Talking about sexual consent: Heterosexual women and BDSM

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Abstract

Sexual consent is an increasingly important concept for sexual violence prevention. Practitioners of bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadomasochism (hereafter BDSM) advocate strong community standards of active sexual consent to ensure that their practices are clearly differentiated from abuse. In this article, we explore the ways in which heterosexual female BDSM practitioners understand the meaning of and communicate sexual consent within their relationships. Their accounts of sexual consent within their BDSM relationships present sexual consent as synonymous with safe play. Yet, even within a context that demands explicit consent, there are complexities and nuances in terms of how sexual consent is communicated during play. We explore how explicit forms of consent found in descriptions of BDSM sit uncomfortably next to feminist analyses of how heteronormativity can undermine women’s autonomy during heterosex.

In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in sexual consent-focused rape prevention education and activism. Oxford and Cambridge universities have mandated sexual consent training for all incoming students (Weale 2014). California passed a law requiring all colleges and universities to provide policies and training for students on affirmative sexual consent (consent where it is the initiator’s responsibility to ensure consent has been granted; De Leon 2014). Activist campaigns have also taken up the language of sexual consent. Slogans such as ‘consent is sexy’ and ‘sex without consent is rape’ are being popularised by social media campaigns and activist efforts such as Slut Walk (see Dajee 2014; Lam et al. 2014; Sexual Assault Voices 2010). Sexual consent-focused rape prevention emphasises the importance of consent to sexual relations.

The set of practices known as Bondage, Discipline and Sadomasochism (BDSM or SM) provide a unique context to further explore issues of sexual consent. Practitioners of BDSM are often involved with online and ‘real-life’ communities. Within these communities, members can learn from each other, meet potential play partners and attend parties to watch and/or participate in play. Communities are also places where people learn about consent practices within BDSM and safe play. Consent is so important to the image of BDSM communities that safe, sane and consensual (SSC) has been referred to as the mantra of the BDSM scene (Weiss 2011). This mantra serves two purposes; it provides safety that is so important to practitioners of BDSM and also differentiates BDSM activities from violence and abusive behaviours (Taylor and Ussher 2001; Weiss 2011). This does not mean that BDSM communities are immune to instances of violence and/or coercion, but that they do establish guidelines with the idea of minimising the risk of experiencing such violence. In this article, we use interviews with heterosexual women involved with BDSM communities about their experiences of sexual consent to explore nuances in...
their vanilla (non-BDSM) and BDSM relationships. We seek to understand how they construct sexual consent within BDSM. In particular we are interested in how these constructions of sexual consent might engage with feminist theorising about heteronormativity. Do BDSM understandings of sexual consent transgress gendered power dynamics present in normative constructions of heterosex? And do they also reinforce heteronormative patterns of consent?

What is consent?

Sexual consent is a concept that is often taken for granted. Many scholars use it without defining it explicitly, assuming a shared understanding of the concept (Beres 2007; Gotell 2007). In Australia, the legal definitions of sexual consent generally specify that consent is the free and voluntary agreement to participate in sexual activity (Fileborn 2011). Legal definitions of sexual consent vary, though there is a recent trend towards an affirmative model of consent in law, policy and educational efforts. An affirmative model requires sexual consent to be a positive indication that both people want to engage in sex, rather than the absence of resistance or refusal.

Evidence from psychological and sociological studies that ask participants how they communicate consent suggest that consent is communicated in a variety of ways. Consent is more frequently communicated non-verbally, rather than verbally (Beres, Herold, and Maitland 2004; Burrow, Hannon, and Hall 1998; Hall 1998; Humphreys 2007; Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). Although evidence suggests that in some specific contexts consent may be communicated most frequently verbally (Jozkowski et al. 2013), consent is most often communicated indirectly (Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999; Jozkowski and Peterson 2013). For example, non-verbally by removing clothing, or when using verbal cues people are more likely to say ‘is this ok?’ rather than ‘will you have sex with me?’ Consent is more likely to be communicated verbally the first time a couple has sex (Humphreys 2007) and is considered less applicable in long-term relationships, compared with new relationships or casual sex (Beres 2014; Humphreys 2007).

