoration of and love for Coraline; she (and I) loves you too. Thank you for all of it, and then some. I will spend the rest of my life trying to be half as amazing as you.

I also want to thank my family for their support along this crazy PhD journey of mine.

Steve Driscoll and Lisa Driscoll, thank you for always being steadfast supporters, even when I am sure it seemed that graduate school was a formidable, never-ending beast for me (and, indeed, it has been). Thank you for all your celebrations with us, thank you for the ongoing curiosity about what being a graduate student has meant, thank you for your neverending excitement and love as I moved from milestone to milestone.

Tina McCambridge, thank you for being the *only* person to ask me when I would be done with my dissertation, but doing so because of your intense desire to read it! Thank you for always having interest in my work, for making a point to ask questions to better understand it, for being a feminist compatriot outside of academia, and for just generally being supportive as I moved forward in a way you were never allowed to. I cannot wait to give you one of the first copies of the book version of this dissertation when I publish it in a few years!

Kyla de Villa and Miguel de Villa, you are such amazing siblings and people generally, and I am beyond grateful for your friendship, your love, your memes and jokes, and the playfulness you continue to inject into my life. Thank you for all the ways you have supported me, and James and Lilith and Coraline, over the last few years in particular. I feel so lucky to be moving closer to you two, and am so proud of the journeys you two are on. And Kyla – I am SO looking forward to seeing you become Dr. de Villa in just a few short years. Dr. Sisters we will be, and what a dream that is!!

Suzu Sorin, momma, how do I even begin to thank you? I do not think it is possible to know how deep a mother's love runs until becoming a mother yourself, and I know I still do not know the depths of love you have for me (and squeeby!). I am sorry so much of our life has been characterized by such pain and violence, but we survived. And what a beautiful life we have made for ourselves on the other side. Thank you for everything you sacrificed, for everything you endured, for every bit of time and energy and lost sleep. Thank you for your pure, unconditional love. Thanks for teaching me how to be “momma” myself, while I learned how to put “Dr.” in front of that title.

James Steven Driscoll, I first want everyone to know how utterly silly you are for asking, “Am I on there? Say that I am the best!” Because, OF COURSE you would be in my acknowledgements (and, fair to say, you *are* the best). I have oodles of cheese I could write here, but I will keep it simple. Thank you for seeing me, in all of the best and ugliest moments, and still choosing me day after day for well over a decade. Thank you for loving me even when I am a bit, or even a bunch, not so easy to love. Thank you for learning to be better, and do better, so we can give our kiddo a better life than we had growing up. Thank you for helping me heal; I know it has not been easy. Thank you for picking up the slack, for letting me stay on campus til 8pm writing and then feeding me and sending me to bed; for all the cups of morning coffee, the packed lunches, the rides to work; it is not lost on me how much you enabled me to write and think and edit over the last year by handling so much beyond your own capacity. Thank you, finally, for never once holding my absence against me, for only ever being supportive and caring so that I could get a job and finish this dissertation. In my wildest dreams, I could not imagine this is where we would be now, but babe, we finally made it, and I cannot wait to celebrate with you!

Lilith Jezebel, you are the best fur-child I could ask for. Your snuggles and wet nose kisses, your sloppy *actual* doggy kisses, your constant raccoon-like treatment of the trash, your communing with the crows, and your general silliness. The day you decided to come home with us was one of the best days of my life, and I would not have gotten through the turbulence

of graduate school without your steadfast companionship. Thanks for letting me be your momma, doggobun.

Coraline Jupiter Sorin-Driscoll, being your mother has been the light of my life. You have taught me so much about how to be a better human, how to be kinder to myself, how to enjoy all the little things that become so easy to overlook. We decided we wanted to have you at the most batshit insane time we possibly could have, and I would not change a minute of it. Thank you for choosing me to be your momma, thank you for giving me things to look forward to every single day, and thank you most of all for being the sweet, silly, feisty little mouse child you are. May you continue to grow up in a world that is less violent to you than it was to me, to your aunties, to your grandmothers, and to *all* of the women that came before us. We *will* make this world a better place, for all of us.

Finally, I have been so fortunate in my securing of substantive support to complete this research. From UC Santa Barbara, in chronological order, this included a Humanities and Social Sciences Research Grant; a Sociology Department Seed Grant; a Steve and Barbara Mendell Graduate Fellowship in Cultural Literacy from the Walter H. Capps Center for the Study of Ethics, Religion, and Public Life; a Flacks Fund for the Study of Democratic Possibilities award; a Department of Sociology Dissertation Research and Writing Fellowship; an American Rescue Plan Quarter of Support Grant; and a Graduate Division Dissertation Fellowship. I also, most gratefully, received an Honorable Mention award for the Beth B. Hess Memorial Scholarship from Sociologists for Women in Society. Without this incredible support, I would not have been able to do justice to this project - and to my participants - in the ways I hope I have.

CIERRA RAINE SORIN

EDUCATION

- 2024 **University of California, Santa Barbara**
Doctoral Candidate in Sociology // Feminist Studies Doctoral Emphasis
“Epistemologies of Consent in U.S. BDSM Communities”
Dissertation committee: Tristan Bridges (co-chair), Laury Oaks (co-chair),
Beth Schneider, and Verta Taylor
- 2018 **University of California, Santa Barbara**
M.A. in Sociology
- 2015 **University of California, San Diego**
B.A. in Sociology // Minor in Sociocultural Anthropology
Magna Cum Laude & High Honors in Sociology
- 2013 **Cerritos College, Norwalk, California**
A.A. in Anthropology & A.A. in English
Highest Honors & Scholar’s Honors Program Graduate

RESEARCH & TEACHING INTERESTS

Sexualities, Gender, Masculinities, Sex/Gender-Based Violence, Qualitative Methods, Social Inequalities, Public Health, Public Policy, Health Policy

PUBLICATIONS

PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ARTICLES

- Talia Kieu, Emily Galper, **Cierra Raine Sorin**, and Brittanie Bloom. 2024. “An Intersectional Qualitative Analysis of Informal Sex Education Experiences of Asian LGBTQ+ Undergraduate Students.” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*.
- Brittanie E. Bloom*, **Cierra Raine Sorin***, Laury Oaks, Jennifer A. Wagman. 2022. “Graduate Students are ‘Making a Big Fuss’: Responding to Institutional Betrayal Around Campus Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment.” *Journal of School Violence*. * **Shared first authorship.**
- Cierra Raine Sorin**. 2022. “Hybrid Masculinities and The Limits of Anti-Violence Efforts in BDSM Communities.” *Men and Masculinities*.
- Stoddy Carey, Stephanie Sumstine, Claire Amabile, Heather Helvink, **Cierra Raine Sorin**, Dallas Swendeman, Eunhee Park and Jennifer A. Wagman. 2022. “Student-Athletes’, Coaches’ and Administrators’ Perspectives of Sexual Violence on Three Campuses with NCAA Division I and II Athletic Programs.” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.
- Brittanie E. Bloom*, **Cierra Raine Sorin***, Laury Oaks, and Jennifer Wagman. 2021. “Graduate Students’ Knowledge of and Access to Campus SVSH Resources.”

Journal of American College Health. DOI 10.1080/07448481.2021.1942010. *
Shared first authorship.

Brittnie Bloom, **Cierra Raine Sorin**, Jennifer Wagman, and Laury Oaks. 2021. "Employees, Advisees, and Emerging Scholars: A Qualitative Analysis of Graduate Students' Roles and Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment on College Campuses." *Sexuality and Culture*, DOI 10.1007/s12119-021-09841-w.

Atreyi Mitra, Dallas Swendeman, Stephanie Sumstine, **Cierra Raine Sorin**, Brittnie Bloom, and Jennifer Wagman. 2021. "Barriers to Accessing the Campus Assault Resources and Education (CARE) Offices on Three University of California (UC) Campuses." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*.

BOOK REVIEWS

2021. "Studying Sex to Understand Sexual Assault." Review of *Sexual Citizens: A Landmark Study of Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus* by Jennifer S. Hirsch and Shamus Khan. *Contexts*.

2020. *Transgressed: Intimate Partner Violence in Transgender Lives* by Xavier L. Guadalupe-Diaz. *Gender & Society*.

BOOK CHAPTERS

Forthcoming. **Cierra Raine Sorin**. 2025. "#MeTooUC: An Autoethnographic Analysis of the University of California's Response to Sexual Violence & Sexual Harassment." Eds. Rebecca Martínez and Monica J. Casper, *Who Belongs? Peer-reviewed anthology in The Feminist Wire Books: Feminisms, Race, and Social Justice* series, University of Arizona Press.

WORK IN PROGRESS

PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ARTICLES

Cierra Raine Sorin. "The ABCs of Consent: A Feminist Sociological Model of Consent in U.S. BDSM Communities." (In progress)

Cierra Raine Sorin. "Responding to Consent Violations: How Community Consent Guidelines are Structured by Social Inequalities." (In progress)

Laura Halcomb, Andrew McCumber, and **Cierra Raine Sorin**. "Exploring Consent in Fanfiction on Archive of Our Own (AO3)." (In progress)

AWARDS & HONORS

2024	UC Santa Barbara Graduate Student Association (GSA) Travel Grant
2024	UC Santa Barbara Academic Senate Doctoral Student Travel Grant
2023	Nominated for the University of California President's Award for Outstanding Student Leadership (1 of only 17 nominated graduate students in the UC system)

2023	UC Santa Barbara Graduate Division Dissertation Write-In
2023	UC Santa Barbara Sociology Department Professional Development Stipend
2023	UC Santa Barbara Graduate Division Dissertation Fellowship (\$8,000)
2022	UC Santa Barbara American Rescue Plan Quarter-of-Support Grant – Winter 2023 (\$14,000)
2022	Sociologists for Women in Society Beth B. Hess Memorial Scholarship – Honorable Mention (\$3,500)
2022	UC Santa Barbara Sociology Department Professional Development Stipend (\$1,280)
2022	Sole sociology graduate student nominated for UC Santa Barbara President’s Year Fellowship
2021	UC Santa Barbara Department of Sociology Dissertation Research and Writing Fellowship (\$6,000)
2021	UC Santa Barbara 2021-2022 Flacks Fund for the Study of Democratic Possibilities (\$1,500)
2021	Inaugural UC Santa Barbara Sociology Department Outstanding Graduate Student Teaching Award
2021	UC Santa Barbara Sociology Department Professional Development Stipend
2021	UC Santa Barbara 2021-2022 Steve and Barbara Mendell Graduate Fellowship in Cultural Literacy (\$2,500)
2021	Sole sociology graduate student nominated for UC Santa Barbara President’s Year Fellowship
2021	UC Santa Barbara Academic Senate Doctoral Student Travel Grant
2020	UC Santa Barbara Dixon-Levy GSA Service Award – Honorable Mention
2020	UC Santa Barbara Sociology Department Seed Grant (\$1,000)
2020	UC Santa Barbara Humanities and Social Sciences Research Grant (\$3,000)
2020	UC Santa Barbara Sociology Department Professional Development Stipend
2020	UC Santa Barbara Feminist Futures Initiative Research Grant (\$2,000) PIs: Laury Oaks, Professor and Chair, Feminist Studies & Leila Rupp, Professor of Feminist Studies and Associate Dean, Division of Social Sciences
2019	UC Santa Barbara Graduate Student Association (GSA) Travel Grant
2019	UC Santa Barbara Sociology Department Travel Grant
2019	UC Santa Barbara Feminist Studies Charlotte Stough Memorial Prize
2019	Pacific Sociological Association Student Travel Grant
2017	UC Santa Barbara Sociology Block Grant Graduate Fellowship
2015	UC Santa Barbara Sociology Graduate Fellowship (\$18,000)

CONFERENCE ACTIVITY

01/2024	Sociologists for Women in Society – Winter Meeting – Santa Ana Pueblo, NM <i>Roundtable participant: Sex Work and Sexual Consent</i> “The ABCs of Consent: Building a feminist sociological framework of consent from U.S. BDSM Communities”
03/2021	Pacific Sociological Association – Online “Toward a Sociology of Consent”

- 01/2021 Sociologists for Women in Society – Winter Meeting – Online
Roundtable participant: Gender Violence: “‘Making a Big Fuss’: Prioritizing Graduate Students’ Knowledge, Experiences, and Recommendations for Social Justice Changes to Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment Policies”
 Co-presented with Brittne Bloom
- 08/2020 Sociologists for Women in Society – Summer Meeting – Online
Roundtable participant: (Calling Out) Harassment: “#metoogradschool: How Do Sexual Harassment & Sexual Violence Affect Graduate Students?”
- 08/2020 American Sociological Association – Online
Sociology of Education roundtable: “Preliminary Analyses from #metoogradschool”
 *Due to COVID-19 this presentation was accepted, but not given.
- 05/2020 UC Santa Barbara LGBTQ+ Research Festival
 “#metoogradschool: Graduate Student Experiences of Sexual Harassment & Sexual Violence”
- 01/2020 Sociologists for Women in Society – Winter Meeting – San Diego, CA
Roundtable discussant: Critical Studies of the Arts and Entertainment
- 08/2019 American Sociological Association – New York, NY
 “Men’s Performances of Hybrid Masculinities in BDSM Communities”
- 04/2019 Pacific Sociological Association – Oakland, CA
Activism Related to Sexual Assault, Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence panel, sponsored by the Committee on the Status of Women: “Men’s Performances of Hybrid Masculinities in BDSM Communities”
- 05/2018 UC Santa Barbara Mental Health Conference
Panelist: “Surviving in Graduate School When There’s No Room to Be a Person.”
- 04/2018 UC Santa Barbara Humanities in Prison Symposium
Panelist: Experience teaching incarcerated men in California via the UC Santa Barbara IHC Foundations in the Humanities program.
- 02/2017 UC Santa Barbara Feminist Studies Research Symposium
 “Consent in the BDSM Community”
- 04/2015 UC San Diego Undergraduate Research Conference
Round-table presentation: “Talking about Sex: The Importance of Sexual Discussion Networks and Education for College Students’ Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors”
- 04/2015 Pacific Sociological Association – Long Beach, CA
Round-table presentation of Sociology Honors Thesis: “Talking about Sex: The Importance of Sexual Discussion Networks and Education for College Students’ Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors.”
- 04/2013 National Conferences on Undergraduate Research – La Crosse, WI
Oral presentation: “Domestic Violence and Rape Prevalence in the Lives of Cerritos College Students.”

PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY, INVITED TALKS, AND PRESENTATIONS

02/2018	Santa Barbara City College lecture for SOC 109 – Social Problems “Studying Consent,” invited by Professor Ian Waller
05/2023	UC Santa Barbara Capps Forum on Ethics and Public Policy “Ending Sexual Violence on Campus: A Holistic Approach”
07/2021	“How to Better Understand Graduate Student Experiences of Sexual Violence.” Contribution to PubNavigator: A science communication platform that uses accessible language to help students navigate scientific literature (aimed at 12 th grade reading level).
04/2021	UC Santa Barbara Resource Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity Panel “Let’s Talk About Kink!”
02/2021	Antioch University Q&A for SOJ 4800 – Consent: #MeToo, Time’s Up “Doing Sexual Violence Activism,” invited by Dr. Cheri Gurse
08/2020	UC Santa Barbara Trigger Warning! Roundtable “Trauma-Informed Pedagogy and Sexual Violence/Sexual Harassment in Higher Education”
04/2020	UC Santa Barbara Resource Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity Panel “Kink and Consent”
02/2020	UC Santa Barbara Feminist Futures Initiative Panel - <i>Sexual Harassment & Violence on Campus: How Do We Move Forward?</i> “#metoogradschool: Graduate Student Experiences of Sexual Harassment & Sexual Violence”
02/2018	UC Santa Barbara Lecture for FEMST 20 – Introduction to Gender & Power “Studying Consent,” invited by Professor Ednie Kaeh Garrison
07/2017	UC Santa Barbara Lecture for SOC 146 – Special Topics in Gender “Studying Consent in the BDSM Community,” invited by Professor Katelynn Bishop

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

01/2022 – 06/2023	UCSB CARE Graduate Student Researcher Graduate student research assistant to the UCSB Campus Advocacy, Resources & Education Center (campus sexual assault center). Attended bystander intervention trainings, conducted and analyzed focus groups with graduate students about their needs from CARE, and designed and implemented the first graduate student-centered workshops run by the office.
01/2018 – 12/2019	Mobilizing Millions Graduate Student Researcher Graduate student research assistant on the Mobilizing Millions research project, working with Dr. Zakiya Luna (UC Santa Barbara) and Dr. Chandra Russo (Colgate University).

12/2018 **UC San Diego Center on Gender Equity and Health Graduate Intern**
– 07/2019 Solo graduate intern at UCSB for the UC Speaks Up project.

RESEARCH TRAININGS

06/2019 **UC San Diego GEH Qualitative Coding & Analysis Workshop**
Three-day workshop for UC Speaks Up interns. Included training with Nvivo, Dedoose, and Atlas.ti qualitative software packages.

12/2018 **UC San Diego GEH Qualitative Methods Workshop**
Three-day workshop for UC Speaks Up. Included basic qualitative research methods, research ethics and compliance, safe and ethical research on interpersonal violence, and training on trauma-informed approaches to research and prevention programming.

SERVICE TO THE DISCIPLINE

Sociologists for Women in Society
 Undergraduate Social Action Award Subcommittee (01/2021)
 Student Caucus Member (09/2020 – present)
 Feminist Activist Award Subcommittee (09/2020 – 09/2022)

Journal ad hoc reviewer
 Journal of Interpersonal Violence
 Violence Against Women
 BMC Medical Education
 Sexuality, Gender & Policy
 Gender & Society
 Contexts

UNIVERSITY SERVICE

UCSB Sociology Department Job Market Support Group (08/2023 – present)
 Inaugural co-convener with Laura Halcomb and Naomi Joseph

UCSB Campus Advocacy, Resources & Education (CARE) Search Committees
 Bystander Intervention Specialist Search Committee (07/2022 – 08/2022)
 Director Search Committee (10/2016 – 12/2016)

UCSB Sociology Department Faculty Award Committee (05/2022)

UCSB Dixon-Levy Service Award Committee (04/2021 – 05/2021 & 04/2017 – 05/2017)

UCSB Campus Climate Survey Committee (10/2020 – 06/2021)
 Graduate Student / Postdoc Subcommittee

UCSB Chapter of the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine (NASEM)
 Action Collaborative (10/2019 – 06/2021)

UCSB Graduate Student Association
 President (07/2018 – 07/2020)
 Vice President of Communications and Records (07/2017 – 07/2018)

General Assembly Member (11/2015 – 07/2017)
 UCSB Sociology Graduate Student Association (SGSA) (09/2016 – 06/2018)
SGSA General Representative
 nowUCsb Executive Board Member (01/2016 – 06/2019)
Anti-sexual violence student movement at UC Santa Barbara
 UC Student Peer Education Symposium on Sexual Violence (04/2016)
 UCSB Campus Climate Survey Implementation Committee (01/2016 – 06/2016)
Sexual Violence Subcommittee
Marginalized Communities Subcommittee

PEDAGOGICAL TRAINING & PRAXIS

09/2020 – 12/2020 **Course Development Consultant**
 Assisted Professor Cheri Gurse at Antioch University in development of an upper division undergraduate course on consent, sexual violence, and the #MeToo movement.

09/2017 – 06/2018 **2017–2018 Interdisciplinary Humanities Center Graduate Teaching Fellow**
 Instructor for UCSB correspondence course in the humanities for incarcerated men in California.

08/2017 – 1/2019 **Sociology Department TA Training Committee**
 Lead TA for the sociology department. Organized and orchestrated TA trainings, including annual training for first-year TAs in 2017 and 2018.

2017 **Workshop Leader at UC Santa Barbara Annual TA Training**
 Ran multiple workshops for incoming graduate student TAs at the annual all-campus TA training orientation.

2017 **UC Santa Barbara Lead TA Institute**
 Multi-day training for Lead TA position for the 2017-2018 academic year.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor of Record – UC Santa Barbara

Sociology

Sociology 108ST: Feminist Qualitative Methodologies – Summer 2021 (online);
 Winter 2024
 Sociology 1: Introduction to Sociology – Summer 2020 (online)
 Sociology 172: Crime and Delinquency – Fall 2019
 Sociology 145: Social Inequality – Summer 2018

Feminist Studies

Feminist Studies 150: Sex, Love, & Romance – Summer 2018 (online)

Teaching Assistant – UC Santa Barbara

Sociology

Sociology 154A: Sociology of Families – Spring 2024
Sociology 128: Sociology of Race & Ethnicity – Summer 2023 (hybrid)
Sociology 144LA: Latina/x Activism in the United States – Fall 2022 (online) & Spring 2023 (online)
Sociology 153: Women and Work – Summer 2021 (online)
Sociology 108: Methods of Research – Winter 2021 (online)
Sociology 185S: Special Topics in Social Research – Summer 2020 (online) & Summer 2023 (online)
Sociology 108ST: Special Topics in Research (Ethnography) – Winter 2020
Sociology 108C: Cultural Analysis – Winter 2019 & Spring 2021 (online)
Sociology 167: Organizations – Fall 2018.
Sociology 1: Introduction to Sociology – Lead TA: Spring 2018, Spring 2019, Spring 2020 (online) & Fall 2021 (online); TA: Fall 2016 & Winter 2017
Sociology 154: Sociology of the Family – Fall 2018
Sociology 170: Sociology of Deviant Behavior – Summer 2017 & Summer 2019
Sociology 118B: The Body – Spring 2017

Feminist Studies

Feminist Studies 80: Introduction to LGBTQ Studies – Winter 2022 (online)
Feminist Studies 150: Sex, Love, & Romance – Summer 2017 (online), Summer 2019 (online), & Summer 2022 (online)
Feminist Studies 20: Gender and Power: Introduction to Feminist Studies – Winter 2018, Fall 2020, & Summer 2022 (online)

STUDENT ADVISING

Graduate Student Mentorship

Talia Kieu, MSPH to PhD student, Department of Public Health, UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health
Emily Galper, PhD student, the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Sociology Honors Thesis

Sarah Teodoro, 2023, “The Effects of Sexual Assault on Survivor’s Romantic Relationships and Sex Lives”
Sophia O’Hara, 2022, “‘Modest is Hottest:’ Insufficiencies of Formalized Sex Education and the Salience of Informal Sexual Learning Sites in Shaping Sexual Learning Experiences”
Julieta Corral Phun, 2022, “Nonbinary Sex Workers”
Belicia Cervantes, 2021, “Investigating Dating App Experiences During COVID”
Ryan Decarsky, 2019, “Trials of Brotherhood: New Pledge Education”

Undergraduate Independent Research

Alyssa Anderson, 2022, Topic: Fatness, Consent, and Pregnancy

Carmen Keys, 2021, Topic: Content Analysis of Gender Roles in Disney Films

Sammy Mattis, 2019 – 2021, “Portrayals of BDSM in Popular Media”

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

American Sociological Association

Pacific Sociological Association

ABSTRACT

Epistemologies of Consent in U.S. BDSM Communities

by

Cierra Raine Sorin

This dissertation is a study of consent epistemologies in BDSM communities in the United States. What is consent? What constitutes a consent violation? How are violations handled, given the extralegal status of BDSM practice? To answer these questions, I draw on a year of fieldwork in BDSM communities in California, in addition to interviews with 55 BDSM practitioners from more than 20 distinct kink communities across the United States (and one in Canada). Four major findings emerged: (1) consent in BDSM operates on a spectrum, rather than being a simple yes-or-no; (2) some level of consent violation is not only expected, but acceptable, to most practitioners; (3) consent is learned by doing, and; (4) in regards to these first three findings, community is centered in critical ways where it is not in other sexual communities. From these larger findings come my analysis: I first analyze 10 prevalent consent discourses, five each from broader American sexual culture and from BDSM communities more specifically, articulating how these consent discourses fail to align with consent practices adequately because of the discourses' singular focus on the individual. I demonstrate how these discourses become weaponized in a multitude of BDSM communities to maintain social hierarchies along lines of gender and sexuality, but also as importantly, along lines of

dis/ability, social class, and race, leading me to theorize *hegemonic consent*. But this hegemonic ideology of consent is not reflected in BDSM play; instead, I outline four tenets of consent practices in BDSM communities that operate counter to this hegemonic consent ideology. I conclude by providing an application of my findings in the form of a new framework of consent, called the ABCCCs (awareness, bodily autonomy, caring, communication, and context), which is derived from experiences of consent, violation, and response that BDSM practitioners shared with me. Though I developed this way of thinking about consent in practice both from and for sexual communities, my goal with the framework is in fact a larger one: how does consent operate in many realms of social life? And how might a framework like this be usable both within sexual communities *and* also beyond them?

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Epistemologies of Consent in U.S. BDSM Communities

Introduction

I think I learned about BDSM, actually, through something that I was really fucking lucky to find, which was when I was in junior high, and I was like, super anxious about making out with someone. And I was wondering where it was gonna go. And I was like, freaked out that I didn't know what I was doing. And just like, you know, I'm an idiot, I don't know anything about sex. I started Googling around trying to find stuff, right? At this point computers were something that, like my family had one in the living room [both Cierra and Jacob laugh] so you had to be careful about when you used it and for what. But I found this website called scarleteen.com, which is a sex ed website for teenagers. And I didn't know it when I was that age, but it was run by very feminist queer women. [Jacob laughs] At the time, I just thought it was like, this is the basic info for everybody... [Cierra laughs] They had a lot of information about things like bondage and there was a lot in there about consent, how it would apply to different kinds of sexual interests. So I think that that's where I first heard of things? And just like reading about things from there. But then, I was also exposed to porn around that time too. And I remember, like, having early conversations with partners in early high school, like, "Hey, do you have any fetishes? Like, is there something you're into?" I don't think I really tried stuff with partners until years later, where we would like, you know, go buy rope or something and try that out or different things like that.

With his Lenin-esque Vandyke, nose ring, and singular hoop earring, Jacob in many ways resembles the stereotypical queer white millennial man pursuing higher education. At 27, he is completing his PhD in the social sciences, while balancing his activist commitments, another job, and multiple partners; Jacob is polyamorous. He is anti-monogamy, with a preference for having multiple partners for sex and other forms of intimacy; in practice, this is reflected in his ongoing romantic and sexual relationships, simultaneously and consensually, with two different women. Jacob has practiced some form of BDSM – that is, bondage and discipline, Dominance¹ and submission, sadism and masochism – for a decade, beginning to employ these

¹ This is not a typo, and throughout, I will always capitalize “Dom/Dominant/Top” as a reflection of the power position these terms reflect within BDSM spaces; “sub/submissive/bottom” will always be in lowercase. This reflects common though not universal practice amongst practitioners in writing about BDSM and identities.

kinky practices before reaching adulthood. And, like more than twenty other practitioners I interviewed, Jacob also identifies himself as a switch, sometimes preferring to be the Dominant or Top in an interaction (the “giver”) and sometimes preferring to be the submissive or bottom in an interaction (the “receiver”).²

I share Jacob’s story above because in many ways it is a quintessentially normal illustration of how many practitioners find their way to BDSM (Walker and Kuperberg 2022). Most practitioners I interviewed for this project shared a similarly-patterned story when I asked how they came into the community: following some initial innate interest,³ coupled with traditional teenage curiosity about sex, and an ability to search online away from prying parent eyes, they encountered sex education websites like Scarleteen or Tumblr, or found themselves watching pornography or reading erotica that contained explicit depictions of BDSM behaviors. For the vast majority of the practitioners represented in this dissertation, this was also where they encountered the idea of sexual consent in an explicit way for the first time, a stark reflection of the state of sex education across the United States.⁴

While BDSM is still considered taboo sexual and sex-adjacent practice within the United States, it is becoming less so (Herbenick et al. 2015). The people that engage in it, including those whose experiences you will read about in this dissertation, are not a strange set of deviants unlike the rest of the American populace; in many ways, they are average. They

² I attempt to define all relevant terms in-text but begin with an ethnographic terminology note later in this chapter.

³ There is considerable debate about whether BDSM is an orientation, as I describe here and as most participants explicitly embraced, if it is a leisure activity, or both (Sprott and Williams 2019; Hughes and Hammack 2022).

⁴ Prior to 2015, consent as part of sexual education curriculum was sparse; even after the legalization of affirmative consent as a policy, which I discuss in more depth in Chapter 2. Sex education across America is still not required in all states, nor is consent required to be covered if sex education is offered (Marcantonio et al. 2024).

live all over the country - in California, Washington, Utah, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, New York, Maryland, Virginia, Washington D.C., and elsewhere; a couple even live in Canada. They are school teachers, lawyers, police and fire dispatchers, graduate students, professors, sex workers, university administrators, tech workers, personal trainers, stay at home parents, and hospital staff. They are married, single, and in long-term relationships. They are monogamous and polyamorous; some have been with their partners for decades and others have casual relationships with play partners that span only a few months. A number of them have children, others plan to have children one day, and some are purposefully childfree. Some are conservative in their politics, some are liberal, and others are explicitly leftist. The youngest are barely legal teens; the oldest are in their 50s and 60s. They live in big homes they have owned for a long time, in childhood homes with their parents, and in shitty rented apartments they can barely afford with roommates who may – or may not – know about their kinky predilections. They come from a variety of racial backgrounds, gender identities, sexual orientations, and education levels.⁵ They have experienced racism, sexism, transphobia, ableism, and other forms of discrimination and violence, including sexual violence; they have experienced these within their BDSM communities and in their greater social worlds. Though I do not claim to represent a snapshot of America writ large, there is significant diversity among this group along all these axes. They are united not only by their participation in BDSM communities, but also in their remarkably similar experiences with consent, consent violation, and community responses post-violation.

⁵ See Appendix A: Data and Methods for a complete demographic breakdown of the participants in this study.

In “Epistemologies of Consent in U.S. BDSM Communities,” I analyze how consent operates within these BDSM communities. As a practitioner myself,⁶ I began this work with a baseline knowledge that consent appeared to operate differently in BDSM than in other sexual communities with which I was familiar; that these differences were important for individuals’ understanding and enactment of consent; and that these communities were very explicit in the way that consent knowledge acquisition occurred. My initial fieldwork and interviews were guided by three broad questions: How do practitioners learn about consent? How do they put that knowledge into practice? And what happens if their consent is violated? I expanded on these general topics of inquiry to explore greater nuances, such as variation in kinds of consent violations, differing community responses to consent violations that had occurred, and even whether practitioners expected consent violation to occur within their communities. Taken altogether, these are the foci of this dissertation.

My goals for this dissertation are threefold. First, using ethnographic data and comparative discourse analysis, I describe how consent discourses and practices both succeed and fail to meet the needs of participants in American BDSM communities. Second, I then analyze how the consent practices of BDSM practitioners challenge what I theorize as the hegemonic ideology of consent present in American sexual culture. And, third, I use the case of BDSM consent practices to propose a new model of consent that challenges the various forms of social inequalities built into cisgender heteronormative understandings of doing consent.

⁶ I explore my insider-outsider positionality in more detail late in this chapter, and much more explicitly in Appendix B: Reflection on the Process.

Studying Consent

The Disciplining of Consent Studies

Consent is mostly studied in non-sociology disciplines or is studied in sociology but outside of the U.S. context, though both of these are starting to change following the rise of the #MeToo movement. Consent-adjacent work in sociology that focuses on sex, sexuality, and gender highlights how sexual lives are structured by greater forces. And until very recently, with the publication of Buggs and Hoppe's 2023 anthology *Unsafe Words*, sociological approaches to consent still *also* focused on the individual or interpersonal level. Even though *Unsafe Words* is a multi-level critical intervention for its proposals of rethinking consent through a queer *and* sociological lens, it is primarily autoethnographic rather than an in-depth ethnographic project on the creation and mobilization of consent, as is this project. Also critically, as I will demonstrate in the rest of this dissertation, consent is structured by other social factors, and thus ethnographic study of it is critical to show how even at the individual level, so too is people's basic ability to consent affected by larger sociocultural factors.

Foci of Consent Studies

Consent studies have centered predominantly on more-privileged peoples: those who are white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and college students comprise the vast majority of study subjects and/or the focus of analysis. Most studies do not engage beyond gender, though attention to queer individuals is steadily increasing (Beres et al. 2004; Lamont et al. 2018; Riecke, Ford, and England 2019; Daroya 2022). Consent has long been understood to be a gendered social process (Humphreys 2007; Powell 2008; Burkett and Hamilton 2012; Jozkowski and Peterson 2013; Kanga 2015; Jozkowski et al. 2014). Traditional,

heteronormative social scripts continue to exist in men and women's understandings of consent, such that while men and women college students do not have significantly different understandings of what consent is, men are statistically more likely to use nonverbal cues to indicate consent and its withdrawal while women are statistically more likely to use verbal cues (Jozkowski et al. 2014). Both men and women expect men to take on the role of sexual aggressor, and men are also significantly more likely to use deceit to obtain sex than are women (Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). Research has almost unilaterally focused on women's indications of consent and withdrawal, and men's interpretations of women's behaviors, resulting in an assumption of how and when men give consent that only further engrains discourses about male sexuality that are harmful to everyone (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Research on the gendering of consent for individuals outside normative cis hetero monogamous couplings, and which centers men's knowledge, behaviors, and experiences, as well as those of individuals beyond the gender binary, is greatly needed.

Consent studies have also focused solely on couplings, despite the existence of and increase in other types of relationship formations. Consent practices also shift from casual encounters to more solidified relationships (Humphreys 2007) such that women become more comfortable with using nonverbal consent indicators in heterosexual encounters the longer the coupling has been engaging in sex (Marcantonio et al. 2018). Even in the relatively few studies of queer partnering, men use more nonverbal cues than do women (Beres et al. 2004). Sexual precedent with a partner, or the pattern of engaging in sexual activities with a partner over time, also changes throughout a relationship, such that how consent is communicated to and understood by one's sexual partner is ever-shifting rather than occurring singularly in the first instant when sexual interaction occurs (Willis and Jozkowski 2018).

Another notable focus within consent studies is the utilization of college students as participants (Frith and Kitzinger 1997, McCaw and Senn 1998, O’Sullivan and Allgeier 1998, Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999, Humphreys 2007, Humphreys and Harold 2007, Burkett and Hamilton 2012, Beres et al. 2014, Kanga 2014, Jozkowski et al. 2014, Conroy et al. 2015, Johnson and Hoover 2015, Willis and Jozkowski 2018, Marcantonio et al. 2018, Willis and Jozkowski 2019). Research that has not utilized college students still tends to focus on the “college-aged” or “young adult” cohort of 18-30 year olds (Beres 2010; Beres 2014; Brady et al. 2018). Very few studies of consent include - let alone focus on - adults over 30 (Beres et al. 2004) or older adolescents who are already engaging in sexual activity (Krahé et al. 2007). These studies thus fail to interrogate how understandings and behaviors involving consent change over time and throughout different life stages, including *prior* to engaging in sexual activities and *following* long-term relationships. Moreover, focusing only on college students fails to consider that most people do not attend college, and thus do not receive the kind of educational programming on consent and healthy relationships that has abounded on college and university campuses over the last decade.

Critically, racial analysis, class analysis, and disability analysis are largely or completely missing in understandings of how consent is understood and employed. The emphasis on gender in research on consent – and by proxy, if only barely, sexuality – makes sense given that studies of consent are usually conducted to promote prevention of gender-based violence, research on consent has yet to proactively take an intersectional approach. Race, class, disability, and age are almost non-existent factors in current empirical findings about how consent works in practice. Even studies that include queer participants often center them in contrast to heterosexual participants, rather than examining queer consent specifically

(Marcantonio, O’Neil, and Jozkowski 2021; McKenna, Roemer, and Orsillo 2021). The one exception to this is a relatively recent call for an “epistemology of sexual consent” that recognizes behavior beyond yes-no verbal responses, drawing on the experiences of consent amongst queer participants (Beres 2022).⁷ Consent studies need to be intersectional, as sexual activity is always-already inflected with racial, class, and ability overtones. This dissertation thus approaches consent from an intersectional perspective. In this work, I also center the erotic; I do not try to divorce consent from the sexual practices in which it is occurring. This embodiment is a critical aspect of consent that has largely been missing in prior research, until, again, the publication of Buggs and Hoppe’s (2023) *Unsafe Words* last year.

Methodologies of Consent Research

Given the disciplining of consent research, it is essential for newer consent researchers, such as myself, to reflect on the methodological choices past researchers have made when pushing for the consideration of consent through other disciplinary lenses. In short, whose consent practices and understandings have we studied? What methods have been used to do this? Why have these choices been made? Who has been left out of these studies? And what other methods might enable better ongoing (and future) studies of consent?

Predominantly, consent studies have been conducted by social psychologists or sexual health scholars, using some mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. Many researchers have designed scales for measuring consent (O’Sullivan and Allgeier 1998; Hickman and

⁷ Notably, sociologist Melanie Beres (trained in Canada, professor in New Zealand) is one of *four* consistent, long-term consent scholars (the other three being regular co-authors Kristen N. Jozkowski, Tiffany L. Marcantonio, and Malachi Willis, all of whom are U.S.-based sexual health researchers). It is no surprise to me that Beres is incorporating the perspectives of queer folks, nor that she is decentering “ignorance,” as she refers to it, in constructions of consent, given her 20+ year commitment to studying consent.

Muehlenhard 1999; Beres et al. 2004; Humphreys and Harold 2007; Humphreys and Brousseau 2010) while others have utilized surveys (Jozkowski and Peterson 2013; Brady et al 2018) and yet others still have used vignettes, either providing pre-written examples to participants or having them write their own (Humphreys 2007; Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). Some of these studies have also included an additional interview component. A combination of surveys with college students' time diaries of their sexual encounters is another approach, though under-utilized given this multi-method approach in only one study thus far; notably, the time-diaries were coded and then analyzed quantitatively (Willis and Jozkowski 2019). The few qualitative studies of consent – all of which utilized semi-structured interviews – were conducted outside of U.S. contexts (Beres 2010; Burkett and Hamilton 2012; Beres 2014). Most recently published is Buggs and Hoppe's anthology on queer consent, *Unsafe Words*, and while pushing the sociological envelope on studies of consent, it is primarily autoethnographic. It is no wonder that Beres (2007) concludes her literature review arguing that further research "should focus on understanding sexual consent in its contextualized environment," clarifying that this cannot be captured via quantitative survey methodologies and must instead be done via open-ended qualitative studies.

Not only is qualitative consent scholarship sparse, but there do not yet exist "ethnographies of consent," nor are there any American sociologists who have published in-depth qualitative scholarship on consent practices, understandings and behaviors. Sociological research that is consent-adjacent (Pascoe 2012; Garcia 2012; Ward 2015; Jones 2020; Hirsch and Khan 2020; Littlejohn 2021) demonstrates how social inequalities structure sexual communities. As I demonstrate, consent is not constructed only between individuals engaging in sexual activity together, but is instead always already influenced by participants'

intersectional social locations, the greater social norms in which they are situated, *and* the norms of the sexual communities in which they find themselves. BDSM communities make an ideal location for studying consent because in these communities, both in-person and virtual, consent is always on display as it is the groundwork from which all activity builds. Understanding how consent works within BDSM communities provides insight into mechanisms of socialization, social control, and social inequality that may also be at play, albeit in other ways, in other sexual communities. To be clear from the beginning, no BDSM community has perfected the practice of consent, nor are discourses always (or even often) reflective of how consent is practiced. However, my hope in illustrating the inadequacies of consent discourses, and the complications of consent in practice in the experiences of a myriad of diverse practitioners, is to demonstrate where change can and does occur for the betterment of individuals and communities. This situating of individual-interpersonal understandings of consent within broader social structures is key to shifting cultures of consent such that consent discourses and practices both reflect the sex that people are actually engaging in, the sex that people want to be engaging in, and to help people who are engaging in sex they do not want to be having. With these goals, I have developed in this project a queer feminist sociology of consent.

Methodology: Developing a Queer Feminist Sociology of Consent

In this section I explore how my work fits into queer sociology, and outline parts of my approach to establishing what I am calling a “queer sociology of consent.” I begin with my choice not only to study sexual consent, but also to do so in a community that I belong to *and* which is already-always marked as “deviant,” despite its slow mainstreaming into more-vanilla

American sexual culture. The project, at its core, is what I have had disparagingly referred to as “me-search” (as if all research is not already at least a little bit “me-search,” given that we as researchers typically *choose* the projects we do). In the simplest possible terms, I had struggled with an immense amount of sexual and domestic violence in the lives of people I care deeply for, and within my own life, and I could not understand it. And I was determined to find some way to *change* that, to find a way to make sense of it meaningfully, and to use that understanding to effect positive social change as I had been taught was possible with sociology.

As I began fieldwork and started to conduct the first round of interviews, I was already deeply involved in campus-level and UC-wide activist efforts confronting sexual violence and harassment, and a seeming inability of the university system to address it in an appropriate way, despite the very recent implementation of affirmative consent policies. Though my efforts in university activism and scholarship remain distinct from my research in BDSM communities, the guiding force behind both has remained the same, and before I had finished data collection for my Master’s thesis, I realized that consent education was not *actually* working in its purported purpose of sexual violence prevention (see Chapter 2 for *much* more on this). At that point, for example, the UC-wide SVSH policy defined “sexual violence” through a narrow cisheteronormative lens: “Without the consent of the Complainant, penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina, anus, or mouth by a penis; or the vagina or anus by any body part or object;” this definition was also in the trainings completed by students in the 2015 and 2016 academic years, and totally negated the experiences of *many* students, including most specifically those who identified as queer (Sorin 2025, forthcoming). If consent could not live up to the model of sexual violence prevention it was (and continues to be) then

what was its purpose in any of these sexual communities? And why was it institutionalized as an effective change-maker, when it was clear even at that point that there were structural factors beyond individual consent that upheld the status quo of racialized, gendered, and sexual violence (Compton, Meadow, and Schilt 2018)?

As I soon discovered in my fieldwork, and also in interviews, similar happenings with consent were occurring in BDSM communities. Even though very clear-cut educational efforts to teach about consent abounded – and were even more straightforward and well-defined than in the university setting – there was also *an abundance* of consent violation occurring, and varying levels and intensities of response to it. This became the focus of my MA, my subsequent article, and a substantive core of this dissertation.

I share this because this project depended on my own “extant subcultural and political affiliations” (Ward 2016; Ward 2018); I could not have carried out this project without my own situating as a survivor, as a witness to other survivors, and as someone deeply invested and involved in anti-violence activism in another kind of sexual community. Nor do I believe that I could have garnered the data I did without being a practitioner, and sharing my own experiences and understandings of BDSM, sex, and violence with my participants. This shared intimacy, and the resulting collaborative knowledge-production that will become more obvious throughout, are hallmarks of doing queer sociology (Ward 2016; Ward 2018).

The study of consent itself – a concept that remains contestedly-defined dependent on disciplinary approach – is necessarily “messy” (Ward 2016; Ward 2018). Part of why consent remains difficult to understand is because it is continually shifting and because discourses are often at odds with one another (see Chapter 2), reflecting greater cisheteronormative structuring of sexual and gendered life (Compton, Meadow, and Schilt 2018). Equally

important is that the traditional way that consent has been studied focuses less on the embodied, sexual *practice* of it and almost entirely on the ideologies of consent that people hold within themselves and within their immediate interpersonal interactions. But, the centering of the sexual embodiment (Compton, Meadow, and Schilt 2018) of consent, as I have endeavored to do here, is also vital - how can consent possibly be understood outside of or beyond the erotic contexts in which it occurs? This is a key component of what has been missing from prior consent studies, and one which I and other sociologists (Buggs and Hoppe 2023; Cheves 2023; Hoppe 2023; King 2023; Buchanan 2023) are beginning to bring to the fore through queer sociological study.

Intersectionality is another component of queer sociological work (Ward 2016; Ward 2018) and one which I have done my best to center, as I have tried to consider the socio-historical contexts that people live and are enculturated in as critical for how they understand and navigate consent – and even their ability or “allowedness” to do so, depending on these factors. Unlike much prior work on consent that treats demographics as isolated – notably gender, sexuality, and occasionally disability – I have instead focused on thinking about how these intersections are used against people to uphold white cisgender abled heteropatriarchy that leads to the hegemonic ideology of consent I theorize in Chapter 3.

Finally, at its heart, although I am trained as a sociologist, I have since the beginning *also* resisted that training; I am, at my core, an interdisciplinary scholar, and so too is this project interdisciplinary. This merging of both humanistic and sociological approaches to behavior and social structure (Ward 2016; Ward 2018; Pascoe 2018) is evident throughout my own structuring of this dissertation itself: Chapter 2 is a discourse analysis that is feminist in nature, but perhaps not exactly sociological. However, it remains a critical start to the

theorization I then do from the data I collected using sociological methods; the discourse analysis, fieldwork, and in-depth interviews all complement each other in necessary ways for constructing this particular theorization of consent.

In sum, this project could not be what it is if it were not an explicitly queer sociological study of consent in a much-maligned sexual community. While I do believe that similar workings of consent could – and will be – discovered in other sexual communities, that the focus is on BDSM communities was important for the centering of consent as a *structural* mechanism of social control, even in a community that operates largely outside of the law, where much existing consent discourse in American sexual politics is anchored. By moving from the margins to the center (Pascoe 2018), I hope to make readers uncomfortable as a starting point of challenging *everyone* who seeks to read this dissertation (and, eventually, book!) to examine how, when, and where we are complicit in upholding the hegemonic ideology of consent that effectively disenfranchises everyone’s sexual and intimate lives such that they are less than they could be.

The Limits of Legal Frameworks of Consent

Though it is not a focus of this dissertation, I would be remiss to not spend at least a short bit of time considering the role of the law in American understandings of consent, given that is often the way that consent is structured and institutionalized (and is a lens through which consent is criticized by some scholars; see Fischel 2019). To do so, I briefly consider three examples of how consent is used as a tool of the state for socially controlling individuals’ sexual lives: age of consent laws, the institutionalization of affirmative consent policies, and the ongoing illegality of BDSM itself.