Gender differences have surfaced regarding perceptions about how consent is communicated (Humphreys 2004; Jozkowski et al. 2013). Such evidence suggests that men are more likely than women to see consent as an event, rather than a process (Humphreys 2004). Men are more likely to say they use non-verbal cues, and women were more likely to say they use verbal cues to indicate consent (Jozkowski et al. 2013). When assessing their heterosexual partners’ consent, women were more likely to look for verbal cues and men were more likely to look for non-verbal cues (Jozkowski et al. 2013).

Understandings of the nature of sexual consent vary. Sexual consent is viewed by some legal theorists and psychologists as a behavioural act (Archard 1998; Ostler 2004), other scholars (see Hickman and Muehlenhard 1999; Hurd and Alexander 1996; Jozkowski et al. 2014; Muehlenhard 1996) make the distinction between the internal feeling of willingness (or wanting) to have sex and the external communication of that feeling of willingness. Hickman and Muehlenhard’s (1999) definition of sexual consent brings these together when they refer to consent as the ‘communication of a feeling of willingness’. In their study of sexual consent communication among college students, Jozkowski et al. (2014) make this explicit in by constructing two measures of consent; an internal measure of consent assessing the person’s willingness to participate in sex and an external measure of consent that measured the communication of willingness.
Inherent in most contemporary definitions of consent is the concept of freedom. For sexual consent to take place it must be within a context where the people involved are consenting free from coercion, force or undue influence. When considering the immediate context of a sexual act, the concept of free consent may seem straightforward. There cannot be any implied or explicit threats or attempts to coerce someone into sex they do not otherwise want. The trouble with this notion of freedom comes when we consider the social contexts within which individuals engage in sex. West (2002) and Gavey (2005) both point out that many people may agree to sex due to social pressures, rather than pressure directly from a partner. For example, a man only attracted to other men might engage in sex with a woman because he feels pressured to conform to heterosexual social expectations, or a woman might have sex with her male partner because she feels it is her duty in the relationship (Basile 1999; Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras 2008; Gavey 1992). MacKinnon (1989) points out that within heteropatriarchy women are impeded from freely giving consent to men due to gendered power differentials. To this end, feminist theorising has pointed out that normative constructions of heterosexuality can be both compulsory and coercive particularly for heterosexual women (Gavey 2005).

Considering heteronormative power relations several scholars have explored possibilities for the production of a heterosexuality that subverts and undoes these relations. Beasley, Brook, and Holmes (2012) make an effort to identify transgressive forms of heterosexuality. Inherent in transgressing heteronormativity is shifting the power relations between men and women during sex. Considering BDSM’s focus on explicit consent and explicit power exchange we were curious about whether the practice of BDSM provides such a site of transgression for heterosexual women.

Consent in BDSM relationships

Consent norms espoused within BDSM communities are composed of two main practices; pre-negotiation of allowed activities, and the use of safe-words or pre-arranged non-verbal signals to indicate the withdrawal of consent (Cross and Matheson 2006; Taylor and Ussher 2001). In studies exploring how BDSM practitioners define BDSM participants reported discussing rules of conduct explicitly before any play, particularly if it was the first time they engaged in BDSM activity, or played, together (Cross and Matheson 2006; Taylor and Ussher 2001). They also reported negotiating which painful, controlling and/or humiliating activities they agreed to include in their BDSM scenes. Many of the participants interviewed by Cross and Matheson (2006) in their study of practitioners’ perceptions of BDSM described the power exchange as mutually constructed between play partners. It is common for controlling or punishing acts to be allowed within a scene, but not in everyday interaction, demonstrating that BDSM relationships are based on pre-agreed, consensual power exchange, not on the dominant partner exercising power over the submissive partner as they wish. Even though during a scene the dominant is given the power over the submissive, each person is generally presumed to have an equal voice during this pre-negotiation.

While the explicit negotiation of consent is considered ideal, and is taught in BDSM communities some practitioners admit they do not practice such explicit forms of consent (Weiss 2011). Some participants in Weiss’ ethnographic study of a BDSM community in San Francisco at times described explicit negotiation consistent with SSC as ‘ridiculous’ (2011, 81). Instead, the guidelines of SSC are generally considered a useful starting point.
for beginners (Weiss 2011). For some seasoned practitioners part of the attraction to BDSM is giving up control and not knowing what will happen. At times, this means a desire and willingness to consent to the unknown.

A further practice implicit in BDSM standards of sexual consent is the critiquing and sanctioning of behaviour that deviates from clear and respectful consent practices. Within heteronormative sex discussing sexual activities in detail with others is unusual, perhaps even taboo (Beres 2007). Different norms encouraging more open communication about intimate behaviours appear to operate in communities based around common sexual interests (Travis 2013). If a dominant violates consent by going past the agreed limits or ignoring a safe-word, they may become known in their BDSM community as dangerous to play with, and risk being ostracised by potential play partners (Taylor and Ussher 2001). In such circumstances, it is hoped that BDSM communities might undertake a positive role, holding members accountable for maintaining a safer environment, and giving a sense of security to vulnerable or inexperienced members. Although not foolproof, this ethics of accountability is important for two reasons. First, it is motivated by care and concern for the well-being of members of the community. Second, it is important to protect the reputation of the community, particularly considering that they operate on the fringes of what is often considered acceptable forms of sexual behaviour.

Given the priority and explicitness of consent negotiations in BDSM relationships, those who practice BDSM present an alternate way of interrogating the meaning and negotiation of sexual consent. Considering gendered power relations and discourses that often position heterosexual women as sexual objects (Gavey 2005), it is useful to understand how heterosexual women who practice BDSM talk about the negotiation of consent and their experiences of power within BDSM relationships.

There is little reported research about the specific experiences of heterosexual women who practice BDSM. The emphasis within BDSM on activities that are not genitally focused and which are experienced as sexual but not as sex (Beckmann 2001; Simula 2012), gives rise to a more frequent participation in different forms of are the quote bisexuality in BDSM than occurs in vanilla sex (Simula 2012) which in turn drives the focus of much research. Additionally, studies of the characteristics and experiences of BDSM practitioners often either do not report on the sexual orientation of participants at all (e.g. Connolly 2006) or else report on sexual orientations of their participants, but do not address this factor in analysis (e.g. Taylor and Ussher 2001; Yost and Hunter 2012).

It is the intersection of heterosexuality and BDSM that we are engaged with in this article. In the context of BDSM community guidelines that focus on explicit consent, explicit power exchange and respect, we seek to explore the possibilities within BDSM communities for renegotiating some of the structuring principles of normative heterosexuality; namely the possibility for heterosexual women to negotiate consent in ways that subvert existing gendered power relations. To this end, we present here a small-scale study that explores how cis-gendered heterosexual women who practice BDSM talk about consent within BDSM and vanilla relationships.

**Eliciting and analysing talk about sexual consent**

To explore how heterosexual women who practice BDSM talk about sexual consent, we conducted a small-scale qualitative study. The research is informed by three guiding principles of feminist methodology. First, grounding knowledge in women’s lived
experiences (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Second, honouring the diversity of women’s experiences, resisting any temptation to homogenise. Third, aiming to engage with participants in a way that was respectful, communicating clearly and sharing information about the research as requested (Reinharz 1993). These principles proved important in establishing trust and rapport, with four of the five participants requesting information about the interviewer’s knowledge of BDSM and aims in conducting this research before agreeing to participate. Many members of BDSM communities have experienced marginalisation and/or judgement from professional communities including academic researchers (Beckmann 2001; Kolmes, Stock, and Moser 2006). The use of feminist research principles was paramount to ensure that participants’ voices were heard and respected.

In order to recruit participants, an advertisement was displayed on a virtual noticeboard of a BDSM social networking website in a major city in Australia, seeking heterosexual women with experience with both vanilla and BDSM relationships to take part in an interview about their experiences of sexual consent. Prospective participants were encouraged to make contact using an email address that did not display their real name, and they were referred to by a pseudonym throughout their participation. Five heterosexual women with experience with both BDSM and vanilla heterosexual relations were interviewed. One participant was in her early 20s, three in their 30s and one in her early 50s. All had undertaken some university study. All participants were in committed heterosexual relationships with trusted BDSM partners at the time of the interview, two were dating, two were de facto, and one was married. Three of them also discussed some casual BDSM play, with trusted casual partners, or at a time when they were between monogamous relationships. The participants had an average of five years of experience with BDSM. One identified as dominant, two as submissive, and two identified as switch (able to be dominant or submissive).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants lasting between 45 and 110 minutes. Interviews were conducted in person, by the second author, a psychologist experienced in working with clients from diverse sexuality and gender communities. Participants were asked about how they defined and enacted consent in mainstream and BDSM contexts, and about experiences in which their consent was respected and disrespected in each of these contexts.

Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). In contrast with inductive thematic analysis where analysis is not driven by researcher’s interest in the topic, theoretical thematic analysis is an in-depth analysis of qualitative data based on a theoretical idea or concept. In this case the analysis was informed by prior conceptualisations of sexual consent, and the data were read and coded for talk that shed light on the participants’ understanding of sexual consent. To this end, analysis took place at the semantic (face value) and latent (underlying assumptions and beliefs) levels (Braun and Clarke 2006). Aspects of sexual consent discussed in previous literature, such as the notion that consent should be given freely, guided the analysis to ensure that we explored a range of meanings of consent.

Talking about consent

Centrality and formality of consent

The language used by participants made it clear that consent was paramount in their BDSM relationships:
In a vanilla context, asking for permission/consent is the exception, whereas with BDSM it becomes the rule. (Annie)

Consistent with previous literature describing consent standards within BDSM, Annie paints a stark contrast between consent in BDSM and vanilla relationships (see Taylor and Ussher 2001; Yost 2010). Four out of the five participants disclosed experiences of unwanted sex and/or sexual coercion or assault in previous vanilla relationships. Part of what they appreciate about BDSM is that the consent process provides for them a sense of power and safety. None of the participants had experienced any breach of consent within BDSM relationships. In their discussions of sexual consent within BDSM practices, participants invoked two common phrases used with BDSM communities. These are SSC and risk aware consensual kink (RACK). Both principals hinge on the use of consent:

I’m very methodical. When I decide to do something, I decide to do it properly, and then I read a lot of things about RACK and SSC … And so now I have a lot of thoughts about how consent should be done properly. (Beth)

Beth and Annie mentioned both phrases when asked about how they got into the BDSM community. Four of the participants talked about how they did research on BDSM, largely online, when they began experimenting with BDSM. This led them to these guiding phrases and towards an understanding of how these principles were fundamental in practicing BDSM. This is one of the lessons that BDSM community groups, including online groups, want people to understand. As already mentioned this serves the purposes of creating a safe environment and of ensuring it is clear that the communities do not indorse abuse. Through online research or social gatherings for people involved in the BDSM community, consent is a topic with which all newcomers must become familiar.

Consent within BDSM practice was learnt in a formal and explicit way. Three participants mentioned that the explicit negotiation of consent consistent with SSC principles was something they practiced on an ongoing basis in their BDSM relationships:

So we talk a lot about limits and … if it’s a particular act we’ll try it out … we’ll just actually have a play and see how it works and that’s good ‘cause you know, other people’s bodies are complicated … when I do my scenes I like to kind of, they’re a bit of a surprise, but it’s all been negotiated beforehand, and usually tested out and it’s all about the timing, ‘cause then I know where it will all fit in the process and that’s good. But I also use extensive safe-word procedures, so he can safe-word just by saying ‘safe-word’ or also ‘stop’ or ‘slow down’ I will absolutely listen to and we’ll occasionally do green-yellow-red, and if for whatever reason he can’t speak, he’ll, because we do quite a lot of breath-play things, and if he really needs to breathe he’ll tap my wrist, and we constantly negotiate those things. (Beth)

Beth talked extensively about the negotiation process. For her negotiating sexual consent was detailed and explicit. It also did not end at the end of a scene:

Afterwards I’d be like ‘Feedback!’ … so what we worked out is that he’s much better writing his thoughts down, so generally in the few days after we see each other and we do stuff he will send me an email talking about what he liked, what maybe didn’t work as well, things that were linked to it that he thought, just his general thoughts about things, how he’s feeling and I’ll send him one back with the same information and that’s really good. (Beth)
Beth discusses her elaborate consent process, a process that surprised one of her subs (who is also dominant with some women but had no previous involvement with a BDSM community). She feels that it is important to debrief the experience with her subs to find out how they felt about the experience including what they liked and any experiences they did not like or were pushing their limits. The inclusion of a debriefing process demonstrates a recognition that the experience of consent may change during play in ways that her subs may not anticipate and may not communicate during play, and a willingness to incorporate any changes into ongoing verbal consent negotiations.