Age of consent laws remain a hotly contested socio-legal issue within the United States, as they should if for no other reason (and, indeed, there are others to consider) than the preponderance of child sexual abuse.⁸ However, that age of consent laws vary so greatly within a single country is evidence of how consent is compliance established by the law that treats sexual behavior as reprehensible based solely on age alone. Though all age of consent laws range from age 16 to 18, close-in-age exemptions, otherwise referred to as “Romeo and Juliet” laws, allow age differences between a partner to be anywhere from two years maximum up to ten years; clearly a 16 year old having sex with an 18 year old is drastically different than a 16 year old having sex with a 26 year old, but there are laws on the books in the United States that treat these scenarios identically, dependent on the state (AgeOfConsent.net 2024). And yet other “Romeo and Juliet” laws, as well as age of marriage laws, allow children as young as 14 to marry with parental consent, or engage in sex with other minors aged 14 or older (AgeOfConsent.net 2024). And this attempt at doing so not only pathologizes sexual behavior before an arbitrary age, but in fact criminalizes absolutely normal behavior. The idiosyncrasy is remarkable:

At one moment, a young person can be understood as a vulnerable minor unable to consent to sexual activities; six months later, that same person, doing the same thing, can become a sexual offender whose sexual innocence no longer needs to be protected; instead, their sexuality is now a threat to others (Gilbert 2018).

The great irony in all of these laws is the apparent workaround they are to *another* law, a dictate that nobody under the age of 18 can legally consent to sex at all. That teenagers are not supposed to have sex, but if they do it should be consensual, even though it already cannot be

⁸ More than any other category of victim, children are most likely to be sexually abused or assaulted by someone they know, and typically this is someone close to them or their family (RAINN 2024).

by virtue of these laws, shows how insufficient the law is in actually establishing what consent *is* and who it is *for*.

The institutionalization of affirmative consent policies is another striking example of how consent discourses become utilized by greater social powers, as well as how they are implicated within them already. Malae's (2022) content analysis of 25 years worth of newspaper coverage of affirmative consent policies on college and university campuses, beginning with Antioch College⁹ illustrates how feminist campus advocates for affirmative consent used a specifically legal argument to push back against opponents of the policies:

By 2014, advocates continued to argue that rape was an epidemic on campus, but they drew upon Title IX to frame sexual violence as a violation of civil rights on campuses (see Cantalupo 2020; Reynolds 2019). Rather than merely discussing the severity of the problem, advocates argued that failing to implement policies like affirmative consent put colleges at risk of violating Title IX... Seizing upon Title IX, advocates emphasized that the rise in campus consent reform was in response to "...evolving federal guidelines about how universities must handle their response to and prevention of sexual assault on campus." In this way, advocates transformed their framing of affirmative consent from a solution addressing an epidemic on campuses to a solution helping universities avoid violating federal guidelines.

By moving away from initial arguments rooted in the reality of rape as an epidemic on college campuses, this approach invoking affirmative consent policies as necessary for ensuring Title IX procedures were being followed properly depoliticized sexual consent on campus. No longer was the focus on the people whose consent might have been violated, but rather, how well the institution was living up to its responsibilities as dictated by the federal government. This approach serves to protect *the institution over the individual* as institutions that fail to be inline with Title IX policies are at risk of losing federal funding; those that fail to support

⁹ I discuss Antioch, and affirmative consent policies, in great detail in Chapter 2.

survivors in the way they need, but which do things “by the book” do not face this same dilemma. Under Title IX, survivors’ consent becomes, in many ways, absolutely irrelevant (with mandatory reporting statutes constituting another *excellent* example of this). Moreover, despite Title IX guidance being held up as the gold standard for ensuring consent is taught to students, staff, and faculty properly since the implementation of affirmative consent first occurred in 2015, this too fails to work in practice. Consider Deigiuli and Nowotny’s (2020) findings:

[A]dministrators, faculty and staff hold a great deal of influence in shaping the culture of consent. However, in the process of translating concept into practice, this influence, far from delivering a coherent and well-developed educational platform, splinters into a multiplicity of often contradictory messages... [leaving] the community at large to draw from individual pre-existing understandings of gender and sexuality to form their own definitions or seek answers from campus community members who are trusted or aligned in worldviews.

So while universities may *technically* be meeting the standards set by the government, the implementation of these trainings and other educational efforts can (and do, readily) fail to create the culture of consent that is intended, leaving students to effectively fend for themselves. And it gets worse. An even more recent study of required Title IX trainings at one large, diverse western university in the U.S. had a “surprising finding”:

[P]articipating in [this mandatory] training makes women students less likely to say they that will report experiences of sexual assault to university authorities...rais[ing] questions about whether one-shot training helps reduce sexual violence and increase reporting on college campuses and whether universities should invest in these types of training” (Htun et al. 2022).

What good is the legal institutionalization of consent norms and practices if they result in survivors specifically choosing *not* to reach out for support upon learning what the university will do in response? I argue that this culture of consent actually decenters consent in its

acquiescence to legal stipulations. With such recent findings, it is not difficult to see how Title IX, through its reliance on the law, actually works *against* the very effort it is purported to do.¹⁰

Finally, consider the paradoxical state of BDSM in the United States. As a queer-affiliated proclivity, BDSM practitioners have a historically negative relationship with the legal system, including being harassed by the police, being unable to access legal assistance following interpersonal violence, and losing custody of children in divorce proceedings for practicing kink (Klein and Moser 2006; Sheff and Hammers 2011; Holt 2016; Pitagora 2016; Stein 2021; Sheff 2021). But BDSM is not *technically* illegal anywhere in the United States. It is true that there is some hypocrisy in state-level statutes that allow for people to consent to “bodily harm” such as in wrestling or football or, most violently, mixed martial arts (Weinberg 2016). Many states treat BDSM differently than these sports, under the premise that nobody can voluntarily consent to this kind of physical activity, and people can (and are) charged under battery and assault charges for engaging in BDSM practices such as flogging, whipping, cropping, and other physically “harmful” activities. When *Lawrence v. Texas* was decided in 2003 – the Supreme Court case that struck down anti-sodomy laws at the federal level – many BDSM practitioners and activists believed that this made consensual BDSM practice legal, too. Unfortunately, this was decided *not* to be the case in 2016 in the case of *Doe v. Rector and Visitors of George Mason University*. John Doe was expelled from George Mason University in 2013 following rape accusations by Jane Roe; she reported that he failed to respect her invocation of a safe word in their scene (Volkh 2016). When Doe took his case to

¹⁰ More on this in Chapter 2.

court, he claimed that the university failed to consider the context of the alleged assault, and expelled him for participating in *consensual* sexual activity, namely BDSM practice. He thus sought a ruling that his right to practice BDSM was constitutionally protected, in line with the *Lawrence v. Texas* ruling; the court rejected that decision, however, ruling that “plaintiff has no constitutionally protected and judicially enforceable fundamental liberty interest under the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to engage in BDSM sexual activity” (Volokh 2016). It is true that harassment of BDSM practitioners by police entities has substantively decreased, though it still occurs (Stein 2021). The combination of these rulings is such that BDSM is not technically illegal, nor is it technically legal, nor is it decriminalized. So where does that leave BDSM practitioners? How much does it matter if the practice of BDSM exists within the legal system, given the legal system defines consent so differently, anyways?

One of the reasons that studying consent in BDSM communities has been so compelling is because of this very conundrum: the consent that practitioners engage exists beyond the framework of consent set legally by the state. This has important repercussions for what consent means, who decides that, what consent violation looks like, and how communities respond to violations. As BDSM communities practice beyond the scope of the law – participants in states where prosecution under battery laws occur, for instance, do different activities in public play than do those of us in states like California where this does not occur – so too is consent in these communities beyond the scope of the law. And while these communities have just over the last few years begun to reckon with this reality in regards to consent violation and response, in part due to the rise of the #MeToo Movement, this has important implications for thinking about restorative and transformative justice approaches to

consent violation.¹¹ After all, when the legal system operates on such technicalities as to allow for the overturning of convictions of both Bill Cosby (Li 2021) and Harvey Weinstein (Ortiz and Siemaszko 2024) - two men who caused significant harm to many women, regardless of formal legal sanctioning of that harm – then “justice” for survivors through the law becomes increasingly less likely. The reality is that legal impositions of consent are never going to be enough to offer a fulfilling, meaningful sexual life to people, in no small part because law is still weaponized to control gender, racial, and sexual minorities – just as it does for BDSM practitioners. Exploring alternative ways of understanding consent and response to violations of it, as I do in this study of kinksters, is critical for moving towards a more just sexual world for everyone.

A Brief History of BDSM in the United States

There has been little historicization of BDSM communities in the United States. Most of my initial knowledge about these communities was passed down from elder kinksters, what I read about on FetLife posts, or what I found on internet blogs run by kinksters. In 2021, historian Stephen K. Stein published the first chronology of kink in America. I briefly summarize the detailed account he provides of the establishment, and change in, BDSM communities through the United States.

Pinpointing the start of BDSM in the United States is difficult, though early fetish films, magazines, and other forms of culture have been documented as far back as the 1930s; fetish material produced in the United Kingdom and brought into the U.S., put this date farther back,

¹¹ I discuss this more in Chapter 4.

to sometime in the 1860s (Stein 2021). This does not account for even older literature, such as the writings of the Marquis de Sade, from whom the term “somasochism” emerged. In the 1930s and 1940s, only through cautious personal ads were somasochists able to find one another (Stein 2021). The literature targeted heterosexual men, primarily, but quickly began to turn towards gay men as well, and also to couples, and fetish-specific magazines became more popular; they also led to the acronyms BandD, DandS, and SandM that, today, have collapsed into the single acronym BDSM (Stein 2021). As gay men in the 1950s began to seek one another out post-WWII, Leathermen began to emerge. These were men who may have had an interest in SandM, or who may have had other interests, as Gayle Rubin found in her dissertation study of Leathermen in San Francisco (Stein 2021). But somasochistic men and leathermen ran in the same bars, and formed gay motorcycle clubs that originated in California and quickly spread across the United States and abroad (Stein 2021). Leather is still a large part of broader kink communities today, and some of the practitioners I interviewed are Leathermen or, in one case, a leatherboi. Broadly, these were informal communities still, though, gathering at bars or in their motorcycle clubs, but not as institutionalized as the communities of today, such as those I studied. The first formal organization was originally called The Eulenspiegel¹² Society, later renamed TES, and formed in 1971 in New York. Its earliest members voted to make it open to *all* people interested in “SM” (Stein 2021). Janus, following in the footsteps of TES, formed in San Francisco in 1974. Cynthia Slater, Janus’ original founder and one of only a few women allowed to attend the gay leather bars, doubled down on the organization following legal issues with sex work and a club raid by the police.

¹² Named after a European folklore character dating to the 1500s who, according to some texts, had an inclination for pain (Stein 2021).

As she sought to bring gay men from the leather bars into Janus, the organization grew beyond a place where practitioners could find one another into a nexus for education focused on teaching participants about techniques of play, cruising practices, negotiation and safety (Stein 2021).

TES and Janus remained the largest and longest-standing communities, as others popped up across the country, and many faded away just as quickly. Parties began to grow in size as well, as communities became more formalized; though they had existed as far back as the 1940s, until the 1970s, they had most commonly taken place in participants' private homes instead (Stein 2021). BDSM continued to gain traction in gay male communities, in part because of the overlap with the leather scene, and also due to increased visibility in art, such as that of Tom of Finland, that merged traditionally masculine figures with gay leather (and was wildly popular). Though BDSM was never *only* for gay folks, the two quickly became conflated in the media in the late 1970s and early 1980s; many notable lesbian feminists (including Adrienne Rich, who I cite in this dissertation) condemned BDSM (Stein 2021). Other representations of kink conflated Nazism with BDSM, which was not only something disavowed by nearly all practitioners then, but which is treated much the same today; as I have heard from practitioners firsthand, even communities that are okay with raceplay will ban people who show up in Nazi paraphernalia, no questions asked. The slow emergence of BDSM into more mainstream knowledge in the U.S. was seen as a "gay" activity, but one which also contributed to ongoing tensions between feminist activist-scholars leading up to the "Feminist Sex Wars." In this time, Samois, the first women-only BDSM organization, emerged; among their members were several feminist scholars, including feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin herself.

Despite ongoing public unease about BDSM, and the perception of it as either pathological or a reinforcement of patriarchy, kink communities continued to grow; by 1986, over 200 existed throughout the U.S., with at least one in almost every state (Stein 2021). As the AIDS epidemic and the blossoming of the Lesbian and Gay Rights Movement took off in the 1980s, queer kinksters struggled with visibility. This is because then, as now, many queer spaces were unfriendly to outward admittance or portrayal of BDSM, because of the already-problematic linkage of kink to violent sexual perversion and even murder that had become common in mainstream media portrayals (Stein 2021). This changed following the 1987 March on Washington, where lesbian and gay organizers specifically reached out to BDSM communities to invite their inclusion. This, along with the emergence of the National Leather Association (NLA), which quickly boasted chapters across the country, took BDSM communities in a “pansexual” direction; no longer was BDSM publicly just for gay and lesbian members, but slowly play parties and other events became open to people of all gender and sexual identities (Stein 2021). This is what most BDSM communities today still look like, confirmed by those I studied.

By the mid-1990s, membership of NLA chapters was about evenly split between men and women; lesbians were about a third of overall membership, gay men comprised another third or so, and heterosexual, bisexual, or other-identifying folks surmised the final third (Stein 2021). With the general increase in membership, as well as continued misportrayal in media and news, BDSM communities became more formal in their education efforts, focused especially on safety. This is not to say that practices became outlawed, but rather that more intentional education happened about how to practice “safely, sanely, and consensually,” in line with the original consent motto of BDSM (Stein 2021). This is still an incredibly critical

aspect of BDSM communities, and one which I focus on extensively throughout this dissertation – how do practitioners learn about consent in their communities? And what happens when consent is violated?

Finally, in the early 2000s, BDSM slowly started becoming more accepted in the mainstream. The internet certainly helped contribute to this, as its emergence made it easier than ever for interested parties to find information, and other people to connect with. But, also of importance, was the portrayal of BDSM in the media (Stein 2021). Most notably – and absolutely a delight to share, as this was my own introduction to BDSM as a teenager – was the relationship between Gil Grissom, lead crime scene investigator, and Lady Heather, a pro-Domme, on the super-popular television show *CSI*.¹³ And other shows soon followed – over the following decade, the BBC’s *Sherlock*, *House*, *Castle*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Bones*, and too many others to name here, would all begin to incorporate BDSM in their episodes in non-stigmatizing ways. Even other procedural dramas, such as *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, began deeper interrogations of kink as non-pathologized.

Colleges and universities – often a bastion of social change in the face of broader social norms – also began to form organizations centered around connecting with practitioners, and teaching and learning about BDSM in the vein of safe, sane, consensual; though not a masterlist, the most notable of these include organizations, some of which are still active, at Columbia, Iowa State, the University of Chicago, Harvard, UC Berkeley, and our very own UC Santa Barbara (Stein 2021).

¹³ Having rewatched the entire series in the last two years, I was *delighted* by how well done everything kink-related was handled throughout the entirety of the series. There is in fact a very poignant scene where a safe word is invoked that is one of the most masterful portrayals of the power – and intimacy – of BDSM that I have seen in any piece of media.

Most contemporarily, the emergence of *Fifty Shades of Grey* was another pivotal turning point for BDSM in the broader American sexual imagination. Self-disclosed by author E. L. James to be a fanfiction of the (equally problematic, heterosexual centric) *Twilight* series, the publication of the first novel in the series in 2011 inspired a social reckoning. Self-published as an e-book, *Fifty Shades* proved so popular that it has now sold over 150 million copies worldwide. The movie series grossed, collectively, over \$1.3 billion worldwide, despite continued negative critique of all three movies. Though many kinksters spoke against *Fifty Shades* for improperly representing specifically *consensual* BDSM, it had an impact; roughly 10% of American adults now indicate some interest in activities that would be labeled BDSM (Stein 2021).

I provide this short history to help contextualize the state of current-day BDSM communities and practices within the United States. These communities are not monolithic – some are continuing to push the boundaries of practice, as well as care of their community members; some are hostile to the inclusion and concerns of people of color and non-binary and transgender participants. You will read about both, but before that, I turn now to a bit of ethnographic scene-setting to explain some common terminology within these communities that will come up throughout the rest of this dissertation.

BDSM Terminology

I provide the following ethnographic and terminological situating of the communities I studied to offer insight into who my participants are, what they are doing, and how BDSM communities are unique sexual communities, all of which is necessary to understand before attempting to dissect their consent practices. Definitions are important for shared

understandings of community, including who is an insider and an outsider; as such, based in my own experiences personally and through fieldwork, I do my best here to reflect on general usage of these terms, while also noting that other practitioners and scholars may rely on slightly different definitions than I do.

To start, I use two primary terms to refer to my participants: “practitioners” and “kinksters.” The term “players” is used, too, but less common in my own experience than as documented in prior studies of BDSM communities (Weiss 2011) and so I do not use it here. I start with these terms for participants to point out very explicitly that BDSM and kink are often used interchangeably, but are actually not the same. BDSM is an acronym that refers to the overlap of three kinds of erotic (but not necessarily sexual) activity: bondage and discipline, Dominance and submission, sadism and masochism. BDSM play runs the gamut: some kinksters may enjoy being bound and gagged; others who have experienced sexual assault may seek to re-enact these experiences with different endings; and yet other participants may pretend to be pets or younger versions of themselves that are cared for by handlers or Daddies or Mommies. In all of these cases and many more, though, is some type of power exchange. While BDSM focuses on power exchange in all of its permutations, kink refers more broadly to “non-normative” sexual proclivities, some of which may include power exchange (e.g. professor-student play or consensual non-consent) but as a broader category do not require power exchange¹⁴ as part of them (e.g. foot fetishes or urine play). In short, BDSM is under the broader umbrella of kink, but BDSM practitioners are often engaging kinks in their play, and so I use both terms to reflect my respondents. I also use the terms “vanilla” (Rubin 1984)

¹⁴ I do believe power is *always* at play in sexual interactions, vanilla or not, but this is not the place to examine that philosophy.

and “kinky” as contrasting terms; vanilla refers to straight, normative, and socially acceptable sexuality. Kinky, in contrast, refers to people engaging in behavior labeled non-normative. Some practitioners used vanilla in their conversations¹⁵ with me, and while it may come off as derogatory to non-kinky folks, it is simply meant to be a marker of difference, one that, critically, also usually implies a difference in consent education.

Participating in BDSM communities is also referred to as being part of the “scene,” which covers all types of BDSM events from play parties to munches to courses held at dungeons. The scene also refers to the combined digital and in-person spaces that practitioners inhabit together. For practitioners in this study, the most common digital sites that were used (though certainly not all of them) were Kik, Discord, and FetLife. Briefly, Kik is an instant messaging app that allows some level of anonymity in part by not requiring users to register using an email address or a telephone number. Discord is an incredibly popular social platform, made popular by gamers, that gives users a lot of freedom to build “servers,” or locked groups that are specific to any special interest a group of people might share. Discord allows users to participate in text messaging, voice calls, and video calls, in addition to picture, video, and other forms of file-sharing. Though Discord was used pre-pandemic, it became a very popular site that kinksters new and old flocked to during the COVID-19 lockdowns. I suspect this is in part because of greater freedoms afforded to users than on the specifically Canadian-based kink and fetish social networking site FetLife, that is, in its own words, “Like Facebook, but run by kinksters like you and me” (FetLife 2024). As I will discuss in Chapter 3, FetLife has stringent policies about naming perpetrators of violence, and as it operates in a

¹⁵ See Appendix A: Data and Methods for more insight on my use of “conversation” as a methodological choice given the way I structured, approached, and conducted interviews.

similar way to the Metaverse, with rules put upon participants by the site owners. Discord is becoming a preferable alternative as users themselves (tend to, but not always) work together to set community rules. In short, Discord allows for more flexibility in communal norms and policies, though FetLife remains incredibly popular around the globe.

There are a number of identities that practitioners can take on within the scene, far too many to recount all of here. I highlight some that are more common, and come up in the pages that follow. The most commonly used are Dom(me) or Dominant, and sub or submissive. These specifically capture the Dominance/submission power dynamic at play, where one player submits to the other. A more extreme version of this kind of play is called total power exchange, or TPE, where practitioners live in their D/s roles 24/7. Switches are players who enjoy both roles; many of the practitioners in this study identify this way, though some identify as leaning more heavily towards one end of the spectrum or the other. Similarly situated are Tops and bottoms; Tops are the doers of actions to the bottoms, who are the recipient of those actions. Dom/sub and Top/bottom may appear to be synonymous, and often people do inhabit both, but that is not always the case. Dominant bottoms and submissive Tops are not as common, but also not uncommon. Masters or Mistresses and slaves also echo similar power dynamics, where slaves are “owned” by their Master or Mistress. These are also common terms for those engaged in kinky sex-work. Numerous participants in this study are pro-Dommes, for instance, meaning that they are paid to dominate other practitioners; they are often called Mistress so-and-so in their paid activities. A number of practitioners in this study - mostly the gay men - identify as pups and Owners. This is another similar dynamic, but one that crosses over with pet-play, of which pup-play is the most common variant, and which emerged directly from gay Leather scenes. Finally, Daddies or Mommies (or Uncles and Aunts, etc.) and littles

are also common identities, stemming from what is referred to as “ageplay” or the engagement with age regression and softer forms of BDSM that can involve more caretaking and pleasure with the power dynamics than use of pain, for instance. Ageplay is specifically *not* pedophilic in nature, and invocation of anything close to even hinting at children being mixed up in BDSM play is treated very seriously. Notably, two of only three or four stories I was told about a practitioner being reported to the police by other practitioners was because of someone’s expression of attraction to, or actual engagement with, minors.

My use of “play” to describe the activities that practitioners engage in is a reflection of the conception of BDSM as both leisure and practice (Sprott and Williams 2019; Hughes and Hammack 2022). “Play” is the term typically used to refer to the actual engagement in kinky activities, though some folks may say “sceneing.” The people a practitioner plays with are referred to as their “play partners” or “scene partners,” and play may be more structured and negotiated with partners ahead of time, or can be quickly arranged immediately before a scene, which is referred to as “pick-up play.” Pick-up play is a style of play that happens in public venues, such as at parties or in dungeons, where individuals who do not know each other (well) or who are not formally partnered can quickly negotiate and engage in a scene. Platonic play is common for many kinksters, and is exactly what it sounds like - playing with people for whom one only has feelings of friendship or camaraderie but not necessarily sexual or romantic attraction.

The community events where practitioners come together are called “play parties.” These can take place at private residences, but more typically take place in “dungeons,” spaces either owned by someone in the community, or rented through membership dues that community members pay, as is the case with one community in Southern California in which

I conducted fieldwork. Dungeons are crucial spaces for community members, as they not only provide more of a community feel than can necessarily be found in attending gatherings at individual kinkster's homes, but also because BDSM is expensive, and gear especially so. Access to certain kinds of play may be more limited without certain costly pieces of equipment. An example of this is the St. Andrew's Cross, a large X often fashioned out of metal or wood upon which participants can be bound and then engaged in various forms of sensory play such as flogging, whipping, tickling, and more. These cost hundreds to thousands of dollars, depending on their construction; these are also large and hard to hide from non-kinky eyes, even for kinksters who have such disposable income.

Dungeons also offer practitioners the opportunity to try types of play through "tasters" run by more experienced practitioners. I have seen tasters for activities as mild as spanking with a paddle to "edgier" forms of play such as that with violet wands, a popular electroplay tool that delivers minor shocks to its recipients. When I refer to "edgier" play or "edgeplay" I mean those activities that may be considered especially taboo, risky, and or dangerous to participants' physical, emotional, and or mental health; they operate on the "edge" of what may be permissible in kink communities. These include, but are not limited to: blood and needle play; knife and gun play; fire, wax, and other forms of temperature play; electroplay; breathplay, or erotic asphyxiation; incest play; raceplay, including slaveplay and Naziplay; and anything that falls in the realm of consensual non-consent. The ability to share toys, tools, and techniques in an educational setting is a benefit of participation in community dungeons.

Kinksters also gather under less conspicuous circumstances, donning vanilla-esque identities in more public settings. These gatherings, often structured around the sharing of food and drink, are called "munches;" they may include some conversation about kinky things, but

will never include play or fetishwear, as they often take place in overtly public settings such as restaurants or bars. I regularly attended a munch in Central California as part of my fieldwork in 2016 based out of a university kink group; our munches, to an outsider, would simply have looked like a group of friends indulging in a weekly beer and pizza night.

I also want to briefly share some *general* consent practices within these communities. These were practices I myself was familiar with prior to beginning fieldwork, and while I will go into much greater detail in the following chapters, having a version of a BDSM 101 primer on consent that a newbie would experience upon entry into most communities will be useful for more deeply understanding participants' experiences. BDSM communities are built from a foundation of consent. As is common to hear within the community, if it's not consensual, it's not BDSM. And while there are differences cross-community in how this may be reflected, there are a few nearly-universal norms that center consent in communal settings, such as in dungeons or on digital kink sites I mentioned prior.

The most well-known of these general consent practices in the vanilla world are the use of "safewords." Though commonplace in media to mock or poke fun at kinksters, safewords are an incredibly important aspect of consent recognition in BDSM spaces. Safewords are agreed upon phrases set by the participants in a scene as a trigger to call for an immediate ending to whatever activity is occurring. Sometimes, there will be a universal safe word set by a dungeon, with the expectation all practitioners will use that safeword instead of their own, which might not be recognizable to others in the area. For some Old Guard kinksters, knowing your partner and their bodily responses is paramount for understanding consent. As some participants shared with me, at the heart of this philosophy of consent is the idea that you should be so in alignment with your play partner(s) that you can read their limits, know their

boundaries, and know when to stop without being told to. As such, there are participants in this study who explicitly told me they do not use safewords with their partners. This is becoming less common, however, and in dungeons is typically not tolerated.

Similar to safewords is the use of the “stoplight system,” which is exactly what it sounds like. Utilizing each color to reflect approaches to play as analogous to stoplights – where “Red” means stop now, “Yellow” means slow down or be cautious, and “Green” means activity can continue on as is – the stoplight system is incredibly popular, easy to remember and easy to recognize in communal settings. It is a common standard to be used in public settings because of its ubiquitousness, and its recognition by community members as parallel to, though not identical to, a safe word that only the practitioners in a scene may share. Use of the stoplight system tends to be more common than a dungeon-specific safeword.

Another quintessential aspect of consent practice that I want to highlight here emphasizes the importance of understanding consent as structured by groups, and not simply by individuals – a point that underlies much of the rest of this dissertation. In public play spaces such as dungeons, or even spaces at BDSM conventions, individual kinksters will act as safety checks for players. These are typically called dungeon monitors, though in some communities I have heard them referred to as safety greeters or other similar titles. Though their appointment to the role differs, these are practitioners with more experience in the scene whose job it is to look out for the safety of all players; they literally walk around the entirety of a dungeon or other play space, observing others’ scenes, and intervening if necessary. Dungeon monitors, also nerdily referred to as DMs, are the only individuals permitted to interrupt a scene; this is critical as for many practitioners, what may look non-consensual has actually been meticulously planned out ahead of time. DMs are also permitted to intervene in scenes that are

violating norms of the play setting, such as ignoring a no-fluids exchange rule, as just one example. The presence of these safety checks underscores not only how important it is for scene partners to have their consent respected, but also highlights how the consent of other individuals at a play party is connected; individual, partnered, and group consent are all factored into rules at BDSM venues, a remarkably different approach to consent than is necessarily found in other sexual communities.

Finally, while not the only other consent practice, I want to highlight the importance of aftercare for kinksters. Aftercare refers to a post-scene set of rituals that may include undoing any bondage or restraints; cleaning the body of the bottom; cuddling, bathing or showering; offering food and drink; giving partners space; and or anything else agreed to by the participants in a scene. Aftercare is necessary for all practitioners, as scenes are often both physiologically and emotionally intense for everyone involved; performing proper aftercare can help participants come out of subspace (or Domspace, depending on a participant's identity), a bio-psychological phenomenon that is at once like an ego death experience and a literal kind of intoxication derived from one's own hormonal fluctuations during a scene. This is due to surges in adrenaline, oxytocin, and other forms of endorphins that result from experiencing heightened and focused amounts of pleasure and or pain. Without adequate aftercare, participants can experience "drop" from being in this headspace, which is another altered mental state that many that bring on both negative emotional repercussions (self-doubt, spiraling feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy, self-hatred, etc.) that mirror symptoms of anxiety or depression more broadly, but in an immediate and extreme way. Drop is more common for submissives and bottoms, but also happens to Dom(me)s and Tops. Heavy play can also have physical repercussions, even when done as well and as safely as possible; because

of the hormonal changes in the brain and body during play, some people experience lowered blood sugar, and some may experience flu or hangover-like symptoms in the several days immediately following a scene. One of the best pieces of advice I have ever received from a BDSM practitioner, for instance, is to *immediately* take ibuprofen with a glass of water after the ending of a scene to fend off both the immediate and longer-term consequences following participation. (You're welcome!) Importantly, aftercare is not just about the physical experiences of a scene; it also includes follow-up communication, potentially both immediately after the scene but also at any point before another scene occurs (even if that is days, weeks, or months later). Not practicing aftercare can range from a red flag to some practitioners to an actual consent violation for others - it is *that* important of an aspect of BDSM practice, and entire classes are taught about how to aftercare well for oneself and for one's partner.

Structure of the Dissertation

There are many aspects of consent within BDSM communities worthy of analysis and reflection; I engage only a few of these ideas in the remainder of this dissertation.

In Chapter 2, "The Inadequacies of Consent Discourses in American Sexual Culture and BDSM Communities," I analyze consent discourses in two sites: American sexual culture more broadly, and BDSM communities more specifically. I first provide a brief socio-historical analysis of the emergence and staying power of five Americans sexual consent discourses ("No Means No," "Yes Means Yes," "Tea and Consent," FRIES, and "Consent is sexy") and five BDSM consent discourses ("Safe, Sane, and Consensual," "RACK," "PRICK," the 4Cs, and CCC). In tracing the origins of these discourses, as well as how they are still culturally enacted,

I present three purported purposes of consent discourse: that they educate people about sex, that they prevent violence in sex, and that they help people to have better sex. Drawing from interview data where participants invoke these consent discourses to discuss their sexual and sex-adjacent practices, I demonstrate how these discourses do a poor job, at best, of living up to the purposes they are supposed to serve. Even BDSM discourses, which are more specific than broader American sexual consent discourses, cannot completely reflect the realities of consent in practice. This leads me to theorize how consent discourses fail to align with consent in practice, in large part because the discourses do not account for the differing power dynamics experienced by people before, within, and beyond sexual interaction. These discourses also focus centrally on the individual, overlooking how sex is raced, classed, gendered, abled, and so on, and how these are not decided by individuals, but by the communities to which they belong. As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the centering of community is central in understanding, teaching, and practicing consent.

Chapter 3, entitled “Hegemonic Consent and the Perpetuation of Social Inequalities,” moves from analyzing discourses of consent to analyzing how consent operates in practice. I explain how sexual consent discourses become weaponized in a multitude of BDSM communities to maintain social hierarchies along lines of gender and sexuality, but also as importantly, along lines of dis/ability, social class, and race. I demonstrate that despite a belief by practitioners that consent discourses serve as protective factors for more vulnerable community members, the literal structuring of the sexual fields and sexual geography of BDSM communities, including play spaces, is designed to maintain these social hierarchies that not only cause harm to marginalized members but which are also bad for the entire community. This concept, which I am calling hegemonic consent, I theorize as being a direct

result of Rubin's (1984) sex hierarchy and Rich's (1980) compulsory heterosexuality: the *ideal* way to do sex, and thus to do consent, is to do so in a way that aligns with white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, and abled norms in society. As I demonstrate, this is not what sex, and thus consent, looks like in practice for most, or even many, practitioners in BDSM communities. The consequences of this are such that many BDSM communities, despite becoming more diverse in numerous ways, are still bastions of social inequality.

But consent practices in BDSM communities are not all bad, and in fact, I believe both as a practitioner and as a scholar that consent practices from these communities can be an anchoring point for positive social change in the maelstrom of more mainstream sexual cultures in the United States. This is the subject of chapter 4, "An Alternative Ideology of Consent," where I demonstrate how four tenets of consent practices in BDSM communities operate counter to the hegemonic consent ideology I theorize structures American sexual culture. I illustrate how consent is a verb rather than a noun; that is, for BDSM practitioners, consent is something that is learned in the doing of it. I then explore how this doing of consent naturally leads practitioners to expect some level of minor consent violations. This expectation contributes to a normalization of some kinds of consent violations, with a resulting understanding amongst kinksters that these violations are not necessarily always "bad" or "harmful", as consent violations are almost always posited to be in American sexual culture. Critically, I articulate how BDSM consent practices are built with community in mind from the ground up; even within an individual interaction, the larger community in which practitioners are located plays an integral role in the development of an understanding of consent, the practicing of it, and responses to violations of it. Finally, I elucidate how an ethics of care is consistently the focus of consent practices within BDSM play. Although there are

many points I could use to argue this, I focus specifically on where there might be the least amount of care demonstrated: cases of consent violations that rise above the low-level ones that practitioners expect. I show how BDSM communities are utilizing transformative and restorative justice approaches to all levels of consent violations, a drastic turn from the “cancel culture” approaches that have become increasingly common post-#MeToo. These alternative approaches to justice are critical for all sexual communities in specifically decentering carceral responses to consent violations that often result in further harm for survivors in addition to harm for violators.

In the concluding chapter, “Building a New Consent Framework from the Margins,” I provide an application of my findings in the form of a new framework of consent. The ABCCCs (awareness, bodily autonomy, caring, communication, and context) as I am calling the framework is derived from the experiences of consent, including violation and response, that BDSM practitioners experienced in practice. I reflect further on the need for a better model of consent in American sexual culture - and indeed American culture beyond the sexual - and consider how building this from the margins, from the “deviant,” could be a revelatory, transformative approach to improving the social and sexual lives of Americans from all backgrounds that is so desperately necessary under an increasingly oppressive approach to management of Americans as sexual and gendered beings. Though I developed this way of thinking about consent in practice from and for sexual communities, like those I studied, my goal is a larger one: how does consent operate in many realms of social life? And how might a framework like this be usable in sexual communities, but also beyond them? I offer some ideas for future research that could capitalize on this new framework, and share how utilizing the ABCCCs in social settings that are sexual and non-sexual alike could help combat the same

social inequalities I documented as present within the BDSM communities I studied when they occur in other spaces and communities.

The Inadequacies of Consent Discourses in American Sexual Culture & BDSM

Communities

Introduction

So I used to think consent had to be sort of this positive, enthusiastic, “Yes, let’s keep going.” But I think it’s more complex than that. And that’s important, because I do a lot of consensual non consent stuff. Which, by definition, can’t really be enthusiastic or support, like, continuing. Because, you know, you’re, you’ve agreed to something, and now somebody is doing something awful to you. And you’re like, “No, no, no, stop!” But we already agreed that you should keep going, even when I say “No, no, no stop!” so I think it’s really complicated. But ultimately, consent is something that’s negotiated by two or more people, which everybody is informed what we expect to happen. And we’re on board with it as long as what we both expected to happen actually happens. And you have, ideally, you have a plan for if that stops matching what you expected. You can break the consent. Usually, that would be like safe words or something like that.

When I ask Sabrina, a 35 year old white polyamorous bisexual switch, to tell me how she defines consent, the above is where she lands. As so many other practitioners I interviewed did, Sabrina relies on multiple ways of understanding and communicating about consent to capture her own experience with it. As I will further refer to them, these “consent discourses” are the cultural interpretations and reiterations of understandings of consent that are part of everyday conversation and found in all social institutions, including educational and healthcare settings. Theoretically, consent discourses are meant to guide actual sexual encounters. Three hegemonic assumptions underlie consent discourses: they educate people, serve to prevent sexual violence, and can help those who engage the discourses have “better”¹⁶ sexual encounters. What I demonstrate in this chapter through a socio-historically informed analysis

¹⁶ By “better,” in this instance, I mean that which is legally sanctioned: I will unpack what else “better” could mean later in this chapter.

of these discourses, in tandem with data from interviews I conducted with BDSM practitioners, is that these discourses do *not* in fact do these three things. Instead, what these discourses demonstrate is that American cultural invocations of consent have yet to be conceptualized by scholars, the general public, *or* BDSM practitioners as a way to engage in healthy, pleasurable sex that celebrates individual autonomy while acknowledging the broader cultural factors that impact the ability to consent in the first place. Rather, these consent discourses become invoked with the stated goal preventing sexual violence, predominantly in heterosexual couplings with traditional sexual scripts of (white) women as recipients/victims and (white) men as initiators/perpetrators (Littlejohn 2021). This modeling of consent in American sexual culture upholds outdated and incomplete understandings of racialized sexual and gender violence, and by doing so, in true Puritan fashion, moves the focus away from desire, pleasure, and sex onto the spectre of sexual violence while simultaneously failing to adequately address that sexual violence. Despite hopeful intentions otherwise, consent discourses are not effective sexual violence preventatives, in large part because they operate at the individual-interpersonal level, and do not engage the larger socio-structural factors that allow sexual violence to happen in the first place.

Conceptions of consent in American BDSM communities are necessarily not identical to those in broader American culture, in large part because consent in kink spaces exists beyond the bounds of the law, as BDSM is still illegal in much of the United States. While kink communities employ strategies in their consent discourses and practices to prevent violence, consent is also discussed and taught in these communities as a way to enhance sexual pleasure and autonomy. And, critically, consent discourses and their employment at kink events start to address consent as something that at once affects and in turn is affected by both the group *and*

the individual - something that individualistic American discourses fail to grapple with adequately. Thus, the questions that drive this chapter center on challenging the particularly American focus on consent as it manifests differently across settings: what if consent was a tool to help gauge not only when a sexual interaction has gone *wrong*, but also a way to measure when a sexual interaction has gone *right*? What if consent was not seen as a way to prevent violence, but also considered as an enhancer for sexual autonomy? How can studying BDSM communities, where hegemonic expectations for consent discourses are challenged, plug some of the holes in broader American sexual consent discourses?

In the remainder of this chapter, I provide an overview of existing consent discourses.¹⁷ I start with those prevalent in American sexual culture before moving to those found within BDSM more specifically. After providing the socio-historical analysis of these discourses, I then analyze interview data to illustrate how each either fails to or inadequately attempts to do the three things that consent discourses purport to do.

Current Cultural Discourses of Consent

Drawing from interviews with participants, and my own experiences in anti-sexual violence activism, I have identified five prevalent discourses of consent in American sexual culture; two of the four have clear origins in the United States, one originated in Canada, another in the U.K., and the fifth is a bit more nebulous in its origin.. I provide a brief history to contextualize each discourse, including what it means, to demonstrate the importance of

¹⁷ With the exceptions of the 4Cs and CCC, two uncommon kink discourses, all eight of the discourses I discuss in this chapter appear in my data.

each discourse's specific lineage and how that connects to the implications of that discourse in practice.

“No Means No” (1992)

Beginning chronologically, the first consent discourse - and the one that many people are likely most familiar with because of its endurance and its longstanding controversy as a framework for consent - is the “No Means No” slogan. This phrase was coined by the Canadian Federation of Students (CFS), the overarching student association of Canadian universities which represents over 530,000 students (Canadian Federation of Students 2024). The “No Means No” campaign began in 1992 as an awareness tool to combat sexual violence on Canadian campuses, and in the words of the organization, “encourages a no-tolerance attitude towards sexualized violence and harassment, and aims to educate and promote discussion surrounding sexualized violence and enthusiastic consent” (Canadian Federation of Students 2024). Although the campaign is ongoing, it is sometimes now referred to as “Consent is Mandatory,” or both phrases are used together, likely as a result of criticisms leveled by activists and feminist scholars at “No Means No” as a standalone slogan (Canadian Federation of Students 2024; Gavey 2005; Burkett & Hamilton 2012). Below is a poster from the organization attesting to some of the ways that behavior, in tandem with spoken word, can be a “no” even if no is not specifically articulated (a common critique of this discourse; see Gavey 2005; Burkett & Hamilton 2012).

Though anti-violence activism was not new on college campuses – Take Back the Night campaigns, for instance, date back as far as 1972 (Take Back the Night 2023) – the emergence of the “No Means No” discourse was a turning point for a focus on consent more specifically.

Though critiques of the slogan have since proliferated, these critiques overarchingly have asserted that the absence of a “no” does not equate to a “yes,” as was still the prevailing thought in American sexual culture in the 1990s. At this time, violation of consent was only believable - if even then - if there was no evidence of struggle. This lack of struggle was the spirit of sexual assault law for decades, and it was not a great barometer for women regardless; consider, as just one example, that marital rape was not federally recognized as a crime until 1993 (Bergen and Barnhill 2006) and that even today, there are loophole laws in multiple states that allow for sexual violence against a partner or spouse without legal repercussions (Tulane University All In 2024). Though the emphasis on women’s right to say “no” and have that respected was a pivotal turn, it was still insufficient; the burden of proof remained on the person enduring the violence, and whether they were “believable” or not if contradicted. In short, though “No Means No” was a step forward, it remained insufficient as a measure of consent for the simple fact that it does not actually offer an example of what consent *is*, only what consent *is not*.

Although it would take more than another twenty-five years to fully take hold, the roots of the second and consent discourse - affirmative consent, also known as “Yes Means Yes” - actually began to emerge in the United States one year before the “No Means No” campaign began in Canada.

“Yes Means Yes:” Affirmative consent (1991)

Like “No Means No,” the slogan “Yes Means Yes” also originated in a university setting. Following two rape cases in the 1990-1991 academic year at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio that shook the campus community, a group of students in 1991 formed

The Womyn of Antioch student activist group to discuss concerns about the ways in which sexual violence was not being adequately addressed by the campus (Antioch College 2007). Using direct action, The Womyn of Antioch presented a rough draft of an anti-sexual violence policy at a university meeting (Antioch College 2007; the policy eventually went into effect, in 1996, but not without a cultural blow-up, described in their archives:

As the story goes...it was the summer of 1993 and a student was co-oping on the West Coast. A University of California campus newspaper was writing a piece on sexual violence on campus. The writer of this piece had learned of the Antioch policy from the co-op student and wrote about it. The Associated Press thought it was fascinating (apparently) because across the AP wire came this little blurb about a school in Ohio with “sex rules”. The media hounded the campus. We were on the front page of the Washington Post, The New York Times; on every newsmagazine show on TV; Saturday Night Live, etc. For the most part the media missed the point of the policy. We were misrepresented and a lot of them just plain made stuff up. We all got really tired of the media attention, really fast.

Overnight, it seemed, the Antioch Sexual Offense Policy became a running joke, including being satirized in a Saturday Night Live skit entitled, “Is It Date Rape?” (Antioch College 2007). The implications of this policy were concrete, as “the best outcome of all this craziness was the number of requests for the policy we got from other campuses who have since used our policy to help shape their own campus policies that deal with the issues of sexual violence,” according to the student-activists at Antioch (Antioch College 2007). One of the unique aspects of the Antioch Sexual Offense Prevention Policy (SOPP), as it was revised and renamed, is the emphasis on consent: even today, visitors to the campus are required to fill out a form stating that all sexual activity on the campus is consensual, with students often standing guard at parties to make sure guests have a full understanding of the policy – which they are required to sign a copy of – and that they comply (Antioch College 2007).

In the early 2010s, a new wave of student activism against sexual violence took off (Schubert and Vidu 2016). Inspired in part by SOPP, as well as in reaction to mishandling of sexual violence cases brought to their campus administration on University of California and California State University system campuses, in 2014 student-activists across California garnered thousands of signatures on a petition asking for the instatement of affirmative consent on public college campuses. The petition was delivered to Governor Jerry Brown, and the presidents and chancellors of the University of California system, the California State University system, and the California Community College system all backed the proposal. Governor Brown signed SB 967 into law on September 28, 2014 (California State Senate 2014). The bill states that to receive state funding, public colleges and universities are required to adopt policies and protocols pertaining to sexual assault, including making services available to students and implementing trainings and comprehensive prevention programs, all of which must be built from a foundation of affirmative consent, defined in SB 967 as

[A]ffirmative, conscious, and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity. It is the responsibility of each person involved in the sexual activity to ensure that he or she has the affirmative consent of the other or others to engage in the sexual activity. Lack of protest or resistance does not mean consent, nor does silence mean consent. Affirmative consent must be ongoing throughout a sexual activity and can be revoked at any time. The existence of a dating relationship between the persons involved, or the fact of past sexual relations between them, should never by itself be assumed to be an indicator of consent (California State Senate 2014).

This legislation has been a landmark case for the treatment of sexual violence, as a stark shift from the “No Means No” discourse. It is also the first piece of legislation that formally recognized aspects of sexual violence which had been used to undermine cases in the past, including participants’ intoxication, clothing, and relationship to their perpetrator. And,

culturally, “Yes Means Yes” has been viewed as a progressive turn to recognize female pleasure and embodiment in sex, as perhaps best highlighted by the publication of *Yes Means Yes!: Visions of Female Sexual Power and A World Without Rape*, co-edited by activist Jaclyn Friedman and feminist author Jessica Valenti (2008). As of early 2024, affirmative consent is the default understanding of consent on university and college campuses, where consent policies exist. When there are affirmative consent policies at universities, there remain issues in equitable and enforceable application of the concept, especially on campuses that are under-resourced (University Responses to Sexual Assault on Campus 2024). Moreover, affirmative consent has not been incorporated into federal law across the United States, nor is it enshrined in law at the state level, meaning that there is potential for confusion in places where consent-based legislation exists in some contexts but coercion-based legislation exists in others.

Though affirmative consent is *not* a standard everywhere, the idea has nonetheless become culturally ubiquitous. And, it not without its critics, some of whom argue that, similarly to “No Means No,” affirmative consent as a policy is “vastly overinclusive, deeply repressive, and socially conservative in its enforcement of traditional gender roles” on campus, despite its “its respect for norms about good sex that we all share” (Halley 2016), a statement that is problematic in its assertive reduction of the American sexual public to a monolith. Research suggests that in practice college men exposed to “affirmative consent policy trainings emphasizing punishment [demonstrate] support for affirmative consent but [also show] reinforce[d] traditional gender beliefs,” such that men are more powerful than women; women, in contrast, showed no such change in their gender beliefs (Tinkler, Clay-Warner, and Alinor 2018). Affirmative consent is certainly an improvement upon “No Means No,” though it still leaves many questions unanswered: What actually constitutes giving one’s consent? Does

consent always have to be given explicitly, i.e. verbally? And are there circumstances where an explicit “yes” should not be an indicator of consent? (Muehlenhard et al. 2016) The move to affirmative consent leaves out the nebulous “grey area” in which many consent affirmations and denials occur.