While all participants valued consent, not all of them negotiated consent this fully or consistently:

It’s suggested that you could do a checklist but I’ve never really done that, it’s more fluid. Maybe you go through the checklist phase, if you’re meeting someone online, if you’ve got an online profile you can say I’m interested in these activities, and they might contact you because they’re also interested and you kind of meet up like that, so you’ve already gone through a little bit of that. So you might have a little conversation about what you like and don’t like, but I’ve never had scenes as such, it’s more like you’re just with somebody and you’re playing and as the submissive you don’t really – you have a choice, but part of what I enjoy is not having that choice. The surprise of whatever the dominant decides to do in that moment. (Eve)

While Eve stressed the importance of consent, she also views consent as fluid and not requiring such explicit negotiation. For her, part of what she enjoys is having a lack of choice, and not knowing exactly what can happen. Eve states that she is making an informed choice to leave the selection of included activities to her dominant partner. This appears to be a departure from stated guidelines of many online BDSM communities. It is a recognition that while the ideal might be explicit negotiation, this is not what always happens within BDSM contexts. This is not to say the resulting sexual activity is problematic, or non-consensual. Simply that standards for explicit consent are not always enacted.

At the semantic level, participants’ talk of consent reflected the discourse most prominent in BDSM communities: that consent is explicitly and deliberately negotiated prior to any play. This discourse is troubled by three of participants who say they do not always follow this version of consent. This finding is consistent with Weiss’ (2011) study mentioned previously where some participants found explicit consent ‘ridiculous’. We bring into question the prominence of SSC further when looking the themes of flow and blanket consent that emerged from the interviews.

Flow

Regardless of whether participants consistently followed explicit consent guidelines they talked about the importance for the dominant to be ‘in tune’ with how the submissive was doing during play. Annie called this ‘flow’:

When it’s comes to sex which always revolved around some aspect of BDSM it’s that flow sort of thing that you generally expect from intercourse … . (Annie)

When Annie talks about flow, she is talking about how partners can be in tune with each other, without explicitly talking about what they are doing. This idea also came through three interviews including Eve’s interview:
As a preference I don’t ever like somebody to have to [safe-word], I like to take somebody to the point, and they’re probably just about to say it, and then I stop. That’s my style…. Because I like, as a dominant you should be able to read that person’s body language, and you should know when it’s too much for them… Because that shows that you’re attentive and responding to the other person, you’re in a mutual situation. (Eve)

In this way flow is achieved by careful attention of the dom to the sub. Despite prior negotiating Eve discusses how she watches for signs people are reaching their limits and for when they may be about to withdraw their consent using the safe-word. She looks for ongoing information that the person is consenting to the activity. Consent here becomes a process as well as an event that occurred through prior negotiation. To this end, the explicit consent allows the dom to go ahead confident she understands her partners’ likes and limits, particularly when the partners do not know each other well.

Paying attention to flow becomes particularly important in safe-word free sessions where sexual consent may appear to be exclusively pre-negotiated. Sometimes subs want to play where the safe-word would not be respected, or where there was no safe-word:

Yeah, and then there’s the other side that I just find fascinating about doing a no safe-word professional session, initially the first time you do it you’re a little bit wary, and I’ve had people safe-word in a no safe-word session, and that it’s like this inner turmoil – and I’m sure this happens in people’s private play, it’s not just the professional world – there’s this turmoil because they have given you the prior consent to ignore their safe-word, but are they really … ? So then I learned to say ‘Are you just safe-wording, or are you safe-wording out of the session?’ Because at that point you would have to end the session, you couldn’t continue playing, because they have gone against their own consent. Because then you’ve just ruined the whole relationship. Because you’re toying with the dominant’s care factor, by saying ‘I want a no safe-word session’ you’re taking the dominant into very tricky territory, so if you start to play with that then it’s difficult to come back from. (Eve)

Eve talks about the potentially conflicted nature of safe-word free sessions. If a safe-word is used in a safe-word free session it makes it difficult for the dom to know what to do. Eve said that when subs safe-word in a non-safe-word session it is ‘toying with the dominant’s care factor’. The dominant has an implied duty of care for the submissive. If the submissive is using the safe-word just for the sake of it they put the dom into a tricky position where they cannot be certain what that duty of care requires of them. Within the context of BDSM relationships both the dom and sub are responsible for their own well-being. As mentioned earlier the sub trusts that the dom will respect his/her boundaries and the dom trusts that the sub will also respect the dom’s position and safe-word if needed. In these instances, Eve feels she has no choice but to end the session because it has damaged the trust and care aspects of the agreed relationship. In this instance explicit consent has been given, but the dom has reason to doubt the ongoing consent of the sub, or the, so she stops the session.

**Blanket consent**

A third theme that came through the interviews can be described by the term blanket consent. Three participants talked about times when they gave explicit consent to doms to make decisions on their behalf or to not tell them what was going to
happen. This occurred within a context where the people knew each other well. For example, some subs, like Eve above, enjoy the experience of giving up control. For Eve, giving up control means not knowing exactly what is going to happen. The safe-word provides a safety net for that eventuality, so participants can experience giving up control, not knowing what will happen, and know that they can withdraw consent at will if needed, and expect that withdrawal will be respected.

Similarly, Cate described a situation where she gave up control to her dom. She went into a situation not knowing exactly what would happen and looking forward to that aspect of the evening. In the end something did happen that she was not comfortable with:

So I find myself in this situation where I was turned on, and I was having orgasms, and I don’t really like him, and yet it was done with my consent ’cause I had agreed to do it, and still have really ambivalent feelings about it … It wasn’t an awful experience, I don’t think I’d do it again. (Cate)

In this excerpt Cate talks about certain things happening that she was not comfortable with, and her intention to avoid such things in the future. The situation was complicated by the fact that her dom Jake was giving someone else permission to touch Cate. Jake was consenting on Cate’s behalf, something that would not meet the legal definition of consent in many jurisdictions. Cate gave her consent for Jake to do this, yet the open-endedness of it meant that Cate was not sure about what would happen. The consent she expressed was not in the moment with knowledge about what would happen, but was prior to the evening. When asked directly whether she considered this experience to have been consensual, Cate confirmed without hesitation that she did. However, with knowledge gained about her preferences, she has since made some decisions and set other limits to prevent similar events from happening in the future. This illustrates a distinction between sex that is unwanted but still, in the participant’s view, consensual. Although she may have become an ‘unwilling’ participant in the sexual activities that took place, she chose not to communicate a withdrawal of her consent at the time, and considered this to determine the consensuality of the activity. In instances like these unwanted or unpleasurable activities can still be experienced as consensual.

Free from coercion

Consent should be given freely. This means that someone consenting to an act must do so in the absence of any coercion or force. The discourse of consent within BDSM is strong not only in relation to the importance of negotiating consent, but this discourse permeated the participants’ talk of their experiences such that they presumed that anything that would happen within the parties they were frequenting was consensual because consent was part of the BDSM community:

Yeah. You’ll have this very argument even within the BDSM community. I don’t personally understand … you can’t judge someone because of how they choose to play. You can not understand it, you can feel free to ask questions, you can inquire about it, but ultimately you can’t judge … Which is why when I come across anti-pornography feminists, basically anyone that’s anti-sexual expression it makes me really really angry, because unless they are directly involved, or they ask questions, you actually have no right to determine what goes on unless you’re a direct part. (Annie)
Considering that BDSM is at the fringes of ideas about sex, and that some activities are at times considered deviant, strange or dangerous by outsiders and even sometimes by professionals (Kolmes, Stock, and Moser 2006) it is not surprising that participants would focus on freedom to do what they want. In the quote above Annie clearly argues for such freedom, although she mentions that there are debates within the BDSM community about whether this is the case.