“Tea and Consent” (2015)

The “tea and consent” discourse derives from a video of the same name that went viral in late 2015 - and came directly from the YouTube channel of the Thames Valley Police in the UK, covering “videos from across the force in Buckinghamshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire” (Thames Valley Police 2024). The idea is that consent is like a cup of tea. A person may want tea if you offer it but then change their mind; they may not want tea at all, so if they say no, do not make any; and, of course, do not make tea for unconscious people because they do not drink tea when they are unconscious. The desexualization of the concept of sexual consent in the PSA utilizes British cultural iconography - drinking tea - to make the quirky cartoon stick figures making and serving tea (or not) be more palatable in a historically prudish culture. The video has been widely viewed; as of February 2024, the “Tea and Consent” video has over 8.2 million hits.

While “Tea and Consent” as a framework borrows some positive components from the affirmative consent framework, I agree with critics that it is truly insufficient as a model for a number of reasons. First, this is the only sexual consent discourse I am aware of that has been specifically de-sexed. The logic goes: if one cannot engage in the conversation of the sexual situation consent is occurring in, then perhaps you should not be engaging in sex at all. To this point, it is also a simple metaphor that seems aimed at children and teenagers; and indeed, in

some places, it is now being used as part of larger consent training in schools with K-12 youth (Karsen 2020). The oversimplification of consent in this model, which might be age appropriate for younger viewers, portrays consent as yet another binary: you either make someone tea because they want it, or you do not make them tea because they do not want it. This binary is problematic (as all binaries are): consent simply does not operate in this way. Sometimes, someone wants tea until they do not, or they want tea after that have already said no; sometimes people are incapable of saying no to tea, because of the relationship they have with the tea-maker; sometimes, there are people who just never want tea, just like some people never want sex. Second, it posits consent as something that one person gets from another person; while this framework seems to stem from affirmative consent, this is actually more in-line with the “No Means No” framework that relies on the recipient of an action to determine when something stops or not. Finally, the framework is “so simple” that it becomes a possible tool for victim-blaming – if someone has non-consensual sex after being exposed to this model, then it must be *their* fault (Brady and Lowe 2020).

FRIES (2016)

The FRIES¹⁸ framework of consent is a Planned Parenthood model that went live on Tumblr¹⁹ in summer 2016 (Tiven 2016) and the catchy public health slogan likening consent to everyone’s favorite form of potato took off like wildfire. FRIES is a mnemonic intended to

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that this came after “Tea and Consent” in that it *also* references food, and a very American one at that.

¹⁹ As Tumblr played a crucial role in the virtual sex education of Millennials and Gen Zers prior to the passage of FOSTA-SESTA in 2018 and the subsequent gutting of the site for its “illicit” sexual content, that this model went live there is of great importance in its cultural suffusion.

help its users remember the facets of consent in practice: that it is freely given, revocable, informed, enthusiastic, and specific.

That the FRIES framework was first introduced on Tumblr speaks to the intended audience as being younger Americans, at a time when “Yes Means Yes” had already exploded in the cultural vernacular of consent. In my analysis and that of others (cite), the mnemonic is also not without flaws. Most critically - as I will reflect on further in this chapter - the emphasis on enthusiasm as a marker for consent overlooks the glaring reality that performance of enthusiasm in sex is explicitly gendered in heterosexual-modeled interactions. Cultural portrayals of sex and sexuality would have Americans believing that masculine people are always-already primed for sex; as such, how necessary is their “enthusiasm” to demonstrate their willingness for sexual activity? Feminine participants, then, carry the burden of doing consent work within these sexual interactions, then, just as they do in various other ways when sex happens (Littlejohn 2021).

“Consent is Sexy” (indeterminate origin)

The last discourse I focus on, “Consent is Sexy,” is not being easily traceable to a single origin. The general sentiment is as simple as the slogan, and one often invoked against critics who argue that asking for or getting consent before a sexual encounter makes the sex itself *unsexy*. While not directly related to affirmative consent, “Consent is Sexy” has been used that way; notably, UC Santa Cruz rolled out a “Consent is Sexy” campaign as its affirmative consent campaign in 2015 following the ratification of affirmative consent as the California state consent policy (Holger 2015).

The primary criticism of the “Consent is Sexy” discourse is its treatment of consent as an add-on to make sexual activity spicier, which is seen as *better* sex; in line with affirmative consent, the emphasis on embodiment of pleasure in consent practices is important.

BDSM Discourses of Consent

To trace the lineage of consent discourses within BDSM, it is critical to understand the cultural shifts following the move from original Old Guard practices to the now more common New Guard practices. Old Guard arose from predominantly white gay leather motorcycle clubs formed by veterans in the 1940s, and is very militaristic in nature, typically characterized by structured mentorship within the group; mastery of skills to earn “leathers” to become a Master or a Dom/me; and a strict adherence to group rules and protocols (Old Guard Leathermen 2024). These protocols, including the use of pseudonyms, costumes, masks, and other forms of secret-keeping, served to protect the larger group and allow for easy shunning of participants who went to the police; BDSM was synonymous with homosexuality, both punishable with arrest and imprisonment (Stein 2021). The culture of BDSM in the U.S. started to shift more rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s, in large part because of the AIDS pandemic (including the overwhelming loss of elder gay kinksters) and more tolerant attitudes towards homosexuality in younger generations of practitioners. a. New Guard is theoretically more inclusive of multiple gender, sexual, class, and racial identities; there is less emphasis on formal mentorship and training to earn your position within a community rather than self-identifying; and High Protocol is not a structuring force for New Guard communities, even while there are still communal rules and trainings within all kink communities. Just as in broader American sexual

culture, in BDSM too there are overlapping consent discourses circulating and being utilized simultaneously.

To become an Old Guard member, a participant would usually be required to spend several years training as a submissive/slave before they would be recognized as a Dominant/Master. Most OG participants do not believe that you can become a Dominant without first being a submissive, and the years of training and mentorship required to do so under High Protocol also mean that you learn how to read the bodies of the people with whom you are interacting, just as you learn to read your own body. While some contemporary consent discourse has bled into Old Guard practices, OG participants I interviewed explained to me that in knowing your partner, common NG practices like safe words, the stoplight system, and general verbal communication might be used but are ultimately not necessary as the training an OG member receives should have you in alignment with their partner(s) such that they can read those partners' limits, know their boundaries, and can know when to stop without being told to. New Guard practices have become more explicit, likely due to the move away from all communities requiring new members to be vouched for upon entry²⁰ to events. Consent is something that should absolutely be explicit and requires in-depth negotiation prior to any "sceneing," should almost always have a verbal component, and safewords are almost always required as a communal rule for public play spaces.

In considering how to teach consent within BDSM spaces, several consent discourses emerged in these community spaces over the last several decades, capturing missing

²⁰ In some communities, especially in my research those that are smaller and/or those that are in more socially conservative areas, this is still common practice; for my entry into numerous communities in California during fieldwork and personal exploration, however, this was not the case.

components from prior discourses as they evolved. Here, I trace these discourses in the BDSM community alongside primary main criticisms of each.²¹

“Safe, Sane, and Consensual”

“SSC”, or “Safe, Sane, and Consensual,” was the first well-articulated framework for consent in BDSM communities, and was coined in organizing documents of GMSMA (Gay Male S/M Activists) by slave david stein in 1983 (stein 2000). Critically, this discourse is the first consent to emerge in *either* broader American sexual culture *or* in BDSM subcultural spaces. This is something important to consider, as the cultural context giving rise to the emergence of this discourse directly stems from the ongoing history of state violence against the queer community and the height of the AIDS pandemic. Playing under SSC, anything goes as long as the participants are engaging in it as safely as possible, are of sound mind to engage in such activities, and, of course, are consenting to participate. As slave david stein reflected later, the sentiment behind this framework was for kinksters to “Have a good time, but keep your head and understand what you're doing so you don't end up dead or in the hospital - or send someone else there” (stein 2000).

²¹ There is one additional consent discourse I do not include in-depth here because it is difficult to determine how, if ever, it has truly been utilized. This discourse is “CCC” or “Committed Compassionate Consensual” and as best as I can determine, it emerged circa 2018. Unlike all the others I include herein, this is not a discourse I have ever encountered except in doing the research to fully write this section. Nonetheless, it has been floating around on Reddit and other sites that discuss kink philosophy since 2018 or so; in at least one digital space, it is cited in at least one place as being Old Guard and thus the predecessor to SSC though I have been unable to verify this. This model appears most relevant to CNC or TPE (consensual non-consent or total power exchange) relationships rather than to kink as a whole; I include this discourse as footnote, rather than ignore it, as it explicitly emphasizes the importance of considering the feelings of one’s partner(s) as an aspect of the consent process, which I will come back to in a later chapter as I offer my own framework of consent.

SSC has been the most well-known discourse for more than two decades in American BDSM circles, the framework has always had its critics; disabled kinksters, including those that participated in this project, cite this as a harmful model that stigmatizes kinksters with mental health issues or disabilities because of disagreement on the necessity of “sanity” to engage in kinky play, and because of contestations of whether BDSM play is *ever* safe or not. And, more broadly, the question of who decides what is “sane” and what is “safe” is also indeterminate. What is safe to one player may be something that another play is never willing to engage in, and while balancing group interests with individual interest is critical, allowing people to make their own decisions about what is right for them, based on risk-awareness principals stemming from the AIDS epidemic, is a core of American BDSM communities. Though critiques continue, SSC continues to be the most prevalent BDSM discourse.

“RACK,” or “Risk Aware Consensual Kink” (2009)

“RACK,” or “Risk-Aware Consensual Kink,” is a cheeky update to SSC drafted on a kinky listserv by Gary Switch to emphasize that it is more realistic to acknowledge from the start the risk inherent in sexual and kinky activities than telling people to “play safely” as “If we want to limit BDSM to what’s safe, we can’t do anything more extreme than flogging somebody with a wet noodle” (Switch 2009). RACK is a relatively common discourse utilized in kink communities today, and is popular because of its reliance on responsibility shared amongst all parties. As Gary Switch elaborated,

RACK is admittedly more confrontational than SSC. It's defiant, the same way the GLBT community uses “queer.” RACK allows us the freedom to have non-PC

fantasies. Don't a lot of us enjoy non-consensual fantasies, either from the top side or the bottom side? We enjoy them in our literature; we may very well enjoy them while we play. But we act them out responsibly and consensually (Switch 2009).

Notably, RACK is well-loved and rarely criticized within kink communities, including those in which I met people and conducted research. The primary critique I have encountered comes from people who do not engage in what kinksters refer to as “edgeplay.” The critique from players who do not engage in edgeplay is about whether and how these activities should be conducted: how “aware” are people engaging in these activities, and how can that be measured for all participants’ safety?

“PRICK” or “Personal Responsibility Informed Consensual Kink” (2006/2009)

“PRICK” stands for “Personal Responsibility Informed Consensual Kink,” and was apparently coined online sometime between 2006 and 2009 by a kinkster using the moniker Mythos (though it has been difficult to actually find this original post) (“And now in BDSM we have people who identify as PRICKs” 2019). The dual emphases on personal responsibility and being informed in this model, as an apparent improvement upon SSC, are to center the role of the individual within larger group settings.

Akin to “no means no” rhetoric, this model is rarely cited, and mostly in disdain, largely because of the emphasis on “personal responsibility” which is often read as simultaneously doing everything in one’s own power to avoid harm meaning while one’s play partners is theoretically let off the hook for their bad behavior in the scene. Other kinksters find the risk

assessment in this model to also center the individual player rather than taking an interpersonal approach, i.e., ensuring all parties engaged in a kink activity have a full understanding of what is happening and how that might affect the players.

“The 4Cs: Caring, Communication, Consent, and Caution” (2014)

The “4Cs” discourse, or “Caring, Communication, Consent, and Caution,” was developed and published in a journal article by kinky scholar-practitioners (Williams et al. 2014). This is a discourse that combines both academic knowledge-making and community experience in an attempt to move away from marginalization of BDSM practitioners. Williams and co-authors explicitly state that they developed this framework with the intention of delegitimizing the psychopathologized emphases from outside BDSM that center “sanity” and “safety” as parameters for consensual play. In my experience, although this discourse is forward-looking in that it addresses care as an explicit aspect of consent, it is not well known; some small communities may use it, and it is findable online, but it has not widely caught on within BDSM circles in the decade since its introduction.

Following this brief overview of these specific models, and some of the broad criticisms of each, in this next section I more deeply interrogate how consent discourses are insufficient in their attempts to live up to what they are purported to do. Namely, I argue, using examples from both American sexual consent discourses and BDSM discourses, that all sexual consent discourses are inadequate in their ability to educate about sex, to prevent violence, and to help participants engage in better sexual activities.

The Inadequacies of Consent Discourses

I turn now to discuss consent discourses as they circulate both in broader American sexual culture and in BDSM specifically, by elaborating on what sexual consent discourses are purported to do, and how these discourses do not actually stand up to these expectations, or, at best, do so in an incomplete or flawed way. To be clear, I do not believe that any of these discourses, singularly or in tandem, do a sufficient job of living up to their purported purposes. I delineate these here, now, to set the groundwork for a new framework that I propose later in this dissertation.

Earlier, I introduced the idea that current consent discourses - both those in broader American sexual culture and those in BDSM communities - have such staying power because of three hegemonic assumptions about what these discourses do: that they are educative, that they help to prevent sexual violence, and that they help people engage in good sex. In considering these three assumptions, in this section I am guided by the following questions: How well do these discourses actually allow for these three things to happen? Are people educated about consent in a meaningful way through these discourses? Does violence prevention happen as a result of the implementation of these discourses? And do the use of these discourses help people have better sex? Critiquing both American sexual discourses of consent and BDSM consent discourses, in tandem with data from interviews with practitioners who explicitly names one or more of these discourses in my conversations with them, I argue that these three assumptions are faulty, and thus do a disservice to the people who employ them, both at the individual and interactional levels and at the group/institutional level.

Sex Education

The most obvious intention of consent frameworks, given their emergence and emphasized utilization predominantly in educational settings, is to educate. However, the effectiveness of consent programming is mixed. It is true that consent campaigns on college campuses that are specifically student-driven, rather than administrator-driven, and which are socioculturally relevant to that student population, can help improve students' understandings of consent (Ortiz and Shafer 2018). This is a critically important finding for thinking about how to continue educating college students about consent. However, given that these policies are often connected directly to campus policy dictated directly by the law (e.g. Title IX regulations and state mandates about affirmative consent), undergraduates struggle to understand them adequately (Albrecht et al. 2023) making these frameworks not as effective as they could be because their legibility to students is not. The data we have is a mixed bag at best, but it makes crystal clear that just because we have education on consent does not mean that it is effective (Jeffrey 2022). This is true not just for formal sex education endeavors, as prior research reflects on, but in more informal avenues as well, as came up in multiple conversations with kinksters I interviewed. For instance, as we near the end of our conversation, Marina, a white 39 year old Pro-Domme and mom in her late 30s, briefly mentions her approach to educating her child on consent:

Marina: "I like to think I have a good grasp on [consent]. I also have a child so like, [I am] teaching them about consent using the tea analogy."

Cierra: Oh, yeah, that's a good video.

Marina: Yeah, I found something for kids on the like tea, but I'm like french fries, the French fry analogy? And, you know, I buy him books on consent, you know, and he has primer books on sexuality and puberty [she laughs]..."

As an educator and BDSM professional, Marina does her fair share of consent education in the community, but relies on the Tea and Consent and FRIES models for her son as they are simple and desexualized. Parents like Marina believe these models to be accessible, and other practitioners, like Maeve, highlight the importance of learning about consent as a child. Maeve is a switch who has been involved in BDSM for nearly a decade since she turned 18, and relays to me, as she has experienced a significant number of consent violation. These occurred mostly prior to her becoming an adult, something that she did not fully comprehend until she swapped virginity stories with friends in college:

Cierra: Did you have any exposure to ideas about consent in college that helped make sense of some of this? Or was it just kind of like through these conversations with roommates and friends?

Maeve: Definitely conversations with roommates and friends and kind of sharing those experiences and like talking about sex, and being able to be open and honest about that helped a lot, but there was no, there was no, like, there wasn't really a broadcasted group kind of that talked about consent. And I remember, kind of, like during Frosh week, we got pins that said, "Yes means yes," "No means no," but that was about it. There wasn't really any, like interpersonal training, but there were no supports, they really or they weren't widely known about at least, to learn about consent.

As Maeve's experience in college highlights, exposure alone to these discourses - in her case, both "No Means No" and "Yes Means Yes" - was not enough, because in her view, people are unable to engage or fully understand what these discourses mean when they are simply displayed on pins or posters. Maeve could not really understand that what had happened to her was not just "off," as she described to me, until she had a group of young women to explain how her first experiences with sex were non-consensual, and how her lack of a yes made it a sexually violent experience. And Maeve is not the only practitioner who discussed the lack of

informedness as an important aspect of navigating consent, both in the aftermath of something but also beforehand. In this case, Winston, a white 46 year old queer erotica writer who had been practiced kink for more than 30 years at the time of our interview, reflects on what being informed actually looks like:

Winston: I also, you know, in kink, especially consent has to be very explicit. You have to basically say at the outset, here are the things I'm consenting to, here are the things I'm not consenting to, you know, and can't be negotiated in the middle of the scene. So, I think in a lot of ways, people in the kink community are - well, they should be - people experienced in the kink community should be a little more aware of the explicit nature of consent, then, you know, so called vanilla people.

Cierra: It's interesting. You started to say "are" and then qualified "should be," tell me about that?

Winston: well, no, because the ideal is that they are but they're not always right. And I think a lot of it is the, what's missing, there is the "I" in PRICK. They aren't really informed. They've seen porn. That actually, you know, that's interesting, because you got the people who experience their kink from porn and the people who experience it from erotica, where it's usually written and a little more nuanced, at least if it's fairly well written. It's got some nuance. Porn has no nuance...I'm a big fan of porn, but it does give people inaccurate ideas of what's likely to happen.

After Winston offers this initial reflection on how the “I” in PRICK is important, he further breaks down his views on erotica versus pornography. He elaborates by using a popular gang bang organization, Fraternity X, to make the point: gang bang scenes take an immense amount of time to orchestrate, people need drugs to make their bodies do certain things, participants need to be cleaned out before engaging in anal sex, and so on, none of which is reflected in the actual scenes that viewers take in. But many of those viewers, in Winston’ opinion, do not understand all that goes on to make these scenes possible. Instead, in his experience, because people saw it in porn, they (initially) think that that is how gay sex is going to go. In other

words, they are uninformed. It is certainly debatable how kinky versus vanilla gang bang pornography is, but Winston' initial point remains: in his view, people practicing kink *should* know better because of the consent discourses, such as RACK and PRICK, that are in use, and thus they *should* be more informed about what it is they are consenting to. In practice, however, he finds that this is not necessarily the case.

This ongoing theme of better communication in educational efforts - so that people can actually understand the discourses, so that they are actually informed, and so on - is something that Finley highlighted for me in my first interview for the project. Finley, a 34 year old white bisexual Daddy Dom who is now married to the woman he was partnered to when I interviewed him, is interested in how the passing of time in relationships affects consent between partners:

Finley: I think the more the older I get, the more I learned about consent, the more I learned about what is consent, and how, this is gonna sound really weird, but when it comes to a sexual consent between partners, or between people, who are, you know, that it's not always yes.

Cierra: What do you mean by that?

Finley: The yes, doesn't always have to be. It's not always a yes, I guess what I'm saying is like, like, if you're, if it's between partners, right? a hand gesture, you know, a certain level of trust that says, This is what I'm feeling right now. ... And, I mean, I mean, it sounds so like, like, 1950s, or whatever. But there is a certain subtlety to consent that we often ignore, and I think, especially with partners, it comes very subtle, especially as you age together, you know, a look, you know, from pat on the ass means, like, let's go, let's do it, you know, and, but that's already, because you were discussed beforehand, you know, and I think that's an BDSM that comes to happen to is that you both learn your likes and dislikes. And you say, Hey, you want to have a scene? You know, and you both know what you want out of it. Because you've been together for so long...What I'm saying is that, over time, when you get to know somebody, even if it's just like a fuck buddy or friend that you have sex with or whatever, that level of consent gets more subtle, and you're able to express it in much more subtle ways.

Building from the “Yes means yes” discourse, Finley highlights how the verbal emphasis that is emphasized in the most popular consent discourses can, frankly, become irrelevant at a point within a longer term relationship. A knowing look or a placement of a hand on the small of your partner’s back, for instance, can take the place of that verbal “yes” that these discourses emphasize we need to obtain before engaging in sexual activity. For Finley, at least, “Yes means yes” is simply not accurate to the way that he and his partner *actually* engage in activities, and it is well-documented that consent practices differ in casual encounters versus established relationships (Humphreys 2007) and sexual precedent with a partner - or the pattern of engaging in sexual activities with a partner over time - changes throughout a relationship (Willis and Jozkowski 2018) such that consent communication is ever-shifting rather than occurring singularly in the first instant when sexual interaction occurs. The emphasis on the spoken as a critical aspect of this consent discourse then makes “Yes means yes” appear to be a discourse aimed at people with less familiarity with one another; where is the education for people about how to manage shifting relationships - and thus shifting ways of communicating consent - across time?

Aside from communication, the other major aspect of education that practitioners highlighted as connected to consent discourses is the actual learning process. For BDSM practitioners, learning about consent means actually *practicing doing consent*, including having room to make mistakes. But do consent discourses actually allow for this to happen? In this vignette, Emmett, a white 27 year old man who identifies as a gay polyamorous leather pup, starts to tease some of this out. He has been telling me about a consent violation so egregious in his leather pup community that there actually was a police report filed - a veritable rarity amongst the communities who allowed me to study them, and amongst American

BDSMers in general. Usually, Emmett tells me, self-policing works such that outside forces are unnecessary:

Cierra: Is it common in your community or in other communities you're familiar with that this, it has to get to that level where police get involved? Or is it usually, I don't want to say not that severe, because that minimizes the consent violations, but like the self-policing works, more?

Emmett: In a way I think it does work, because, again, if it's, if it's an accidental violation, it's okay. You're new to this or or for whatever reason, the flogger's slipped... You know, this is why I actually hate safe, sane, consensual.

Cierra: Yeah?

Emmett: I prefer RACK, risk aware consensual kink. That's a risk, [that the flogger] slipped, you know. And I feel that, you know, those conversations are all, need to be had, like, "Hey, okay, your flogger slipped, move on, you know, what you did, we're calling you out on it. We know what you did."

Cierra: Yeah.

Emmett: "We see it again..." or not really see it again. But more like, you know, "Let's be more focused," kind of thing.

For Emmett, the highlighting of why certain discourses are important for the work they do in the community directly relates to how well these communities are able to self-police, both to prevent and to respond to consent violations. The emphasis on risk awareness - in this case in a literal example of a consent violation that would not result in a member being punished by the community - is necessary for all involved parties. The opportunity for people to make and learn from their mistakes as a part of the educational process, something that the "Safe, Sane, Consensual" discourse does not capture, but which "RACK" maybe comes closer to, at least for Emmett.

Many of the kinksters who spoke with me reflected on consent as something that you learn by actually engaging in it - and how by not engaging it, you cannot actually be consenting. Here, Winston, the erotica writer from the gang bang example earlier, explains to me how he understands consent:

Cierra: And just to start with, can you tell me how you define consent personally?

Winston: Oh, yeah. I mean, I kind of like the risk aware consensual consent, you know, the consensual kink, the RACK approach, although also, I've also heard of PRICK, personally responsible, informed consensual, kink but I think they just went for the acronym there. [Cierra laughs] But I do like the idea that consent is only consent if both parties actually understand what's going on. And if people have an erroneous notion about what's going to happen, because they've seen it in porn or something, they're not really consenting to it. They're consenting to a fantasy that they have about it. And so there's definitely a distinction between the things you fantasize about doing and the things you are actually going to do...

Winston, blurring the awareness/informed line between the two discourses he mentions to me, emphasizes the difference between fantasy and reality and how consent is the defining line; without being fully in the know about what is going to happen to you in an interaction - a hallmark of BDSM practice - then you cannot truly be consenting to what you are engaging in. It's a provocative point, but one that he is not alone in making. Noah, an indigenous married pansexual man in his 40s regularly hosts kink parties at his home with his wife, and as such, has given a significant amount of thought along with his wife to the rules and expectations for BDSM behavior in their home setting. During our conversation about this, he explains to me what he understands consent to be:

And what all those things mean to me is that if two people are discussing doing an activity, they have to, to have the what I describe as kind of risk aware,

enthusiastic and informed consent, they have to understand not just agree to but understand what they're agreeing to, and understand the risks involved, not just say, oh, yeah, I understand. But to understand that, if you're doing edge play, you could actually get hurt. Like you can really get hurt and end up in the hospital. And so like a deeper understanding of risk. And consent, meaning a non-coerced, non-dictated like, excited to do an activity... So you have to step it back and say like, "Okay, since you've never been spanked before ever, we're not gonna negotiate a heavy impact scene, we're gonna do a toy bag tour and do some really light experimentation. And it's not gonna be a big deep scene, because you're not capable of consenting to that because you've never even been close."

Beyond his need to use multiple discourses in tandem to fully paint a picture of what he means - again, undergirding the inefficacy of a single discourse to adequately reflect his understanding of consent - Noah's example demonstrates the importance of not just expecting someone to be able to jump headfirst into the proverbial deep end, but to instead dip a toe or two in to begin to understand the activity and its impact on the participants before getting into heavier, harder activities; again, this is a fairly common approach to consent in BDSM scenes. Isaac, a white bisexual polyamorous PhD student in his late 20s, reflects on this as well, highlighting the mainstreaming of BDSM acts into vanilla life, and the potentially dire consequences of people engaging in activities they are not properly informed about:

Isaac: I think it's becoming really common for BDSM practice, as I was talking about before, it's really common for BDSM practices to, kind of like, creep into what's kind of otherwise considered vanilla sex. Like a really common one is choking, like choking is just kind of like, drifted into a really vanilla understanding of sex. And it's just strange. But yeah, like, within the BDSM world, choking is actually understood as like, depending on how you're doing it, but choking is understanding it is genuinely one of the more risky things you can possibly do. Like, it's so much more dangerous than... [trails off, thinking]

Cierra: ...almost anything else I can think of. [both laugh]

Isaac: Yeah, yeah. Like, it's, it's, it's really fucked up. And that you hear, like, I've heard stories from friends who have no experience of BDSM about, like, passing out from being choked during sex. And, and, I, I think that it won't be

easy. But I think it's like growing that, like, BDSM is becoming this like shining beacon of conversations about consent and conversations about just the risk associated with different sexual practices. Like, the risk aware, what's the acronym? Risk aware, consensual...?

Cierra: Consensual kink.

Isaac: Is it RACK?

Cierra: Yeah, it's RACK.

Isaac: Yeah, yeah. Um, so yeah, like the risk aware part of sex, which is just like, you know, really lacking.

For Isaac, BDSM communities are a “beacon of conversations about consent” not because they allow for people to engage in edgeplay like erotic asphyxiation, but because these communities make the space to have dialogue about what these activities are, and how to do so as safely as possible, so that there is no passing out during sex.²² That the discourses allow for the opportunity for people to think about, and learn about, risky activities such as erotic asphyxiation *as a part of* engaging in them is a major difference between American sexual consent discourses and BDSM-specific discourses. Other practitioners take this idea even a step further - both Yvette and Daphne stressed that to truly learn about giving your own consent, you need to not just be engaging in an activity in an informed way, but you need to have your boundaries too - a concept that is totally missing from American sexual discourses. Yvette - a queer white polyamorous grad student in her late 20s - and I are discussing an article in the *New York Times* that we had coincidentally read relatively prior to our interview (in my

²² When done right, breathplay is NOT supposed to result in people passing out, which can result in lack of oxygen to the brain, and permanent physical damage in a number of other ways as well, or even death in worst case scenarios. This is actually an incredibly dangerous result of kink sex bleeding into vanilla sex, and how the lack of education about it is a critical misstep, which is why I use it as an example even though it can be triggering.

case, the evening before, in her case, the morning of). The article (Febos 2021) was an interesting examination of consent through the lens of cuddle parties in New York City, non-sexual gatherings that people pay to attend in order to literally cuddle with other interested people. The author talks about her own experiences attending these cuddle parties and what it taught her about navigating consent in both sexual and non-sexual interactions. The article comes up in our conversation as Yvette and I have been discussing the politics of saying no in sexual situations:

Cierra: And it was something that struck me too, when she's talking about the cuddle party of like, thanking people for saying, no, what do you think of that?

Yvette: I: I, so when I, when it first was a thing, when I first experienced it, I definitely was like, Oh, this this, I don't like it. But then now I'm kind of like, no, this is great. Like, this makes me feel heard. This makes me feel respected. I think it's a really good skill for people to develop. And like even in that article, I think she talks about how somebody came in cuddled with her that she wasn't, that she said yes to, but she didn't really want to. And I honestly think that experiences like that are important to learn how it feels when something happens that you didn't actually want. And I think that in a low risk situation of like, cuddling... I hate to say that people should have their consent violated, because I don't think that that's the right thing. But I think that it is a skill that you develop over time. And you don't always know where that line is until it's been crossed. And it's important to be able to develop it.

As our conversation progress, Yvette further considers the importance of trying activities that you may be unfamiliar with and realize in the doing of them that you dislike them; saying “yes” when you do not really mean “yes,” in her opinion, does not mean that her consent is necessarily being violated, but it helps push the boundaries of her consent in ways that are fruitful both in the moment and in the future. And as she is someone who enjoys consensual non-consent play, this is a foundational aspect for Yvette’s understanding of consent such that she is best able to engage her kinks. Yvette was not alone in this perspective, either. Daphne,

a 29 year old queer Chinese and white biracial kinkster in a leadership role in her community on the East Coast, invokes discomfort as a necessary part of the learning process. Here, she zeroes in on “enthusiasm” - an aspect of both FRIES, her preferred model, and affirmative consent - as something to question:

Cierra: That makes a lot of sense. So, do you think that, then, consent always has to be enthusiastic? Or is there somewhere between enthusiasm and coercion that consent can also exist?

Daphne: Yeah, I don't think it's a set black and white. I'm like, uh, you know, certain types of play, I think I might not be enthusiastic, like super enthusiastic for. But it's still important for me to explore or to do, especially things that are uncomfortable or like, kind of edging into my limits. But they're things that I still want to push myself on and explore. So yeah, the line is definitely gray. It's not, it's not an either or, and I really do think it's situationally and like, person to person specific.

Nuance within consent is not something that any of the discourses capture well, but just as other kinksters above elaborate in other areas, nuance speaks to the many aspects of sexual interaction that are murkier in practice than discourses make them appear to be. As so much of sexual activity, both within and beyond the bounds of BDSM practices, occurs in this grey area, it is important to capture it in discourses first if they are to be truly educational and not simply something to replicate because that is the cultural expectation. Ambrose attends to this as he discusses the rise of “Yes means yes” on college campuses, and his subsequent growth as a sexual being:

I remember when affirmative consent campaigns rolled out on campus and being like, “What the fuck is this?” like, at the time thinking like, “Oh my god, this is amazing and fantastic!” Because it was the first time I'd been exposed to any consent education. And then now I'm like, “Okay, this was actually like, a great like, baby step, but it leaves out a whole bunch of shit,” and that, like, that's where it's relevant. So thinking, you know, expectations changed, but also people change and like, what might be a consent violation, you know, to you at one point may not be to you at another point. You know, um, and I think that

makes people uncomfortable to like, we want it to be black and white, yes or no. And not that gray.

As a lawyer, Ambrose's point is striking; even though, in the state in which he practices affirmative consent is the law, the reality is that the law - and in turn the discourse that structures the law - is simply not reflective of how people experience sex, or how they experience consent violations. How many people do not realize in the moment that they are experiencing sexual violence, instead taking days, months, or even years to process and name that experience? All of these discourses, but especially the more popular "No means no" and "Yes means yes" discourses leave out the blurriness that composes many, if not most, sexual interactions between people, both those that are consensual and those that are not. This is an important consideration for the next assumption about consent discourses: that they are violence preventatives.

Violence Prevention

A twin purpose of these frameworks, in tandem with educating, is to prevent violence. Theoretically, these consent discourses should be an important tool for instances where sexual violence happens out of ignorance, such as when someone relies on problematic scripts they have learned about sex and then try to act it out, such as the rise in undiscussed strangling in young people's sexual relationships (Herbenick et al. 2022) that Isaac alluded to prior. With the passage of SB967, the adoption of affirmative consent in California in 2015, reports of sexual assault on California college campuses have increased, though other forms of sexual violence such as stalking have not (Wade 2017). While it is unlikely that the increase in reporting correlates with an increase in occurrences of sexual violence - it is difficult to

measure whether there has been a decrease in sexual violence as there is not a lot of evidence to suggest that there has been a decrease in sexual violence either. And – critically – even rape prevention educators, when asked about consent education, doubt that better consent education will help prevent sexual violence (Beres 2020).

If consent education worked well, as might be expected given the systemic rollout of affirmative consent policies on many college and university campuses, there should thus be measurable evidence of prevented violence in reporting rates. Given this is not happening, then what educational work are consent discourses actually doing? One possible answer assumes that education does not equal a change in behavior, meaning that even having a solid understanding of consent from these discourses does not translate into using that education in practice, thus allowing for violence to occur still. This is a phenomenon around consent education which is continually being documented; even when the educational aspect of these frameworks is effective, knowing these consent discourses are not enough to stop violence. Early research indicates that even with knowledge of affirmative consent, implementation of it is considered untenable by student leaders (Curtis and Burnett 2017); more recent research shows that heterosexual male college student in their own self-narratives of sexual activity have strong knowledge of consent scripts but simultaneously rely on ambiguous cues for consent instead of explicit consent-seeking strategies, with many putting the onus on their sexual partner(s) for stopping an encounter (Bedera 2021). Students “report deliberately using ambiguous communication in sexual situations because it confers several social benefits, despite the risk of miscommunication” (Hardesty et al. 2022). And even when a significant portion of a population (80%) understood the consent framework in use on campus -

affirmative consent - only one in five students actually changed their behavior to include aspects of affirmative consent (Youstin 2022). And - perhaps most alarmingly if consent discourses are thought to be violence preventatives - quasi-experiments with college students about mandatory university sexual misconduct training demonstrate that women are *less likely* to report experiences of sexual assault if they have completed these trainings (Htun et al. 2022).

But how do BDSM discourses work for practitioners in preventing sexual violence? Here, too, these discourses fail to capture the socio-structural factors, and center the individual, an approach that has always been inadequate in addressing violence. Yasmin, who is married to her primary partner and practices polyamory with non-men partners, reflects on how her husband is supportive of her finding new partners:

Because my husband, you know, bless his heart, he describes himself as vanilla with chocolate chips. But he's also very supportive of me going out there and getting those needs met, because he's like, I realize he's like a more of a service top and that energy feels a little different. So he's like, "if you find somebody who's a good person, a safe player," he's willing to meet them to to kind of vet them out as well make sure that they're, you know, safer, saner all that. He's like, you know, "then by all means," because it does feel different.

That he takes this paternalistic approach to vetting potential new partners for Yasmin, but invoking "Safe, Sane, and Consensual" to do so obfuscates the reality that women both must expect sexual violence and need protecting from it, especially by the men in their lives. Moreover, this standard of becoming familiar with someone meaning that they are safety also operates in direct contradiction to who most women's abusers are: sexual partners, current or past. Ben is a 46 year old white heterosexual man who volunteers as a safety-and-greeter invested in anti-violence efforts in his community. He uses the same consent discourse in a very topsy-turvy sort of way about protecting both himself, but which relies on nearly identical

logic (despite the fact that men are much less likely to experience sexual violence from women):

I believe that those that adhere to this, ask once and once only rule [for] consent. That's for me. And I want to interact with people that follow that. And I want to forward that as how it should be. I want that to be enforced. And I want that. So I'm a safety greeter. I want safe spaces, like safe, sane, and consensual, and all this sort of thing. And so like I've been asked to play by someone I don't really know. And I don't want to hurt their feelings. But I don't really know them. So I have to like, write it down, make a post about it, to kind of get that thought. So I can read it and remember it. Because in the moment, you'd be like, What do I do? But if I'm like, no, no, I told myself what to do.

By invoking “Safe, Sane, and Consensual” as a safety mechanism to protect himself while also not “want[ing] to hurt [other people’s] feelings,” and without really explaining further what a safe space looks like other than “ask once and only once for consent,” Ben is centering his own non-existent experience over that of the people in his community who actually *do* deal with consent violations - predominantly, in his community, the women. This individualized-gendered phenomenon is not unique to Yasmin or Ben (who are members of different communities); Marley, a 28 year old white pansexual woman in a third community, shares her experience with similar problems, too:

Marley: Being asked over and over and over again and coerced into a yes isn't consent either, like nagging someone until they say yes isn't a great way to do it either. Like, I think I saw something somewhere that like, “no doesn't mean convince me.”

Cierra: Mm hmm. I've seen that.

Marley: Yeah. And I liked that a lot. So, and I've had, actually, this partner that I broke up with last year, I was laying boundaries about being in the community together and existing side by side, and he, he told me he found loopholes in my boundaries.

This “no means convince her” rape culture approach to consent stems directly from bastardizations of “No means no.” While startling, given the deep-seated commitment to consent in BDSM communities, Marley was not the only woman who told me about partners who violated boundaries that seemed to stem from these gendered expectations about sexual gatekeeping, where the onus for consent protection falls predominantly on women (Littlejohn 2021; Jeffrey 2022). And, frustratingly, “No means no” discourses are not the only that have this gendered responsibility associated with it, as Iris, a 27 year old white polyamorous pansexual woman discusses in regards to a situation where she unknowingly violated another woman’s consent:

Yeah, there was one time there was a girl I was seeing. And I found out after the fact that she actually didn't want to be making out that much and that she was far drunker than I thought she was. And that was just the worst feeling for me. That happened, like a year, or a year and a half after my own experience with [someone else] being creepy. That was much more of a minor consent violation. But just that it just absolutely crashed on my head. And since then I've just been very, very careful to not mind read anybody not assume I know what's going on in somebody else's head or assume that I know what their responses, their nonverbal responses mean, that sort of thing or even looking out for when somebody is saying yes to just go along with you. So that was quite an experience.

As Iris highlights, even the utilization of affirmative consent is not always effective in preventing consent violations from happening; sometimes yes does not mean yes, and people - women in particular - can go along with things they do not actually want to do, as can those who are incapacitated in some way (Thomas et al. 2017; Marcantonio et al. 2024). Sage, a 35 year old white nonbinary polyamorous rope geek, further illustrates this implicit gendering of consent discourses as they relayed to me a story they heard secondhand from a friend about a serial violator in a community they once belonged to:

Sage: I'm sharing even though it's not firsthand, but I explicitly trust the friend who told me about it to be relating the truth. And after [this story] came out several other local girls related similar experiences with that guy.

Cierra: And what, what was the community response directed at him?

Sage: You know, that's the really unfortunate thing is that he wasn't part of the community. And so there wasn't really anything that anyone could do. I mean, he didn't come to munches or parties, he wasn't known to many people, it all came out over [FetLife]. So I mean, the community banned him, but he already wasn't a part of it. So they tried to just write a post, like "there's this guy, you know, if you're new, here are some things to look out for. If you identify as submissive, that doesn't mean that you have to say yes to everything. If you're female, that doesn't mean that you have to say yes to everything that a male proposes," like really basic stuff. But nobody knew his exact name. And the people who had been in his space, were not willing to give his address. So it was like, it was really tough, it was like, well, they don't, how can they address this? And no one wanted to go to the police.

That the community Sage and their friend belonged to was not immune to gender expectations about consent and sexual gatekeeping is unsurprising; the "no means convince me" rhetoric is such a pervasive aspect of sexual consent discourse that it maps onto BDSM communities too, where young submissive women in particular are targeted to "say yes" when they do not know any better because the partner that is responsible for sexual gatekeeping is also the one with less sexual power. Unfortunately, as Alice, a white pansexual switch in her mid-20s shared, even improvements upon "non-kink consent" in BDSM communities does not always work:

I don't, don't want to be reductive when it comes to talking about like non-kink consent but i think that tends to be you know, mainstream consent rhetoric tends to be much more focused around the "yes or no" mentality. and it's definitely evolved more to be like "oh but you can revoke that consent at any time." but it still tends to be like you're consenting to doing things with this person, all the things, or you're consenting to doing none of the things with a person and if it's maybe even a little bit more nuanced than that, it's you're consenting to do sexual things with the person or maybe even checkoff some of the first base second base third base whatever those are in or not you know? but within kink it's like oh you know if i one of the people like i talked to for my for my thesis project she's like, "oh you know i don't i have a hard limit on tickling, like oh

you can just tell someone they're not allowed to tickle you” like that is nuance. Your level of consent negotiation can be “i don't want you to touch me here, doesn't matter if it's sexual or not, don't touch me here, don't tickle me.” um you know, “i don't want you to call me this name, i don't want you to call me like sweetie,” like whatever that is you know. The level of consent can be you know “i don't want to [be] mark[ed] when we're done,” um it's so much more detailed than just like “what are the sexual acts that we're doing, yes or no?” um and it can it's sort of the slider scale instead of yes or no and it's 15,000 more sliders...

Alice's analysis of how neither “Yes means yes” nor “No means no” work because both operate along a definitive binary is apt; Ambrose, the lawyer who recalled affirmative consent coming to his college campus, remarked something similar previously. The reality is that sexual consent is composed of many aspects - or those 15,000 sliders Alice references - and they exist on a spectrum rather than as a binary. But, none of these discourses, including those in BDSM, capture this. And without capturing the full picture of what actually happens in people's sexual interactions, then consent discourses cannot possibly act as a violence preventative because what they are advertising is - as Winston, our erotica writer remarked - simply a fantasy.

This last point about consent discourses not being a reflection of the real ways that people engage in sexual activity is where the last assumption about consent discourses picks up: do they help people have better sex lives?

Better sex

The third intent of consent discourses is to equalize sexual interactions by facilitating better sex. But how do we measure “better” sex, or even “good” sex? If orgasm is the metric for “good” sex, then that fails: not only is there still a substantive gendered gap in achievement of orgasm in sexual interactions, especially between differently-gendered couples. The way

that people think about orgasm is gendered, with women's orgasms being perceived as "work" and men's as "natural," such that men's orgasms continue to be prioritized over women's (Andrejek, Fetner, and Heath 2022). Even in queer sexual encounters, individuals change how they behave based on their partner's gender, and rely on strongly gendered scripts that are both heteronormative and cisnormative (Harvey, Jones, and Copulsky 2023). And the other major way to consider measuring "good sex" – by desire of the participants – is also shortsighted. Sex is not necessarily "desirable" for all people at or at all times, but still can achieve the participants' goals for engaging in it.

The problem with using models like these to teach people about consent is that when the models do not reflect how consent happens in the real world, there can be negative consequences as people may be engaging in sexual activity that is consensual but not desirable or pleasurable. While the practice of engagement in undesirable or unpleasurable sex is heavily gendered (Thomas et al. 2017; O'Sullivan and Allgeier 1998), a lack of desire or pleasure is not the same as a lack of consent, and confusing the two is asking for trouble. Many reasons for engaging in sex that is not desired come from moments of coercion or compliance, and this is gendered (Fenner 2017), too; however, there are also sexual experiences that operate beyond this coercion/compliance understanding and which also do not consider or even explicitly decouple pleasure from the experience. By demanding that sex be desirable - or coded as "enthusiastic," as it is explicitly in both the affirmative consent and FRIES discourses - ignores the experiences of many people engaging in sexual activity they may not "desire". Sage, a non-binary graduate student engaged in kink for nearly a decade, clarifies how this emphasis on enthusiasm is insufficient in kink experiences:

Sage: I like to use the planned parenthood fries model of consent. So consent is freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic and specific with an asterisk next to enthusiastic because I don't think that all consent always needs to be enthusiastic. But I like it as a general framework...

Cierra: I'm familiar with the FRIES model. And I love that you bring it up. I do want to follow back up with that comment about consent doesn't always have to be enthusiastic...why do you think that that's not necessary all the time?

Sage: Well, enthusiasm is an overly privileged emotion. We want to be inspired, we aspire to pardon me, we aspire to enthusiasm, we want to be enthusiastic about all the choices we make. But enthusiasm is not always possible. Sometimes you do something that you're not necessarily enthusiastic about, but you want to do it for various reasons. So I think when it comes to consent in kink, there might be something that you're consenting to, because for example, you're interested in having someone push your boundaries. Let's say, I am scared shitless of you putting that burning cotton swab on my palm. But I want to know that I can get through this. And then afterward, you're going to wrap me up in a blanket and give me a piece of chocolate and tell me how good I was for doing that. Right? It's totally consensual, it's not enthusiastic, because I'm, I'm too scared, I'm doing it because I want this person to show me how they can take me to a place that scares me, for example, that's just one of I mean, hundreds of, of ways that I think consent might not be enthusiastic. Another way that I think it's important to name is that if you're new or inexperienced about something, you might want to try it out. But you just don't have the emotional or the intellectual framework to really be enthusiastic about it. And that also connects with informed consent. So maybe you're starting to become informed about something. Now you want to have the embodied experience of it. You haven't had it yet. So you're like, Can we try this thing? It's not enthusiasm, it's trepidation. It's, it's, it's unknown. It's maybe even anxiety. That doesn't negate consent.

As Sage points out, we agree to things all the time that we do not want to do - that does not mean that we are coerced into them. Sage presents only a couple of examples of how desire does not have to be an active part of the consenting process, but there are certainly many others; among them may be couples having trouble conceiving, but still trying to do so even if sex is now a chore; asexual people trying to connecting with their non-asexual partner, despite not having an interest in sex themselves; established couples engaging in “maintenance sex” to keep up intimacy in their relationship; and all of us who have simply engaged in sex at one

point that was just not that great, which, in all likelihood, is probably virtually every person that has ever engaged in a sexual encounter. Sexual liaisons where a “yes” may be given when someone agrees to sex, despite not truly desiring it, are not uncommon, nor should all of them be treated as abhorrent; engaging in sex that is not desired does not mean that it is non-consensual despite a lack of joy or pleasure in the moment of sexual interaction itself. None of these individuals’ experiences can rightly be considered non-consensual simply because they are not pleasurable, and to argue otherwise is inherently anti-feminist, as the emotional state of people involved in a sexual activity is not on its own a sufficient measure of whether that activity is consensual or not.