In her interview, Annie identified activities that she felt people should not be able to consent to. The list was short; and consisted of beastiality, sex with children and snuff (films where someone is killed on screen). The reasoning for the list related to issues of consent. Animals and children cannot offer consent. Annie argued that no one could consent to being killed (as that consent could not be effectively withdrawn should they change their mind).

Perhaps the most fraught example of when participants talked about freedom to consent to any activity was in relation to rape scenes, or what is sometimes called ‘consensual non-consent’. Eve spoke about feeling guilty about her desire and enjoyment of consensual non-consent, particularly because she herself had never experienced sexual violence. The use of the term consensual non-consent is used deliberately to separate negotiated play from sexual violence. Annie defended the practice of consensual non-consent by saying that no one should judge an activity between consenting adults.

Following on from discussions about the acceptability of BDSM practices based on consent, three participants presumed consent was present in BDSM activities they witnessed, even in cases where it might not be clear to the outside observer. Cate spoke about witnessing a male dom tell his female subs to perform sex acts with other men. She says:

And they’re there consensually and voluntarily so I guess that’s what they want to do.

(Cate)

Assuming that activities were consensual because they took place within BDSM environments also meant that there was the perception that everyone participating in BDSM consented to any risks and activities and are thus responsible for any negative consequences that arise out of those activities:

And the thing is with submission, you may be submitting but you can’t necessarily just let things happen and hope to god the person you’re playing with notices, that’s why you need to be able to safeword, it’s taking responsibility for your own emotions, your own responses … In a vanilla context that would be victim blaming, when you try to use it in a BDSM context it sounds like victim blaming but it’s not … the victim does not have, let’s face it in a sexual assault situation, does not have any power. What victim blaming does it assumes that the victim actually has had some power when it’s not the case at all. (Annie)

Similar to two other participants, Annie described how the sub has the responsibility, once they consent to something, for their own reactions to what happens, and to ensure they safeword if they need to. Considering the apparent power imbalance, where the submissive has less power than the dom Annie is aware that placing responsibility on the sub for their own reactions to the play may seem like victim blaming, after all they are not in control of the play in that moment. In the case of BDSM play, the distinction between what is consensual and
what is coercion may not be easily apparent to those viewing the play or the dynamics between a dom and sub because it is not known what was negotiated beforehand.

Unlike, the three other participants Beth, questioned the assumption that because behaviours were taking place at BDSM community events, that they were consensual. She recounts an experience where she met a guy at a BDSM club. She felt the guy was not acting respectfully towards the women he was with and questioned the ethics of his actions. Yet, she stopped herself short by saying:

I don’t want to be too paternalistic, and I can do that, I sometimes get a bit ‘I know what’s best for everybody’ and I don’t want to do that. There was a bit where [this guy] got bored of [‘his’ women] speaking to us and he just kind of walked off and kind of yanked [their leashes] and it didn’t seem like it had been pre-negotiated that way … [the women] looked a bit sort of surprised and irritated by that. But they didn’t really say anything and the people I was with were like ‘Ew!’ and it made me really really upset. (Beth)

Beth challenges the notion that because people are practicing BDSM that everything they are doing is consensual. She questioned the actions because they did not seem respectful, but did not think it was her place to make a firm judgement, or to say anything to the man in question. Her reaction is making a judgement about the acceptability of the behaviour, and yet recognises the dominance of an ‘anything goes’ version of consent within BDSM by not doing anything.

Through the free from coercion theme we can begin to see some tensions in the ways that participants talking about consent in BDSM. Within this context where consent is part of the mantra of BDSM, it became easy for at least some of the participants to presume that all that was happening within BDSM play was indeed consensual. Even for the participants who questioned some behaviours they found it difficult to challenge seemingly disrespectful behaviours.

**Conclusion**

This study began with an interest in exploring the possibilities for BDSM practices to enable at least some heterosexual women to transgress heteronormative sexual practices. From the stories of our participants this does seem to be the case for these five women. The women interviewed were able to carve out a sexual space where their desires were considered alongside their partners’ desires and they were able to feel they had power and control over their sexual lives. Four of the five participants in this study mentioned that this was an unexpected contrast to their previous experience with vanilla relationships, although it is unlikely that this is the experiences for all heterosexual women who have practiced BDSM.