Another way that consent discourses are positioned as making sex “better” through this lens of “desire” is via the “Consent is sexy” discourse, but this too falls short in actually being able to make sex better for people. Marina and Daphne both articulate that this discourse is meant to make sex even sexier -

And for some people, myself included, including one of my new partners, consent is incredibly fucking sexy. And, and it was like a buzz phrase for a while, consent is sexy but it really is, when a person is telling you what they want to do to you incredibly specifically, or with you, and then asking you what you like about that...like me and my partner especially it's this loop I told them it's this feedback loop once we start, we just like, it's great. (Marina)

So you know, like you don't, it doesn't have to be a stiff stuffy conversation like you can make a conversation about consent really sexy. And like with my romantic partners, it definitely is more of that flavor than like a pickup play or something like platonic rope tie or something of that nature. (Daphne)

In both of these instances, this discourse does seem to work for Marina and Daphne, but - critically - only with established partners. Daphne shares that this is not an approach she takes with new partners during pickup play. As Jennings alluded to earlier, if consent is both operating

well within a long-term relationship *and* the rules of consent have shifted over time, then how much does this discourse actually help make sexual interactions better? Put simply, consent discourses do not adequately instruct people how to have better sexual relationships because they are not modeled after how people actually have sex. Yasmin, who has very structured consent protocols she follows due to a consent violation earlier in her time in the kink community, reflects on how *other* people maybe do not engage in such a “clinical” approach to getting consent:

Um, so for me consent, it has to be ongoing, it has to be very clear, almost like clinical. And I know for some people, they're like, that's not really sexy. I'm like, well, broken boundaries, sexy to you. So I'd rather risk, like, the clinical conversation versus like, I just stepped on your toes, and now the mood's completely ruined, and I feel like an asshole.

Continued studies of consent demonstrate how “understandings of consent are disconnected from how young people understand communication about sex” even while they have sophisticated understandings and ways of communicating intentions about sexual activity (Beres 2014). Even with increased sexual consent education in college settings, this holds; students’ “understandings of consent were relatively limited, often contradictory with participants’ lived experiences, and reflected the contexts in which participants engaged in sexual activity” (Marg 2020). A major point of the “Consent is sexy” discourse is to make people talk about and ask for consent more - but some people are unwilling because it just is not reflective of how they actually engage in sexual activity. And while talking about consent is more common among kinksters, as Yasmin has experienced, conversation is not the be-all, end-all. Relying on this “Consent is sexy” discourse can also have negative consequences, as

Hazel, a white queer 33 year old who has been practicing kink since she came of legal age, describes when discussing a new partner situation:

I will never give a blowjob my whole life, ever, will never happen. Right? Because [of] childhood trauma, but a guy that I'm going to bed with for the first time may not think to ask before he says hey, you know, and makes some kind of lewd comment about my mouth, right? Not even gonna think about it. He doesn't mean anything by it, he's not trying to be rude. Um, I can see how that can be a really an attempt to be really sexy when asking for consent, right? But you're still going to trigger the hell out of me. You don't know that, I didn't think to tell you, I should have told you. But we're past that now. Right? That's where it's a conversation. And that's where it's also a, does this build trust or does this break trust?

In Hazel's case, having long-standing sexual trauma that is not discussed beforehand - as might be perfectly understandable with a new sexual partner - and then trying to use the "Consent is sexy" discourse *in practice* can result in harm despite the participants' best interests otherwise.

This emphasis on "Consent is sexy" as a discourse that results in better sex only serves to contribute to the creation of a sexual culture that inevitably fails its participants, as it does not reliably portray what sexual activity is, but rather focuses on an unrealistic trauma-and-trigger-free version of what good sex "should be." Instead of this unachievable utopian model, sexual beings need consent discourses that account for and represent how people actually engage in sexual activity.

Conclusion

Though the first BDSM consent discourses emerged before "No Means No" and "Yes Means Yes," there is a general temporal parallel in the evolution of both kink discourses and broader American sexual consent discourses. I have separated them to provide cultural and historical context as separate, but I want to point out a broad similarity amongst all ten of the

discourses I have discussed. All of these discourses focus on the individual and interpersonal interactions; lining up neatly with the framings of consent in existing research that I believe results from the study of sexual consent largely occurring outside of American sociology (Beres 2007; Muchlenhard et al. 2016; Fenner 2017). As such, attention to the group, institutional, and structural factors that allow or hinder consent have gone largely unstudied, with a few very recent exceptions (Hirsch and Khan 2020; Buggs and Hoppe 2023). This emphasis on the individual and interpersonal level is unsurprising in American sexual culture - and, indeed, the governing of sexuality by the state - focuses on the management of individual sexuality. However, as sociological research on sexuality (Ward 2015; Ota 2020), sexual violence (Hirsch and Khan 2020; Fahlberg and Pepper 2016), and sexual subcultures (Cheves 2023; Hoppe 2023; Buchanan 2023) demonstrates, the management of sexuality is *never* about only the individual. Rather, individuals are affected by, and in turn affect, the larger cultural environment of which they are a part. American sexual culture is specifically structured by larger social forces, such as the legal system dictating who is allowed to be a sexual being, what kind of sexual activity is allowed to occur, and where that sex is allowed to happen.

In sexual consent discourses, it is striking how invisible these structural dynamics are in both American sexual culture more broadly and also within BDSM subcultures, and how they are taught and enacted above the level of the individual and interactional. Most consent discourses operate from a starting assumption that sexual activity happens in a vacuum, and it does not. In truth, all consent discourses I have relayed herein are inadequate to truly capture the experience of the individual, the moment of the interaction, and the structural and organizational forces acting upon the individuals in any sexual interaction. As Marley

highlights, it is important for people to consider the people around them - and not just those within a particular interaction - when engaging in play:

Marley: I could go on about other scenes that I've seen him partake in. one actually, particularly sticks out. He was co-topping a scene with another top, they had a bottom strapped to a chair and they were paddling her thighs, or doing something to revise. She yelled. And said no. And his direct response to her was no is not a safe word, and then hit her again.

Cierra: Wow.

Marley: And like I, as far as I know, they didn't have that kind of relationship. And like, I don't think that's really something that's cool in a public place, regardless of if you do or not. Like, that's really, really bad imagery. Particularly if you have someone new to the community, like you don't know who's there. So that's one that sticks and like the scene ended shortly thereafter.

As Marley points out, some people may only have an understanding of American sexual consent discourses when they enter BDSM spaces, and so saying something like “No is not a safe word” - a bastardization of “No means no,” - can be especially harmful to newcomers. Marina shares her personal experience of playing in a dungeon with a newer partner, how things went badly, and could have gone even worse:

I had someone faint on me once, tied to a St. Andrew's Cross, because he did not want to admit to me that he didn't feel well. And he got a tongue lashing thing from me after the aftercare, and he was okay, and then a few days later, I checked in on him and said, “We need to talk about this because this is not okay. Yeah. You get other people in the room at risk, you know, not only yourself, so it's, you know, God forbid, it was really bad we had to call an ambulance everybody in that space now is gonna feel unsafe with first responders coming into a place where discretion is really important.” Like so it's, it's yeah, it's like personal like yeah, there's all conversation about personal responsibility with that and I was like, “You need to eat before you play, come on.”

Invoking PRICK as an important facet of kink play in public spaces, Marina actually underscores how problematic it is that group dynamics are *not* considered. First, this emphasis

on “personal responsibility” means that people can get into trouble at the front end, like the partner who fainted on the St. Andrew’s Cross, because the consent discourses in use do not establish communal norms for what is acceptable behavior; playing without having eaten or while dehydrated is a big no-no in most communities I am familiar with, but it is not usually a spoken rule. The assumption here is that this person should have known that ahead of time, and it is solely *their* fault for fainting because they did not adequately take care of themselves. At the same time, though, Marina also points out how PRICK used in this case is directly harmful to other players in the scene: the safety of the group will literally be compromised should first responders be called to respond to a medical emergency, and that is certainly *not* something to which the people in the space were consenting.

Aside from the absence of the group as an entity, the other major component missing from consent discourses that should be reflected in some way is the acknowledgement of power differences between people engaging in an interaction requiring consent. As consent frameworks began to emerge thirty-plus years ago, they were simultaneously seen as a sexual equalizing tool for interpersonal relationships and a way to prevent the sexual violence by men that many women are (still) taught to expect. These frameworks have shifted in some significant ways, but the absence of acknowledgement, let alone analysis, of power dynamics as the reason consent frameworks are necessary in the first place, is stark. Nevermind the very real need for greater attention to how social identities such as race, gender, and class are always intersecting with sexual situations such that one’s ability to consent is always in part predicated by those very social identities. These varying cultural dynamics affect who gets access to specific kinds of sexuality, and who does not; unsurprisingly, these dynamics are often used to keep more marginalized individuals from being able to participate most fully, and, in effect, to

actually be able to consent to what they are partaking in. Ulysses, self-identifying as bipolar, is a 21 year old white transmasculine nonbinary bipolar sex worker who specializes in BDSM play. They share their discomfort with some consent models as they give me their understanding of consent:

Cierra: to start with, I'm wondering if you can just tell me how you define consent, and where you got that definition from or how you came to it?

Ulysses: Um, FRIES. So Tumblr, you know, freely given reversible, informed, explicit... what's the last one? Safe?

Cierra: I think so. [laughs] I always forget the 'S' too.

Ulysses: Yeah, [laughs] it's like, it's either safe or sex. Yeah. You know, as someone into CNC also, and someone who's also insane, I don't like the sane and safe one, obviously.

Cierra: Why not?

Ulysses: Because, you know, well, I get it. But it just kind of goes into, in my opinion, a little bit of like, ableism, where it's just like, I mean, I'm not saying, but I can still have, you know, safe sex...

The critique that Ulysses makes of “Safe, Sane, and Consensual” is one of the most abounding in kink spaces, both virtual and in-person. Nobody is sane all of the time, and especially for those who might use BDSM as a way of dealing with trauma (Hammers 2018), the lack of sanity does not equate to an inability to participate in safe sex practices; this criticism was literally one of the reasons for the branching out into RACK and PRICK, as I trace above. But mental health was not the only power dynamic that was cited as not well-addressed by consent discourses. Ben, the Daddy Dom invested in violence prevention in his community, and David, a bisexual Latinx/white biracial Dom in his 30s, both alluded to the problematic gendering

inherent in consent discourses. In explaining his appreciation for rules in BDSM communities, Ben tells me about his experience navigating sexual liaisons in the vanilla world:

I don't think the term consent was quite as common as it is in this community. It was like, No means no, it was another way of saying it. And, but then I have guy friends that are like, No, there's no way. And then I had girlfriends who were like, yeah, no doesn't always mean no. I'm like, I couldn't follow these rules. I like clear cut rules. So I was always a little too hesitant to kiss a girl on a date. I didn't know she wanted me to kiss her. I didn't know she was just gonna let me kiss her because, well, "it's easier than trying to force him away from [me]," so I'd be like, so I would walk her to her door, being a gentleman. And then I would step back before getting to the actual kiss.

In this example, the sexual gatekeeping assigned to women - and to women in heterosexual interactions, in particular - has confusing results for people of different genders. For the men in Ben's circle of friends, a "no" meant "there's no way," presumably because of the supposed danger inherent in violating a "no" and being accused of sexual assault thereafter (a fear commonly cited by men post- #MeToo, given their fears of how to now interact with women). But, per Ben's experience at least, "no" from the women he knew, including those he sought sexually, was not always so clear cut; sometimes, "no" was meant to be interpreted as "chase me" instead. David shares a similar observation of the duality of "no means no" in the vanilla world versus the wonderful world of kink:

Cierra: So is there a difference between consent and the vanilla world versus consent in our world?

David: In essence, I would say no, ultimately, it comes down to there being a line at some point and you being aware of that line. In the kink world, it's harder and easier. harder because you screaming "No, no no!" can actually increase, mean the exact opposite in the game, you screaming "stop!" can mean the exact opposite and make the game harder or but then easier in that for many people, there are ways to be safe by implementing safe words or the red yellow green system, or having a watcher if you're into that in the middle of your scene, kind of referee to observe if things go too hard or too heavy. So in that case, it's it's different. It's, I guess, different. In our, if done, right. And kink world, there's

versions of safety checks, I guess I don't, I guess there are in the vanilla world, but they're more blatant, I guess, in the kink world.

Turning Ben's observation of how "no means no" can mean "yes" in the vanilla world, David argues that it can do the same in BDSM, except that there are safety catches in place in BDSM spaces that do not necessarily exist in vanilla sexual settings. What they both point out is the inefficacy of the "no means no" discourse for understanding, and as David points out, there thus needs to be some other way to measure consent instead, as with the stoplight system model he references.

Intersections of gender with other social positions are implicated in these discourses, and the ways that they are used (or not), as Daphne discussed with me throughout our interview. Daphne has a substantive amount of kink educating experience under her proverbial belt. Here, she explains her trajectory to arriving at enthusiastic consent - invoking FRIES, once more - as her baseline for playing:

Daphne: When I was first entering into kink and BDSM I do think like a lot of my consent, the consent that I gave people was closer to coercion than like my full enthusiastic consent. And that is definitely like no longer the case. But to deprogram myself from what I initially thought, consent and all of that involved took time. And I think, you know, a lot of that time was just doing it over and over again in the BDSM community and educating myself and talking to other people about how they do the thing.

Cierra: So how did you come to realize that the consent that you were giving was more coerced and not maybe fully informed or fully enthusiastic?

Daphne: Um, because when I would give that to people before I was playing, you know, when I was just starting off in the community, I was never thrilled about like, things that we were doing. I was never psyched. Like, I, I felt like I was obligated to say yes. Which is very different than being super jazzed to say, yes. Like, those are two very different yeses that tell very different stories about where a person is. And I was definitely, yeah, I was not enthusiastic about a lot of the consent I used to give. And so I would, I think that's the line I would draw between, like, coercion and enthusiastic consent.

Cierra: Why did you feel obligated?

Daphne: Um, it's hard for me to tell people No. Like, I think just having been raised as a, like, Asian woman, a lot of that background. We, like, the women in my family have not been great at speaking up or advocating for their own selves and needs. And so learning how to do that, for myself was not something I totally grew up around, and I needed to learn how to do that for myself over time.

While some of Daphne's reflection on enthusiasm mirror's Sage's discussion of it earlier on, the key difference here is Daphne's intersectional experiences prior to being a kink community member, specifically as an Asian woman. And Daphne's point is such an excellent one - that because of sociocultural factors, in this case around racialized and gendered identities, the actual ability to give or rescind consent is not available to everyone. In other words, some people really cannot say "no," so a "yes" does not mean "yes" and in these cases is still actually a "no." While existing research on use of consent discourses has captured the ways that it is gendered (cite), some of which I demonstrate throughout this chapter, there is not yet work explicitly centering how racialization and its intersection with gender affects consent.

Despite the underlying cultural discourse that positions consent as a sexual equalizer, sex has never been about equality, nor can it be by default when unequal relations stemming from social identities that are ascribed different positions in the power hierarchy continue to exist, whether these are based in mental health, gender, or racial identities; while we can work toward a world where we envision sexual equality is a reality, it is not yet. To ignore the power differentials that structure our sex lives, while using one-size-fits-all slogans to manage those same sex lives, is naive at best. The existing discourses in use are then not only dysfunctional,

but not truly useful, if they cannot help people navigate the politics of engaging in sexual behavior with people who have different forms of social power.

Consent discourses fail to attend to the role that culture and social structure play in creating and maintaining sexual identities, focusing only on the individual/interpersonal level of sexual life without attention to the greater social forces that influence who people have sex with, how they have sex, and even what they want from sexual relationships. This neoliberal emphasis on the individual as the be-all, end-all consent-maker is a way to hide the fact that sexuality is not isolated from social interaction, nor is sex. The emphasis on the individual removes the possibility, the reality, that there are community norms and other social expectations beyond the individual and beyond the particular people engaging in that sexual activity that affect how that encounter goes, nevermind how those people are held in their particular sexual community (Ota 2020; Phan Howard 2023; Cheves 2023).

In this chapter, I have delineated how consent discourses are portrayed to have three main functions: to educate, to prevent violence, and to help people achieve better sex. I have demonstrated how these discourses do sometimes provide a little education, but not enough; they do not meaningfully prevent sexual violence from occurring; and they do not help make sex “better,” in large part because they do not actually reflect how people engage in sexual activity. What is it that consent frameworks *actually* do, then? As I will elucidate in the next chapter, consent discourses are a structural tool to exercise control over sexuality, through either group or institutional means. As BDSM operates largely outside of the law, given it is not expressly legal in the United States, and as certain types of play remain illegal, constraints on consent are not there in the way that they are in other sexual communities, and so people

can engage in other practices that can be beneficial for all, which I discuss more in chapter four as I introduce a transformational justice model of consent. But, before then, it is important to turn our attention to how consent operates not just as a *discourse* but *in practice* - how do BDSM practitioners engage these consent discourses in their physical experiences of play? And what are the consequences of doing so? As I will demonstrate, consent discourses have a significant role in BDSM communities - and, likely, in other sexual communities as well - for not only creating but maintaining pre-existing social inequalities amongst members of the community. Even if we never reach a sexual culture of equality, as I maintain is truly utopian, we ought to strive towards more equitable sexual communities, and a primary way of doing so is to investigate where inequities hide.

Hegemonic Consent and the Perpetuation of Social Inequalities

Introduction

Cierra: Is there something that you really struggle with in being part of these various [BDSM] communities?

Sage: Yeah, old cis white dudes.

Cierra: [laughs] Expand on that for me.

Sage: [laughs] Okay. The worldview that old cis white dudes in kink tend to espouse tends to be diametrically opposed to my worldview in almost every way, except for the fact that they're kinksters. In my experience, old cis white dudes think that kink is about fucking the shit out of people with vaginas to show them how powerless they are.

Cierra: Yeah, that's pretty gnarly.

Sage: Yeah.

Sage, a pansexual non-binary PhD student who has nearly a decade's worth of experience practicing and teaching in kink communities, is not at all shy in naming the people who have treated them and their friends and partners inappropriately in the communities in which they have practiced. Unlike many of the practitioners I spoke with, Sage is unique in that they have spent time in at least four geographically distinct kink communities, including several abroad. As a non-binary person, Sage has experienced discrimination based on their actual versus perceived gender identity. And this discrimination has often come from people who not only occupy the top of the status hierarchy in these communities - "old cis white dudes," in Sage's own words - but also from those who simultaneously tend to have more control over how these communities operate. They control the physical venues, the handling of consent violations, and the repercussions that come with consent violations.

Though "old cis white dudes" are far from the only people who cause harm in BDSM communities, their positioning in the sexual geography (Hirsch and Khan 2020) of kink spaces

as well as their literal and figurative domination of the sexual hierarchy in the sexual fields (Green 2011) of pansexual BDSM sexual communities. This is a reflection of a hegemonic ideology of a singular way to “do consent,” stemming from a hegemonic ideology of “doing sex” that privileges white, cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual practices. The ideology of “doing consent” constitutes what I am calling “hegemonic consent discourses” and “hegemonic consent practices.” To be clear, this hegemonic construction of “doing sex” is not a monolith; there is diversity within sexual practices that center white cisgender, abled, heterosexual people. What I am drawing attention to here is how the sexual practices built around these identities – those at the top of their respective hierarchies of race, gender, sex, and ability – are hegemonic, just as those identities themselves are. This aligns with Connell’s theorization of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Whether or not this hegemonic heterosexual is achievable is not the point, but rather, it is constructed as the ideal type against which all other forms of sex, or in my argument, all other forms of consent, are contrasted.

I concluded the previous chapter by reflecting briefly on BDSM practitioners’ own understandings of the faultiness of existing consent discourses. These discourses are insufficient to fully address the lived realities of how consent is *practiced* by kinksters in these communities. As I demonstrate in this chapter, these discourses do not fully capture the gamut of what consent is and what consent does for participants in a community. Further, the way that consent discourses are put into practice by practitioners structures BDSM sexual fields (Green 2011). Rather than leveling social and sexual hierarchies, and fostering more egalitarian social and sexual relations, I show that sexual consent discourses instead often work in ways that reinforce inequality between sexual partners, both manifesting hierarchy and maintaining

social relations that privilege some participants' experiences over those of others. In this chapter, I highlight how consent discourses are employed within BDSM communities – both within scenes and beyond them – as a purported tool to ensure that all participants' consent is realized, but also as a tool that operates to enforce existing social inequalities such as racism, ableism, misogyny, transphobia, and more whilst simultaneously obscuring this process as it occurs. In these communities, the results are stark: despite ongoing critique by scholar-practitioners and kinksters more broadly, communities across the United States continue to center cishetero abled patriarchy (Sheff and Hammers 2011; Martinez 2020).

Hegemonic Consent

While BDSM remains on the “outer limits” (Rubin 1984) of acceptable sexual behavior in the United States, American sexual culture has shifted to become more inclusive in a number of ways over the last forty years.²³ Simultaneously, however, current cultural attacks on progressive gender and sexual rights²⁴ demonstrate that a rigid gendered-sexual hierarchy following feminist anthropologist Gayle Rubin's “charmed circle” (1984) continues to undergird American sexual culture at large. “Good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality” (Rubin 1984) is centered historically to prioritize the experiences and desires, including pleasure, of individuals at the top of other social hierarchies: men who are also cisgendered, white, and able-bodied. As Rubin argues, there are only certain ways to have sex that are permissible;

²³ Most pertinent examples include the legalization of “gay marriage” and the release of the first-ever over-the-counter birth control pill in March 2024.

²⁴ Among other examples include: the ongoing attack on transgender rights, the Dobbs abortion rights ruling in the Supreme Court in 2022 and subsequent state attacks on reproductive rights, including contraception; and even the March 2024 suspension of Pornhub access in the state of Texas,

everything outside of this cisgender, heterosexual sex (which I hereafter refer to more simply as cisheterosex) remains the standard, and everything else remains degrees of deviance away from this hegemonic norm. Cisheterosex is the hegemonic way of “doing sex” within American sexual culture. Even if it is not how many, or even most people, actually *do* sex, it is how Americans believe they *should* be doing sex and/or it is the standard of “doing sex” to which other doings of sex are (at least implicitly, but often explicitly) compared and understood.

As benchmarks for how sex is normatively and without stigma supposed to happen, consent discourses emerge from this hegemonic cisheterosexuality. Consent as a theoretical concept is sexualized to reflect the tenets of heterosexuality that prioritize men over women, both in expectations of pleasure and fear of violence. Consent is *also* a gendered process - men “do consent” one way while women “do consent” in a different way (Humphreys 2007; Powell 2008; Burkett and Hamilton 2012; Kanga 2014; Jozkowski et al. 2014). The traditionally heteronormative scripts that men and women rely on in sexual encounters is shown from the moment consent begins: men are more likely to use nonverbal cues to indicate consent and its withdrawal, while women are more likely to use verbal cues (Jozkowski et al. 2014). Both men and women expect men to take on the role of sexual initiator, and men are also significantly more likely to use deceit to obtain sex than are women (Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). Studies of consent reinforce these cisheterosex norms, with most studies focused on women’s indications of consent and withdrawal and men’s interpretations of women’s behaviors (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Thus, research has consistently documented that men are generally presumed to request consent, while women are generally presumed as those responding to such requests. This approach reifies assumptions about who is responsible for requesting and giving

consent in a sexual encounter (women as gatekeepers), effectively disenfranchising *everyone* participating in sexual activity. There is inequity built into the consent process of consent because there is inequity between genders; importantly, if women are “doing consent” one way and men are “doing consent” another way, then consent discourses must also be reflecting this gendering.

The combined cisheterosexualization and gendering of consent reflects how sex happens for men versus how sex happens for women. And it is troubling, as a binaristic set-up, to focus on the man-woman or male-female dichotomy, as the sex/gender binary is also upheld via the charmed circle (Rubin 1984). People who fall outside of these hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality are either engaging in activities that are not recognizable as sex and/or are not recognizable as consensual (such as with cross-racial sex and marriage prior to *Loving v. Virginia*). This cishetero ideology of consent and the discourses that emerge from it are also cisgendered and heterosexualized; the promises that these discourses offer to participants are built on this logic that centers white male supremacy, including the threat of violence that comes with it. That is, the logic of discourses of consent is cisheteronormative despite being offered as a framework within which to make sense of any sexual interaction. Indeed, each of the three tenets of consent discourse I identified in Chapter 2 - education, violence prevention, and better sex - are gendered.

To demonstrate what these discourses look like in practice, I offer the hegemonic example of the beginning of sexual life, pivotal one for its timeliness and stage-setting for sexual life more broadly: the American cishetero narrative of “virginity loss.”

Although definitions are slowly shifting, including among queer populations who may not engage in penis-in-vagina intercourse, the roots of “virginity” as a concept originate from a gendered context focused on white Christian purity and reproduction. Even now the concept of “virginity loss” is still typically defined by individuals as the first time a person engages in penetrative sex of a vagina by a penis (Carpenter 2001; Carpenter 2002). Generally, the “first time” is constructed as an awkward fumbling between a presumably heterosexual couple soon to reach adulthood who have romantic feelings for one another. Further, they are innocent and *do not know how to have sex* other than the basic mechanics of what-goes-where (Savoury et al. 2022). The interaction is symbolically loaded, situated as a “loss” for women but a benefit for men (Holland et al. 2000).

Losing one’s virginity is a gendered accomplishment such that it is expected for men to be celebrated as no-longer-virgins, while women navigate a more complicated status post-virginity. Expectations for pleasure are one-sided, prioritizing the male orgasm while women’s are “incidental” (Wade, Kremer, and Brown 2005) and the reality is gendered as well: between 60% and 70% of men report “extreme physiological sexual satisfaction” during first intercourse while only 25% of women report the same (Higgins et al. 2010). In simpler terms, *sex is not good for everyone*. And, for women, *first sex carries many connotations of violence*, from the literal rupturing of bodily tissue and the pain that can accompany that (Planned Parenthood 2011; Go Ask Alice 2015) as more than 50% of girls and women report experiencing (Tsui and Nicoladis 2004); to anticipated coercion from one’s partner to go farther than one might want (Holland et al. 2000); and the fears of pregnancy that result in “gendered compulsory birth control,” a burden born almost exclusively by women (Littlejohn

2021). How is this the ideal for entry into the sexual world, and how is it so incredibly gendered that men are positioned for status and pleasure and women bear the brunt of the shame and pain?

The aspirations for how to have sex that are captured in consent discourses - being educated about sex, preventing violence in sexual encounters, and having better sex - are rooted in *the* way to “do sex” from the moment it is permissible and thus expected for Americans to be sexual beings. As such, this hegemonic ideology of cisheterosex has resulted in hegemonic consent discourses and practices. To be “hegemonic”, this ideology of consent, based in cisheterosex, does not need to dominate not by force, but instead typically works by spreading “through culture, institutions, and persuasion” (Gramsci 1971; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). And for it to operate culturally, such an ideology of consent must be diffused throughout American culture.

The Disconnect between Discourse and Practice

To better understand the hegemonic consent ideologies in American sexual culture, a differentiation between the *ideal* of sex (as proffered by sexual consent discourses) versus the *reality* of sex (as demonstrated by actual sexual consent practices) is critical. While this hegemonic discourse of consent may work for and accurately describe many interactions that people are seeking and accessing in American sexual culture, it cannot - and does not - reflect all of the consent that people are seeking in their sexual interactions. This is, in part, because it relies on a hegemonic way of “doing sex” that is not achievable, or desirable, for all people (Rubin 1984). Moreover, I have already established that there is a singular ideal of “doing sex” properly, but in reality, people engage in sex for numerous reasons. Hirsch and Khan (2020)

call these “sexual projects” - literally, the answer to the question of *why* people engage in sexual activity (for pleasure? money? intimacy? status?). And it does not take heavy theorizing to understand how people can have multiple, contradictory sometimes, and often overlapping reasons for engaging in sex; having ever had sex oneself, or talked to someone who has about their experience(s) is sufficient enough to see the multitudinous sexual projects that exist. That there is variation in people’s sexual projects - having sex for pleasure, for intimacy, for conception, for status, for gaining power over others, and so on - demonstrates that there cannot be a singular way to “do sex,” and, thus, not a singular way to “do consent” either, despite legal stipulations otherwise.²⁵ And, critically, even the same person can experience variation in their sexual projects at different points in their life; consent, then, can also be understood differently by the same person at different points in their life. Notably, too, these sexual projects also shift across time within the same population because they are not just individually derived, but instead stem from societal understandings of how, when, and why to “do sex.”

Consider, for instance, the transition on college campuses from “No Means No” to “Yes Means Yes” I discussed in the last chapter, and what that shift indicates about a change in the expectation of what college students’ sexual projects *should be*. That consent discourses fail to capture how people actually “do sex” is understandable, because these discourses do not capture variation in sexual projects because of the lack of ability to acknowledge that variation even exists. What emerges when people put consent discourses into practice is a disconnect between the two - the “how to do consent” and the “doing consent” necessarily do not match in practice as they do in theory. As a result, people engaging in sexual activity then piece

²⁵ See Chapters 1 and 2.

together consent discourses in a way that most reflect how they actually “do consent” in practice.

That one discourse alone is insufficient is a repeated theme amongst the kinksters I interviewed. Multiple BDSM practitioners I interviewed hit on this point, describing the use of multiple discourses while seeming to acknowledge that no single discourse works to meet their needs. Opal, who I introduced in Chapter Two for instance, tells me about how she defines consent based on discourses she has learned in required introductory BDSM classes in her community, run by fellow kinkster Daphne:

Opal: I’d say it’s permission. But if we want to get to the framework, I like to use FRIES. I don’t know if you ever heard that before, freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific. So for me, the actual definition of consent is stated permission. But for me consent in the kink scene means all of those things, it means it’s freely given, enthusiastic, informed, reversible.

Cierra: And how did you, I mean, I know that that’s a model that comes from Planned Parenthood in particular, how did you come into contact with that?

Opal: Daphne started, that’s how, that was already built into her 101 class. I took her class and changed it and kind of modified it to myself. But that’s the one she uses. In addition to RACK [risk aware consensual kink] instead of safe, sane, and consensual. That’s the one we use because we feel like it is a little more updated.

While Opal’s basic definition of consent is “permission,” she utilizes multiple frameworks - both within (RACK, SSC) and beyond BDSM (FRIES) to fully derive a model that reflects what consent in kink means to her in practice. Though she mostly names the tenets of FRIES that she relies on, RACK is also an important discourse as it captures something the Planned Parenthood model does not: risk-awareness. And Opal was not alone in bridging RACK with another discourse for a fuller practice of consent in kink activities. Noah, the kinkster in

Chapter Two who talked with me about throwing parties with his wife at their home, explains to me how rules are set for these parties derived from his understandings of consent:

I've definitely read a fair amount of polyamory media and BDSM media that often talks about consent as being important. And it's also, it's not a specific enough term, but just the word. So if we're talking about informed consent, or enthusiastic consent, those add additional colors to it. So I guess for, for the purposes of what we're talking about, like I'll stack them all together. When I'm introducing somebody new, or when we're talking about house rules for one of our parties, we generally use a combination of, of RACK, of risk aware consensual kink, and also like enthusiastic and informed consent... I think consent comes up as a challenge more on the very front end of somebody who's new and doing like pickup play, and they've never really played before.

For Noah, these “additional colors” that “informed” and “enthusiastic” responses add to the discourse of consent become critically important in a group setting over which he holds some responsibility, especially when newer kinksters are present who have limited or no experience.

Kinksters also used multiple consent discourses to point out where practices do not align in ways that make sense to their understanding of consent in practice. Ben, a white Daddy Dom in his early 40s who was also a relatively new player (having been in the scene only three years when our interview occurred), focused a lot in our conversation about how being clear-cut kink rules made things for him, which he felt empowered by. At the very beginning of our interview, when I asked him what BDSM meant to him, he immediately hones in on consent being the critical component for him. He explains:

Ben: I like the rules of it. I like the consent. I like when you follow the rules. I like the “ask once and once only, no means no, yes means yes. “Whereas in the vanilla world, if I can say that without being derogatory, everything is like, “No, you can ask five times, that’s okay.” Persistence pays off. I never liked that. And I thought that was the only way the world worked. And so I was very impressed by that. But then when I got the screening, and they’re like, “No, we follow rules, like to the letter, those that follow rules.”

Cierra: Right? [both laugh]

Ben: Then I was like, oh my god! because I like rules. I like lists. I like knowing what the boundaries are. And then there's no question. Everything is just more open.

Even though Ben is critical of the discourses he mentions - “Yes Means Yes” and “No Means No” - he cites them as overlapping in his experiences in the vanilla world. And while Ben goes on to later define consent in the “Safe, Sane, Consensual” model (see Chapter 2) he also continues to employ the “once and only once” discourse connecting affirmative consent and “No Means No” that he cites here. In this case, it is not that Ben is utilizing multiple discourses to document how sexual behavior works in his experience, but instead he bridges multiple consent discourses to emphasize his point about how sexual consent in the vanilla world does *not* work in the way he needs. Helen, who runs in the same circles as Daphne and Opal and has a background in public health doing educational work on sex, also defines consent for me by using the FRIES model, focusing at first on “informed” and “freely given” as vital tenets in her understanding. When I ask Helen about the role of enthusiasm, she launches into a brief monologue about the role of enthusiasm in her adherence to sexual versus other practices of consent:

Um, so definitely, like familiar with the the idea of enthusiastic consent and that sort of just being okay with something, or like accepting it, it, you know, not being the same as like being excited about it and really looking for that kind of excitement. It's something that the person actively wants to do, is looking for, and I do agree with that in a lot of ways. I've also recently been thinking about, especially when it comes to sex and sexual play in my own relationship to like that, you know, there's this sort of idea of like, I'm trying to remember the phrasing. It's from, like Emily Nagasaki's book, *Come As You Are*, like, responsive. I think I think she says, like, like, where you aren't necessarily, like actively, horny, or lack of a better word, but you kind of respond to the other person's energy or like, can, like through certain forms of touch that are not

necessarily explicitly sexual kind of come to being ready for sex, but that you aren't necessarily going to get there on your own. And for me, that's often, I guess, been the case, or that there's sort of, um, I've had a lot of times where I'd say my relationship to sex or to sexual play, is, I'm, like, open to it with certain partners in appropriate contexts but like, I don't seek it out actively. It's not like, sex is just not something that I necessarily approach with like a "hell yes, I want this right now!" kind of thing. But where I'm like, "I'm genuinely open to this, interested in it, if that's something that the other person wants," but like I wait for, like them and like will follow their lead. But that's not out of like, hesitance, that's just how I function. And that can also be kind of hard with partners who are much more trying to operate off an enthusiastic consent model, because like, they just won't bring it up. Because they don't want to have even the possibility that they're like, pressuring me or like putting that on me. And then I'm like, okay, but no, like, if I tell you, like, I'm interested, but like, you're gonna need to, like, bring it up. Or if we've established that within our relationship, there's a dynamic where, like, I'll do something or wear something to like, show times when it's okay to approach me like that. But like, I'm never going to be like, "yes, fuck me now, please!" I just don't operate that way. But it's sort of like, "let me tell you what I'm in the place of like, being open to it." And that is me, consenting, even if it doesn't fit, an enthusiastic consent model. And also, like, I think that's still like, counts as consenting.

While Helen relies on FRIES as her primary model of consent, as she describes, enthusiasm is not a focus in her own sexual projects, and that can - and has - put her into conflict with partners before, who expect her to display enthusiasm as a benchmark for their interaction going well, and even for certain activities to occur. Helen articulates a way around this potential site of conflict, explaining how she has devised ways to demonstrate her consent to sex to her partner(s) that they can read - a counterpractice to the scripted understanding of consent that the FRIES discourse presents. She continues by explaining how in other non-sexual BDSM contexts, she utilizes the enthusiasm she disavows as necessary to her more-specifically sexual activities:

Because it's like, if there are times where for physical or mental health reasons, for example, I don't feel up to it, or like, you know, we start doing something and it's just not feeling right. I don't want to do any more like, it's with people where I trust that I can be like, "actually, no," and just have it and like, it still fits all the other, you know, informed, revokable, et cetera. It's just not

necessarily enthusiastic. I do think that's a great model for a lot of things, and for a lot of people, and I like the enthusiastic consent concept. And I would also say, like, for a lot of the other types of play, I do when it's not sexual, that's what I go with, like, I will be like, "Fuck, yeah, please hit me as hard as possible with all of these implements!" Um, it's just, there are other models of consent that I think can also be valid and applicable. And I just would like people to be able to have nuanced conversations about these things.

Helen points out how this discourse utilizing enthusiasm is "a great model... for other people," highlighting a recognition that there are differences in her sexual projects from others that she might interact with, even though she does not delve into that further while also expressing a desire for more widespread conversation about differing models of consent.²⁶ Helen is not alone in criticizing "enthusiasm" as not exactly representative of how she practices BDSM. Sage, a nonbinary polyamorous self-identified "rope geek" with nearly a decade of experience in BDSM communities also focuses in on this tenet in the FRIES discourse:

Sage: I like to use the Planned Parenthood FRIES model of consent. So consent is freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic and specific with an asterisk next to enthusiastic because I don't think that all consent always needs to be enthusiastic. But I like it as a general framework...

Cierra: I'm familiar with the FRIES model and I love that you bring it up. I do want to follow back up with that comment about consent doesn't always have to be enthusiastic...

Sage: Well, enthusiasm is an overly privileged emotion. We want to be inspired, we aspire to enthusiasm, we want to be enthusiastic about all the choices we make. But enthusiasm is not always possible. Sometimes you do something that you're not necessarily enthusiastic about, but you want to do it for various reasons. So I think when it comes to consent in kink, there might be something that you're consenting to, because for example, you're interested in having someone push your boundaries. Let's say, I am scared shitless of you putting that burning cotton swab on my palm. But I want to know that I can get through this. And then afterward, you're going to wrap me up in a blanket and give me a piece of chocolate and tell me how good I was for doing that. Right? It's totally consensual, it's not enthusiastic, because I'm, I'm too scared, I'm doing

²⁶ I discuss this further in Chapter 4 as I articulate how practitioners are educated about, and in turn educate others about, consent within BDSM communities.

it because I want this person to show me how they can take me to a place that scares me, for example, that's just one of I mean, hundreds of, of ways that I think consent might not be enthusiastic. Another way that I think it's important to name is that if you're new or inexperienced about something, you might want to try it out. But you just don't have the emotional or the intellectual framework to really be enthusiastic about it. And that also connects with informed consent. So maybe you're starting to become informed about something. Now you want to have the embodied experience of it. You haven't had it yet. So you're like, Can we try this thing? It's not enthusiasm, it's trepidation. It's, it's, it's unknown. It's maybe even anxiety. That doesn't negate consent.

Sage eloquently breaks down how even though they rely on FRIES as their preferred sexual consent discourse, they are not actually always fully using the discourse because the “enthusiasm” piece does not fit with how they do kink. And, as they explain, in some ways, being “informed” can actually be at odds with being “enthusiastic” because someone may want to engage in an activity they actually dislike, or are unsure of, or - as with Sage's example of the burning cotton ball on the palm - are even afraid of. Sage also points out the role of inexperience in navigating these discourses; as both Noah and Thomas the erotica writer (see Chapter One) discussed, being informed presupposes a certain knowledge base to begin with. Without this knowledge base, it is not possible to be both informed *and* enthusiastic. Affirmative consent and FRIES as sexual consent discourses, then, in and of themselves breakdown as not completely achievable for everyone engaging in sex because not everyone who relies on these discourses will have already engaged in sexual activity; even sexperts or well-practiced BDSMers may still have a lack of embodied knowledge about a particular act or toy or roleplay that precludes full enthusiasm.

Finally, Keanu, a gay Hawaiian Dom and pup handler in his early 30s, shares a story of a scene he witnessed between a friend and fellow Dom and an over-eager young boy pup.²⁷ As Keanu begins to explain, this pup had misbehaved and was to receive a “punishment” scene. But this pup was very service-oriented, and extremely talented at masking his emotional and physical reactions that the Dom who was punishing him could not adequately read his body cues. Keanu, having extensive experience around gym-goers, realized quickly that the boy was in trouble:

He had a, you know, when you’re dehydrated, and there’s that little crusty stuff on the side of your mouth. And also the way he was sweating, it was a stress sweating. It wasn’t physical activity sweating. I can kind of tell that with people because of, you know, the same stuff, but also being around people that work out a lot... And so I didn’t get involved directly. But I did indicate to my friend who was issuing the punishment, I did nonverbally communicate to him by catching his eye that I needed to talk to him. And so he disengaged the scene, we helped him untie the boy. But technically, before I talked to him, I did kind of annoy him because he just wasn’t sure what I was doing. So I kind of annoyed him by taking the boy outside and with a bottle of water. And we like talked for a long time outside before we went back inside. But I told him that, you know, being so young, it’s really easy to get caught up in like, being objectified. And I think chasing the the high of being objectified, feeling, you know, all those endorphins and fun chemicals from being service oriented and fulfilling the service, it can be it can be a little too enticing to keep going. And I think helping people understand their limits first, or, or being more aware of them would have been a better way to handle that than to keep going because the boy didn’t say anything or do anything that indicated he didn’t consent to the next thing that was offered. The Dom that I was friends with and I both tend to really like to do leading play, where like, you know, you might pull up an item say like, like a plug or a flogger or a rope. And you kind of like tease them with it. You get them to verbally consent as you go by showing them the next item that you want to use. If it’s a toy oriented scene, for instance, or like you know, like “oh, you want that you want that?” and then you kind of get them to agree to it but you kind of note they wanted it anyway. And then you move into the playstyle. I think that he had offered that because the boy, going into it, knowing

²⁷ To be totally clear, there were no minors in the scene described here. For participants engaging in a submissive role in a scene, gendered language such as “girl” or “boy” that connote a lower status in the social hierarchy may be used by participants, willingly, as part of the power exchange occurring. All participants in this scene - and all others depicted in this dissertation - were legally consenting (ha) adults.

it was a punishment play, because he had broken a rule - I think that [the boy] had thought that he had to consent to whatever. And I think that my friend read that as he is affirmatively consenting, and I think that that's where they didn't communicate, they didn't really have the same expectation of what was going to happen. And I think that maybe that would have been better with communication.

The Dom's misreading of the pup's body cues as affirmative consent certainly indicates a communication breakdown, and as Keanu rationalizes, signals also a need for that pup to have better limits for themselves.²⁸ More importantly though, it highlights the breakdown from discourse of affirmative consent to the practice of it - the pup did not communicate anything verbally, per Keanu's telling, and thus by default could not be engaging affirmative consent in his scene with the Dom. This was not a consent violation per any of the three's accounting, but it is an illustration of how consent can "go wrong" (in essence, become a consent violation) when a discourse is used that does not match the practice of an actual sexual encounter.

As I have shown here, for many kinksters, the discourses they attempt to use to navigate consent simply do not always align with their actual practices. While it does appear that there is some general awareness of this at the individual level, there is no simultaneous understanding of this disconnect between discourse and practice above the level of the individual, which I argue speaks to the hegemonic nature of consent discourses. This lack of alignment between the micro, meso, and macro levels where consent discourse and consent practice operate is also, I believe, a reflection of how attempts to "do consent" are operating *only* at the level of the individual, while discourses of consent operate at the individual,

²⁸ Notably, this is not uncommon for folks newer to the scene, of all genders, but especially for folks who identify as bottoms or submissives; it is very easy to lose one's head when newer to kink play, especially when intense psycho-physiological sensations are part of a scene. This is thus not a victim-blaming critique, as it might read to outsiders, but instead an observation from a more-experienced player about, frankly, *two* less experienced players.

interactional, and communal levels. However, not only are these hegemonic discourses not reflective of individual people's sexual projects, but they are *also* not reflective of either the sexual geographies (Hirsch and Khan 2020) or sexual fields (Green 2011) wherein participants are "doing consent."

Because cisheterosex remains the default, the failure of consent discourses to adequately reflect sexual projects of individual participants while simultaneously neglecting the specific sexual geographies and sexual fields in which consent is happening, anything that does not fall in line with the hegemonic consent discourse cannot be recognized as something which should be occurring anyways, thus allowing for social inequalities to occur when these discourses are put into practices. And without recognition of practices as normal or abnormal above the level of the individual, then these inequalities of many kinds can (and do) occur. This is incredibly harmful to sexual communities, as those I study, and allows inequalities of many kinds to become further entrenched within these sexual communities; even if someone who endures a form of inequality can label it, and then bring attention to it, there will not necessarily be greater acknowledgement of that inequality as a responsibility of the community to address. And, participants may not necessarily even bring these experiences to a broader communal level for addressing specifically because of the logics of the space in which they exist (Wade 2021). This results in further reinforcement of hegemonic consent, cementing cisheterosex at the top of the sexual hierarchy where it always was to begin with (Rubin 1984; Rich 1980).

Ultimately, then, both hegemonic consent discourses and the consent practices that emerge from them result in the perpetuation of inequalities within communities - both those

that are gendered and or sexual in nature, but also those that reflect other social positionalities, such as race, class, and ability. In the final part of this chapter, I demonstrate how these consent discourses are used by practitioners - both American sexual consent discourses and BDSM discourses - to “do consent” in this hegemonic way that reinforces existing power hierarchies rather than challenging or breaking them down. This happens because hegemonic discourses of consent focus on the behavior of the individual, with no acknowledgement or inclusion of the social bubble within which they exist or within which sexual interaction is taking place. This includes the groups, communities, and institutions that structure sexual behavior and subsequent consequences for violation of that behavior. Consent discourses are built from the American ideology of individual responsibility, such that it is *always* up to the individual to ensure consent happens the way it is “supposed” to. This emphasis on the individual ignores the structural conditions that allow for consent to happen - or not - such that any number of violent social interactions including racism, ableism, sexual violence, transphobia, and so on, can remain unchallenged above the level of the individual-interactional because of the lack of structural response and support systems. It is this lack of attention to the structural rules and influence governing sexual behaviors, including the process of consent, that enable structural inequalities to be upheld. And, as I will demonstrate, these inequalities are not only upheld, but also are exacerbated by the individualistic focus on consent discourses.

Inequality in BDSM Communities

Elaborating on the above, here I present a number of cases in which consent practice does not reflect the discourses I analyzed in the last chapter. In some of these cases, a consent

discourse is invoked, but my analysis is not focused on specific consent discourses being invoked, but about the way that the hegemonic ideology of cisheterosex and thus hegemonic consent operates in the practice of consent such that social inequalities either emerge or become reinforced in these communities. Specifically, I provide examples of four kinds of inequality, and how consent discourses and practices uphold them: class and sex-gender hierarchies deriving from a combined sexual fields-sexual geography structuring of BDSM spaces; ableism; racism, and transphobia.

Sexual Fields meets Sexual Geographies

I combine a sexual fields approach with a sexual geographies approach because neither fully captures what is happening in the BDSM communities in which the kinksters I spoke with practiced. Sexual fields are “part of the social process whereby taste is socialized in the deepest sense of the term, exposing and sensitizing the self to particular kinds of bodies, sexual themes, practices, and capital portfolios, and elaborating on and consolidating desires that preexisted the field” (Green 2014 :41). Sexual geographies refer to “the spaces people move through [that] are essential to understanding both sex, and sexual assault [as a]ccess to space, and control over who can and cannot enter that space is a critical way power works” (Hirsch & Khan 2020). I bridge these two to help paint an ethnographic portrait of the sexual hierarchy in specifically pansexual BDSM spaces, those that I have experience in, and which the majority of my interlocutors participate in as well. Pansexual BDSM spaces are those that contain players of multiple genders, and where play between any gender is generally (but not always, as I show with a case from the South at the end of the chapter) approved. These are in contrast

with leather spaces, which tend to be more gender and sexuality-segregated. Also, typically, pansexual spaces now embrace more of the New Guard approach to doing kink, though the Old Guard does remain, and can affect the vibe of a community and its play spaces. What this means is that within pansexual BDSM communities, there has emerged a strict gender-role hierarchy that privileges certain people over others. A brief perusal of FetLife will quickly make this apparent as well, including the many unsolicited “dick pics” and “nicer” messages from men looking to demonstrate how “Dominant” they are, get laid, or - in many cases, as I have experienced firsthand - both. Dominant men - or Doms - are usually at the top of the hierarchy; these men have the most control over physical venues and have a larger role in controlling digital spaces where practitioners gather, though this emphasis on digital spaces is changing both because of women’s anti-violence activism (Sorin 2022) and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that pushed everyone into digital spaces in a way that had not yet emerged in kink communities. These men are almost always more-established (ranging from their 40s and older), have a great deal of experience within the community, are white, well off financially, and express sexual interest in women.²⁹ In contrast, the most sought-after play partners in these communities, by and large, are young, white cisgender women (typically 25 or younger) who are traditionally attractive, newer to the scene, and who have submissive or bottom- oriented identities. This combined hierarchy of raced-classed-gendered sexual desirability, coupled with older Dominant white men’s control of BDSM spaces has specifically kept BDSM spaces oriented towards inequality in a number of ways that have been

²⁹ As I also discuss in my anti-violence research (Sorin 2022), it does not matter if these men are *also* interested in men; if they are interested in women AND have a Dominant social identity within the community, they will attain greater power within the community.

well-documented by both other practitioners and scholars (Weiss 2011; Sheff and Hammers 2011; Martinez 2020). Sequoia, a non-binary trans masculine two-spirit in their late 30s, has experienced a number of classed and raced interactions that have kept them – as a lower class Indigenous sex worker – from being able to fully participate in the community closest to them.

Cierra: You mentioned that there have been class barriers for you, the having to pay for everything to belong, basically. Um, can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Sequoia: A lot of more organized communities, I found them to be very classist, in general are like upper middle class. And there's actually a, quite a lot of sort of, like, cultural assumption in a lot of like poor communities and communities of color that like BDSM belongs to rich white people. And it's not something that people can participate in unless you are a rich white person, or an upper middle class white person, even if you are kinky, like your kink is often framed differently, and or you choose to go about it through doing sex work, because that's something that can support you monetarily. It's not necessarily, there's a lot of rhetoric around in like a lot of, like BDSM communities, or like white, middle class BDSM communities about like, sexual discovery, and sexual freedom and whatnot, but all of those, all of that revolves around having access to money, to spaces, to toys, to other people, and time to practice. So like, there is definitely like a class and privilege aspect to it.

But Sequoia does not just point to the ability to exist within BDSM spaces as someone outside the hierarchy I describe above; they articulate how the constructed ideology of BDSM presupposes a certain kind of sexual existence that privileges whiteness and upper class status that affords, in Sequoia's own words, "access to money, to spaces, to toys to other people, and time to practice." The lack of meaningful engagement with these issues - which, again, has been cited by other practitioners and scholars (Weiss 2011; Sheff and Hammers 2011; Martinez 2020) makes kink continue to center the experiences - and ability to consent - of only those who can access all of the things that Sequoia discusses. An inability to access these spaces at the outset makes it that much harder for the folks who manage to do so to be able to meaningfully belong - and to have one's understanding of consent seen and validated by the

majority, who may not understand or simply reject assertions that certain practices are problematic. The women whose experiences I detail in the rest of this section attest that simply belonging in some of these more privileged categories is not enough to protect against consent violations. Lacey, for instance, though a person of color, admits she is white-passing and she also tends to take on a Domme role in her community and runs some of the local rope classes; she is a community leader in her own right. And though Lacey herself did not experience any consent violations, she, as did every other woman, have examples of those within her community:

The joke that we like to make is my teacher was the head of a cult. He was not, it was not actually a cult. Um, but basically, he was polyamorous. And he would use his notoriety to find new partners to pick up and to play with and to be sexually intimate with. It was bad poly practices in the sense of he had four primary partners that knew about each other, but didn't know about the hundreds of women across the country that he was sleeping with, um, without their knowledge and their consent. And so that's like the poly aspect of it. But as far as kink play, in general, there was a lot of abusing his position to sleep with many of the women, specifically the rope bottoms in the community, and also using these women to compete against each other for his attention. And basically like the divide and conquer. As a result, there was a good chunk of them that were harmed, either through their relationship or through something that happened in their dynamic, be it bondage Top and bondage bottom, or DS Top and DS bottom.

The overlap of polyamory and BDSM circles is a venn diagram with a substantive middle, and just as in more vanilla contexts, the abuse of alternative relationship practices in the name of sexual domination does happen, and often through a lens of consent that being polyamorous means anything goes. But, beyond that, her teacher's use of his status as a leader in the community to target and force young, new rope bottoms to compete against one another for attention reflects a hyper-traditional cisheterosexual model of a cishet man pushing cishet women to compete with one another for his sexual attention that ultimately is disempowering

and can result in the abuse of those women. But, as Lacey continues to share, the actions of this teacher actually were bad for the entire community, not just the women who he abused:

Cierra: So how did this, his four primary partners didn't know about all of this that was going on? Like, how did it all come out? I mean, that sounds, like, pretty explosive.

Lacey: So some of it was in bits and pieces... I can tell you one instance in particular, basically, he invited one of the people that he was sleeping with, to a party that his main primary³⁰ was at. And she didn't know that this person that he was bringing was a partner, and she found out [and was] very angry... at least my outward interpretation, where it was either his way or kind of like the highway. And if you want the bondage rides on top of that, like you're gonna do what he says. Um, as far as the actual I'm gonna call them what they are consent violations that I was told about. People step forward, this was right around when we first started happening. And there was a great purge or like an exodus of a lot of cisgendered male rope tops for inherently using their privilege and their power in these facilitating positions, to take on partners, and either take advantage of them while they were tied up, or just use their position to kind of overpower them... You just didn't want to be on his bad side, in particular, because again, especially in New York, if you got banned if you weren't allowed to come to his classes, you also weren't allowed to come to his events or his intensives or anything else you there because... you were effectively banned from the community as a whole.

Lacey's teacher is not just an individual "bad apple," per se, but rather one of a number of men specifically in the rope subset of this kink community engaging in a pattern of rope Doms in particular using their prowess in the community to target young women, get them to go along with whatever they want, and then ban them from the community if they "misbehave" or speak out. This is true for basically everyone I spoke with who had any experience in rope communities, I suspect in part because of the more heavy gendering of rope communities historically, with men as rope riggers and women as rope bottoms or rope bunnies, a point

³⁰ A primary is exactly what it sounds like: it reflects one model of polyamory, where two people are each other's "primary" partners and all other partners are "secondary" such that the primary couple can make choices about their relationship that overrides any other relationships either partner has. In polyamory circles, while this is not an uncommon model, it is considered by some to be highly unethical because it still results in relationship hierarchy, which polyamory is theoretically against.

which Sage touches on in their own experiences as a non-binary rope rigger later on in the chapter. Key above this point, though, is how challenging men like Lacey's teacher can result in banishing that essentially means full ostracization from the community. Depending on the size and geographic location of a kink community, to be ostracized in this way might mean no longer being able to engage in a kink with other people beyond one's partner, especially when considering other social factors, like class, that can also affect one's ability to participate. This false dichotomy between community and challenging a predator renders a lack of true consent for these practitioners who are either forced to endure horrible abuse and assault if they want to remain in community with other kinksters. And, unfortunately, even the ability to get out the names of predators like Lacey's teacher are restricted by the same sorts of sexual fields-sexual geography logic that allow certain people to control digital spaces as well as classes and other communal spaces. Maeve, a white pansexual submissive woman in her mid-20s, shares an experience of essentially being raped by a man she connected with on FetLife, in part because of the restriction of naming abusers on the popular kink networking site³¹:

Maeve: I [had] been interacting with someone on FetLife, had met them at an event quickly once or twice, and just kind of hit it off, I felt we had chemistry, was out with friends one night and had a few drinks. And, you know, texting back and forth flirting and he says, "Hey, come meet me at this other bar" that

³¹ This is a HUGE bone of contention amongst users, especially women and non-binary kinksters who have endured abuse from members in the community *and* because of the regular occurrences of serial predators within these communities, as I document throughout this chapter. Relevant parts of FetLife's Terms of Use that put limits on how to describe and (not) name abusers while simultaneously banning the behaviors that those abusers have been documented by victim-survivors to engage in: "Prohibited Conduct - You agree that, while using BitLove's [FetLife's parent company] Products and Services, you will not: Personally attack, make fun of, troll, flame, bully, stalk or otherwise harass another member; Make criminal accusations against another member in a public forum; Make or promote any type of racism or hate towards anyone in specific or a group of people, unless in the context of role-playing between consenting parties; ... Upload, post, email, otherwise transmit, private conversations between two people in any public forum on FetLife without the expressed written consent of the people who are involved in said private conversation; Post, directly or indirectly, any personally identifying information about another member without their consent. Personally identifying information can include, but is not limited to, a person's full name, first name, last name, email address, profession, phone number, address and place of work" (FetLife 2024).

he was drinking at. And I had the liquid courage and kind of the blinders on when you're first exploring. And that feeling of frenzy where you feel like you need to explore every opportunity that comes by, so[I] took it to the bar that he's at. And we hadn't discussed really what the night would look like or what if any kinky behavior would happen. And I was kind of just expecting, like, casual, maybe a little bit like rough sex with a guy from the bar... We were walking to his place from the bar and he was a very touchy feely and I was like, okay, whatever, it is what it is. And started being more grabby. And at one point, grabbed me by the throat and kind of pushed me against a tree and was just holding my face and kind of kissing me. And while that is something I'm into, we had not discussed any of that whatsoever. It was in the middle of a busy city center. So very quickly, he could have looked very bad, which it was bad but still didn't raise enough alarms [for me, so we] get back to his apartment and hang out for a little bit, smoke some weed, just kind of get used to each other and then he came on pretty strong and kind of before I even realized what had happened I was on all fours naked with a plug in and a dildo inside me. And he tried putting a pacifier in my mouth. And I kind of was able to communicate, I guess, that some of that was not cool, readjusted and ended up hogtied and gagged. So in hindsight, realizing I had absolutely no way out of that situation, and it was not something that we had discussed, I didn't have a, like a drop signal or anything. There was no contingency. So go through this situation. And I managed to kind of - I'm sorry, I'm trying to remember things.

Cierra: No, no, you're doing great. I appreciate you sharing.

Maeve: I managed to kind of twist things away from the kink. We just had sex and then I kind of said like, "Okay, I'm ready to go home, can you walk me home?" And he did. And I remember just feeling really panicked and triggered and like, something was not, not right about that. And just immediately having that gut instinct of like, "Oh, shit, you walked me home." And I kind of just sat with that and eventually saw on FetLife that he was banned from some events and kind of everything fell into place. And I felt a lot more validated but still violated.

Essentially, had Maeve been able to read names in descriptions of violence on FetLife, she might have been able to avoid this sexual violence. But, as the primary digital space for kinksters to connect, FetLife has strict rules in place that are meant to protect all users; specifically, there is now a rule of not allowing people to name their abusers, under a presumed

anti-doxxing protection that users consent to via the terms of service,³² that makes it difficult for people in these communities to communicate to others which other members are unsafe or even predatory. This is especially critical for members newer to the scene, and not necessarily aware of these kinds of dynamics targeting young submissive women, as Maeve was when she had this experience. Even while whisper networks do exist in some BDSM communities, and there are ways of sharing stories of abuse that lead to people figuring out who an abuser is, such as how Maeve discovered the man who assaulted her had done similar things to other women, these are insufficient to prevent violence, one of the primary intended tenets of consent discourses. FetLife simultaneously disallowing the naming of abusers and upholding a 2012 ban on making “criminal accusations against another member in a public forum,” makes this digital space operate similarly to in-person communities such as the one from Lacey hails. The guise of consent actually overrides participants’ actual sexual desires and needs, in this case that being protection from sexual predators. Through a sexual fields-sexual geography lens, the FetLife site creators (two white-passing, cisgender, well-off men with sexual interest in women) directly limit the ability of people to access knowledge that can help them from ending up in a situation where they are violated, as Maeve describes in her experience.

This digital/in-person split plays out in many practitioners’ experiences in different ways. All of the women in this section, importantly, belong to different communities; nevertheless, they share the same concerns, regardless of geographical or communal constraints. Sofia, a white pansexual cisgender woman in her early 30s, is a well-known sex educator with major followings on multiple social media sites. As a fan of hers for years prior

³² See footnote #8.

to the project,³³ I am surprised that despite this following and her knowledge about BDSM and sex more broadly, she prefers to inhabit predominantly virtual spaces, dating far before the COVID-19 pandemic, though some health problems also make her cautious of public outings still when the interview takes place. When I ask her about her preference for digital versus in-person escapades near the end of our interview, she explains:

Sofia: I always got a weird feeling off of people who are in leadership positions, specifically in the kink community. They were always like, older, dominant males. And that was, yeah, that was a problem for me for a long time, of like dealing with people in the community who like, didn't want younger people in our dungeon and things like that. Or they wanted to allow guns in the dungeon at one point, and it was like, wow, yeah, it was the whole thing. So, um, I think that whole not being able to know like, who I could really trust in the community like to have a voice that I considered a safe person, as a leader, you know.

Cierra: Yeah, I mean, trust is such a big part of being in kink generally, like, whether that's privately or publicly, but also being in community of any kind, I think. So that makes sense to me. Hopefully, things will be different for you like once COVID is, I don't want to say over, COVID is like a more, you know, manageable part of life. And you get out into more public spaces again. Have you had other concerns about kink communities, either the digital one or this in person one since you got involved?

Sofia: I mean, yeah, I feel like everywhere that I've gone to the local community, I mean, like I said, I haven't done a ton of community of like, local stuff. I also did some play parties in New York, and Massachusetts. And we kind of have the same things where it's like, I was always hearing like, very negative stories about certain people. And those people were still like, leading those events. And like, you know, they were popular people in that scene. And it was always intimidating. And like, I felt like I could never trust anybody. I had a friend that I met on Tumblr, who actually was like, a big name in the New York kink community. And then it came out like years later that he was like a super consent violator. So like, having been friends with him, and like, having that whole experience of like, watching people I knew, like, come out with these stories. It was like, I don't know, it made it really hard to stick to the local community, because I feel like everyone kind of accepted that these things

³³ I did not have confirmed knowledge that she was this person until our interview, which was a strange and also exciting moment, given some of my own education about sex and kink came from following her online starting in college.

happened and just kind of kept the people in the community. And that was always like, an issue for me. I feel like online is a lot less tolerable. I feel like it's easy to block people and move on. So that's just my personal preference.

For Sofia the digitalscape is easier, and preferable, because the rules of consent are different and in some ways easier to enforce, helping to attempt to hold people accountable for their behavior in more concrete ways, such as being able to individually block from the digital spaces someone who has behaved in inappropriate ways spaces. But, even with greater protections in her digitalscape, Sofia recognizes that power plays a significant role in whether someone can have their consent violations recognized by their community; she recounts the story of a friend who struggled with just this:

Cierra: Do you think it would ever be unsafe or bad to seek out for consent violation in any of the communities that you've been a part of?

Sofia: Like to personally do it? Um, no. But I haven't, I haven't had my consent violated by, like, someone in power. And I feel like my answer would change, if that was the situation, but I do know, someone who was and like, it was a lot different for her to bring up her experiences compared to mine, because it happened [by] somebody who was like in the in charge of, of the kink community, basically. And she kind of like, got isolated, and people didn't believe her and things like that. So that's more of an issue, when we go back to these people in power who are making these decisions and doing, you know, repeated consent violations. I think that's a lot different story than, say, if I got a consent violation by like a partner that I brought to the dungeon or something, I think it would be handled differently.

Sofia points to this overarching problem that many other women and non-binary participants named of the community leaders being abusers, but also articulates another critical point: that a between-partners dispute might be handled differently than a dispute involving a big member of the community (even if allegations were brought against them by a partner, as Lacey mentions in a vignette above). This also points to hierarchy operating at multiple levels, and

even an assumption that a thing between partners is just that - something between partners, not something that needs attention from the community, even if one of those partners is alleging violence from the other. This “keep it in the family” approach to handling sexual violence is not new and points to how individualistic these consent discourses can be when put into practice: if the community is not directly implicated, the logic seems, then the dirty laundry ought to remain behind closed doors. Jewel, a white pansexual cisgender submissive woman in her mid-40s, presents two opposing situations from her own community that highlight this private-versus-public conundrum, again with a focus on digital spaces as the site of consent violation:

Cierra: Did you all talk about like, what to do if people like, let’s say, you let somebody in and they passed all these all these requirements, but then did something creepy, or someone that’s already been part of your group does something they’re not supposed to?

Jewel: No, not as much because I think we’ve already actually gone through that. One of the earlier members, who was a long-time scene partner of one of the other members... [he] did some, you know, really creepy shit with other new members of the community. And it was like, “Okay, you’re violating the rules. You’re being a terrible person. So you don’t need to be here anymore.”

Cierra: And how did they just get kicked out? Did any conversation with them or just kind of – ?

Jewel: No, I think, because we had like three different, three different members who had some evidence in like chat logs and stuff to show, that was enough for the mods to be like, “No, we’re not even going to give you a chance to defend yourself. Because clearly, we can see, you’re doing things that you said you wouldn’t do.”

Needing “hard evidence” of a consent violation (or, in this case, a minimum of one violation each per three *different* women) is a demonstration of how consent violation is hard to “prove” and how consent discourses thus already do not match their intended purpose of preventing

violence. Part of preventing violence, theoretically, is first, actually being able to name that violence occurred, and second, being allowed to name that certain people perpetrated it. This in turn makes these consent discourses not work within digital spaces, as “proof” can be offered, and decisions about how to handle consent violations no longer rest on allegations but are captured in the actual digital data of the community. In this way, the handling of digital consent practices breaking consent discourses is a good thing for practitioners. However, even these digital spaces are not without their own issues around performance of consent given that they can continue to be “owned” by particular people, and thus the digital infrastructure can also become part of the cisheterosex hierarchy of controlling sexual activity and consent (or not) to it. Jewel gives just an example of this, in very direct contrast to the first example:

Cierra: Do you think that like, having, I don’t know, I hate to use the word like evidence, but having evidence of these kinds of behaviors for these digital spaces will make it easier to keep out folks or get folks who, you know, shouldn’t be there, out? Or do you see, like, a potential trouble there?

Jewel: Well, so thinking about it from the perspective of having been afraid of being outed, initially, I can see, you know, having those kinds of records being scary, if you know, if you’re in that position, worried that other people are going to learn something about you. So I see that that’s kind of a way that maybe that goes sideways. And that’s just in general, not like somebody’s doing something nefarious. But just like, in general, having the digital record can be a threat. And it’s not always foolproof because we also, one of the initial kink Discords I joined. The owner of the Discord³⁴ was the one doing the nefarious things. And he used to when he would get mad at, you know, the girl that he was grooming, he would delete his conversation history with her. And like, I actually saw this happen personally, not because he was grooming me, but because I was poking at him about his current girlfriend. And he got angry with me. And I saw the messages disappear. From our conversation. Oh, wow, as he deleted them. And so that’s, you know, unless you’re taking screenshots immediately, those aren’t always going to be available if someone is that type of person. On the other hand, I think they’re harder to fake, then I guess I was gonna try to compare it to something, but I don’t really have anything to compare to. They’re hard to

³⁴ The “owners” as Jewel describes, do have the ability to control the digital space in ways analogous to earlier observations about the ownership of physical spaces.

fake, unless you're, you know, pretty good with graphics. And that's a whole lot of work to go to. It could be done. Um, but, you know, at that point. At that point, it probably would be better to try to get both sides. You know, but how do you I don't know, how do you prove that's really the case?

Digital spaces are not perfect for managing how consent happens, and how violations are treated, but are viewed by some practitioners - including Jewel, here - as potentially more useful in their ability to be just in the “proving that's really the case” when a consent violation occurs, underscoring once more the failing of consent discourses put into practice to actually prevent violence, but also to even be seen by practitioners as a way of preventing violence in the first place. This phenomenon is super evident in Marley's experiences. Marley is a white pansexual switch in her late 20s who has been practicing BDSM for about five years. Of all the women I spoke with, Marley shares more specific instances of consent violations that she has experienced within the scene than anyone else, a fact that undergirds her passion for staying in the community, as she shares that she dreams of one day opening a queer educational safe space that will double as a BDSM venue at night. Marley's desire to open a space herself, rather than relying on existing spaces, is due to her experiences - all of which, as she describes in the following two vignettes - came at the hands of community leaders who also control the only two public venues in her community. As our conversation picks up, Marley details for me one of her earlier consent violations, and how it happened despite her taking significant care to *not* endure any violence:

Before I showed up to any event in person, I found a chat room online of people who were involved in [this] community. And the owner, operator admin of this room was a middle aged man who, and like the room was predominantly full of young women brand new to the community. But it was under this guise of like, wanting to chat and connect with people and whatever. And for the most part, I think it was, but when I met this guy in person, him and his partner like, very much tried to manipulate their situation, get close to or be involved with young

women. And this is the person that touted consent the loudest and the hardest. And earned my trust very quickly because of things like that. Like he was very charismatic. He was a smooth talker, he made it sound like he knew about consent. And the first time my consent was violated in the community. He was the first person I went to. And he made me feel like he was addressing it and supporting me. But then the next thing I know, he's like, plying me with alcohol and touching me before I gave him consent to. And then when I share my story with other women in the chat room, they have one in return... The same people who host the negotiation and consent workshop are these same people that I first dated getting into the community, and my mentors, and the community pillars - this is all the same two human beings. And their play party starts off with a script and a little spiel that they read you about the party rules. So they go over consent, in a very broad way [but] you have like five minutes at the door, you can't really get into a big long conversation surrounding consent.

Beyond the reality in these communities of the people who have the power in the scene not only getting to control physical venues as well as virtual access to digital spaces, such as being server-owners, Marley highlights how these same people are also able to *establish the rules of consent* on their terms. And because of this, consent then means whatever those specific “leaders” want it to mean. With the specific targeting of young submissive women newer to the scene, who do not know enough to protect themselves, these women learn to rely on the “mentorship” of older community members - but unfortunately for many women, like Marley, these are the people who are able to use their “knowledge” of consent to nefariously prey on these younger women. Marley describes the only other community leader, and her frustration with his conduct:

Marley: And then the other venue, at least with his own parties, the person that owns it, he doesn't have dungeon monitors at all. And he basically says, like, do your best on your own... He also has been outed online in the past for hosting a party, where he invites known predators or allows them to come... Like someone who is not allowed at any other event except this guy's because he has shared screenshots with people's personal FetLife accounts on vanilla social media. He has, someone has a restraining order out against him, like, very, very serious things. And this guy willingly allows him at his event because they were friends. Oh, yeah. Yeah. Another thing that this space owner and community

leader has done was he posted a photo of a human bone on his fetlife A femur, that he is like talking about how he got legally and everything is above board, which I don't think people are allowed to just own human remains legally.³⁵ Like I don't think there is anything legal about that. And he's treated it and turned it into an impact toy. And then a couple weeks later, he posts a photo of one of his young submissives with this human bone in her mouth.

Cierra: Yeah, that's like degradation kink to a whole other level.

Marley: Yeah, I just like it just like your skin crawl, right? And there are so many people [who seemed fine with it] or thought that was so cool and fun. And I was disgusted with all of them. I would be the first person to - I'm not going to yuck someone's yum. But I will speak up if I think someone is being unsafe because I think there's a difference in expressing concern and being like, "Oh, that's gross."

Marley uses the "Don't Yuck My Yum" discourse, a variant somewhere between RACK and PRICK that essentially means not judging other practitioners' kinks as what is acceptable to one person might not be to someone else, and vice versa, but people are entitled to have their own sexual preferences. The invocation of this here, though, serves as another illustration of the breakdown of consent discourse in practice. When the people who literally control access to BDSM spaces are also the people who violate consent, there is no meaningful recourse for members,. This in turn can enable those people to conduct increasingly more harmful behavior, such as inviting known predators to play parties and using human remains in kink practices in utterly disrespectful ways. As a result, these predators become immunized from critique they might otherwise have to confront, were they not in charge of the physical spaces in which play occurs. Jessica, a white bisexual submissive in her early 30s who had always been interested

³⁵ It is in fact legal, if you follow certain guidelines, to own human bones, even if it's weird. It is, however, extremely disrespectful, gross, and in poor taste – as well as a poor reflection of BDSM more broadly – to use human bones in kink play.

in BDSM but was only a year into the scene, shared a similar story of a community leader co-opting consent and then committing consent violations:

Cierra: So you mentioned you have heard of these more predatory situations. Do you know of any of these where police have been called in to deal with it?

Jessica: Offhand no, but I know that there is one person in particular, relatively well known in [one East Coast] community ... I actually do not know the name of this person, but it seems as though there is a relative 50/50 split. And people who are like, "No, this person is an expert at this particular thing that they do. You know, they are all about enthusiastic consent, anybody who's saying otherwise is just playing for attention." And 50% say "No, this guy's pretty fucking terrible." And as far as I know, like, one incident in particular, like, there was a pretty blatant situation, at least, this is how it was described in a post, where the victim had said, the victim had played with this person before. And it was very, very explicit, "I cannot play when I have been drinking, period, the end, I don't do it, it is not a thing I do." And in the past, he has been very respectful of that. But then there was a point in time where like, he had come over. And it was like a friendly gathering with this guy and some other people. And at some point, she became aware, after like, heavily drinking and having a good time and progressing into a point where she was blacked out, she became aware, and of her like surroundings, and she was like, in a futo [a Japanese rope tie] and like, had her arm like extended above her head. And she was naked from the waist down and like some other stuff, and it was like, you know, very obvious that he had talked her, while she was very drunk, into stuff.

Cierra: Yeah, that's problematic.

Jessica: And the split was about 50/50 on whether like, this had actually happened or not.

Cierra: Wow, like, not even just like how, whether she consented or not, but like, even if the scene happened?

Jessica: Whether she had consented or not. And in a situation like that, she had been extremely clear in the past, she does not play when she is drunk. Like, that is a situation where obviously, at least in my mind, it seems like this is obvious. That is the definition of rape, if ever there was one, police should have gotten involved, and for various reasons they did not.

Just as Lacey described how her mentors used consent to groom and abuse her in a different East Coast community, Jessica's recounting that 50% of her peers did not believe this woman's experience because the man who assaulted her was an "expert" at enthusiastic consent

illustrates how the weaponization of consent discourses act as a protective factor the people who employ them. These same people can then turn around and violate that consent with little repercussion, because they have demonstrated the tenet of education in the hegemonic ideology of consent discourse, once more showing how the practice of these consent discourses at best does not align, and at worst, actively causes harm to individuals and to communities.

Finally, I want to share an experience from a man I interviewed who experienced his own consent violation, in a weird and roundabout way. Gavin is a white bisexual cisgender man who waffles between switch and sub to his wife's primary role as Domme. Located in an East Coast community, like Jessica, Gavin recalls for me a decision he and his wife made to host a smaller play party as an alternative to a very popular, massive kink gathering, in part because of his consent violation:

We wanted something more intimate than [this giant wintertime event]. The other problem [this event] has is it's huge. It can have 1000 people. And I think part of [this one problematic organizer's] problems with consent occur because the spaces are incredibly crowded. And I don't think the average dungeon monitor can actually see everything that's going on. And, you know, the law of large numbers says that the more people you throw into an area, the more likely you are to have something go wrong. So I didn't, as I said, I didn't go this year, and I didn't go last year. But I believe the year before, my owner was concerned that my consent was violated, I didn't even realize it. Because we were doing a sort of a puppy play thing. And people touched me that she hadn't cleared to touch me. I couldn't perceive that. Because if you're in a mask on your hands and knees, you can't really, we don't see you know, with those masks on, you don't see how, you don't perceive how a dog perceives, right? So I couldn't tell that that occurred. She obviously didn't, was rather upset about it, but didn't tell me until later. So [events like these are] very crowded, and people have a tendency to not necessarily be on their best behavior. So I think there have been some concerns about that. Also, the guy who runs it did not handle challenges to his, to how things ran very well. I do know at least one person from years ago who had attended events of that person's going back years, who felt that they are continuously violated, they weren't treated well.

Gavin points to one more piece of the sexual fields-sexual geography puzzle for BDSM communities; it is not just about who *owns* the spaces, but about the ability to *manage* them, that can result in consent violation. If there are too many people within a space, then there will almost certainly be issues with being able to do the community carework³⁶ necessary to prevent or respond to consent violations. This then comes back onto the individual being responsible for managing their own consent – a reflection of the individualism in the hegemonic consent ideology – but even that is not always possible either, as Gavin points out, given certain restraints on what one is wearing or the activity one is engaged in. This emphasis on consent being at the level of the individual highlights the need for community care to encourage and support consensual interactions, as an immediate and utter lack of them in turn only allows consent violations to flourish especially in a group that can be as large as a thousand or more participants. What is a practitioner to do when the community cannot guarantee consent will be respected, but neither can the practitioner protect their own consent? For Gavin and his wife, the answer was simple: create their own small, intimate (read: trusted) event as an alternative to the larger community event. But, given any number of social locations practitioners might hold, this is not a tenable solution either, as many practitioners may not have access to private spaces to host such parties, or may not have the financial means to do so, meaning this is not an inclusive ideal strategy.

³⁶ I am purposely not using “police/policing” as the verb/noun here as a way to move away from violent neoliberal individualistic understandings of how to manage a group of people. I use community carework - a concept I will discuss in further depth in the model of consent I propose in chapter 4 - to capture the desire of many people in these communities to actually *care* for their community peers, and desires for one’s self to also be cared for by others, rather than a “cancel culture” approach to push people out without any sense of accountability or opportunity for reformation.

Ableism

Another area that interviewees pointed out as a site where social inequalities manifest is in the consideration of disabled and/or neurodivergent kinksters. Isaac is one of these kinksters himself - he is a white bisexual polyamorous switch in his late 20s, has been in the scene about four years, is currently completing his PhD in a STEM discipline - and identifies as autistic. As Isaac has already divulged his neurodivergence by this point in the conversation, as we move into a discussion of the “rules” of consent, I am curious about his understanding of the explicitness versus implicitness of them:

Cierra: Do you think that all the rules for consent in these different spaces are explicit and openly discussed? Or are there things that you take for granted? Or that maybe you kind of have to learn through doing?

Isaac: I think the enthusiastic part is a really good example of that difference. I think evaluating enthusiasm is such an incredibly subjective thing, especially in consent in comparison to the other components of consent. Because like, the word Yes, is much easier to assess than the level of enthusiasm that someone has, which is so obviously, like a spectrum. And then if it's a spectrum, then like, where do you draw the line on what's appropriate and what's not. And I think that ability to read enthusiasm and another person and to assess that is something that I don't know if there are good ways of teaching that. I mean, besides, you know, like, read their body language, you know, like, like, listen for keywords, you know, like, you can obviously teach levels of it, but like, it's never really going to be well understood without experience... I had a partner who, um, their expression, both before and during a scene was like, very deadpan. So they could be getting beaten as hard as you could possibly imagine beating someone and their face would just be like, flat. Which, you know, like, like, from the outside looking at that person, if you very easy to make an assessment that something is very, very, very, very, very wrong. Totally, like that body language does not at all match the situation that they are in. Yet, that's how they express themselves. And especially when you go into the situation of people who are autistic to some extent, or have some sort of impediment and how they read process express emotions. You get into all these tricky situations of just like, the enthusiasm really being this tricky thing to assess. So that's why I say this thing of like, enthusiasm is always a great policy. But it feels less like one of the hard rules than the other parts, just because it has the subjective nature.

Drawing on the “Yes Means Yes” discourse, Isaac breaks down how the baseline for this discourse is ableist in that it cannot account for differences between the communication abilities and needs of neurodivergent or disabled kinksters versus those who are neurotypical. Neurodivergent people, including those with autism or ADHD, who may not enact things like enthusiasm that are presupposed in the discourses and thus are part of the hegemonic model of “doing consent,” are still able to give their consent, however, once again pointing to a breakdown between discourse and practice that can be harmful to those with less social power (in this case, that being disabled and neurodivergent kinksters). Helen is a femme nonbinary multiracial queer kinkster, who I serendipitously interviewed later in the same week I interviewed Isaac. And since I had just had that conversation with Isaac, I wanted to hear from other disabled or neurodivergent kinksters, of which Helen also self-identifies:

Cierra: You mentioned that you’re neurodivergent. I interviewed somebody earlier this week, who’s also neurodivergent, and they talked about the enthusiastic model as one that’s harmful, potentially, to neurodivergent folks who maybe don’t express emotion in the same kinds of ways. What do you think of that?

Helen: Um, I wouldn’t say it’s necessarily harmful because and I also think, like, I get the idea that like, you know, that someone who’s neurodivergent might express emotions differently than others. I guess for me, there’s a difference between like, feeling something differently, expressing something differently and not feeling that thing. Like there will still be because I would say in general Like, there’s things that I will be enthusiastic about, I might not convey that the same way that someone else might, regardless of if they’re neurotypical or neurodivergent. Um, I know that some of my mannerisms or ways of responding to things are not what people are expecting, or used to depending on what it is. And I make a point to tell people that if I’m doing pickup play, I, as part of negotiation will tell people how I tend to respond to certain stimuli. Because I know that some things are different. And I know that some of that, like I’m very quiet and stoic about a lot of things. And it’s not, because I’m not enjoying something or like zoning out or a lot or you know, a lot of things that people worry about that are happening. And I also am consistently able to, to talk about and voice through, you know, just like words, what I’m feeling or what’s going on. I won’t necessarily do that unprompted.

So I'll tell people before seeing, especially if they're a new partner, or pick up like a partner, like, here's how I tend to react, or act. And if there's something that you're not sure about, like, you can ask, I'm like, I will be able to explain, I will be able to tell you what's going on, I'm giving you I like doing a lot of things where like, I'm using a number scale for pain during a scene, because, again, doing sometimes more extreme forms of play, and [I do] not respond in the way that people expect.

Being neither in total agreement nor disagreement with Isaac, Helen does agree that neurodivergent people may - and do - express themselves differently than do neurotypical people. Being neurodivergent means needing to do more work to convey consent if it is shown in "atypical" ways, instead of the ways the discourses are set up for people to do so, such as with enthusiasm. And so the practice of these discourses, even if it does work, is inherently ableist because it presupposes that the only way - this hegemonic way - to express consent is through enthusiasm and that just is not the reality for many neurodivergent people.

But neurodivergence is not the only site of ability where consent discourses and practices diverge. Having conducted half of these interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was fortunate to interview a wide range of participants, including those who had been disabled prior to the pandemic, and some who had become disabled as a result of COVID-19. Even for people like Alivia, who is not disabled, COVID-19 was a hot button topic. A 31 year old white bisexual polyamorous switch, Alivia has an impressive eleven plus years of experience in BDSM communities. And, Alivia took over as the predominant leader of her community in the South right about the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is impressive given her community is on the larger side, with about 250-300 members. As COVID came up in the course of the interview, Alivia shared how her community had responded to reopening; at this point in time, much of the country was still under lockdown, and in California, not a single community had resumed in-person events yet:

Like I said, the South is probably totally different than it is in California. My brother in law actually lives in Los Angeles and like the stuff he tells me I'm just like, wow, that's just not [the same kind of] community. He asked, we don't have a mask mandate or anything down here. We did but very quickly it kind of fell to nothing... members were sort of encouraged to do whatever makes the person feel comfortable. If you're vaccinated, great, you don't have to prove that to us, that's your choice. If you'd like to wear a mask, right, you don't have to do that, to us, it's your choice. We very much so let our members know like, this is our location for this week, it is a smaller space, if you're uncomfortable in that, you know, we are happy to look for something otherwise, or you can wear a mask, but we don't make them do anything. Which I think kind of goes along with our whole thing of consent with them, is you're consenting to coming to this area and potentially putting yourself at risk, and you have to weigh that option for yourself and see if it's worth it. Thankfully, in our groups, we haven't had any large outbreaks of anything. So we're very thankful for that. But we do get the mix of people and kind of how I mean, I'm, I'm vaccinated, but how I ended up feeling was just like BDSM has to be a part of my life, I'm going to find partners who are comfortable meeting in person, because I need that outlet. And I think for a lot of people during this time, they experienced like bouts of depression from being like separated from their friends and separating from that physical touch. Which is just natural to expect. And it's just one of those things that our members had to weigh on. Is it worth it? Or is it not worth it? We have had a few people ask, you know, will we ever institute a mask mandate, but we just kind of went along what was with what was going on in our state, and just reminded them that if they feel unsafe, that it's better if they stay home.

In Alivia's narrative, she draws on PRICK ("Personal Responsibility Informed Consensual Kink"), a BDSM-specific discourse that emphasizes individual responsibility as key to ensuring consent occurs. This emphasis on individual responsibility reflected in this discourse is absolutely in line with the hegemonic consent ideology - and is one that immediately puts disabled practitioners between a rock and a hard place. Kinksters with disabilities are at once forced to choose between their physical health, which could be easily compromised at in-person events, and their socioemotional health, reflected in the human need for community. And Alivia's perspective was one that other kinksters observed in members of their own communities, as well; Agatha, a practitioner in another community who is not disabled but

also very concerned about not getting COVID-19, also points out how even with group decisions put in place, with COVID-19, the individual *still* assumes the risk as she unhappily experienced herself:

Agatha: Much of the play events have been at least fully masked, and or vaccinated. Um, But again, every venue sets its own rules. Yeah, the only play events where masks have been not mandatory have been ones where you've had to prove vaccination status. Okay, now, let me be more explicit that you have been vaccinated... Because that has been a free for all. Really, that has been, there's been requests for masked individuals, there have been requests for, you know, please only show if you have been vaccinated. And both of those, it, essentially, if it's not an event where you didn't have to pay, if it is an event where you didn't have to pay money, then you pretty much had to, you know, attendee assumes all risk, no matter what has been requested, because I have definitely had the experience of being led to believe that I was at a vaccine event, and it turned out to not be.

Cierra: Yeah, so that sounds really counter to what you were telling me earlier about protocols and expectations for events beforehand. How does that make you feel about being in community with folks?

Agatha: Yeah, it has changed things. It has changed things.

Cierra: Yeah, I bet.

Agatha: And that to be explicit, those are those are the munches. Those are, you know, the social things. I have not seen or heard anything as far as the actual play events.

Cierra: Presumably, because they're checking cards at the door and making masks-

Agatha: Yeah.

Cierra; Okay. So that that's interesting. Do you know if the folks who are not vaxxed, for instance, are showing up to the play parties and just not being allowed in? Or are there play parties for folks who aren't vaxxed?

Agatha: I don't know.

Cierra: So, yeah, you said it's changed things. How is it making you feel about trying to be back in community that you've missed, knowing that there's been some shift and like, who assumes responsibility?

Agatha: It has tinted the rose colored glasses that we, we may be all about consent, but we're not necessarily all about consideration for our fellow man. That's hard. And it makes me sad.

Cierra: Has that changed the way that you are thinking about when or where to attend events?

Agatha: Yes.

Cierra: Are you doing anything like can you devise new specific strategies or are you thinking about forming like your own Munch group or anything like that?

Agatha: Yeah. However that is still true in the social space because unless the venue requires, as a social event, munch, event organizer, I have no ability to enforce.

Cierra: That is tough. Do you think that will make folks who are feeling more like you more inclined to? I don't know. I can't think of like, private social activities. But I'm almost wondering if that's like a potential outcome of this, of like, "let's do a munch, but it's like brunch at my house," for instance, do you think stuff like that is starting to happen?

Agatha: Yes. I mean, you know, oh, a little sad, because, you know, you hear about things and you're like, oh, okay, well, oh, well, you know, so there's a little bit more, you know, stratification that's happening.

Disappointing for Agatha (and other kinksters whom I spoke with), even people who are willing to be more COVID-19 conscious for themselves but also for their community members cannot totally exercise this consciousness because of the rules of venues and having to be reliant on them. This is not dissimilar from other spatial analyses I have offered, where the ownership of a space really dictates what happens despite the wishes or needs of participants. Simultaneously to this space-ownership issue is an emphasis on the individual that means that people are really expected to manage their own health even when there are things put in place - as spoken to by Agatha's experience attending an event that was portrayed as COVID-safe

but actually was not, to her dismay. And all of this through the lens of consent is not about consideration of one another - it does not put into practice what is expected from hegemonic discourses, specifically about not doing violence.³⁷

Racism

Another critical aspect of social inequality that many participants brought up - every single non-white participant, in fact - was the rampant racism present in BDSM communities across the country, even in those located in seemingly more “progressive” areas like New York, Washington D.C., and California. And, as I conducted some of these interviews amidst the height of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2020 and 2021, I appreciated how forthcoming people of color interviewees were with me, a white woman, about their experiences. In a strange turn of events, Xavier, one of the Black folks I interviewed, began their foray into BDSM in a community adjacent to one I was intimately familiar with. A Black mixed 23-year-old nonbinary transmasculine submissive, Xavier is originally from California but now presides in a community in the South. And Xavier had a lot to share about other forms of oppression and inequality they had witnessed or endured, both in the in-person scene and in the digital kink spaces they inhabited. Wanting to know more about their experience as a Black transmasculine submissive, and having heard from other folks specifically about the racism of white leaders in kink communities, I asked about how they navigated this:

Cierra: So you’ve mentioned, like, folks being transphobic, you’ve mentioned folks being anti submissive men. Have you seen racist stuff also in some of

³⁷ Yes, through the lens of disability activism, personal actions that allow for potentially or actually disabled members of a social group to become ill with a disease that has serious and long-term effects, up to and including death, and many of which are still unknown, is absolutely committing violence.

these spaces, from like white leadership, or leadership being called to deal with a racist incident and not doing it properly?

Xavier: The biggest thing that sticks out in my mind is there was a slave auction. And I was like, “Do we really want to use those words?” And I know that’s, I mean, that’s a conversation in the wider community, from my SoCal community, where I come from, no one uses the word slave. So I thought it was like, weird, when I started hearing it more, but I’m like, I know it is a thing. And some like, I know that’s like community to community. And what I will say is, just the lack of it is the big thing of like, someone may say something like, “Hey, this is kind of racist,” and so it just gets shut down instead of having a conversation is what I’ve seen mostly... There was the same auction, so I pinged the POC group and I was like, “Hey, are we like, are we good with this here? Like, has there been a conversation with that term being used here?” And immediately, like, they had changed the wording and everything, but there wasn’t an actual discussion. And I was like, well, that’s useless, because I think it’s, that would have been a productive conversation... Like, if you use a term, that’s your, you know, obviously, there’s more history to that term, but it just doesn’t make me uncomfortable... and there was, I don’t remember exactly, because it was like, in the middle of a work day. But there was something else that was like weird. And I was like, “It wasn’t that it was racist, I was like, ‘Hey, you don’t seem to be accounting for the racial implications of what you’re doing, like who you’re doing this or the requests that they were making.’” And again, a mod got called into the situation and instead of like, us being able to have like, an actual, like a public conversation, so people could kind of see it get worked out, all of it was deleted.

The refusal to meaningfully engage in criticisms regarding race and raceplay brought up by members of color – and even more specifically, by Black community members, like Xavier themselves – only reinforces the existing racial order. Black folks are not consenting to having activities like slave play exist within their communities, or having slave auctions; other people of color voiced similar concerns in both rounds of interviews about the appropriateness of race play.³⁸ This lack of attention to the perspectives of people of color in kink communities also pushes people out - Xavier detailed a number of different spaces they tried to situate themselves

³⁸ Slave auctions are events, usually fundraisers, where “slaves” are auctioned off. The term itself is both very common and incredibly problematic within BDSM communities across the U.S. in particular given the history of slavery and the oft-ignored historical context of that as connected to sexual domination and submission in the context in which auctions occur.

in but ultimately opted out of, like this one, because of the lack of meaningful and supportive attention to the concerns of POC. Indeed, the pushout of folks of color under the guise of white people engaging in consensual play was brought up by multiple participants, especially those of younger ages. Rory, a non-binary agender Asian bisexual service submissive, is the youngest kinkster I spoke with in the entire project but had already had four years of experience across two broad communities - a large one in New York and another in the San Francisco Bay Area. As a Gen Z kinkster, I greatly appreciated their difference in perspectives about the “oldness” of the scene from older practitioners I spoke with, and especially of the still-existent big rifts in communities attributable to Old Guard politics and New Guard politics. Issues of fatphobia, misogyny, and racism were all pertinent to Rory’s experiences in both East and West Coast communities, and ultimately contributed to their decision to temporarily step out of the scene around the time I interviewed them. Rory explained:

Rory: I’ve basically been out of the play party circuit for a few months now, because I was expecting too much consent violation and expecting, like, treatment that I didn’t want to consent to, even if it wasn’t kink treatment. So I’ve just simply stopped going.