As mentioned in the introduction, there is a proliferation of consent-focused educational materials and calls for more explicit negotiations of consent for all relationships, and it is not hard to imagine that BDSM-type consent guidelines could be useful in vanilla relationships. Yet, our analysis revealed tensions and potential contradictions within understandings of consent as it is discussed by heterosexual women who practice BDSM.

First, despite strong imperatives of explicit consent, the reliance on flow highlights the need for implicit forms of consent communication. BDSM models of consent consistent with SSC and RACK demand an explicit and direct form of consent. Yet this does not always
work, either because people have the desire to experience the unknown, or because it is not possible to predict at the outset all eventualities that may require negotiation. To account for the limits of explicit consent, practitioners of BDSM, especially doms, must also pay attention to flow and read the body language of their partners to ensure their safety and comfort. Research with non-BDSM heterosexual relationships suggests that sexual consent negotiation is similar to what our participants labelled as flow where partners talked about reading body language for levels of comfort/discomfort in addition to sometimes checking in verbally (Beres 2010, 2014).

Secondly, the consent talk of the participants brings into question the notion of freedom as it relates to sexual consent. Within a BDSM model of consent, each person is responsible for their own participation and apparently freely able to make choices about the activities in which they participate. These conversations about consent relate to what Breanne Fahs (2014) refers to as the freedom to. People should have the freedom to engage in the activities they want. Fahs discusses the relationship between the freedom to and freedom from in relation to sexuality and sex positive feminism in particular. Similar to discussions here about BDSM, sex positive feminists often focus on women’s freedom to participate in certain forms of sex, and argue that they should be able to engage in whatever kind of consensual sex they want. This is contrasted with feminists working in the movement to end sexual violence who focus on freedom from, and the right for women to have lives free from sexual violence.

Herein lies the difficulty of the strong focus on consent within BDSM. The anything goes as long as it’s consensual approach to sex ignores social structures that privilege particular positions and groups. It presumes that all choices are free and does not acknowledge the way that all choices are constrained by social structures and discourses that shape social behaviour. This brings up what is arguably the most contentious debate about BDSM practices and relationships (see Weiss 2011 for an overview of this debate). Radical feminist critiques suggest that BDSM re-inscribes already problematic power relations and reinforces cultures of violence. Yet many BDSM communities highlight the potential for BDSM practices to challenge and subvert these same power relations. Through this discussion of consent, and freedom to consent to anything, we can begin to see how there is the potential for both possibilities.

BDSM play has potential both to subvert and reify heteropatriarchy. The trouble is that it becomes difficult to tell the difference between activities where heteronormative power relations are subverted and played with, from those where they are re-inscribed (see Weiss 2011 for an analysis of this tension). This is particularly the case for heterosexual interactions with a submissive woman. The difference is context dependent and it requires ongoing engagement with the practices and conditions of BDSM (Weiss 2011).

We recognise that the results presented here need to be interpreted with caution given the very small sample size. However, small samples are not uncommon when studying BDSM communities (see Pitagora 2016). Community members often experience stigma because of their sexual practices, and may be reluctant to participate in research. Because we were interested in heterosexual women this further limited the participant pool as many BDSM practitioners identify on the queer spectrum. Due to the small sample size, we recognise that there are likely other experiences and perspectives of heterosexual women who practice BDSM than the ones presented here. Nevertheless, the data presented here offer a nuanced and complex view of consent within this context, one that opens out possibilities for further study.
Consent is a nuanced and complex topic. Even within the BDSM world where prior negotiation is key, consent is not clear-cut. Instead, we can begin to see that sexual consent consists of nuanced and implicit communication between partners, even when the sexual interaction has been explicitly negotiated. Within these negotiations, focusing on freedom to participate in sex can risk ignoring structural power relations that constrain and inhibit our choices. An ethical and nuanced understanding of consent means looking further into how people think about communicating consent while navigating power relations and acknowledging the limits of freedom.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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NOTES

1. In this context, play refers to engaging in BDSM practices with one or more people.
2. A scene is a pre-planned and pre-negotiated episode of play, usually taking place at a BDSM party or venue.
3. The term cis-gendered refers to a person whose gender identity is consistent with the sex assigned to them at birth.

REFERENCES


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