Cierra: How would you want the community to better support you, so that you could be back?

Rory: I think like... more education about kink that is also inclusive of the experiences of people of color and queer people and trans people. Because it’s one thing to say, like, you know, just say no, but it’s another thing to like, think about the racial dynamics that might be behind like a person of color, saying no to a white person, or a person of color, saying yes, to doing something with a white person, and what that like the repercussions that have socially, Like one of my really close friends, he’s a Black man, and like a white woman that he’d never met before, had wanted to do a home invasion, consensual non consensual scene, at our house, so, like, that’s one example where it was like, he obviously said no to the scene, but those kinds of asks can really make consent [difficult].

Cierra: Absolutely. How did your friend work that out with this woman? Did he like explain the context there?

Rory: I think he ended up like, shutting her down entirely. But that's also something I've experienced where like, white partners will, you know, ask things of me that would make me really uncomfortable. And I'm put in this tricky spot of feeling like me saying no, and explaining why I said no, will be devalued, or delegitimized, because it comes from, like, that whole interaction had racist undertones, basically.

Cierra: How do you think we should deal with these situations in kink communities?

Rory: I'm going to try to explain this because it is very nuanced, I think that, well, I don't believe in the shaming of kinks, necessarily, but I do think that we should be encouraging in the community, like critical thinking about why we have some kinks instead of just carte blanche, all kinks are great. Like, the "it's just a kink, it's just sexual preference, like you can do it once..." [rhetoric] is not great and allows for things like race kink to persist. I see it on FetLife, for example, there's a ton of race kink groups and stuff. And obviously, it's like, "well, these people, it's like, it's just their kink, So it's not serious." But race kink is a huge issue. So I think we should be encouraging people to like, you know, ask themselves why they might be wanting to do this race kink, and maybe why wanting or having a race kink is not appropriate... I don't think the community, the broader community is super receptive to it. And that kind of refusal to be receptive to criticism of kink, in general has led to more extreme anti-kink on the part of a lot of young people of color who are not in the community [but who might be otherwise].

As a femme non-binary person of color, Rory has come to expect their consent to not be considered within the scenes, which has, quite literally, pushed Rory out of them. And specifically, the experience of being an Asian fat femme has resulted in fetishistic treatment by white members of the community, who historically do not respond well to challenges to their inappropriate and harmful behavior. Instead, people of color, like Rory and Xavier, are subjected to violent rhetoric and fetishization from white folks, under the guise of it "just being a kink." This invocation of "don't yuck my yum" to protect and preserve racism within the space under the guise of it being consensual acts that people can "just say no" to, means that

people with less social power in the scene, like people of color, either have to accept the violence in the community, challenge it in the hopes that things may change as Xavier has, or walk away from it altogether as Rory decided to do. Raceplay continues to be a particularly hot-button issue in the kink community following #BlackLivesMatter, and increased discussion is not a bad thing. However, more than perhaps any other “kink,” those associated with race do harm to significant portions of these communities while the privilege of the people engaging in them - in this case white kinksters predominantly - allows those activities to go on unchecked. And as a result, BDSM communities remain whiter and more exclusive than they should be, all while doing so under the veil of consent.

Transphobia

Another, though less commonly cited form of inequality that participants brought up in interviews was transphobia. This was more common for participants who lived or were practicing kink in areas with more conservative politics, especially around gender identity and expression. Alivia, the white bisexual switch now running her Southern community, brought up transphobia as a broader discussion of her community’s commitment to “keeping the politics out of kink.” For her community, besides COVID-19 policies (discussed above), the other major way that “politics” manifested was in gender transgressive ways. Alivia shares her perspective on folks in the community who are transitioning, initially seeming supportive:

We’re so fortunate to have people who are transitioning and just in different walks of life. Some are transitioning male to female, female and male. And it’s always interesting to me to see how, like, I hate to say again, but the seasoned people who have been in the lifestyle for 30 plus years are handling those people. Because it’s like, all of a sudden the political stuff from the world has now infiltrated your kink life too. And we have, you know, just last week, we

had a member that is male transitioning to female and they wore buttons that said, you know, her/she...It's kind of weird, but I think it in the way of we have so many people that are like new and excited to come out on the scene and be like, "Yes, this is what's going on in my life, and it's great, and I now have a girlfriend, and I'm a girl" and like, all these things, and they want everyone around them to kind of understand it and accept it and be on board with it, but we just have some people who are like, "it doesn't really affect me..." But again, it's like, are you choosing people to force to, like, add things to their kink life that maybe they never thought they would add to their kink life? Like I said, unfortunately, this is the South... And I think, you know, that's something that we can always try to improve in the kink community, especially our group, is just because you've been doing this for 30 years doesn't mean that that's what's supposed to happen. ...and that that has been probably the hardest struggle is trying, you know, to make those people, the younger generations, like feel accepted and validated and like we are here for you, while also saying to the older generation, like we're going to respect these people, and what they're going through, we're not asking you to 100% agree with it, but you're going to be decent, human beings. And for the most part, like, I honestly, I can't think of a time where someone has felt like misgendered, or anything like that.

While being a community leader in a community with such contrasting political orientations - up to the point of including members who genuinely believe that kink can ever be "apolitical" - must be challenging, the rhetoric that Alivia uses of "forcing" people to "tolerate" individuals with changing gender identities is harmful and captures a reality for trans people that they are not fully welcomed into communities where they were pre-transition. Being queer and being transgender are not "normal" in all pansexual communities, and adding on extra layers of "politics" and "keeping the politics out of kink" this set of identities gets honed in on as not only not being fully accepted, but as only tolerated within the community, through the guise of people living their own lives as "forcing" their identities on others. The reliance on wanting to make elder kinksters feel valued still inadvertently privileges those people over folks with marginalized gender identities, all through this lens of "consent" and "force" - as if they could ever be the same given the amount of violence that transgender individuals in particular face

on a regular basis. And, critically, transphobia is bad for *everyone* in a community, not just transgender and nonbinary practitioners, as it stems from other overarching forms of oppression under patriarchy. Sage, the nonbinary rope geek whose commentary on “old cis white dudes” opened up the chapter, is aware of this. They explain their approach to organizing at kink events over several years based on a specifically pro-trans, anti-misogyny platform:

Sage: I lived in [a major Asian city] for three and a half years. So during my time there, [this city’s community] had a ... kink con. And in the first year, I was just an attendee, because I wanted to get the lay of the land. But in the second year, I was a presenter. And in the third year, I was an organizer. And the agenda that I brought to my presentation, and to my organizing of the event was very much to not involve anyone who had that kind of gendered mentality about their kink practice. And to actively discourage the entire event from promoting people who would view kink in this stereotypical and limited kind of a way. And also to be very careful about the way that the event would approach allegations of consent violation either in the past about people that it was looking at bringing as organizers or, or presenters or at the event itself.

Cierra: I’m wondering what, what drove you to have that person that specific perspective that you were organizing around who was invited and like their experience as consent violators or even just allegations of that?

Sage: Mm hmm. Well, many things. It was a very cumulative process, from what I had experienced in [European city], but also who I am as a person who’s extremely feminist and into gender equality. And the fact that during my first year, as an attendee, I went to the conference had like, it had a lot of different workshops, but it had like a special rope track. And one of the presenters in that rope track was a [European] guy named Nui du Tokyo, who was the [European] equivalent of Bruce.³⁹ He lived in Japan for a few years, done a lot of lessons, showed up wearing his bondage pajamas. And claiming, making all of these claims about what men and women could do in rope. Well, there I was as the rigger with my trans female partner, and he comes up to us and start saying to her, addressing her as a male, how she is going to tie me. So that was disgusting. And, and that person, then the next year was accused of consent violation in Paris. So in my mind, being a misogynist doesn’t mean that you’re going to violate consent, it means that there’s a higher correlation between those problematic outlooks. And so because they were already linked, I wanted to as

³⁹ Bruce is a relatively well-known rope leader who Sage had firsthand experience with. Sage labeled them a misogynist early on in their community experience with Bruce, and he has subsequently been outed as perpetuating serial assaults but remains in charge of some rope classes and events.

an organizer of the kink con, to set those frameworks in place because they're sort of mutually reinforcing.

Consent is good for equity among genders, not just including the cisbinary woman/man, but also for people who are non-binary, genderfluid, and/or trans; misogyny does not mean consent violation per se, but there is a definitive correlation, and so fighting one will naturally help fight the other. This connects to the hegemonic discourse by tying expectations of violence to specific genders, which is a reflection of how gendered and sexual violence works more generally, with women experiencing more violence than men (and at the hands of men), and transgender and queer folks experiencing *even more* violence (Guadalupe-Diaz 2019). Consent discourses and consent practices that reflect the *reality* of how people of different genders - and different races and sexualities and abilities - "do sex," might actually live up to the violence prevention promised by the hegemonic consent ideology reflected in consent discourses within BDSM communities and in American sexual culture more broadly.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have demonstrated how consent discourses and consent practices do not always align in American sexual culture, and even more specifically, do not always align within BDSM communities either. I do this by theorizing hegemonic consent, both in discourses and in practices, and how American sexual consent ideology is rooted in cisheterosex that privileges white, cisgendered abled men's experiences over everyone else. But, if there are hegemonic consent discourses and practices, then there must also be alternative consent discourses and practices (Gramsci 1971; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). This is where BDSM communities are an excellent place to study consent, not only because of the existence of these same hegemonic consent discourses and hegemonic consent practices as I

have demonstrated above, but also because there are counterdiscourses and counterpractices to the hegemonic consent I have theorized here, in part because of the relationship of the law to BDSM versus the law to sexual consent in broader American sexual culture. In my next chapter, I provide more insight about how consent does work in practice in BDSM communities, and how these practices - even if not used by all practitioners or within all BDSM communities - *are* a genuine alternative to the hegemonic consent ideology in American sexual culture that reinforces social hierarchies of sex, gender, race, ability, and class. These alternative discourses and practices in fact allow practitioners to move beyond mere attempts at sexual (and other forms of social) equity, while building a consent ideology that frames community and care as critical components of sexual life, while also encouraging learning of consent by doing - a frame that is altogether missing from the hegemonic consent ideology of American sexual culture. I use this alternative consent ideology to theorize a new framework - which I call the ABCCCs - that is applicable not only in sexual life, but in any context in which consent is invoked.

An Alternative Ideology of Consent

Introduction

I really love kink events, because people don't hug unless you ask them... When I negotiate, I'm very clear about what's okay, what's not okay. And so people stay within that. In vanilla settings, like if I go out dancing at a club? I once had an NFL football player try to force me to dance because I wasn't smiling and having enough fun... he kept trying to grab my arms and force me to dance, and I was like, 'Take your hands off of me, or you're going to be in a lot of trouble...' So, you know, the BDSM community has given me that sense of confidence that I'm allowed to negotiate for what's okay with me, and that people can't force me to do things just to make them happy.

Sabrina, a white, bisexual switch in her mid-30s, speaks with me from the East Coast; she is three hours ahead of my time zone when we begin our conversation after her work day ended. Sabrina has been a practicing kinkster for a few years, but her understanding of consent has evolved significantly in that short time period, which she shares is important for her as she really enjoys engaging in CNC (consensual non-consent) play. When I ask Sabrina near the end of our interview if she has ever experienced a consent violation herself, she relays the above vignette contrasting her experiences in the “vanilla” (non-kinky) world versus in the BDSM spaces she frequents.

The way that Sabrina shares this story captures an alternative ideology of consent in comparison with that in the last chapter. In the rest of this chapter, I articulate this ideology of consent, analyzing how it is alternative to the hegemonic consent ideology. I do this by engaging my participant-observation and interview data about consent practices in BDSM communities, both virtual and in-person. Because BDSM remains on the “outer limits” (Rubin 1984) of sexual activity, I argue that it is in fact its taboo – and in some locations, illegal – status that makes it an ideal site for the emergence of a different understanding of consent. The question of il/legality of BDSM means that consent derived from these communities already

exists beyond the bounds of broader Americans sexual consent that is structured by the law, as I wrote about in the first two chapters. And BDSM being so centered on community, in rather stark contrast to the emphasis on the individual in broader American sexual culture, is another notable difference in how consent is structured in the two different settings. Taken together, as I will demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter, the way that consent operates in BDSM communities is a critically different, more sustainable, and frankly better, model of consent than the hegemonic ideology of consent so inculcated in American sexual culture more broadly.

An Alternative Ideology of Consent

There are four tenets of consent practices within BDSM communities that collectively constitute a model of consent that differs significantly from the hegemonic ideology of consent previously discussed. First, in BDSM communities, consent is a verb, not a noun; it is an active participatory process in which people learn about it by *doing* it. Second, many practitioners *expect consent violations* - not necessarily egregious violations on the level of sexual assault and rape - and consider them part of the learning process. Third, consent practices are built around not just the individual, or an interaction between people in a scene; rather, these practices are built with an understanding of the *entire community*, underscoring that the behaviors individual actors engage in directly impact the people around them, even if those people are not directly involved. Fourth, and finally, *care about individuals within the community is consistently centered*; in this section, I center specifically on cases of consent violations and community reactions to them. Taken together, these four tenets form an alternative consent ideology that challenges the hegemonic consent ideology I theorized in

chapter 3 by centering community and care, by expecting – and thus, to some degree, normalizing – low-level consent violations, and, critically, by taking an overtly educational approach to learning about and “doing consent” within BDSM spaces. While I have separated each of these four components into discrete sections for heuristic purposes, in actuality they are not so easily separable; instead, they work together in tandem to constitute this alternative ideology of consent.

Consent is a Verb, not a Noun: Learning by Doing

Although prevailing consent discourses in American sexual culture and within BDSM communities operate under an assumption of educating about consent, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, they fail to do so adequately. Instead of relying on discourses to educate, however, participants in BDSM activities engage in a variety of hands-on activities within their communities through which they learn and *practice* doing consent. For Jade, a 47-year-old white pansexual woman, some of this education about consent came first from having it violated:

Jade: Well, I learned about consent by having my consent violated.

Cierra: That's, yeah, that's pretty awful. You're not the first person to tell me that. Are you comfortable sharing a little bit more about that?

Jade: Yeah, sure.

Cierra: So what happened? Like how, how did you learn about consent in that process?

Jade: I mean, there's so many times and so many ways, you know, that I personally have been assaulted. You know, there's just so many, it's very hard to live. You know, I mean, 30, 40 times in different ways. You know, I can't even begin to list them, you know. And then also to, like, just just, you know, the rape culture that we live in... but my own personal violations, definitely were part of my journey towards, you know, the swinging of the pendulum from being a victim to wanting to reclaim my power, and that progress from, you know, unbridled sexual exploration on my terms to you know, playing in the BDSM world, and conscious negotiation.

Jade's experience is not unique amongst the practitioners who spoke with me. In fact, many women practitioners, including a number of those whose stories I shared in chapter three, had consent violations as a part of their growth in learning about consent. Daphne, a very experienced rope rigger and community leader, shared about how her own experiences in first entering the scene resulted in what I am labeling consent violations, even though she did not fully conceptualize them as such for nearly a year afterwards:

Cierra: So this is the part of the interview that can be potentially a little bit triggering, so I just want to reiterate if at any point you don't want to answer something, or if you just get to a point where you want to skip the rest of this section, that's totally okay with me. So please just let me know. To start off with I'm wondering if you've had your own experiences with consent violations in the community?

Daphne: Um, Yeah, I would definitely say so. I think, um, I guess it's hard for me to see them as consent violations because I didn't even know what I was signing up for. So how could they violate that? But one was when I was brand brand brand new like, hadn't even gone to a rope class, didn't know anyone in the community, just knew I was interested in BDSM maybe. And I invited this guy that I had met on and had been talking to on a dating app over, told him I was really into spanking which I was but he came with like a wooden paddle and basically like, within the first 30 seconds like not even warming up to get to that point but like started going in I would say like a six on the 10 scale. off the bat like I was not feeling it at that point, like I hadn't, like my body wasn't warmed up. I didn't know that that wasn't okay. I just knew that I didn't enjoy it. But I also did not say anything at that point. I'm like, oh, maybe this is just what BDSM is, and I'm not into it. I know better now. But like, I think that was the mindset back when it was happening. And then, I think, another instance, within that same sort of timeframe of like, just being very new to the community, not realizing like, how to navigate these conversations, because I had never really done them before. I spent the night at another guy's house. And it was like, impact play primarily, but impact play that I was not super into. And I did say, "I don't think I like this." And I believe his response was something along the lines of like, "Well, tough it out for a few more minutes and like really see." And I did, I still didn't like it. But I didn't even say anything at that point. And I do feel like that, that scenario did feel very coercive, like looking back on it. I'm like, "Oh, no, he pushed me into doing something I said I was not comfortable doing. And it was not a good experience." So those are the two that come to my mind.

Cierra: And you said you were newer in both of these cases. So like, what, what happened after each of these instances with these different folks, as you were reflecting, and -

Daphne: I don't think I really like truly realized them for what they were until at least a year after the fact when I had taken some classes specifically on consent and negotiation and was really trying to like, I think my light bulb moment was when I was writing my first lesson plan for teaching rope 101 at the rogue project. I was like, oh, consent negotiation. This is what these things entail. Hmm, those experiences I had a year ago, definitely don't line up with this. This is kind of bullshit.

For Daphne, the learning how consent worked in BDSM spaces - notably, as different from her experiences in more vanilla settings, as she alludes to in both descriptions of “not saying anything” in response to both of these men - needed time to develop. It was only through preparing to teach *other* practitioners about consent that Daphne realized these two moments were, at best, “coercive” and “bullshit” – not the consensual kind of kink that she practices and now teaches. She is not alone in having needed time and other experiences to fully understand what had happened to her; many survivor-victims do not process that they are experiencing consent violation in the moment, or do not trust those purported to “help” in reporting situations, like police. Indeed, these are two commonly cited reasons people of all genders offer for why they do not seek help following a rape or sexual assault (Stewart et al. 2023; Thomas and Kopel 2023; Goodman-Williams et al. 2024). For Daphne then, it was *both* the experience of consent in practice itself *in tandem with* then teaching other practitioners about consent that helped consolidate what felt wrong to her when she was “brand brand brand new” to the scene. But the “doing” of consent in this way is not limited to behaviors that a participant may engage in themselves, as Gavin, a 53-year-old white bisexual switch, highlights. The role

of community education, based on this expectation that consent is learned by doing, is also critical, as Gavin highlights when I ask him about prevention work in his community:

Cierra: one of the other things that has come up is, like, people within individual communities taking it upon themselves to act as protectors or moderators. And one of the communities out here in California, for instance, we've got this thing called a safety and greeter team that is, like, designed to help newbies from falling prey to predatory people. Do you have anything like that in your community?

Gavin: There are. So some of the clubs that I know of will have, my groups that I know will have gateway or beginning events for new people...the one club I'm familiar with has been closed for a while. But normally, when they're open, they'll have a, [they] don't call it beginner night, but...it's digital, it's designed to be an introductory thing. I just can't remember what they term it. And they actually limit the kinds of styles of play that are allowed to occur on those evenings. For instance, if I remember correctly, they don't allow any kind of sexual play on those evenings. And I think they, you know, they tend to encourage the heavier players not to do particularly heavy stuff on them. Under the assumption that these people are new, and yeah, part of it, we don't want to scare them off. But part of it's also that those things have certain connotations that that new person might not be able to understand.

The twofold communal approach amongst practitioners in Gavin's circles - that is, the beginner classes and the limitation on certain kinds of play at newbie events - are both meant to prevent more extreme forms of consent violations from happening and act as a signal to everyone within the community that before engaging in a certain kind of behavior (sexual behavior mixed with kink, "heavier" forms of play⁴⁰), newer participants to the scene have some learning to do. This emphasis on newbies versus more experienced practitioners was prevalent in nearly all of the interviews I conducted, as was this mindset about what kinds of behavior are (in)appropriate within a scene being dependent upon who is partaking. Hazel, a very

⁴⁰ Though Gavin did not specify, from my own experience, this could range from heavier forms of impact play (which can be more dangerous because of the implements and needing to have proper anatomical knowledge so as not to injure a partner) to forms of edgeplay that also require extra education before engagement.

exuberant single queer white Domme who takes her educator role in her community quite seriously, reflects on this by sharing a couple of examples where she inadvertently violated two different partners' consent:

Cierra: And in kink spaces, what about if you're playing with new folks? Like is there some forgiveness there as you're learning the ropes kind of like you've given a few examples of like, the wax example you gave us like?

Hazel: Yes... Here's what I say, right? I have a responsibility as a Domme to know my shit, right? I may not know everything right? I make mistakes. I'm human, but I have to own up for them and atone for them. So when I had to shave my husband's entire stomach in public in front of somebody else because I fucked up and forgot to put a barrier between his skin and his wax. I also took him home, exfoliated him very gently, and like was what do you need for me? How do I make this up to you? What can I do? Right? Because I felt genuine remorse... Bucky is a [another] great example. I bit Bucky too hard, several times. And after time, Bucky said nothing. The next time Bucky was like, "Hey, next time you do this, I need to be a little bit easier. I cannot go into work, bitten like this," and I'm like, "Alright, that's fair, right." But there was still that communication of Hey, this is a boundary and in the heat of the moment, probably nobody noticed. Right? But the conversation happened afterwards that hey, this happened in the moment it was okay but afterwards, this isn't okay, anymore, right? And that's fine.

Even as a more experienced player, Hazel admits she still commits boundary violations, as do many practitioners. While accidents are not an excuse for consent violations, the leniency that understanding consent is continually a learning process. The "owning up to" and atoning for harm is necessary for the process, and a large part of what keeps BDSM communities moving forward despite a plethora of consent violations. This emphasis on newbies committing accidental consent violations versus more predatory participants purposefully harming others, was also a common distinction between the way consent *should* operate and the way that it *can* operate. But, as Savannah, a 29-year-old heterosexual white switch, points out in our

conversation about the difference between these kinds of violations, the community response to these various kinds of consent violations also differs:

Cierra: So, like, how does this affect things, whether it's an accidental or purposeful consent violation?

Savannah: Right, well, I think I want to start with the accidental ones, because those are the ones you're gonna see more often. And again, it's one of those, you're playing with somebody new, you negotiated, but you forgot one of the things that was mentioned and picked up the wrong toy like say, they don't like canes, but you have tons of canes in your play bag, and you had it all laid out. You're halfway through the scene and the person's really responding. So you grab your cane instantly, they red. "Oops, it was a mistake. I got caught up in the moment. I apologize." You can discuss it with them if the person feels like it really was a genuine mistake. Okay, they'll ask you to put your canes away out of the way so that you can't accidentally pick it up. And then you guys continue playing. But it's always up to both parties, whether that play continues or not. Right. And, you know, a violation is still a violation. There needs to be honest contrition on the part of the person who did the violating, and usually if it's a mistake it's there. The person feels so bad like, "I'm so sorry. I messed up. I know we talked about this. I just forgot. And I'm sorry..."

Cierra: Yeah. So can you tell me a little bit more about how the community as a whole reacts to these different types of consent violations?

Savannah: The oops newbie mistakes, the community tends to kind of circle around that person, and then mentors them to teach them how to really handle a scene properly. A lot of times, if they've got good people around them, they'll be reminded how negotiations work and the importance of sticking to that negotiation before. As far as the intentional violations go, I've seen it where the entire community just bands together and says, "No, you're done. You're not playing, we're going to make sure that people like especially the newbies [know that]..." The intentional violators, repeat offenders, typically their mode of operation is to go after people who are brand new to the scene who don't know any better. And so it's people like that that you'll then see on the message boards, "Hey, please don't respond to this person, they are unsafe," stuff like that. As far as being at the dungeon, and in different club nights, these people will be banned from those events, because they are known to be an unsafe player.

This emphasis on re-education efforts directed to newbies who violate consent is absolutely antithetical to larger American sexual consent practice, which operates through a much more

carceral understanding of consent violations. Indeed, consent violations in American sexual culture more broadly swing in one of two directions: “innocent until proven guilty,” a carceral model that forces victims to “prove” that violence occurred, and that they were not to blame for that violence or, more common since 2017, a “cancel culture” approach following the rise of the #MeToo movement (cite Berg) where an accusation is sufficient in the court of public opinion for guilt to be declared. Both of these are deeply problematic approaches rooted in carceral understandings of how to recognize, respond, and recover from consent violations that ultimately uphold cishetero patriarchal understandings of sex and violence - and thus, also, the hegemonic consent ideology I theorize. As Maeve, who I introduced earlier, explained to me in detail, this treatment of newer players runs on a shared ethos that participants were all once new themselves, and thus *also* made these same sorts of mistakes as they learned about consent in BDSM:

Cierra: How do you all learn about consent in BDSM? Does everybody just kind of walk in with common knowledge or—?

Maeve: No, there is kind of a lead by example situation that happens when you're new and you come into, at least our little community. For our Discord, for example, we have a list of rules that you have to agree to, to get into the group that basically states like you will not personal message anyone without asking in the group first, kind of publicly in front of others, you won't share photos from outside of the group, and things like that. So at least there is a bit of a focus on our digital end of I guess, digital consent, of sorts. And, but then for the events, which tend to be kind of the heart of our community, or they were pre pandemic times, and it was always a, you come in, and there are people who go over the rules, and it's, it's clearly explained, like, “Do not touch anyone without their permission, don't touch their stuff without permission, ask for permission.” So it's definitely more focused on events than kind of a general knowledge about consent and consent violations. You also learn by making mistakes, which happens, but sometimes we just have to, you know, correct a mistake, someone who's new or doesn't know that, yes, you should ask before you hug someone before saying goodbye. But a lot of the time, people are fairly gracious and will correct those things. Because we know how it was to be new

as well. And to some, in some cultures, it's just not like, consent is not the same. So sometimes it's just cultural differences and kind of educating people on what is acceptable in our community and what is not.

Cierra: Okay, well, I've got a couple questions. So first, is there some kind of expectation for consent violations to happen then?

Maeve: Not necessarily the expectation. And I guess this would be our prevention framework of sorts, just making everyone aware that they are operating within rules. I don't think anyone really wants to anticipate consent violations. But I think we like to lay everything out just to, like, cover our asses and the asses of others. And it's, we don't, like we don't want anyone to be in that situation. So I think we try to do a blanket like this, this is what's not okay. If you're not sure, just ask.

Maeve was not the first person I asked about expectations of consent violation, and this idea of “expecting” violation came up time and time again from the first few interviews all the way through the last several. And while Maeve’s point about not wanting to anticipate consent violations also held for many practitioners, the stories that were shared with me pointed to a reality otherwise: there is a cultural assumption, a sometimes admittedly uncomfortable one, that consent violations of certain kinds *will* occur.

Expectations of Consent Violation

Many practitioners seemed uncomfortable simply saying “yes,” to the question of whether they expected consent violation in their BDSM community. Ultimately, though, most of them did in some way hold such an expectation, reflecting an engrained community understanding that because consent is something that people learn by doing, and because mistakes are part of the learning process, consent violations *of some kinds* are thus inevitable. Even the people who initially responded “no,” some of whose opinions are shared below, ultimately gave answers that demonstrate otherwise when consent is put into practice. And -

for many practitioners, anyway - this expectation of consent violation is not necessarily bad or to be feared. Instead, it is a signal of the risk inherent in practicing BDSM, a fact captured in all of the BDSM discourses and in a great number of practices as well. It is a signal, too, of the ability to endure discomfort in order to reach greater satisfaction within BDSM practice, a phenomenon noticeably absent in American sexual culture.

Iris, a 27-year-old white pansexual polyamorous switch, elucidated the difference between these kinds of consent violations by eloquently terming the occurrence of violations that happen due to lack of knowledge “newbie fuck ups.” And she highlights how the expected “bumbling” of newcomers has meant she has taken on a mentor role to prevent “stupid ideas” from becoming reality, as she describes in this scene at a local college kink group she attends where she finds one new player has given another new player a rope burn on their neck:

Cierra: Just want to reiterate, this next section can be triggering. There's a question you don't want to answer or if you need to stop the interview, just let me know. And we'll work with that. What happens if someone's consent is violated?

Iris: It's not good. It's what's whatever the action is, is, I mean, it's assault or abuse at that point. If somebody continues past the point of somebody giving their safe word, none of this is okay anymore. And if there's any coercion involved, really, really not okay.

Cierra: Is there a difference, like in talking with other folks, a common theme is, especially with folks who are newer to the scene might accidentally overstep somebody is, one of somebody's boundaries are something that hasn't been communicated. Is there a difference in that kind of consent violation versus a purposeful, like, I'm going past your safe word, or I'm doing something you say not to?

Iris: Yeah, definitely. Like, newbie fuck ups.

Cierra: That's a good way to describe it. Yeah, newbie fuckup.

Iris: newbie, fuck ups. I definitely have a bit more leniency with that. But I just, it's, I take it as a serious safety issue. So it's like I see that. And then I, I mean, I've mentored I don't know how many people at this point. I remember one time there's one person who, it was a rough day, there was chaos. There were people in groups everywhere. Usually, it's just kind of somewhere between Cub Scout night and dungeon time, it's pretty great. But all of a sudden, in the corner, there is a rug burn on somebody's neck. And I'm like, Stop that right now. All right, let me tell you all the ways that this is a stupid idea... So that was kind of more of a technique screw up. In terms of consent screw ups, I go back to the basics. And you know, how did this happen? And, you know, why is this? Are you, first off, are you okay? For the person who's had their consent violated, a lot of times, people are actually pretty flexible in terms of knowing that there is going to be some bumbling around when they're getting, when they're first getting into the scene. I worry a lot less about that. Unless it's also mixed with rope around the neck for example. Yeah, it's why I'm always babysitting the noobs, because they can, they can get themselves in really deep really fast.

For Iris, the worry here is less about the fact that a consent violation happened - a rug burn to the neck was not on the docket for the event that she describes - but rather, it is *how* the consent violation happened, through a lack of knowledge which, quite literally, could have resulted in a hospital visit or worse for the neck-burnt participant.⁴¹ Her response in the situation is telling, almost an exasperated older sister approach: a sigh and a “Did you really just do that?” before jumping in to take care of both newbies. And Iris’s longevity within the scene, including experiences like this one, has her “babysitting the noobs” given her firsthand knowledge of the capacity for things to get out of hand with newer players. Sofia, a 30-year-old white pansexual polyamorous woman, also reflects on the reality of “low-level” consent violations within community settings:

Cierra: We have this knowledge, we have this emphasis, like, I mean, you can't have a conversation about kink without talking about consent in the same

⁴¹ The general consensus in BDSM, despite being full of risk-inclined participants, is to *not* fuck around and find out, because it can be literally deadly. The students at this event had zero knowledge of how to engage in any of the activities that transpired in a manner even resembling “safe,” or they would have known not to use a rope in breathplay, let alone to the extent that someone received burns from the rope on them.

sentence. And yet, like consent violations still happen, like really frequently. Do you think there's some kind of expectation for consent violations?

Sofia: In the community or like, in a general sense?

Cierra: in the community specifically. Unlike anything, not like the egregious like, you know, you tie someone up in rope and rape them, for instance, not like that, but like, you know, I don't want to say milder but different like knowledge-based consent violations?

Sofia: I think it is expected. Um, I think the level of like that violation is important to talk about like, so. I'm trying to think of how to word this correctly. So like, there's definitely different levels of consent violations. And I think that say like a dungeon in a local community, like they would expect a certain amount of like low-level consent violations. But I think something, obviously like, [above] that level would not be expected. But I think the smaller stuff is kind of expected in a way. And I think people get away with a lot more because they're kind of like, no, like, mistakes happen, like, miscommunications happen, things like that. And I feel like it's kind of an excuse to like, not really dig into those specific instances.

Cierra: Do you think personally, that there's like an acceptable kind of consent violation in a scene? Or are like all consent violations, like, really bad and problematic period?

Sofia: I think there's acceptable, I do like, I hate saying that, because like, personally, I don't believe that it should be acceptable. But humans do make human errors. And I think it's definitely possible to have a situation where it's not even like one person in particular is at fault. But like there was, there was a lack of communication. Or there was a miscommunication where one person thought something was clear, and the other person didn't, I think these things do happen. So I do it a little in a small way. I do expect certain consent violations. But I think that the level of which these things are happening, like the frequency that they're happening, and like, the how consistently they're happening and things like that, I think that's an important thing to look at, at the larger community scale.

Despite not necessarily desiring consent violations, Sofia is aware that they are a part of practicing in BDSM, and thus, to a degree, are also acceptable, to a point. Critically, she points back to the metrics of the larger community, rather than one-to-one experiences, as a way of understanding how appropriate the amount of consent violation over all is. This is an important

bridging of both individual perspectives and experiences of consent with larger communal norms that is noticeably absent within hegemonic consent ideology, where communal or group norms are largely invisible in consent processes, including violation. Daphne, who hails from a different community on the East Coast, considers a different aspect of expectation of consent violation, also stemming from the unique ethos of being a BDSM practitioner:

Cierra: Do you think that consent violations are expected in the community?

Daphne: Um expected? Yeah, I would actually say so. Um, there's a sort of like a quote that I bring up even in the classes that I teach and, like, navigating consent, like, well, everything we do, is has a risk inherently tied to it. Like there's no such thing as risk free, there's no such thing as safe. There is only like, risk mitigation and doing safer forms of play. And so not sure I'm having a hard time trying to think of like, how to articulate my answer for this.

Cierra: Well, I guess, maybe while you're, you're thinking for a moment, one of the things I think about is different kinds of consent violations. Is that, you know, is that a thing? How does experience and you know, this communal knowledge play into it? And if that, if that affects this, like expectation that maybe some consent violations will happen, and that's not even necessarily a bad thing?

Daphne: I, okay. So, I do definitely think there are levels to consent violations. And I think a lot of it has to do with like the severity of harm that was caused, like the intention behind the actions and track record. Also, you know, so a lot of this does come down to like, how, it's not a matter of, if it's a matter of when you fuck up doing what you do? How do you handle that? How do you plan to handle that? I think that's a really important part of negotiation for like, a lot of a lot of scenes. And it's definitely something I try and bring in. But if I were, when I fuck up, how, how will I respond? Um a big part of that is the communication aspect. So asking the bottom, what you can do for them, what they need, doing so, apologizing, and actually being sincere about that. Not just doing that because you're afraid of being canceled or banned from like a con. Making it very clear that like, when you are playing you are you are willing to handle like, harm that you have caused. And so - I actually I have a friend who teaches rope suspension. And she is, she's really good. She does it across the country across actually like North America and Europe. And she will always tell even like the paying clients who request suspension sessions with her, like some of the risks, all of the risks involved, but then says, Here is what I would do, if shit goes sideways. So kind of being able to have the like, if shit goes

sideways conversation with people. Because I think especially when you're newer to the scene, you don't necessarily realize, like, you don't know what you don't know. And so how could you know what nerve damage is to a body and what the potential risks of nerve damage having a TK on could do to you? Unless it's explained. And so, yeah, I think a lot of it also goes to, like, increasing education for for everyone involved like... how to how to advocate for themselves how to keep themselves safer. How to like, spot when someone's bullshitting you.

For Daphne, the expectation of consent violations of some kind is part and parcel of practicing BDSM because of the other forms of risk inherent in practice - something captured, to a degree, in the discourses from chapter two. Simultaneously, Daphne also undergirds the responsibility of both individual practitioners and the community more broadly to provide ongoing education for everyone, because, as she explains, for newer folks in particular, “you don’t know what you don’t know” and that is one aspect of how consent violations occur. Thus it is important to take classes that teach these skills so as to minimize the occurrences of violations in these ways, even though sometimes “shit goes sideways” regardless, and that is also to be expected. Hazel shares a similar perspective, though she is more hesitant to say “yes” to the question of expectation:

Hazel: What was the question you asked me?

Cierra: we were talking about whether you expect consent violations within kink Um, what about like, newer folks?

Hazel: New partners?

Cierra: Yes.

Hazel: So with new partners, I expect that there's going to be maybe toe steppings... But the conversations are in active real time. And it's about establishing rapport and boundary and consent together as a couple or play partners, right? ... I can tell you all day long, I don't like spanking. But what I can't tell you is if you take your belt off in a certain way, I'm going to go hide in the closet for an hour. And that's the kind of thing that you learn in that early

stage with a new partner is stuff that is my specific triggers, right, my specific things, and I'm never gonna hold it against you. If you cross a boundary that you didn't know existed, I'm never gonna hold it against you...like, if, if something like that happens in that beginning stage and there's genuine remorse and there's genuine Oh, my gosh, I'm so sorry. How do we keep this from happening again? Right? What's the plan for the future? There's absolutely wiggle room. There's absolutely a little bit of, not an expectation of violation, but an understanding that, hey, this person doesn't necessarily know me and they don't know my history. And they may not. They may not think of things right, they may not understand how x activity that is super normal to everybody else to me is like, horrifying and awful.

While “expectation” of consent violation may not be quite the way Hazel would phrase it, her emphasis on the reality that in playing with a new partner, it is literally *impossible* to know everything about them. For people with a background of trauma in particular - Hazel is very open throughout our interview that she is a survivor, as are most of the women and a number of the men and non-binary individuals I interviewed - this is even more important *as the survivor* to be aware of and thinking about. Hazel shares this perspective not in a victim-blaming kind of way, but in an agentic way focused on taking care of oneself while being able to build rapport with one's partners. This need for personal responsibility is highlighted also by Opal, from the same community as Daphne on the East Coast. Flouting hegemonic understandings of consent in practice by moving away from individualistic understandings, Opal, a 25-year-old queer white educator and Domme, focuses on the importance of community accountability:

Cierra: So you've identified kind of like, two different kinds of, we'll call them consent violations, like really overt predatory ones. And then these kinds of like, like harm happened, whether that was the intent or not of the person who did the harm. What about like, people who are new to the scene?

Opal: ...I think if you are inexperienced, you don't know what you're doing. You know, that's what experience means, you need to learn from example. And I think having a community that's going to hold you accountable, but also is

going to be helpful, as opposed to harmful. You know, you see that somebody has been making a mistake in their rope instead of trying to cancel them, instead of trying to call them out in a way that is potentially humiliating or embarrassing or harmful to them. You talk to them, they might not know, they might not know that they keep doing the same thing in rope. And it's actually really dangerous. And oh, my God, everybody knows that's dangerous. They don't know it's dangerous. I think compassion is a really big part of making people feel welcomed and making people feel less shame. Because I think all humans have the capacity to do harm. I've done harm, you potentially have done harm...

Cierra: This is maybe a weird question. But I'm wondering if you think consent violations are something to be expected in kink communities?

Opal: I think you could say that. I don't think you can ever mitigate all harm, regardless. Because, you know, somebody can, you can do the most informed negotiation in the world. And then I can just have a brain flip and freak out. And that's not because of anything that you did. It's because of just what's happening. And how you respond to that is important. But also, if you weren't expecting that, you know, your response might be different. So it's, it's tough, because consent can be as little as a simple touch or a simple way that you're speaking to somebody. I've seen many I've been in situations many times where I've accidentally called somebody the wrong honorific because I'm not used to playing with them. And I try to go for what the standard honorific is, and I forget that they don't like that honorific, because I have bottom brain and I forgot, and I have ADHD, and I forgot. And so like, that's a bad thing. I shouldn't do that. I'm violating that person's consent... And that's why I say always be very specific, especially with newbies, because I'm like, you don't know, you don't know how many soft limits you have. Because you don't even know that that's a thing yet, you know, you take your first click class, and you're like, Oh, I didn't realize that I had to say I don't want to do X, because I didn't know that X existed. So that's why informed consent is so important. That's why very specific consent is so important.

Once again, the lack of knowledge of newcomers is a guiding principle for doing consent in the community Opal belongs to; her acknowledgement of her own consent violations, by using incorrect pronouns or honorifics for new partners, is an excellent example of how it takes time to learn how to do something correctly, and also how it takes time to be able to repair post-harm. Her inexperience led Opal to cause other people harm, a fact she also admits, sits with, and attempts to atone for, as that is *also* an expectation. Rather than a “do no harm” approach

to consent, there is instead a “do minimal harm, and learn from it” approach that, as I will discuss further later in the chapter, is also a unique aspect of how consent operates in BDSM communities. Yvette, a 27-year-old white bisexual woman with two partners, comes to a similar conclusion about consent violation expectation and recovery, but takes it one step further by connecting it to broader cultural treatment (or lack thereof) of consent in the U.S.:

Cierra: do you think that consent violations are expected in the community?

Yvette: I like don't like saying yes. But I think that like I, I feel like they should be like, I feel like it. I mean, there's obviously a level to what level of consent violation is expected. But I think that as you're playing with things that are, you know, fringe and especially for like consensual, non consent type stuff, I think that there will be times where consent violations happen. And I think that it's not necessarily a bad thing.

Cierra: Tell me more about those ones that are like not necessarily bad things.

Yvette: Yeah, I'm like, I think that experiencing those things teaches you how to make them not happen again in the future. So I'm thinking like one example of like, me saying, I don't want sexual play. And I did a scene where somebody had like a bullet vibrator necklace, and was using that and like, got to the general area. And I was like, hey, like that? I didn't say anything at the time. But then after I was like, Oh, yeah, that definitely, like I knew when it was happening, it was like, past my line. And but that taught me to say like, this is what I mean, when I say no sexual play, and it like, taught me to be more explicit about it. And at the end of the day, like, the, at least for me, and maybe this is my own privilege of not really having any intense trauma behind consent, that it was, you know, there weren't that many consequences to that happening. It was just like, Oh, I had some vibration that, you know, objectively felt good that I was like, I didn't want this and then I got to realize how to say no to it later.

Cierra: So are there, besides like instances like that where you're learning, as you're negotiating with new partners, maybe in playing for the first time or something, what about for like, folks that are really new to the scene? Are there expectations that those folks are going to violate consent or have their consent violated in some way?

Yvette: Yeah, it's hard because I like, I wish the answer, I think in a perfect world where we've been taught consent from being like two years old, that there should, there wouldn't be that expectation at all. But I think in the society that

we're in where people weren't taught consent at all, that unfortunately, like, you know, if I think about the example of the community I have being okay with, like spanking each other. And if a new person walked in and spanked me, I'd probably be like, "Hey, I don't, I don't really want this." And I don't like I don't necessarily blame them for doing it. But having walked into the space and seeing everybody doing it, and being like, oh, everyone's doing it, she must like it, I can do it too. And again, it's like, I feel like I want there to be non-consequential consent violation so people can learn. Because I feel like you learn through experience. It's just really hard to have non-consequential consent violations.

As Yvette points out, the hegemonic ideology of consent present in American sexual culture is not present in younger people's lives, as thus historically people do not consciously learn about consent from when they "are like two years old."⁴² Exposure to consent in actual education spaces is mixed, has mixed outcomes in its effectiveness, and is not required throughout the entire country (Marcantonio et al. 2024). And, as many other kinksters pointed out, "you learn through experience," and without any opportunities to experience consent, there cannot be effective learning of it. Finally, I want to highlight Yvette's use of the phrase "non-consequential consent violation" to refer to the process of trying and failing and learning to do consent in practice. Untying expectations of extreme consequences from these "low-level" kinds of violations, as Sofia described them above, is also important: making failure not just a reality, but an expectation, also helps create space for people to atone for those times when they do cause harm. This is very in-line with restorative justice approaches to consent violation, a facet of BDSM communities that I will discuss in more-depth later in this chapter.

⁴² I recognize that some forms of harm reduction education consent ARE taught that early - "don't hit people!" to a two-year old whose brain is not formed enough for emotional regulation, for instance. This is not necessarily in the vein of "consent" that I discuss throughout this dissertation.

The Importance of Community Consent

Another aspect of this ideology of consent in BDSM communities, which has already been highlighted in the last section, is the centering of community as a site where consent operates. Rather than people in a scene being isolated individuals engaged in a consent process with only one another, practitioners of BDSM playing in public spaces are also understood by their communities to be engaging in *communal* consent processes that both reflect group norms around sex and sex-adjacent activity. This approach within BDSM (and, indeed, all sexual activity) does not occur outside of socialized inequalities built from power differences in social hierarchies. Centering community also allows space for consent violation as well as responses to those. Alivia, the 31-year-old white bisexual married community leader in the South, speaks to both of these, demonstrating how the balance between individual and community is struck in the spaces she helps oversee:

Cierra: Is there ever any expectation that like newer folks will have consent violations? Because they're still learning? Or is it pretty harsh? Like, no, there will not be consent violations of any kind here?

Alivia: You know, I think there's a lot of grace given to certain extents. Naturally, when you're a newbie and you walk into a room, if you see someone you may know, it's exciting to be like, Oh, my gosh, I know that person or, you know, so I think we deal with consent issues, more there of people, just like yearning for that connection, but not realizing the responsibility of keeping things anonymous. So, oh, we try, leaders of this group, to really [follow] the protocol of, hey, if you recognize someone, no, you can't say hi to them, you know, like things like that. Especially the big ones. Like I say, like, don't pick it up if it doesn't belong to you. Because we don't want our newbies who are so excited to just be thrown to the lions and think like it's a college orgy... So we really do try to teach them that before anything else. So we always have like, like I said, with our munches, we always read our rules. Our rules are always up on our website, they're on our FetLife we direct people to them if they need them. And we are very good about nipping people in the bud immediately. I can't tell you the amount of messages, "hey, all of a sudden I'm not in the group like what's going on?" we have to [go back and] I'm like "This violation happened. I'm sorry, but we won't be welcoming you back..." [audio cuts] if they like, violate, they're out. It leaves people feeling safe.

Unlike the image of the college orgy, purportedly with every person for themselves in a tango of hedonistic and unstructured sexual activity, BDSM play is more structured (even the orgies). Because of this, for many kinksters, including Alivia, some consent violation is not only expected but also permissible, especially amongst newer players who are learning the rules.

But, there is a threshold at which people will be cut off - and Alivia and her co-leaders are not afraid to do as handling the safety of the group is really important, and that sometimes means removing people for failing to adhere to the rules. Essentially, the expectation of some consent violation is *not* a ticket for practitioners to do whatever they want, because there are consequences and the well-being of the group supersedes the individual. This communal emphasis is an important divulgence from hegemonic consent, as it centers not just the individual, but multiple members of the community simultaneously, both those within the exact interaction *and* those outside of but still affected by it. However, this communal emphasis is not without its own issues, as Daphne highlights in two different ways. She first tells me about a friend of hers, a rope rigger who at the last minute refused to complete a rope rigger demonstration at a ropecon⁴³ when one of the most common pieces of equipment was broken and could have greatly injured or even killed the rope bottom with whom she was doing the demo.

Daphne: But yeah, so that was a huge consent violation. And they tried to pressure her, they tried to coerce her into teaching a class that may have like, really, really hurt her bottom. And thankfully, she completely stood her ground, she got kicked out of this event. But her bottom was safe. Yeah, and it's just really shitty. That, to my knowledge, maybe like one other con who did some dumb shit and decided to still have a week long summer camp in Massachusetts over this past summer [of 2020] during a pandemic.

Cierra: Holy shit.

Daphne: Yeah, yeah, super fucked up. And people went, there was like a RSVP list of 100. pretty wild. Um, so yeah, it, I really do think people who organize events, people who lead things within the kink and BDSM community, I think if you are in a position of power, you, you you signed up for this, we are

⁴³ BDSM practitioners have conventions, too, just like gamers and comic book fans. Cons are usually a combination of classes, demonstrations, and speaking events. This event was a ropecon, a con specifically centered around shibari and other ropeplay practices only (as opposed to also including other kinds of play).

obligated to keep our community safe. We are obligated to listen to our community when our community tells us that harm is happening in some way, shape, or form. Like I don't think it has to, or it should be exclusively all on us to like fix these problems. But I do think, being in these positions we owe, we have a responsibility to like, if we don't know about consent, if we don't know about tranSofiaormative justice, if we don't know about accountability, or what that entails, for the sake of everyone, like, if you're an organizer, you better fucking learn that stuff. Or you're not going to be around very long.

In addition to the friend at the ropecon, Daphne also briefly comments on the incredibly irresponsible choice of a portion of a community to host an in-person summer camp event at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Summer 2020. As Daphne articulates, it is an “obligation” as a leader to uphold the collective safety of individuals and the broader community - even if it can get you kicked out of an event by others. This leaves room for inequality to creep in, depending on who the leaders are and their own positionalities within and beyond their community.⁴⁴ But this communal obligation to collective well-being is also a unique aspect of consent in practice in these communities that is altogether absent from sexual communities in broader American sexual culture that rely on the hegemonic consent ideology. This balancing of the individual versus the community at large comes up in other ways as well, including participants’ ability to even enter a community. Rebecca, a 25-year-old white polyamorous submissive woman, also a member of a community located in a conservative area of Utah, explains:

Cierra: How often? Or what situations do police actually get called in to deal with consent violations?

Rebecca: Um, in our personal community, we are actually extremely careful with who was even in. The kind of process is you have to meet someone from the community, and they need to get to know you first. And then if you want to go to a class or to a party, they have to vouch for you. And then they have to be

⁴⁴ See chapter two.

there with you, and stay with you the whole time to make sure that you don't do anything inappropriate to educate them the whole time. And if something does happen, depending on how serious whether it's if they if they've walked into a scene without consent, then that would be a different thing that if they actually tried to assault someone, but if they do something more serious. If it's actually really serious, they will totally get the cops called on on them. Like that's not okay. But for the most part, what happens is, if it's a little more extreme, or if they got really intoxicated or something, they will be removed from the premises, they will be either depending on how bad the infraction was, we'll be warned and given a second chance, or they will be completely banned from the property completely. We actually have quite a few, there's actually three or four different communities right [from] Ogden to Provo. And all of those communities, even though we don't always get along and agree on stuff we all share with each other who has been banned from our areas. And typically, if someone has been banned from one, they are automatically banned from all.

In communities like Rebecca's, the stakes of being "outed" as a kinkster are potentially much higher (Haviv 2016; Holt 2016) than in other communities, such as those in areas of California I studied. In our interview, she shared that she knew people who, upon being outed, had their marriages dissolve, lost custody of their children, lost their jobs, and one person even lost their home. Because of this, her community - and several nearby communities, and those in other more conservative areas, such as Alivia's community - are very strict in their protocols for consent violations. While some level of consent violation is still permissible, generally the standards are tighter in how consent violations are handled such that even other communities are alerted when someone is banned for inappropriate behavior, something that was very atypical of the communities in my overall sample. Though the approach to notifying other communities is unique, this practice of vetting members for the group's overall safety is not. Marina, a 39-year-old white pansexual ProDomme, participates in a community in a much more socially and politically progressive part of the country. She also talked to me about vetting, but from a different perspective given changing communities during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic:

Marina: I know some people who've run munches online to create success and I know some people who have some kind of rough beginnings where they didn't vet people and had issues with people popping in and out of the rooms you know, being disgusting and threatening to dox people meeting and thing it's just yeah you know no one ever hears from them again it's fine just like go away a little but yeah, just it's been living online now. It's been like this you know, it's been a learning curve for everybody and for some bigger than others, I think. You know, I thought about like it's one thing to have someone come in person because I always observe them, how they interact with people. Right? I like to think that my radar for folks pretty good but online I don't know, they could share, they share the password meeting stuff with somebody. So vetting became something that I did with clients anyways. And now I did it with, you know, newbies and friends of friends and all this other stuff from it's, yeah, it's been good. We've, I've had no problems with our munches honestly, online this whole time.

Cierra: What is your vetting process look like?

Marina: So it typically is the way that the event is said, is they RSVP? It's not, it doesn't automatically add them to the RSVP list that everybody else can see. So I'll see you there RSVP, I'll ask them to send me a reference. If they can't send me a reference, then we will schedule a phone call or a video call. And I will talk to them for usually half an hour or so and then let you know, I'll tell them. Okay, well, I'll give a talk to my co host. And I get back to you. I actually have final say, but that's a way to make it seem like I'm not the only one making the decision. So, you know, some people don't like to be told no. They think it's more than one person then they like, whatever. Um, so yeah, I've only have you like a few people that I never called back and didn't approve their RSVP. After speaking to them. There's a lot of people who never get back to me, I'm like, hey, you know, I need references I need for a new schedule. I never, they never get back to me just because they're not really active online and checking the messages and stuff. So if you're the people who really want to be a part of this particular, you know, month group, they want to be in community, they're really serious about it. They'll get back to me, even if it's late, even if they missed the lunch. You know, people are like, Oh, I'm sorry, I got busy and like, that's fine. You know, let's let's get you better for the next one. Yeah, it's, so it's worked out really well. And I can also see on this, yeah, I posted I'll see on site, we have mutual friends, and also hit up the mutual friends say, hey, you know, so and so? Would you would you vouch for them? You know, I've had people say, Oh, we became friends, but I don't really remember that kind of talks too much. And we can't really, I can't confidently like vouch for them. I don't really know. I'm like, okay, but that's just something, you know. So yeah, it's been really, really helpful.

Marina explains how this vetting was helpful to her in vetting clients, and then became a part of her practice within her community to help stop and to further help solidify people as safe for the community or not following zoom-bombing of events. This emphasis on needing references, for other participants to “vouch” for newcomers, is not actually a new practice within BDSM communities but has a steadied history from the advent of BDSM in the United States. Indeed, most Old Guard communities had similar sorts of practices in place to ensure the safety of the group, and to have communal buy-in to the risks of belonging to a sexually “deviant” community at a time when homosexuality and other non-cishet sex practices were even more heavily policed than they are now (Stein 2021). And with the onset of the pandemic, a great influx of new practitioners to virtual communal spaces meant that many communities suddenly had to grapple with how to accommodate so many people, and how to do so in a way that aligned with existing community norms around inclusion and safety. Pearl, a 44-year-old white bisexual polyamorous submissive, was part of a group of kinky friends in a digital space that was slowly becoming a more formalized BDSM community space, and shared with me some of the questions and concerns existing members had about how to expand:

Pearl: One of the groups that I'm a part of on Discord is not a formal group... It's just a bunch of friends that, you know, one of them I met on Kik, and she had a bunch of other friends. And so it's just basically a friend group. But they're starting to formalize a little bit more into like, maybe we should invite a few more people. So there's a there's actually an there's an actual discussion right now going on about like, how do we vet the people that we invite? How do we ensure that they're going to be a good member of the community? And what do we do if they violate these rules? Like, are there tiers of the violation? Or do we just kick them out immediately, you know, on the first go round or whatever, so –

Cierra: What are the discourses around those things? I mean, I'm interested in all of those and like how groups decide those things, so that's fascinating, you're like watching this happen in real time?

Pearl: Yeah, yeah. It's really interesting. There's discussion in the, it's like the public announcements channel on the Discord that they've set up. They had originally had a or like, you know, we're gonna have a spank party, at so and so's house or whatever. And so they posted some things in there, they use the tag that alerts everybody that there's a message if you haven't disabled those, because you can still do that on Discord. But you know, how do you get a hold of people otherwise? So they tag everybody, and they mentioned, like, here's the reason why we want to talk about who we can invite. And so the person who's, you know, basically taking over as one of the mod positions, she talked about, like, Yeah, this is a safe space, we all know each other. But if we want to invite other people that we know, like, what if one of us has a problem with that person, what we've experienced issues with them in another space. So what we're gonna do, is have a discussion about people before we invite so she laid out a couple different scenarios, like first you, maybe you post something in the prospective invites channel, and you talk about this person, how you know them where you met them, any, you know, experiences you've had with them that are that maybe we're not quite red flags, but maybe you would be to watch out for Right. Or maybe you tell a mod, that you want to invite somebody and they post the thing about it so that it's, it's more like an anonymous, here's somebody we want to invite, and somebody knows them. And then maybe that stays up for like, four days. And the community has a chance to look at it and express any concerns and, you know, a couple different scenarios like that. And then the group voted on what we thought was the best scenario for that and ended up being like, well post something, you know, if you want to invite somebody, you post something about them. And the group, gets a chance to have a little discussion. And then after a certain time, if there's no concerns, then that post gets archived, so the person doesn't see it, when they when they get invited, but then the mod will invite them and then they can have like a, you know, preliminary, I think we decided, like 30 days, or they have a limited access to the server. And then after that, if they've proven themselves to be a decent person, then they can we can open the rest of the server to them.

I was fortunate to interview Pearl at the time they were participating in this group formalization, as it provided me insight into how, where, and why certain aspects of community are prioritized over others, and indeed over the individuals that make up that community. This is really highlighted in this “trial run” opportunity afforded to newbies, wherein the membership level is scaffolded for a set period of time. This allows people to demonstrate how they (can or cannot) abide by the various sets of rules before being offered

the full privileges that come with being a member, including eventual opportunities to participate in physical play events outside the digital space in which things began. Though this example - and most of those before it in this section - are illustrations of preventative actions taken by BDSM communities, even this approach to prevention is relatively unique in comparison to sexual communities that rely on a hegemonic consent ideology as the focus remains based in concern for the community as a whole rather than individuals and the violence they may experience.

The Foregrounding of Care

There are a number of ways that practitioners demonstrate consent in their practices in BDSM communities, but in this section I want to focus on a particularly illustrative example: responses to consent violations.⁴⁵ Specifically, I present examples of how many communities - though, not all - began implementing restorative justice practices during the course of my study in response to consent violations as a way to treat all participants with care and dignity. As an important caveat, I began these interviews around the explosion of the #MeToo movement in 2016/2017 and amidst increasing legal control over sex on the internet, most notably the implementation of FOSTA-SESTA in 2018. These are both important cultural moments for American sexual culture, and the repercussions of both could be felt in the communities in which I participated and from which I interviewed practitioners. What these BDSM communities are attempting to do - and struggling and even failing sometimes - is to grapple with what justice is, what victim-survivors want and need post-violation, and how to

⁴⁵ Other forms of consent-based care practices include checking in on play partners during a scene and performing aftercare.

balance harm as a reality with the expectation that consent violations are part of being in community. Lacey, a 33-year-old white-passing WOC and Dominant switch, reflects on during part of our conversation about her mentor, who was outed as a serial assaulter, and how people adjacent to him also experienced blowback:

Lacey: And really, when this, when this all went down, and it's something, it's a personal regret that I have to like when this all went down, because our BDSM community is so naive, in regards to how to handle holding people accountable for their actions, it's just "No, you're a problem throw you out into the world, we don't want you anymore." Um, versus like, "hey, do you regret what you did? Do you want to either, like, work on those behavioral issues that are clearly not acceptable in our community? And then allow you to come back in?" Um, do you want like, what does the bottom need in order to grow from the potential harm that you caused these people as well. It's a concept in theory that, specifically the rope aspect of it, people love that idea of holding people accountable and doing this sort of restorative justice process. But it's still really high level theory, and we haven't gotten into deep cases where that's worked.

Cierra: And what happened with your teacher, like, as these things came out?

Lacey: He initially told me that the one of the people who had accused him of his behavior had asked him not to say anything. Um, and he said, Nothing. All these stories came out, he kind of just fell off the face of the earth, for lack of better terms, none of his friends stood up for him. My ex partner at the time, who was in his rope family, nobody stood up for him, nobody said anything. And for the most part [my ex] still ties with people, he will still continue to further his own education and rope. But as a community, we were just inherently shitty to him, and I guess a couple other people. And I know we've learned better now. But, again, trying to put accountability into practice, rather than in theory has been inherently difficult.

Lacey's ex-partner was treated as fruit of the poisonous tree when their mutual mentor was outed, such that his affiliation with a serial assaulter was enough for other people in the community to turn against him as well, despite no allegations of wrongdoing on his part. As Lacey reflects, doing restorative justice work is difficult, and in this instance, she and her community failed her ex-partner and several other community members, who may have also

experienced harm at the hands of this rope mentor. While her ex was not pushed out of the community, this was a learning moment for her, a “regret” that her community did not do better by all of their members, and a commitment that Lacey shared later is important to her moving forward. Yvette reflects on the experience of a friend who felt the community had failed her when she experienced a consent violation, but for Yvette, the communal response in this instance was not so black and white:

Cierra: So do you have any examples or experiences with like, a more consequential consent violation and the community response to that?

Yvette: Yeah, actually, as we're talking, I'm thinking of one, this was not one that happened to me, but it happened to a friend of mine, she was doing pickup play and negotiated a scene with someone. It was at a dungeon. And he ended up going into like, a more private part of the dungeon that was not as public and then actually ended up asking other people to leave and like, she's a person who very much wanted to do it in public and like, have that, you know, safety net. And she ended up like, you know, she was tied up and didn't like it and like, there was a whole bunch of things and she reported it to the people who run the dungeon and there was like a whole, I don't even remember the whole saga, but it was like a number of emails back and forth. And like, she ended up just being like, I'm not going to play with people at this dungeon again.

Cierra: That's unfortunate. It sounds like maybe those folks didn't give her the kind of support she was looking for?

Yvette: Yeah, and like, the thing is, is I have mixed feelings, because I, I don't necessarily think that like, you know, the incarceration method of like, just lock this bad person up and never allow them out and don't give them any, like real rehabilitation is like, the way to solve it. And that's what she was looking for. It was like, make sure he never comes back, make sure that he is banned for life. And the people who were in charge were like, no, and it's a really hard thing, because my personal thoughts are that like, maybe they could ban him from certain days, so that she could go on certain days. And no, he wasn't there. But I do think that the put them in a box, don't let them out don't actually try to address anything, don't actually, like, teach him the consequences of his actions and like, and again, that's like centering the the male in the like, person who can who violated the consent, it's hard... On top of that, to like, complicate matters, she is a trans woman. So like, She's also got that intersectional, that baggage,

that's not the right word, but like intersectional history that she's bringing to the table of like, this is why it's important to me that he's not allowed back.

Cierra: Yeah, absolutely. Do you have ideas about how to better negotiate that or—?

Yvette: Yeah, it's so hard because like, you know, well, it's not like I said to her, oh, I think he should like, you know, relax your desires. Like, I didn't tell her that I thought that kicking him out was the wrong thing. I just listened to her. But I think like, if I think about a one on one class, I kind of like the idea of being like, okay, you have this space, you have three strikes, three strikes, you're out. This is what a strike is, if you get one strike, this is what you'll have to do. And you kind of like, because I think that everybody should be allowed to make mistakes. And when it's a pattern is kind of when it's a problem. If somebody perpetually does the same thing over and over again, and doesn't learn and grow then okay, just kick them out, and don't let them back. But I think about this specific scenario, I don't see if they kicked this guy out of this space and told him not to come back, I see no reason why he's not just going to go to another space and do the same thing.

Trying to be sensitive to her friend's intersectional identity as a transwoman, Yvette is nevertheless blunt: simply kicking this man out of the community could not effectively support her friend's needs post-violation. The delicate balance between centering the needs of survivor-victims and the people who violate their consent is an area that needs more attention in BDSM communities, and many practitioners are aware of this. For Yvette, this means creating more stringent and specific guidelines - such as giving people “three strikes” that are well-defined. Ideally, these community guidelines both prevent harm *and* help keep people accountable when harm does inevitably occur, even from low-level consent violations, by giving people the opportunity to learn from their mistakes. Further, that the consent violator in this story is “not just going to go to another space and do the same thing,” demonstrates care for her friend who was violated, the violator himself, their greater community, *and* potential future community spaces in which that man might find himself. But the struggle of not yet having set guidelines to follow, like the “three strikes” approach Yvette proposes, came up in multiple

interviews. Opal talked with me about this from the perspective of someone who once had a much more carceral approach to handling consent violations but has since shifted to a restorative justice orientation instead:

Opal: When it comes to kink experiences and people feeling like they weren't handled correctly and people feeling like they're not safe in the community. I think it's unfortunately, kind of like, same old song that happens to a lot of kink communities. I think it happens to most kink communities. Because I mean, it's a very vulnerable space, you're doing things, you're doing dangerous things, you're doing risky things, you're doing things that on the surface look very harmful. And so it gets really complicated.

Cierra: You said you think this is something that happens with most or all kink communities, like tell me a little bit more about that. That seems a little counterintuitive with this focus on consent, right?

Opal: I agree. I think it's the kind of thing where there's not a general framework for, there may be a general framework for consent, but I feel like there's not a widely accepted and held framework for how to deal with harm in the community, their consent violations, dangerous people, predatory people. Thankfully, I have seen the conversation shift away from cancel culture and call out culture and go more to accountability culture, call out culture only when accountability processes don't work. I hate putting culture behind everything. But I definitely have moved myself, I used to be just like 100%, call these people out, ban them, get them out of the community. But thankfully, I was educated. And you know, casting people out, banning people is not generally going to solve most issues. Even if the person is super dangerous and predatory. If they're not willing to change, that's one thing. But generally, that process is kind of skipped. And they're not given an opportunity to have any sort of accountability or go through any sort of process of retribution or justice, which is generally what the victim could want, potentially, but they there's not kind of a way to do that that's widely held. And thankfully, in my communities, in the Greater New England community, I've seen a lot of people talking about it. I've seen it in like a lot of other big communities, Maryland and Texas, Austin area, that kind of stuff. I've seen way more accountability versus canceling and calling out, which I think is really great. It's also messy, of course, you know, I have an accountability process myself, I have people that are and the problem is their bias, because these are people that are considered my friends, and I trust them. But in my case, I also trust these people to not defend me to not believe me over the victim to you know, anything like that I would trust these people to hold me accountable. And I hope that they would because I would hold them accountable for issues.

This “same old song and dance” of consent violations not resulting in a framework of response that community members find adequate is part of the shift happening in these communities post-#MeToo. As Opal underscores, giving people the opportunity to own up to their mistakes and then demonstrate that they can do better is important, and worth the “messiness” of it. This holds even for people whose behavior will not ultimately change, because such an approach does not assume that violating consent one time means that a person always will do so. Asking people to be “accountable” to one another, as this restorative justice approach does, invites people to build stronger community together, while also providing meaningful responses when harm ultimately does occur. And, at least in Opal’s community, this approach *is* beginning to take hold with positive outcomes. She offers me an example of how restorative justice was utilized with success for two directly-impacted people, those impacted more secondarily like herself (as she shares that the harm-doer in the following was an ex-play partner of hers), and the community more broadly that all of them belong to:

Thankfully, we haven't had any direct issues in my like, close circle of friends. I have had a thing where I played with somebody where it turns out later that he had done a couple instances that required, that he felt required, like, public FetLife apologies and acknowledgments. We [the leadership, including myself] were contacted once about, somebody, the same person was coming to our rope class regularly, and the person that they had done harm to saw that they were in the RSVP list and they said “Hey, I'd really love to attend your class but I see that [this person who cause me harm goes] pretty much every time. Is there anything [you] could do?” And we asked them what they would like us to do. We did go ahead and speak with the person who had done harm, but they were okay with that, we went and spoke with the person who had done harm, because they had kind of gone through a process. And I don't know, if I wasn't, you know, I am not privy to the information of forgiveness happened or sorrys happened, but they weren't actively, you know, fighting or anything. And we were able to ask him to just step out of class for a little bit, not step out, but not come to a couple classes. And she was able to come and she didn't feel like we had, I just didn't want her to feel like we had like, bended over backwards just

for her, I wanted her to feel like it was a totally normal thing to do, and something that we could carry out as educators and community members. So that was a good experience. And I think that was like the best possible experience. But there's obviously far more messy. When emotions and stuff like that is involved, it's very hard to be impartial, it's very hard to not want, you know, to freak out and be really black and white and cancel people in and out of stuff. So it's very complicated.

This handling of things was a win for this community. Even the conversation with the harm-doer was handled by another community leader, Daphne, who did not have a direct relationship with him. This decision in itself was important as Opal succinctly sums: emotions can make it hard to be impartial and thus hard to support everyone adequately and fairly. More social distance, as in this case, can be effective in helping balance impartiality and everyone's individual needs. This is a fine line to walk. For Ambrose, a white femme transman in his late 20s who works as a defense lawyer in a separate East Coast community, restorative justice is effective in its ability to help with this to achieve positive social change. With his experience with the law, and my own knowledge of and experience with Title IX and anti-violence activism, much of our conversation centers around ideas of changing consent culture, restorative justice, and rehabilitation, both within and beyond BDSM communities. As we near the end of the interview, when I asked participants about the effects of #MeToo in their communities, we end up on the topic of cancel culture, and Ambrose offers some insights into separating people from their behaviors:

Cierra: ...I'm also thinking about this defensiveness that some folks have, and that I think tends to be like, cis straight men, especially in responding to allegations of consent violations. And I'm wondering if, like, is there some kind of connection between the idea that like, if you harm somebody, you're a bad person, and that's what's going on here? And if there's a way that we could move away from like, we're human, we all hurt other people sometimes, and that's, you know, that's being human and doesn't necessarily make you bad?

Ambrose: Yeah. I think this comes down to, this is something we I've seen in like social media discourse is like canceled culture is like if someone does one bad behavior, or even a series of bad behaviors, they're canceled, like they are not allowed to engage in the community. Many times it is accompanied by harassment, by doxxing, in online communities at least... And I think that's where a lot of the rub in rehabilitative justice, specifically in the BDSM community comes from, is that this like, once you're branded a consent violator, you will always be a consent violator, when really like this person was in our community before this, they probably have had interactions where they didn't violate people's consent, you know, they, they aren't doing this in every interaction they have, like, we need to also teach them to identify the good things they've done, so that they can see how they're different from the things that aren't good. But I think it's critical that we're able to separate behaviors from people to a certain point, like, there are some people who, you know, don't, who aren't interested in that rehabilitative work, or don't believe they could ever do harm. Or actively enjoy doing harm. And I think there comes a point where the community would have to draw a line and say, you know, "Despite best efforts, there's nothing more we can offer you. I'm sorry. But you're going to have to, you're not welcome in these spaces anymore." But I think we get there way too quickly now, because we tie behavior with the person. And that, assuming they will always behave that way. Whereas if we don't do any of that rehabilitative work, of course, they're not going to behave any differently. But if we do engage in this work, there's a good chance behavior will change.

Just as both Yvette and Opal spoke to in slightly different capacities, Ambrose's emphasis on separating the behavior from the identity signals an acute shift away from an ideology of consent that frames consent violation as "you did a bad thing so you are a bad community member and now you do not get to be in community" to a consent ideology that frames consent violation as a "you did harm and you need to do better if you still want to be in community." This framing alone is necessary to provide space for people to exist in the nuance of harm-doing and response such that they can learn to do and be better. This underpinning logic of an individual bad actor versus a person who genuinely *belongs* in a community, is a way that these practices of consent - up to and including responses to consent violation - meaningfully shift away from a hegemonic ideology of consent. Instead of focusing on individual rights and responsibilities, there is a shift to an alternative ideology that recognizes the communal aspect

is *always* present as well. Caring about the people within a community, while a radically simple idea, is a key component of an ideology of consent that supports everyone.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have offered an alternative ideology of consent by demonstrating four major aspects of the operation of consent in practice in BDSM communities. First, the understanding of consent as a verb, a process through which one learns by doing. Second, there is an expectation that consent violations will happen, and that this is not necessarily bad, even when there is some level of harm. Third, a privileging of the community occurs within consent practices, even to the detriment of the individual in perverse invocations of consent. And, fourth, there is a foregrounding of care for all, including those who do harm through consent violations, through which many BDSM communities are now moving towards restorative justice responses to consent violations as opposed to more traditionally carceral approaches.

Individually, each of these four aspects of consent ideology is an important move away from the hegemonic ideology of consent I theorize in chapter 3. Taken together, however, these form a truly alternative ideology of consent. Specifically, the de-legalization of consent with a focus on learning and community beyond oneself reframes consent as not an individual-level phenomenon structured by society but rather a sustainable community practice that can be shaped by, and in turn shape, community existence through care for others. The hegemonic ideology of consent is meant to lock individual participants into specific ways of doing consent and is punishable, theoretically, by the legal apparatus of the state for not obeying. This alternative ideology of consent I have theorized instead allows for a freer experience of sexuality, both at the individual and communal level, and it allows for flexibility in practice

while simultaneously respecting and upholds differences in sexual communities rather than punishing those that step out of line.

After reflecting on these four aspects of an alternative consent ideology in BDSM communities, in my concluding chapter I thus propose a new consent framework: the ABCCCs (standing for awareness, bodily autonomy, caring, communication, and context). Built from the actual lived experiences of practitioners, both good and bad, this new framework derives from BDSM communities but is one that I have envisioned as applicable in a variety of sexual communities, but which I also have built as a model that is applicable to other settings as well, such as in healthcare and in legal contexts.

Conclusion: Building a New Consent Framework from the Margins

Introduction

Sage: I mean, a consent violation doesn't happen, in my opinion, because there's a lack of information about consent violations. I think it's part of a broader social framework that needs to change. But being that an individual BDSM community cannot change a broader social framework around sex, gender, and identity, all it can do is work with what it's got, continuing to keep the issue talked about, and, discuss[ing] and associating it with best practices. And with, like, what's needed to be a member of that community is vital, in my opinion.

Cierra: I want to go back to something that you just said for a minute; it sounds like you're relating consent, practices and knowledge within kink communities as not just about the kink communities themselves and some of like bigger social things, maybe mapping on to the way we interact with folks in kink? Am I understanding that right?

Sage: I think that kink, or any community of people with a shared pursuit or identity, is just a slice of the broader social fabric of whatever society it finds itself in. So it's going to have as many different diversities as society has, and it's going to reflect the kinds of viewpoints, progressive or otherwise, that that society also broadly has.

This particular passage comes near the end of my interview with Sage, as we are discussing how BDSM communities need to improve for their members. As a gender-transgressive person, non-binary Sage has spent a lot of time thinking about gender, and consent, and violence, in part due to their own experiences enduring consent violations within and beyond their kink communities.

Sage's point is one that I come to as I conclude this dissertation, not just to underscore its incisiveness – essentially, that unless we address the social inequalities within broader society, those are going to continue to filter into smaller microcosms such as BDSM communities – but also to center the stance that “BDSM communit[ies] cannot change a broader social framework around sex, gender, and identity.” As someone I have discussed kink

and gender and violence with many times over the last decade I have been doing this project, Sage would be one of the first to knock me down a peg for my perpetual optimism. But, naive in my belief or not, I genuinely believe that BDSM communities *can* start to change the ways that American culture treats sex, gender, and violence, specifically *because of* the communal emphasis on consent that I have shared thus far. Some of this is already starting to happen; the first step is BDSM being more visible to the broader American sexual public. Flawed or otherwise, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* empire has brought BDSM into the sexual mainstream, at once pushing the boundaries of what is considered “vanilla” (Rubin 1984) and what is “too extreme.” While this is one axis on which change is happening in sexual culture more broadly, it is taking place without the education necessary to safely and consensually practice BDSM. Indeed, the increased integration of kink into mainstream vanilla sexual activities (see the rise of undiscussed choking in adolescent sex, for instance [Herbenick et al. 2022]) *without* a meaningful centering of consent decidedly unqueers kinky practice for everyone. The risk is adopting a revelatory and freeing approach to sexuality and turning it into just one more tool of the cishetero patriarchal model of sex and gender that is harmful to *all* of us, kinky or vanilla, queer and otherwise, because of its reification of problematic hierarchies that result in social inequalities.

To combat this harmful approach to mainstreaming BDSM practices in otherwise vanilla contexts, and as an application of the findings shared earlier in this dissertation, as a committed educator on all things sex/sexuality/gender I have developed a framework that bridges consent discourse and practice such that they are not only able to be in alignment with one another, but also so that they are accessible both within sexual situations and beyond them. I illustrate the ABCCCs framework of consent - which I argue is applicable in any setting

wherein consent is invokable - by further examining how practices of BDSM practitioners reflect certain goals for interactions that are not captured in the discourses I discussed previously, nor in the hegemonic consent ideology I proposed in the previous chapter.

To theorize this alternative framework of consent, I center the following stipulations⁴⁶: it decenters the legalistic model that focuses on protecting institutions over protecting people; it emphasizes actually educating its users, rather than inferring people will learn simply from exposure to discourses; is not a one-size-fits-all approach; it centers joy and pleasure of participants; and, perhaps, most importantly, it is derived from the lived experiences, the *actual practices*, of the people engaging in sexual interactions with one another. If consent discourses reflected the practices of consent that people *actually* engage in, the violence inherent in so much of American sexual culture would be more visible, and thus easier to challenge in the ongoing fight for sexual equity. And, while it is true that sexual equity as a concept is perhaps itself locked into a logic of cisgender white heteropatriarchy (Ward 2023), the road to sexual utopia has to start somewhere, and a good first step is striving for sexual equity. Historically, consent has been considered a critical tool for this, and while many scholars argue consent is insufficient for better sexual justice (Fischel 2019), I am not yet ready to give up on consent. Instead, I believe that consent remains a critical place for change, even if it is just one *piece* rather than the whole puzzle of how to make sex better for everyone.

⁴⁶ Critically, this comes from a queer feminist sociological perspective, drawing from arguments I make earlier on in this dissertation; my own commitments and experiences with consent violations and doing anti-violence work; and a solid rejection of the carceral system that has co-opted consent discourses and practices, especially in the aftermath of consent violations, such that they have been rendered ineffective for victim-survivors *and* consent violators alike.

A New Framework: The ABCCCs

I return briefly to a reflection on existing BDSM consent discourses. While I demonstrated that they do not fully work for participants, consent discourses often become cobbled together to make something more functional. This becomes apparent to me when I ask Daphne to explain how she defines consent - and how she teaches it in the classes she runs in her East Coast community. She invokes several of the consent discourses I first discussed in chapter two, including two American sexual consent discourses and at least one that is more BDSM-specific:

I would define consent, and this might be like a long and wandering definition, but it is something that is risk aware, so you are aware of the many aspects of things that could potentially go wrong, including risk mitigation. It is freely given, it is not coerced. It is, yeah, informed. It's freely given. It's like, you can revoke it at any point. Yeah, it's someone choosing to opt in to doing an activity, knowing full well, the risks and implications inherent. And also knowing sort of, like how you got my consent for this interview, like, I can refuse to answer a question at any time. Like, I know what I am able to do. And I can exercise that right. And I don't, I would not feel bad about advocating for what I need. And that to me, I think is a really crucial part of consent.

I share Daphne's definition as an example of how these varying discourses, though ultimately not as helpful as they are purported to be, are important for practitioners. In many ways, both broader American sexual culture discourses and those specific to BDSM are important for people who use them. Earlier in this dissertation, I shared two instances of how Daphne herself experienced coercive challenges to her consent upon her entrance into BDSM, and how it was in learning more through practice that she came to be empowered in herself. Though this combination of discourses has helped Daphne make sense of consent, that it is a combination bridging multiple sexual cultures helps make my larger point: even with the ability to provide some support to some people, no existing discourse is all-inclusive in its reflection of what

consent is meant to do *and* what it actually does for its users. This reality is what inspired, in part, the ABCCCs - what would a model that *actually* did what practitioners needed it to look like?

There are five aspects of consent that build to the whole model, each of which I detail more below with examples of it in practice from BDSM practitioners: awareness, bodily autonomy, caring, communication, and context. For each of these, I provide analytical examples as captured in practitioners' recounting of their literal consent practices: how do they know that consent has been given? How do they know if it has been revoked? What is consent, and who gives it? By focusing on these simpler-seeming aspects of being within BDSM communities, I demonstrate how these five tenets are always at play in the way that kinksters think about, educate about, and ultimately enact consent in their own practice.

Awareness

Awareness means being actively participatory in the consent process, rather than treating it as a passive process. Awareness means that it is experiential - learning consent by doing it oneself, over and over, is critical for fully understanding what consent is in a given context, how to give it, how to revoke it, *and* how to recognize these actions from other parties in an interaction. Awareness also focuses on the importance of in-the-moment cognizance, or the importance of being fully knowledgeable and involved in decision-making. It means understanding one's own limits, or yes/no/maybe expressions, and also ensuring that you know those of your partner(s) before beginning and continuing a sexual interaction. It also means knowing where those limits can be pushed or compromised with one's partner(s), and where the lines not to be crossed. Awareness also means recognizing the risk associated with

engaging in sexual activities - physical, emotional, mental, and social - at both the interpersonal and group levels of a sexual community. For Ralph, a 23 year old married white leather pup, awareness is a part of their consent process by the simple virtue of consent having “consequences” that vary dependent on the type of consent that it is:

Cierra: Is there a difference between sexual consent and other kinds of consent?

Ralph: As with any type of consent, it comes with its own specific risks. I would say that consent in general, is fairly standard across the board. It’s the act of agreeing to something but the implications of what you are agreeing to bear with it a specific set of, not circumstances, a certain set of consequences, gravity that require different levels of interaction and ability to rescind consent.

For Ralph, this awareness starts with the realization that consent is not a simple “yes” or “no,” as captured in several of the consent discourses from chapter two. As a result, the nuances and the risks that come with consent and its rescission are not static, nor can they ever be as each instance of consent is unique. Al, a 19 year old Indian man exploring his sexuality, considers the balance between partner desires as part of the consent process:

Cierra: So like, what if there’s something that the dominant wants to do that the submissive doesn’t or vice versa the submissive wants to do something the dominant isn’t comfortable with?

Al: I think at best circumstances you should work to reach a compromise, you know, it’s about for me I think is on making some sacrifices in terms of you know, willing to to push your limits but not break them. By pushing your limits you can expose yourself to new things and experience new things, but breaking them is something that I think is absolutely a no-no.

For Al, knowing what one is capable of in the moment, so as to understand where limits are pushable and where they are not, is critical for management of an interaction with a partner. This kind of awareness is what allows practitioners to “experience new things”, even if that

may cause discomfort or uncertainty, as Sage and others discussed and I analyzed in chapter three.

Bodily Autonomy

Consent with bodily autonomy recognizes the role of the body in interactions. Unlike other popular consent models, bodily autonomy understandings of consent recognize that participants can and do willingly choose to engage in activities to which they may not have enthusiasm, even though for other participants, enthusiasm may still hold importance. The emphasis on the body allows for a reclamation of individual agency, including an emphasis on setting and maintaining boundaries that may also allow for the reworking of trauma. Bodily autonomy here means that participants' self-defined needs for various kinds of safety is considered and respected, such as choices to use drugs or alcohol in a sexual environment, and that their consent is both freely given and totally non-coerced, even in those less-than-enthusiastic situations. Finally, an emphasis on bodily autonomy as part of the consent process also highlights the place in sexual activity for pleasure and joy, on the terms of the participants in that interaction. For Sabrina, a 35-year-old white bisexual switch, their very definition of consent centers a sense of bodily autonomy that was new to them upon entering their first BDSM community:

Like, what consent looked like when I was younger was, well, when somebody tries to rape you, you have to tell them stop. No, no, no, you know, it was like very much like consent, how to react when somebody like, takes it to an extreme...But then getting into the BDSM community, like day one, it's like everything is consent, like whether or not you may hug a person, when you see them at happy hour, you need to ask, "Can I touch you?", not just assume like, "Hey, nice to see you!" and just hug someone without asking. Yeah, not like, that was a really dramatic change at that point because everything is just so explicit.

The emphasis on the explicit was echoed by other participants as well; though not everyone relied on enthusiasm as a measure of consent. For Jessica, a 31-year-old married white bisexual woman, this way of communicating desire from *all* parties is what makes something consensual:

Consent is all parties involved in a particular act affirming that they all want to be there, and they are giving that assent without coercion or, like, pressure. It's like it's in, I mean, there's like the concept of enthusiastic consent, I guess. But it's like everybody is involved. Everybody who's involved wants to be there and says they want to be there.

Similarly, for Al, the process of negotiation hinges on full understanding of what is going to happen, what each participant wants, and an agreed upon negotiation of that in its entirety:

So you meet someone who's a Dominant and before you do anything, I guess before you do anything with them, you both sit down and discuss, you know, what are each of your, like, what was your like, What are your limits, hard limits, soft limits? What do you want to get out of the experience? and then based on that you make a decision whether you want to, you know, give up your power to this person.

Specifically, the elaboration of what a practitioner wants to “get out of the experience” captures bodily autonomy, as it allows space for discussion of the expectation for both familiar and unfamiliar socio-sexual experiences from an interaction. A participant may, for instance, desire a set number of orgasms, may want bruises as a reminder of the play, may want to feel the sting or thud of a new-to-them implement, and may want to fall into “subspace.” And another participant may want some or none of those things at all, and instead desire other experiential

foci. The important caveat here is that each play partner has the ability to name and expect⁴⁷ what will happen to them in the scene they embark upon.

Caring

Caring in consent is simply about recognizing and responding accordingly to the humanity in oneself and in the people with whom one engages sexually. It is about treating sexual partners and one's self with empathy and respect regarding dis/abilities, dis/likes, wants, and needs. Caring also recognizes that being trauma-informed, such as by paying attention to any physical bodily issues, or mental and emotional traumas, in all participants within a sex or sex-adjacent activity is critical in practicing this empathy and respect. Caring as an aspect of consent processes also focuses on responsibility - both for oneself and for one's partners, but also for the community or group in which these sexual interactions are occurring. Jessica articulates this by providing an example of when verbal consent may *not* be sufficient in a scene:

Cierra: Okay. And how would you know if [someone had rescinded their consent]?

Jessica: Usually, they're, usually it's verbal, either, you know, there's the obvious, like, safe word. But another verbal thing is someone checks in, like, if you're playing with somebody new or you're playing especially hard with somebody that you play with frequently, you know, someone will usually check in and be like, Hey, is everything okay? Like, that seems like a very extreme reaction. Are you doing okay? And at that point, the person can be like, No, I'm actually not. I probably should have safeworded, but I didn't, but I think I'm done. But there are plenty of times where you can, don't necessarily give verbal revocation.⁴⁸ So people will have like, like hand signals, or like, they'll be

⁴⁷ As much as they have knowledge of the particular acts they are about to engage in ahead of time, which, as discussed prior, is not always the case!

⁴⁸ Some practitioners will go non-verbal when they enter subspace or Domspace. Others may literally not be able to speak due to toys or gear limiting that, with the most common example being a ball gag being placed in one's mouth.

holding on to something and drop it if they are tapping out, or literally tapping out. There are a lot of ways to revoke consent.

Jessica illustrates how being attendant to one's play partner is demonstrating care beyond the simple forms of verbal consent that, even in BDSM scenes, may still be a basic initial understanding that consent is happening. By checking in, for instance, a Top might realize that the bottom they are playing with has gone nonverbal, and can take appropriate shifts in the scene to ensure that bottom is still consenting to the activities. This kind of responsibility for one's partner is also an aspect that Charlotte, a 34-year-old married white queer woman highlights:

There's a level of responsibility that comes along with being the top and they meet, and they have to accept that responsibility to keep the submissive safe, and to keep themselves emotionally safe. Because when you're engaging in power play, or any kind of pain play or anything like that, you are taking the safety and the emotional security of your partner onto yourself. And you if the person is topping, and they're engaging with somebody, as a bottom that is pushing things further or putting allowing themselves to be put into dangerous situations that they that the person who's on the who's topping did not necessarily consent to that is just as dangerous for them as it would be for the person who is having the action put upon them. So consent is really important for all parties involved, they both, they all need to know what they're getting into. They all need to understand what the expectations are for themselves and for their partner. And they need to understand what care looks like for each other. So often, a Top will require their own form of aftercare that may or may not align with the person who's bottoming. And that needs to be talked about ahead of time so that those things can be arranged and they can work together to have a good time in a safe way.

The potential emotional impact that accompanies participation in BDSM activities is not to be taken lightly, and how aware a kinkster is of these is crucial for themselves and for their play partners. For Charlotte, and many practitioners generally, consent does not stop when play stops but continues through the end of a scene and into aftercare, which I discussed previously. This emphasis on all players having their needs met - not just the person who is having things

done to them, but also the person who is doing them, too - underscores the recognition of every participant as being uniquely situated and deserving of support. This is something that Ralph also reflects on. As someone with experience in both submissive/bottom roles and Top/Dom roles, he is especially attentive to how Tops and Doms can have their own needs overlooked because of overeager bottoms and submissives:

It is to both persons advantage in a BDSM situation to fully understand and consent to what's going to happen, as someone who is very empathic, and who has done both submissive and dominant things. ...It can be a very emotionally tough thing to do and you want to have those limits well established and be sure that you aren't going to be hurting yourself or the person that you are ultimately responsible for in this situation. And you want to give your consent to whatever they want as well; there are times when the submissive person will want more than the Dominant person will want and, and that limit needs to be established both ways.

As Ralph points out, ensuring that everyone's needs are met is incredibly important to establish up front, which can be easy to overlook on the part of Doms and Tops, whose needs sometimes appear invisible because they are the person "in charge" of a scene.⁴⁹ Taking the time and space to ensure that all participants have been able to negotiate and care for their needs, even as those needs might change from scene to scene, is critical to attempt to prevent someone's consent from being accidentally violated.

⁴⁹ Because submissives and bottoms are recipients, newer players in particular (and some more established folks who buck broader understandings) may believe that Doms and Tops do not need to have their consent taken into account, because obviously if they are engaging in something as the "doer" then they want to be. There is at least one quote somewhere in this dissertation, however, where I provide an example of submissive admitting that they violated their Dom's consent by pushing that Dom to punish them without actually ensuring that the Dom was willing and able to do so of their own will. This is but one example, but the overall point is important considering the power dynamics and how those might map elsewhere when considering "giver" versus "receiver" positioning.

Communication

Communication – verbal and nonverbal, as above – as an aspect of consent highlights consideration of the cultural emphasis on verbal forms of consent-giving and consent revocation. While these may be common - or even preferred - amongst many kinksters, they are far from the only way that consent is navigated. Indeed, many participants shared how verbal communication is not always the desired or normal way of conveying consent within sexual interactions, and how sometimes communicating verbally is literally an impossibility, such as with the use of specific gear (e.g. ball gags) or when a participant has experienced a “drop” and goes into a nonverbal headspace. Kinksters also emphasized that consent is negotiated between participants - rather than being a simple “yes” or “no” - and that it is revocable at any time, even with familiar or repeat partners. Finally, kinksters also reflected on how communication is critical as consent is liminal: its constant re-negotiation means that it is dynamic and ever-changing, rather than being set as a single moment in time followed by another moment at a later point in time. For participants like Ralph, relying only on verbal consent is what feels the safest for navigating a scene, both prior to and during play:

Cierra: within an interaction, how do you know if consent has been given by both parties?

Ralph: I prefer it to be explicitly given consent. Okay. I, I will not go into a scene any anymore, that I have not sat down and discussed in advance. I don't do BDSM as much as I used to, ever since I've gotten married it is it is done gone away for us to a significant degree even since we started dating, but I would not go into a scene that I had not explicitly discussed with the person that I was participating with, agreed on a set of limits and explicitly consented to those limits as well as set a safe word or other very explicit way out for both parties.

Cierra: So that consent negotiation is always verbal and always before a scene starts?

Ralph: Yes, in my opinion.

While Ralph is an outlier compared to many practitioners I interviewed, their point stands nonetheless, and for them is a way to make sure with absolute certainty that every participant fully understands and is expecting what comes next in play. Things are not so cut and dry for everyone however, as Jessica explains; for her, communication can be much subtler:

Jessica: Generally speaking, like, like the ideal situation, is that someone explicitly says, Yes, I would like to do this. If you know someone very well, sometimes that gets looser, like, you know, you start talking to someone, you're being coy, or whatever. Generally speaking, the idea is that everybody expressly and enthusiastically says, Yes, I want to do this thing.

Cierra: Is it always going to be verbally given? Or are there other ways that that can be communicated?

Jessica: I mean, you certainly can communicate in other ways, like, you know, you can take the hand of somebody and drag them into a bedroom or whatever. But yeah, so yes, it's absolutely possible to give consent in other ways.

Even while Jessica prefers this communication to be verbal, studies of consent have long-documented both nonverbal and verbal forms of communication to be prevalent (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999; Beres 2007; Jozkowski and Peterson 2013; Fenner 2017). But, within BDSM, verbal versus nonverbal is not always so clear, even when existing protocols are in place. Safewords are arguably the most well-known performance of consent, but also are a lynchpin of BDSM practice. And - even with their longstanding, and frequent requirements in public play settings that players have a safeword, people do not always use them, as Charlotte explains to me regarding their total power exchange scenes with their spouse:

Cierra: So in that instance [of total power exchange] would you still have, like safe words, for instance, or use the stoplight system to check in?

Charlotte: Um, it depends, it really depends. With my spouse, we have had times where we've removed safe words. Because they're very in tune with my body, they know me very well, they know when I've had enough. And sometimes I do go a little nonverbal and kind of lose my ability to safeword out if I need to. But I think with anyone who wasn't that I didn't have that longtime connection with, I wouldn't, I probably wouldn't remove safe words, just because it gives you a level of one more level of protection if you need it. But I think anyone that I was willing to do a power exchange with would, I would have to feel very safe with them. And know and feel like they would either be able to read me, read my body before I needed to safeword, or would at least respect a safeword."

For Charlotte and her spouse, their familiarity with one another allows them the ability to communicate nonverbally, even in moments of extreme play, as is the case with total power exchange. The communication, however, is still there - as is her ability to give and rescind their consent in these situations. Liam, an 18 year old biracial gay man, elaborates on how the subtlety is key and can be solely dependent upon being able to read a partner's body language, even if a preference might be for more explicit forms of communication:

Cierra: So, you said that both parties have to give their consent, can both parties then revoke their consent from an interaction?

Liam: By all means, Yeah.

Cierra: Okay. And how would you know, if this has happened?

Liam: if something has happened, then for example, use a safe word or generally, a withdrawal from the situation? I would say that those are like a major things, but there could also be just the general like, change in the tone that is something that like, how do I put it, not changing the verbal tone but change in the situation's tone. So if that occurs, then I would consider it not something, not a revocation of consent but an, 'Okay, so are you okay with this?' if there's an issue.

Cierra: So how would you, how would you see that change in tone? Like, can you give me an example?

Liam: Um, generally, you know, like, for example, one of my partners, one of my boys. He, I would know, his was, like, his, like, kind of body language when dealing with someone for a long time, and even a relatively short time, if he's

uncomfortable, he's going to act quite differently in terms of body language, than he would be if he's perfectly relaxed. So because of that, it would be kind of a very obvious thing. But I'm not saying that it's always, it can be extremely like the term. So I would say it's kind of a circumstance, almost."

Being able to read between the lines, so to speak, is crucial in communication of consent between BDSM practitioners, especially when considering altered mental states, toys that prevent verbal consent, and even forms of play where a "yes" may not mean "yes" and a "no!" may mean "please sir, keep going!" The recognition and validation of a variety of forms of communication, including written, verbal, and nonverbal, are critical for understanding the holistic communication employed by BDSM practitioners to share in consent processes.

Context

Context in consent emphasizes the shifting nature of sexual interactions, even between longer-term sexual participants. Context also refers to the specificity in an activity or partner one is engaging with - one activity may be fine on a certain day, or with a certain partner, but may not be at other times. This atemporality means that consent is contextual in that it is not a one-and-done phenomenon, but instead an ongoing, ever-changing process. It is liminal in that it is constantly being re-negotiated, is never completely stable nor completely set, as a participant can revoke their consent in a moment. Contextuality of consent is also reflected in changes in desires and (dis)likes throughout time; a participant may desire an act one day, but not the next. Finally, consent being contextual reflects the reality that a participant can consent to something and realize after the fact that it was not as consensual as they believed it to be, changing their mind for present and future iterations of said activity. For Charlotte, the context

of consent was both based in a very specific understanding of both sexuality and gender prior to their entrance into kink, when it began to shift:

I think I started to really learn about what consent was in college, just in talking about date rape and and talking about intoxication, and you know, back then, and it was very much a like, this is how to not get raped kind of thing, not a like how to actually ask for consent. So I, I learned about it to a degree in that regard. And it was always very heterosexual driven, it was always very, you know, boys asked girls for her permission to touch them or participate in a sexual act with them. I learned more about what that meant to me as a queer person and as a kinky person in my 20s, and are like, in my late 20s, when my partner and I got together, and we started talking about, like, levels of consent, and the idea of enthusiastic consent. And kind of like, trying to discover ways to get consent without breaking the mood, if that makes sense. Yeah, so those sorts of things kind of came to me later on. So it's been sort of an evolution.

This context for Charlotte was important in its ability to shift as they embraced their identities as both queer and kinky - and the change in context also offered more agency to them, too. The variance in consent in BDSM versus vanilla communities came up in multiple interviews, especially as participants discussed their entry into BDSM. For Sabrina that means having different expectations about what might happen if they have sex with a vanilla partner versus a fellow kinkster:

Cierra: Is there a difference in like, consent before a sexual interaction versus other kinds of consent?

Sabrina: Um, I think it's, there's different kinds of consent depending on for me, at least based on how familiar a person is with BDSM. So the community has pretty strong rules about what you negotiate things and you say, I want this, this and this and it's expected that you won't do any of those things. Whereas if I am sleeping with somebody that's vanilla? I assume they have no idea how to negotiate and they will be weirded out by that. So consent is a little more, a little more fluid.

Cierra: Okay, So can you tell me a little bit more about that? Like, how do you and a vanilla partner then like, navigate consent together?

Sabrina: Um, I, I try to be very just forward with them, letting them know, I think this, I'm not okay with this. Because I don't think that I, I don't trust them to have those skills. So I've tried, like, build those expectations that like, I'm going to stop things if I'm not comfortable with this. And I know what I like and I don't like, and I'm going to be open to talking about it along the way. So I try to like, be a role model for them throughout the process. But with the understanding that they're going to do things that they didn't ask to do, and I'm not going to, like, get angry with them, because I know that they don't know better yet. I'll just sort of like, stop them and be like, "This isn't okay. And here's why. But I'm not mad at you. Next time. Let's talk about that before you do that."

Operating from a mindset that people in vanilla contexts do not have the proper consent knowledge demonstrates how kinky sex can be very different from vanilla sex, and knowledge of those two different contexts can mean what is a consent violation in one setting might not be in another. This is a huge shift away from a global understanding of what constitutes a consent violation, and underscores just how important the specific context - sexual, in this case - in which consent happens is for navigating that consent process. Similar shifts can happen depending on familiarity with a partner, as Liam describes for me:

Cierra: Okay. How would you know if everybody had given their consent?

Liam: I would know basically, if they had told me for I mean, do I think that I have to ask someone, 'Okay, do give me give me your consent,' before sex ? with my partner I don't, particularly every time I go, I think okay, so I have your consent? No, I would say it's just an agreed upon, kind of set of boundaries.

Cierra: Well, I mean, that sounds like something that's already been negotiated then right?

Liam: Yeah, it's a general understanding, and not only to be like, for example, with someone that I'm like a partner that I'm familiar with, I would say, the definition, I would say almost the definition that that changes, but not in a negative fashion.

Cierra: Explain that a little bit more.

Liam: Rather than, okay, someone who I'm completely unfamiliar with, or sexual, I know, some sexual preferences were there, I do not know their limits, do not know their boundaries. I'm going to be much more concerned about communication, than I would be with someone who I know their boundaries, I know what's going on. If that person who might know their boundaries is uncomfortable with something, then I'm going to be reflexive. But me, communication to me, like for someone who you are uncomfortable, not uncomfortable, if you're unfamiliar with is very, of course, very important. But for my boyfriend or whatever, I know what he is okay with. And if he is not okay with it. Of course, it needs to be, it will be expressed, and there have been times where that's happened. But it was not, I wouldn't say a violation of consent, because it was just "Oh, how about we not?"

Here again, what might be considered a consent violation under a different set of circumstances, such as with a less well-known partner, is not necessarily alright, but also is *not* a consent violation either. That is an important distinction. By meaningfully engaging the reality that consent can be different in varying contexts, then sex and sex-adjacent activities are *also* allowed to be different in those contexts; this creates space for sex to be uncomfortable, weird, and not totally desirable, for instance, without making sex that fits in that category harmful or violent. And, given American sexual culture's preference for cisheterosex can never be uncomfortable, weird, or not totally desirable, the ability to challenge this norm is inclusive of diverse sexual practices and the varying communities in which they occur.

Building Consent from the Margins

How could BDSM cha(lle)nge the hegemonic ideology of consent? As I opened this chapter with part of mine and Sage's conversation about the need for change in BDSM communities, as a sexualities scholar doing sociology for the hopes of effecting positive social change, I cannot help but reflect on the ways that BDSM already are a beacon of hope for better sexual lives for many of their practitioners. In that vein, to begin the end, I share two

short vignettes from memos I wrote during the project about my own experiences with consent violation and with entering BDSM:

The very lack of experience that I had with consent in relationships translated into the few romantic relationships I had as an elder teenager into my young adulthood. When I was blackout drunk right not long after I turned 18, I kissed someone unexpectedly. I violated their consent. I did not realize I had done something wrong until the next morning when, both of us hungover, we discussed what had happened. I realized I had made a mistake and though they were not hurt, they had been very upset in the moment and I had caused that because of my own ignorance. I've carried that with me since then, and so even in my own experience, I really just thought it was a knowledge problem above all else. But, of course, this was naive. Consent is always about power, period. And when I entered the BDSM community, also right after I turned 18, so many things immediately clicked into place for me. The playing with power dynamics that I felt so acutely in many realms of my life, the amount of trauma the people around me had gone through (and that I had gone through too, which again, I was not really ready to face yet), and the ability to control what happened to you was absolutely a shift in my reality. And so I started this project, desperate to show people the goodness in BDSM for what it could give to people, how it could offer power back to the people who had had their power taken from them. How it could level the playing field between sexual partners. How it could be freeing!

The first time I was put in handcuffs was a revelatory moment. It was also an incredibly odd one. My small friend group - a ragtag bunch of college kids all majoring in anthropology - had decided to dress up for Halloween even though we had class until about 7pm that evening. Costumed as Glinda the Good Witch from the popular novel-turned-play Wicked, I was

wearing a pale pink dress reminiscent of what a teenage girl might wear for her quinceañera or sweet sixteen party. I had ordered a blue dress, but received a pink one instead, too late to exchange it, and though I felt self-conscious in something so frilly and feminine, I will admit that dress hung in my closet for nearly a decade, a memento of a fond memory for myself – and my husband. My then-friend-eventually-with-benefits-now-husband, James, had decided to cheekily dress up as the Christian Grey, grey suit and silk tie, and dyed red hair to boot. As props to really sell his costume, he brought along a couple of his tamer toys: a basic crop and a pair of cheap metallic handcuffs, not unlike those used by police. I had known James for over a year by this point, and he had already taught me a lot about BDSM and polyamory - both ways of moving about the sexual-social world that were very unbeknownst to me prior to him entering my life, and both of which intrigued me. At nineteen, having just gotten to the end of a bad years-long relationship that started when I was underage with a boy who was a few years older than me, and afraid of the repercussions of having sex with a minor, meant I was still (luckily) a virgin. And as most teenagers are, anything and everything about sex fascinated me, especially as I never received any formal sex education. Needless to say, between what I had already learned from James and from my recent forays into kinky Tumblr, I could not help but be curious about what the night might hold as we took the bus from campus to the fancy restaurant we decided to go to for dinner. And, when after dinner we dawdled outside Olive Garden, it did not take much egging from our friends for me to accept James' offer to try the handcuffs. As I placed my hands behind my back as instructed, I felt something in me shift, and I knew I would never be the same.

Like many practitioners I know personally, and most that I interviewed for this project, I have always felt inclinations towards what I now understand as BDSM. I offer this intimate

glimpse into my life because, as these two moments were foundational in what eventually became this project, they also capture moments of contradiction, confusion, and eventually, clarity. These moments stick in my mind so solidly not only because of the chaos of them (and in the latter, the butterfly effect moment that, unbeknownst to either of us at the time, connected me and my life partner), but also because it illustrates the many contradictions I continue to navigate as a queer woman, as a practitioner, and as a scholar-activist. Where do my scholarly exploits end and where do my personal perspectives begin? Often, as a queer feminist sociologist, and insider-outsider in the communities I study, that line is blurry. I am in constant consideration of both my ability to be a practitioner and friend in the communities I belong to, and how this affects the rigor of my scholarship, something made even more complicated by the feeling I am already living under a microscope due to the deviant nature of my work. As not only a scholar studying marginalized social-sexual communities, but as a member of them as well, I know that I am better-equipped to build trust with participants, and access knowledge I can share in broader arenas when other researchers would likely be unable to do so.

My participation in BDSM communities has enriched my life in so many ways, and in the most important of them, it has given me a way to have a sexual voice all my own. Being a practitioner has let me explore my sexual inclinations in a healthy way, has in fact allowed me to explore all the queer parts of myself in the broader American sexual culture that otherwise told me who I was and what I wanted – including, most basically, a sex life free from coercion and non-consensual violence – was not only unattainable but literally non-existent. BDSM proved both of these wrong, and while as I have absolutely demonstrated, there is further work to be done, there is also sexual liberation still to be found, if people are only willing to push

back against the status quo of what consent means, how that is decided, and what the repercussions of violating it are.

Building from these undulations of unknowns followed by eventual understanding, I built the ABCCCs from the experiences of practitioners within these BDSM communities that I studied to reflect what they desire in their sex and sex-adjacent practices while also portraying what they actually *experience* in both non-consensual and consensual interactions. This consent ideology is based in the queer feminist sociological approach to studying consent that I discussed in the introduction. It explicitly centers the embodied sexual practices of participants, rather than leaving sex and sex-adjacent activities in the abstract (Schilt, Meadow, and Compton 2018). It allows consent to be “messy” (Ward 2016; Ward 2018), rather than trying to box it into a one-size-fits-all approach to sex, which in turn gives greater agency to the participants in an activity. And, by focusing on the experiences of a marginalized sexual community, this model also moves from the margins to the center (Pascoe 2018) to question the expected and accepted sexual practices of doing consent and doing sex in broader American sexual violence that are still so plagued with hierarchy and violence. As American culture comes under increasingly fascist management of us as sexual and gendered beings, Americans desperately need a better model of consent. Building this from the margins, from the “deviant,” could be a revelatory, transformative approach to improving the social and sexual lives of Americans from all backgrounds that is so desperately necessary in our current political moment. And, though the ABCCCs was born as an ideology of consent focused on the sexual, it is my hope that it can – and will – be used in other realms of social life as well.

Conclusion

I make multiple interventions throughout this dissertation. I begin to offer a “queer feminist methodology of consent” – a methodology I discuss in-depth in the introduction. In so doing, I build from feminist and gender studies, LGBTQ+ studies, and sociology to critically examine consent from an intersectional, interdisciplinary lens. Specifically, I bridge consent studies – much of which has occurred outside of sociology – with sociological analyses of power specifically situated within communities and institutions with pre-existing understandings of consent as it operates between individuals. By focusing not only on the individual or interpersonal, I demonstrate how broader socio-historical factors merge with specific cultural contexts to structure how consent occurs within sexual communities. Instead of theorizing consent as a one-size-fits-all phenomenon, I instead delineate how consent practices and knowledges are very much dependent upon the social locations of the people within particular sexual communities, and in turn structure those sexual communities to maintain many kinds of social hierarchy amongst its members. By taking an embodied approach to studying consent – that is, by focusing on the physicality of the sex and violence experienced by practitioners – I anchor this study of consent deeply in queer sociological studies of sex/uality. And, as I straddle the line between insider and outsider, I embrace a feminist approach to conducting sociological research by challenging assumptions about the appropriateness – the “bias” – of being of the community to which one is studying.

I believe now, even more than I did when I started fieldwork and interviews in 2016, that the unique approach to consent in BDSM communities has much to offer other sexual communities, and to those who are vanilla and heterosexual, who might not see themselves as part of a sexual community because they occupy normative sexual identities. In doing this

work, I had a number of goals for this project, both for the practitioners about whom I write, and for other audiences as well.

For practitioners of BDSM: I hope that this speaks to your experiences, or those of your fellow kinksters; perhaps, if you have experienced some of the kinds of harm I write about, you will realize that you are not alone, and that it is not your fault if those harms have not been handled the way that you hoped. Perhaps there are roots of help hiding in here for you to find, if your own communities do not have the ethos or strategies surrounding consent and violation and response that I document herein.

For sociologists: I hope some of this finds its way to the mainstream because I believe consent is of radical importance in *all* of our lives (and not just those parts connected to sex). And for those sociologists doing queer sociology as I articulate is the spirit of this project: I hope that, just like I now can, you see even when faced with struggle, a lack of belief in your project, an overwhelming fear you are not a sociologist (if that is what you aspire to be), and even amidst the many queer failures (Pascoe 2018) that in the end make the project better – you *can* do it.

For those invested in anti-sexual violence activism: I hope this will provide you with sparks of insight for the work that you do in your own anti-violence efforts. And I hope that it will help you challenge normative responses to violations that are wrapped up in legalistic understandings of consent and justice, as these are insufficient for all of us.

For anyone hoping for a freer, more supportive, more caring kind of sexual life, I hope that this work will find its way to you, will inspire you, and will help you build the kind of sexual life you dream about.

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 2

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Appendix A: Data & Methods

This dissertation draws on data I collected in two stages over a six-year period, using ethnographic participant-observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews with practitioners in BDSM communities across the United States (and one community in Canada). This research was approved by the Human Subjects Committee (HSC) which serves as the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the University of California, Santa Barbara.

In total, my study includes 54 interviews with 55 BDSM practitioners, participating in more than 20 distinct kink communities (some participants had experience in multiple). The first round of interviews and all participant-observation occurred from 2016 to 2017, for my Master's thesis research. A second round of interviews took place from 2021 to 2022, building from this initial data collection and with an expanded interview protocol to capture current events that were affecting BDSM communities. In round one, I conducted 27 in-depth interviews, including one (spontaneous) group interview with three participants, with a total of 29 participants. In round two, I conducted 26 in-depth interviews and one follow-up interview with a participant from the first round.

The participants I worked with represent diverse categories of identity and experience. In line with existing criticisms of BDSM communities and studies of them (Sheff and Hammers 2011), my sample skews heavily white (37 of 55 participants). A third of respondents cited another racial identity, including identifying as Black, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Indigenous American, or multiracial. Generally, practitioners have college degrees (21 completed a Bachelor's degree and another 22 completed or were pursuing a postgraduate degree), and largely are younger adults (43 are in their 20s or 30s). More cisgender women

(28) participated than cisgender men (18), and about 15% of participants (9 of 55) have a gender identity outside the cisgender binary, including several folks who identified as agender or two-spirit. Overwhelmingly, participants identify as queer; only 7 of the 55 identify as heterosexual; this is unsurprising, as BDSM communities in the U.S. initially formed by gay soldiers post-World War II (Stein 2021). Even though the participation of heterosexual people has continued to grow since, BDSM communities were initially queer. (Stein 2021) All identities are self-reported, and I have not edited them from what participants shared on their demographic forms pre-interview. Participants were asked to provide a pseudonym, and all names herein are pseudonymous, though I elaborate in this appendix on the process I used for names as the pseudonyms many participants provided were not anonymous enough.

My sample was not meant to be representative, but I did seek to capture the experiences of a variety of kinksters given my familiarity with the (relatively accurate) white middle-class stereotype associated with BDSM communities (Sheff and Hammers 2011; Martinez 2020). The one identity that is noticeably absent amongst my sample of practitioners is that of “lesbian” for sexual orientation; not a single woman I interviewed identified this way, though nearly all of them expressed some degree of sexual interest in women. The smaller number of lesbian BDSM enclaves has been documented (Bauer 2014) in contrast to the continued growth of pansexual and gay male communities, but it is curious that I would not have reached a single lesbian kinkster given the widespread sharing of my flyer on multiple public listservs and social media websites. I do wonder if this is also reflective, however, of changes in identities of non-heterosexual women in the United States, such that more women now identify as bisexual or queer while fewer women identify as lesbian (Rupp and Taylor 2010; Bridges and

Moore 2018; Mishel et al. 2020). Finally, though I did not ask participants to self-identify whether they have a disability, a number of them disclosed during the interview process that they have a physical, psychological, and/or a cognitive disability.

Operating from a feminist standpoint epistemology of centering the voices and experiences of my participants (Collins 1990) – and especially in trying to do justice to the people who shared instances of sexual violence with me – I made a concerted effort to model consent practices in collecting, processing, and sharing data in a way that has felt appropriately practitioner-focused. Relying on my insider position (Blee and Taylor 2002) as a practitioner, I connected first with people in the communities with which I was familiar, using snowball sampling to reach friends and peers of people I knew personally. This is how I reached many of the participants I interviewed first-round. I had three primary respondents (two practitioners and a fellow graduate student familiar with but not participating within kink communities) who helped connect interested people with me. I also designed and posted a public, IRB-approved flier on Facebook, Twitter, and multiple email listservs to seek further participants; one of these identified me as a practitioner myself, while another did not. In both rounds of interviews, I provided my contact information, and interested parties were instructed to reach out. This felt like a less intrusive way to connect with practitioners while reflecting the constraints from the HSC approval of the project. Even though I believe if I had utilized more direct strategies I may have been able to conduct more interviews, I stand by this choice. In the second round of interviews, I set up a demographic form that I asked interested parties to fill out as part of their expressing interest in participating; this was to streamline the collection of demographic data, and to keep myself organized. After I had received interest in both rounds, I then emailed the

participant to find a time that fit their schedule best; in this email process to establish an interview time, and utilizing a trauma-informed feminist philosophy, I distributed a sexual violence resource sheet to all participants, as I knew I would hear stories about consent violations; this sheet is included in this appendix.

My goal in these interviews was to impose myself on participants as little as possible, while also trying to speak with as many of them as I could. Generally, I think this was a success, though it did not always feel that way during data collection, especially with ongoing scheduling issues during round two due to COVID-19 problems, biographical availability of participants, and general zoom burnout of potential participants near the end of the study; beyond the 54 practitioners I interviewed, ten additional people tried to complete an interview with me but were ultimately unable to do so. I had hit saturation in my data by the time I stopped interviews, but I ended recruitment with dissatisfaction given the ongoing pattern in March and April 2022 of scheduled-then-cancelled interviews. I am grateful, however, both for those who participated and the additional interested parties who could not.

As the interviews were split in two time periods, I also want to note a curiosity: I did not have funding for the first round of interviews, and also had a much less diverse sample in the first round (a higher concentration of white and well-educated individuals in particular). I was lucky to secure funding prior to beginning the second round, and paid every participant a minimum of \$20 per interview. While the timing of the second round of interviews could have also contributed to the greater diversity of people I reached, as the second round of interviews began during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, it is possible that paying people a fair wage for their participation - rather than expecting them to volunteer their time - positively impacted

the study by allowing me to reach a greater number of people with diverse identities and backgrounds. While I initially considered the pay discrepancy a failure of mine, I recognize it now (Connell 2018) as a critical learning opportunity that in its queer failure (Pascoe 2018) has helped me double-down on the importance of paying *all* future respondents on future projects for their time.

All of the names used in this dissertation are pseudonymous. I asked people during interviews (first round) or on the demographic form (second round) to provide a pseudonym, and my intention had been to use those provided to me instead of deciding on names for participants myself. Ultimately, that did not work as I had hoped, as many practitioners chose a pseudonym that was either a shortened version of their actual name (e.g. “Frank” for “Franklin”) or they chose to use their scene names. This troubled me, as I wanted to honor the desires of my participants; some were fine with their real identity being known about in the written components of this project, despite agreeing otherwise upon signing the consent form, in which participants signed that they understood their “identity will be kept confidential, and [their] name will be changed in all written research post-interview.” I chose a strategy in keeping with this agreement. All names have been changed, but I have tried to honor practitioners’ choices by finding a name close to their real name or their pseudonym. For instance, if someone had chosen “Summer” as their name, I would have chosen “Autumn” to reflect a similarity but still mask their identity. For participants who focused on their racial identity as critical in their experience of BDSM, I tried to find a name that culturally aligned with that racial identity (e.g. Aaliyah and DeShaun are both Black-identifying practitioners, and Yasmin is Persian). For transgender individuals, I chose names that reflected how femme

or masc their lived name is; Ulysses identifies as trans masc non-binary. For non-binary individuals, I also chose names from non-binary baby name lists; such is the case with Sage and Sequoia, for instance (and in Sequoia's case, I also tried to honor their indigenous heritage). In totality, there surely must be a better approach to decisions about name changing, under what circumstances, and how to change names appropriately, but I was unable to find one in consulting the literature and multiple other researchers.

Eight of the round one interviews took place in person, and the rest via Skype or Google Hangouts. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted all of the second round of interviews virtually via Zoom. All interviews were recorded, with the participants' consent. I used Otter.ai to transcribe each interview and then completed a second transcription during which I anonymized files and destroyed recordings.

Interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 3 hours and 40 minutes, with most between 45 minutes and 2 hours; in total, I collected more than 75 hours of audio recording. I chose semi-structured interviews to allow for a more organic conversation to arise that might provide me information that, even as an "insider," I may not have thought relevant on my interview guide or may have overlooked altogether (Blee and Taylor 2002). Indeed, some of the findings from the first round of interviews directed my writing in ways I had not anticipated; my MA article, focused on masculinity and men's anti-violence efforts, for instance, was not on my radar as a potential topic of focus when I began interviews.

In all interviews, I asked practitioners about their history with BDSM communities, including when and how they learned about consent; the process of consent giving and revocation; and community norms for establishing and maintaining consent, preventing

consent violations, and responding to them. In the second round of interviews, I also asked participants to discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic affected their BDSM practices, the role of the #MeToo movement in kink communities, and suggestions for improving BDSM communities. I sometimes refer to these interviews in-text as “conversations,” and though the practitioners I interviewed did the majority of the speaking, I did approach these as moments of shared knowledge production, as (hopefully) some of the passages I have included reflect. As an equalizing approach in line with this conversational model, I also entertained and engaged *every* question participants had for me; I provided an opportunity pre-interview for questions, and again at the very end. And, as only felt fair, I answered these questions as openly and honestly as possible. Generally, these centered on three topics. The first set of questions concerned my reasoning for doing this project, where I divulged my own experiences learning about consent through BDSM, as well as my history of research and activism against sexual and gender violence and the occurrence of it both within my own life and in the lives of people I care for. The second set of inquiries summed to a single question, really: why would I choose such a topic for my dissertation given the conservative nature of academia? This was asked, of course, by the graduate students, professors, and a few others with postgraduate degrees, none of whom are “out” as kinksters in their professional lives, as am I. And, finally, some practitioners were curious about my own experiences within BDSM, including my own identities as a practitioner, including my interactions with others on FetLife and at in-person events.

I used a grounded theoretical approach (Charmaz 2006) to guide my analysis of transcripts, concentrating broadly throughout the project on themes related to consent

knowledge and expectations, and experiences of violence and consequences thereafter. After every few interviews in the first round, and after each in the second round, I jotted initial ideas down in a memo. What stood out to me? What was connecting to other interviews? These memos eventually helped me come up with my initial codebook, which I revisited multiple times, before sorting them into the broader themed-chapters that appear here (and one additional piece that is not a part of this dissertation). I piloted some of these, specifically for the chapter that became the conclusion with my new framework, in a workshop only for UCSB Sociology graduate students; the input I received from colleagues was also helpful, both for final coding, and for the development of the framework. Unlike the ways in which I have been taught qualitative coding, the process was anything but linear, and even as I wrote this dissertation, I analyzed and reanalyzed my data differently, messily, and in a more circular fashion; I see this as yet another example of this project being squarely situated within queer sociology.

As I moved through the first ten or so interviews in round one, I paid special attention to topics that repeatedly came up that were not explicitly part of the interview protocol I used. These “sensitizing concepts” (Charmaz 2006) that stood out in the first round of interviews became the focus of my initial publications from the project on anti-violence efforts in BDSM communities (Sorin 2022) and helped me scaffold the expanded protocol for the second round of interviews. That the #MeToo movement, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the subsequent #StopAsianHate movement all occurred while I conducted these interviews helped direct the focus of the project, in large part because one or more of these deeply impacted the lives of every kinkster in the project and came out in interviews even

unbidden. I am certain, if nothing else, that these movements and events contributed to participants' willingness to speak freely about their experiences with them as directly connected to their experiences within BDSM communities.

These cultural shifts also sparked a deeper understanding of inequality in BDSM communities for me, and as I completed the second set of interviews in particular, my focus narrowed again. I was already more intensely attuned to community engagement with consent violations and ideas about different types or levels of consent violation, and also began to memo about an initial idea about how consent seemed to be being weaponized against some participants who voiced dissent in their communities around race, COVID-19 protocols, and sexual violence. Following over a year of memoing while finishing the interviews – and simultaneously publishing from another project on sexual violence, institutional betrayal, and intersectional approaches to social change – I knew that consent rhetoric being used to enforce social inequality needed to be the crux of my dissertation; this theoretical lynchpin became Chapter 3.

In trying to write Chapter 3, and following a practice job talk and a real one, both to interdisciplinary audiences, I also realized that this phenomenon of consent weaponization was occurring specifically through the consent discourses that people used. Again, my familiarity with sexual consent discourses in other settings from prior research projects, proved critical in formulating the arguments that would become Chapter 2, which I had to go back and write *before* I could finish Chapter 3. This caused me to go back into my transcripts for an umpteenth time and with a new focus; I was surprised to see how often participants utilized discourses both stemming from BDSM and also those from broader American sexual culture to make

sense of their own experiences, and those of others, and in both positive and negative ways. Consent both worked *and* did not work for these practitioners, and there was some basic understanding of this among many of them.

Finally, as people shared with me the things they loved about their communities, as well as their hopes for how their communities could improve, I knew that a focus simply on how consent did *not* work was insufficient to tell a full story, nor was it how I wanted to represent a “deviant” sexual community where violence was occurring. Consent, after all, *did* work in these communities a lot of the time - that was why I had started the project, to figure out *how* it worked and *why* it was different. As I found, it was a different baseline ideology of sex, autonomy, and community that held the key to understanding the differences between consent in BDSM communities and in greater American sexual culture. When participants shared with me their different perspectives on, experiences with, and communal approaches to the problem of consent violations – especially in the second round of interviews that occurred post-#MeToo – I realized just how important community care and restorative justice were for these communities. Participants were even starting to use some of that language to describe communal philosophies and actions pre- and post-violation, even if they had not received any formal training in how to do restorative or transformative justice in practice. This was the missing piece I needed to complete this story of consent in BDSM communities: where it worked well, consent was used in these specific ways. And that is what led to my theorization of the ABCCCs, a new framework of consent that is applicable both in sexual communities, and in other arenas of life where discourses about consent circulate and then become practiced.

Without understanding how consent *does* work amongst and for BDSM practitioners, I would have been unable to theorize this framework.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Race	Gender	Sexuality	Education*	Age
Aaliyah	Black	Female	Bisexual	BA	25
Aaron	White	Male	Gay/Queer	MA	26
Agatha	White	Female	Bisexual	PhD	51
Al	Indian	Male	Undecided	Secondary education (high school)	19
Alice	white	cisgender woman	pansexual	Master's	25
Alivia	white	female	bisexual	College - BA	31
Ambrose	white	femme transgender man	queer	JD	26
Beck	Hispanic / latino	nonbinary	queer	Bachelor's	30
Ben	White	Male	Heterosexual	B.A. (college)	46
Brittany	White	Female	Straight	MA	34
Charlotte	Caucasian	Female/Femme	Queer	BA	34
Daphne	biracial - Chinese and white	AFAB, woman	queer	Master's; currently in a PhD program	29
David	White/Latino	Male	Bisexual	BA	30
DeShaun	African-American	Male	Straight	Some college	23
Dorothy	Hispanic Caucasian	Female	Heterosexual	MA in Social Work	28
Edna	Caucasian	Female	Heterosexual	2 MAs	50
Emmett	White	Male	Gay	BA	27
Finley	White	Male	Bisexual	BA	34
Gavin	White	Male	Bisexual	BA	53
Hazel	white	woman	queer	Bachelor's	33
Helen	Mixed /multiracial (black, white, Jewish per interview)	Femme (AFAB, nonbinary)	Queer/bisexual	MPH	26
Henry	Caucasian	Male	Gay	HS Graduation	19

Participant	Race	Gender	Sexuality	Education*	Age
Iris	White / Euro-American	Female	Pansexual	BA	27
Isaac	white	male	bisexual	BS; completing a phd	28
Jacob	Euro-American	Male	Queer	MA, in a PhD program	27
Jade	European / Caucasian	Female	Pansexual	Graduate School	47
Jennifer	Caucasian	Female	Bisexual	BA, started PhD	38
Jessica	White	Female	Bisexual	BA, doing postgrad	31
Keanu	Hawaiian	Male	Gay (but like a Kinsey 5)	BA in Women's Studies	31
Lacey	white-passing POC	female	bisexual	Bachelor's	33
Liam	White / Central Asian (Chechnyan)	Male	Homosexual	2 year trade school	18
Maeve	white	female	pansexual	Bachelor's	26
Marina	white european descent	female	fluid/pansexual	Bachelors	39
Marley	white	cisfemale	pansexual	Bachelor's	28
Noah	Native American	male	pansexual	Associates	41
Opal	white	ciswoman	queer	high school	25
Pearl	white	cis female	bisexual	BS	44
Quinn	White	Genderqueer	Pansexual	High School graduate	26
Ralph	White	Male	Gay	Some college	23
Rebecca	White	Female	Demiheterosexual, Panromantic	BA	25
Rory	Asian	non-binary agender	Bisexual queer	Some college	21
Sabrina	White	Female	Bisexual	MA	35

Participant	Race	Gender	Sexuality	Education*	Age
Sage	white	non-binary	pansexual	Master's; currently in a PhD program	35
Samuel	White	Male	Gay	Master's degree	67
Santiago	Latinx	Male	Heterosexual	AA	25
Savannah	White	Female	Straight	BA, MA currently	29
Sequoia	biracial - Lakota and white	non-binary trans masculine two-spirit	queer	vocational school	37
Sofia	white	cis woman	pansexual	BA psychology	30
Tahlia	white	female	pansexual	Master's	32
Ulysses	white	trans masculine, nonbinary	homoflexible. primarily into men and non binary people. occasionally women	high school	21
Violet	Latinx	Female	Bisexual	BA	24
Winston	White	Male	Gay/queer	Ph.D.	46
Xavier	Black mixed	non binary trans masc	Bisexual	BA	23
Yasmin	Persian & Euro- mutt	Woman	Homoflexible, Kinsey 5	MS	31
Yvette	white	female	bisexual / queer	Bachelor's; in graduate school	27

* For education, I asked people to share the highest level of education they had completed by the time of our interview.

Recruitment Flyers



Let's talk about
BDSM & Consent!

Are you:

- 18 or older?
- A BDSM practitioner in the U.S.?
- Interested in being paid to discuss consent practices in your community?

Learn more about this interview study
run by a fellow practitioner:
<https://tinyurl.com/bdsm-consent>

Questions or concerns? Email **csorin@ucsb.edu**
IRB Protocol #25-18-0957



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Master's Interview Guide

Introduction and Informed Consent

Definitions

- What does BDSM mean to you?
- How did you get involved with the BDSM community?
- Where did you learn about BDSM for the first time?
- How do you define consent?
 - Sexual?
 - Other?
 - If differences, ask to elaborate on why and what those differences are.
- How did you learn about consent?
- What does consent mean in the context of BDSM?

Giving and Taking Away Consent

- Who gives consent in a BDSM interaction?
- How do you know if consent is given?
 - Physical?
 - Verbal?
 - Other?
- How is consent negotiated?
- Who takes away consent in a BDSM interaction?
- What happens if someone takes their consent away?
- How do you know if consent has been taken away?
 - Physical?
 - Verbal?
 - Other?

Violation of Consent

- What happens if someone's consent is violated?
- How does the community react to consent being violated?
- Have you ever had your consent violated?
 - Yes: Was this within or outside of the BDSM community?
 - Yes: Can you tell me what happened?
 - Yes: What happened after this occurred?
 - No: Can you give me an example of consent being violated?
 - No: Can you tell me what might happen after someone's consent has been violated?
- Is there anything that I have neglected or that you would like to add?

Dissertation interview guide - BDSM & Consent

Introduction and Informed Consent

- Re-introduce myself, why this project, etc.
- Answer any preliminary questions
- Collect informed consent
- Share sexual violence resource sheet

Entering BDSM Communities

- How (and when) did you get involved with BDSM?
 - **If learned about sans community:** How did you come to be involved with a BDSM community? Why this community?
 - **If started with a community:** Who / how were you introduced to this community? Are you still part of this community? Why / not?
- Were there any challenges to you getting involved in the scene?
 - Paying for entry to things, affordability of fetish gear, etc.?
 - Challenges to gender / sexual identity?
 - Racial identity / mistreatment?
 - Accessibility issues?
 - Others?
- Can you tell me about any concerns you may have had since joining the scene?
 - Go back to list above
- Tell me about your BDSM community?
 - Different from the original community you joined?
 - Geographic locale
 - Practices/kinks it is known for
 - Group norms, specific cultural issues, etc.
 - How well-known / accepted are practitioners in your broader geographical area?
 - Any specific stories of non-acceptance? (e.g. consequences of outing)
- You've been a practitioner for xyz amount of time... what about BDSM keeps you in the community?
- What is something you really enjoy about being in the community? **Specific example**
- What is something you struggle with in being part of the community? **Specific example**

Learning about and Defining Consent

- Now that we've spent some time discussing your community, and how you became a practitioner, I'd like to ask a few questions about consent and BDSM. Can you tell me how you define consent?
 - How did you come to this definition?
 - How much did being a part of a BDSM community shape your understanding of consent?

Processes of Negotiating Consent

- Who gives consent in a BDSM interaction? Who takes away consent in an interaction?
 - **If not all parties:** Why is that? What is the other person(s) doing?
 - **Try to explore how consent is “one-sided” rather than constructed with another person OR how not everyone has consent to give**
- How do you know if someone has given their consent?
 - **Press:** examples
- How is consent negotiated in your community?
 - **Press:** examples
- What does rescinding consent look like? How is it recognized in your community?
 - **Press:** examples
- What happens after someone rescinds their consent?
 - **Press:** examples

Community Prevention

- Prevention of consent violations is something I have noticed is important in various communities I have been a part of, and I am curious about efforts in other communities. I'd like to start with you telling me about the rules of consent in your BDSM community.
 - Safe words? Stoplight system? Others?
 - How did you learn about these rules?
 - Posters in dungeons/play parties? BDSM 101s? Munches? Online communities? Others?
 - Are all of the rules explicit, instructed and openly discussed? Or are there some rules that are taken for granted, but not often openly discussed?
 - **Are consent violations expected in the community?**
- Are there other mechanisms or strategies for preventing consent violations in your community?
 - What are these?
 - Ex: safety & greeter, houses, dungeon monitors, etc.
 - Who participates?
 - Specifics: gender, race (if possible), sexuality, kink identity
 - What is the process for getting involved in efforts like the one(s) you described?
 - Are these informal efforts, or are they formally sanctioned by the community?

Consent Violations

- Now, I'd like to talk more specifically about consent violations, including your own experiences, if you are comfortable with that. Have you ever had your consent violated in a BDSM scene/setting?
 - **Yes:** Can you tell me what happened?
 - **Yes:** What happened after this occurred?

- **Yes:** Did you continue to participate in your community? Why / not?
 - **Clarify:** was this a different community than the one you're currently in?
- **Yes:** Did you seek help of any kind?
- **No:** Can you give me an example of what someone's consent being violated might look like in this community?
- **No:** Can you tell me what might happen after someone's consent has been violated?
- **No:** If you - or someone you know - had your consent violated, would you seek help in your community? Why or why not?
- **Would it ever be unsafe or bad to seek help for a consent violation? How so? What would you do in that instance?**

Community Response

- I'd like to discuss what happens following a consent violation in your community. Can you tell me what kinds of resources for help you feel are available to individuals who experience consent violations?
 - Police / legal help? Why/why not?
 - Community resources?
- What about informal mechanisms or strategies for responding to consent violations in your community?
 - What are these?
 - Who participates?
 - Specifics: gender, race (if possible), sexuality, kink identity
 - What is the process for getting involved in efforts like the one(s) you described?
- What formal processes for reporting or otherwise receiving aid for consent violations exist in your community?
 - Who participates?
 - Specifics: gender, race (if possible), sexuality, kink identity
 - What is the process for getting involved in efforts like the one(s) you described?
- If you reported to your community that you had experienced some form of violence, do you think you would be believed? Why / not?

#metoo and BDSM

- The #metoo movement has affected just about every large kind of community in the U.S., including BDSM communities. How has your community discussed/reacted to #metoo?
 - Firsthand, friends, online conversation, etc.?
- Outside of your own community, what do you think about the role of #metoo in BDSM?
 - Has it changed things? How? For the better or for worse?
- Are there other areas where BDSM communities could grow/change for the better?
 - **Yes:** What are they? How might this work be done?

COVID-19

- I want to pivot a little, as we near the end of our conversation, to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on kink communities. Can you share with me how the pandemic has affected your ability to participate in BDSM activities?
 - Increase in digital activities?
 - **Yes:** What kind? Tell me more about them?
 - **No:** Why not?
 - Play bubbles?
 - Others?
- What are some of the adaptations your community has made because of the pandemic?
 - How do you feel about these?
- How has the pandemic affected your thoughts about the necessity of in-person activities for BDSM practitioners?
 - Practitioners vs. Communities?
- What do you think COVID-19 will do to in-person BDSM practices post-pandemic?
- What would you like BDSM practices to be like post-pandemic?
- What about communities where public play goes away, e.g. a dungeon closes, etc.?

Cool-down / Debrief

- Go over interpersonal violence resources one more time
- Is there anything that I have left out or that you would like to add?
- Can I contact you to clarify any questions I may still have?
- Do you know other individual(s) who might be interested in participating in this study?
- Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Informed Consent - “BDSM and Consent”

You are herein being asked to consent to being interviewed or observed for doctoral research by Cierra Raine Sorin, M.A., a doctoral candidate at the University of California Santa Barbara, under the direction of Dr. Laury Oaks and Dr. Tristan Bridges. The purpose of this study is to look at consent within the BDSM community. You are eligible to participate in this study because you are a self-identified member of the BDSM community.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked a series of questions about what you understand BDSM to be, how you learned about, what you know about consent, and how consent operates within the BDSM community. You will also be asked about your personal experiences with consent violation, a topic that may be triggering to sexual violence survivors and allies alike.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time, and you are not required to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. Your information will remain confidential; only the researcher will have access to any identifying information given during the interview, during participant observation, and / or on the digital questionnaire.

All interview participants will be paid \$20/hour for their time, with a minimum payment of \$20 per person. Participants who begin an interview but choose to end it will also be paid \$20. Ending the interview early before its completion will still result in a minimum payment of \$20, prorated through the amount of time spent up to that point (at a rate of \$5/15 minutes).The researcher will send payment via Venmo (a free-to-use digital pay app)

immediately following an interview. If Venmo is not amenable, participants may work with the researcher to find another solution.

The risk involved with your participation in this study is minimal, although there may be some discomfort concerning questions of sexual violence, but a resource sheet will be given to you should you need to contact someone for psychological support. Additionally, there is a small likelihood that others may come to know you have participated in this study, but every possible precaution to prevent this will be taken by the researcher.

Interviews will take place via Zoom, and recorded. Zoom automatically records video and audio; I will delete videos after the end of an interview, and keep the audio files only long enough to transcribe them. Once transcriptions have been completed, all Zoom recordings will be destroyed. Zoom like all other digital services has some risk involved with its utilization; however, following the uptick of online interactions for business under the pandemic, Zoom has invested a significant amount of time upgrading its privacy and security practices. Most importantly, I will not upload recordings to their digital servers. Here is more information about Zoom's security practices: <https://zoom.us/docs/doc/Zoom-Security-White-Paper.pdf>

All materials will be stored in a password-secured location. I reserve the right to take notes as well, both during interviews and during participant observation, and these will remain confidential and will also be stored in a private, password-secured location that only I have access to. All names and personally identifying information will be changed for your protection. I will keep de-identified data for future research, but will not share these with others, and they will be kept secured as specified above. Even with these precautions, however, research documents may be subpoenaed, so 100% confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Again,

you are under no obligation to answer any question, or to complete the interview, and you may ask questions of me at any time. Thus, by signing and dating this form, you accept the following:

- I may record this interview, take notes for this interview, and/or take notes for this observation;
- Your participation in this research is strictly voluntary. You may withdrawal your interview from this study at any time;
- You will be paid, at minimum, \$20 for your participation as an interviewee;
- You may ask me to stop the interview at any time, you may ask me questions at any time, and you do not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer;
- Your identity will be kept confidential, and your name will be changed in all written research post-interview;
- You give permission to the researcher to maintain de-identified data after the conclusion of this project; and
- You may be contacted by the researcher in the future regarding additional studies. You can opt out of future studies with no repercussions.

Any questions regarding this research may be directed to Cierra Raine Sorin, M.A. at csorin@ucsb.edu or to the advisers for this study, Dr. Tristan Bridges (tbridges@soc.ucsb.edu) and Dr. Laury Oaks (oaks@femst.ucsb.edu). You may report problems that may result from your participation or direct questions in regard to your rights as a subject in this study to the Human Subjects Committee, University of California Santa Barbara by phone (805-893-3807) or by email (hsc@research.ucsb.edu). All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.

Thank you for your participation!

Signature

Date

Crisis Resources

Some of what we discuss in our interview might be triggering to you. I am not a licensed professional, nor do I have direct experience with all of the below resources. I have provided these to you if you find yourself struggling or in crisis and need help that I am not equipped to provide. If you need help finding resources more local to you, please be in touch!

National Sexual Assault Hotline

1-800-656-4673 or online chat at <https://hotline.rainn.org/online>

National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-7233 or online chat at <https://www.thehotline.org/>

Trans Lifeline Peer Support Hotline

1-877-565-8860

LGBT National Hotline

1-888-843-4564 or online chat at <https://www.glbthotline.org/peer-chat.html>

Le Red/The Network

617-742-4911 or text 617-227-4911

The Trevor Project

1-866-488-7386 or chat online at www.thetrevorproject.org

National Suicide Prevention Hotline

1-800-273-8255 or online chat at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/chat/>