

UC Santa Barbara

UC Santa Barbara Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

Fifty Shades of Consent: Gender and Anti-Violence Work in the BDSM Community

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/30j488nq>

Author

Sorin, Cierra Raine

Publication Date

2018

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Fifty Shades of Consent: Gender and Anti-Violence Work in the BDSM Community

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Sociology

by

Cierra Raine Sorin

Committee in charge:

Professor Laury Oaks, Chair

Professor Beth Schneider

Professor Tristan Bridges

Professor Jennifer Tyburczy

June 2018

The thesis of Cierra Raine Sorin is approved.

Laury Oaks, Committee Chair

Professor Beth Schneider

Professor Tristan Bridges

Professor Jennifer Tyburczy

May 2018

Fifty Shades of Consent: Gender and Anti-Violence Work in the BDSM Community

Copyright © 2018

by

Cierra Raine Sorin

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While we complete our research projects individually, they are in no way solely the result of our individual work as we are constantly supported by the communities around us.

Graduate school being what it is, I am first thankful to my cohort-mates, who from day one have listened to me process ideas and struggle through coding and writing, along with everything else that comes with being a graduate student. Jasmine Kelekay and Kendall Ota, thank you for your unwavering support and for the shared uncertainties and doubts as we have fought these last three years to finish our MAs. I cannot wait to read your theses!

I am also very thankful for the team of professors who mentored me throughout this process. In both their courses and in one-on-one meetings, Dr. Verta Taylor and Dr. Beth Schneider were integral in helping me formulate my project as a sociological understanding of consent in BDSM communities. I thank Dr. Tristan Bridges for helping me answer questions I did not know I had, pushing me to think further and deeper about my work and its implications, even when it made me angry and uncomfortable. Dr. Jenn Tyburczy, as another scholar of BDSM, has helped push my theoretical thinking about power and community beyond this project alone. Even in my most unconfident moments, Dr. Tyburczy validated the work I was doing. Finally, my primary advisor and chair, Dr. Laury Oaks, has been a literal godsend since I first started grad school. Any struggle I had, research-based or otherwise, Dr. Oaks has been kind, supportive, and a welcome problem-solver. She has been instrumental in my development as a feminist scholar who finds herself in the middle of multiple disciplines. And, above all, Dr. Oaks has always reminded me that I am more than the work I do – something that is so easy to forget while locked in this Ivory Tower.

I could not have got here without the support of my friends and fellow sociologists, Matthew Fritzler and Amada Rodriguez, who listened to me read draft after draft, had writing parties with me, and took me on wild adventures to get away from school when we all needed it. I love you both, and look forward to supporting you as you finish your MAs, and eventually, our PhDs!

The individuals who spoke with me about their experiences as BDSM practitioners made this project what it is, and were nothing but kind and generous with their time and stories.

My fiancé, James, walked our pup Lilith more than his share and made dinner almost every night of spring quarter so I could focus on my writing. His love, care, and unwavering support of me made all the difference in my finishing this thesis.

My family has been my rock since before I entered graduate school. My dad, who started his Ph.D. when I was only seven, has modeled the kind of scholar I aspire to be – hard-working but also unafraid to play hard and be present in family life. My sister, who I have grown so much closer to as we have aged, sent me SO many cat pictures every time I needed cheering up or a distraction from writing. And, finally, my mom has always been my most vocal supporter and sacrificed her opportunity to earn a graduate degree so I that I could. For that, and for everything else, I dedicate this thesis to her. Love you, momma!

ABSTRACT

Fifty Shades of Consent: Gender and Anti-Violence Work in the BDSM Community

by

Cierra Raine Sorin

All practices within the BDSM community are built upon a firm foundation of consent, which I, as an insider-outsider, interrogate in this study. This thesis critically examines the construction of consent and gendered policing of sexual violence in pansexual BDSM (bondage and discipline, Dominance and submission, sadism and masochism) communities. Participant observation and interviews with 29 individuals representing more than 15 distinct BDSM challenges the binaristic approach to consent in that it establishes consent as interactional and ongoing, rather than episodic, while also illuminating the role that non-verbal communication and interaction plays in the giving and revocation of consent. Two types of consent violations occur within the community – “newbie fuck-ups” and “purposeful predations” – each of which is responded to differently by practitioners because of the assumed intent of the violator. Moreover, men’s and women’s approaches to preventing sexual violence in BDSM communities, while similar in nature and practice, have different outcomes: men’s work results in a reification of their masculinity while women’s work serves to build community, often as a result of women having themselves experienced sexual violence. Implications of this research for future projects is discussed, as we can never bring the problem of sexual violence to an end if we do not explicitly define consent and reflect on the power relationships that constitute it.

Introduction

BDSM (bondage and discipline, Dominance and submission, and sado-masochism) occupies a particular place in the cultural imaginary of contemporary American society. Often relegated to the category of deviance – a term which has been used in the field of sociology to describe groups of “nuts, sluts, and perverts,” – BDSM practitioners remain understudied by mainstream disciplines in ways that do not reify harmful stereotypes and prejudices equating BDSM with abuse and violence (Liazos 1972). Although interest in and visibility of BDSM practices has exploded in recent memory due in large part to the best-selling *Fifty Shades* book series and films, there still exists a significant amount of misinformation about BDSM practices, much of which reproduces gendered forms of violence that BDSM is ideally intended to usurp. Arguably the most important of these is the operation of consent, given mainstream understandings of power relations supplied to non-practitioners via media, such as the film *Secretary* (2002) and the more recent *Fifty Shades* franchise.¹ Practices within the BDSM community are built upon a firm foundation of consent, which I, as an insider-outsider, interrogate in this study.

Drawing on interviews and ethnographic research conducted in 2016 and 2017, this study has three primary goals. First, this is an effort to share accurate information about consent practices in the community, including how practitioners construct and enact consent. Second, this research explores policing practices within the community in response to consent violations, as these are almost never reported to legal authorities. Third, I also aim to better elucidate how the performance of work to end sexual violence in the BDSM community has

¹ Anthropologist Margot Weiss (2006) argues that while these books and films may provide a look into the BDSM community, they do not do much to destigmatize or normalize BDSM practices or practitioners – especially because of the misinformation and reinforcement of heteropatriarchal norms they contain.

drastically different repercussions for women than men. This thesis centers the voices of the practitioners who shared their time and stories with me, many of whom also identify as sexual violence survivors. I have consciously made this choice as a researcher who has worked with sexual violence survivors in the past, but also because survivors can and do find solace in BDSM practices (Landridge and Barker 2007), directly contradicting (and further troubling) discourses around BDSM as non-consensual violence simply committed by “deviants.”

Finally, in doing this work, I share my findings both within and outside of the community of “nuts, sluts, and perverts” (Liazos 1972) with whom I worked. This is not only beneficial in terms of contributing to the destigmatization of the community, but also will hopefully help to normalize BDSM and begin removing the very real dangers that exist for individuals who openly identify themselves as part of these communities.

BDSM 101

The first time I made a trip to a dungeon, my partner and I and a couple of friends drove down to Los Angeles for an event called Bizarre Bazaar. Occurring multiple times throughout the year, these events offer practitioners who also craft BDSM-related goods an opportunity to sell their wares in an open market area to other practitioners. Wares include everything from traditional implements of play, such as floggers and crops, to commissioned artwork and handmade jewelry, to my favorite: kinky teddy bears, no two alike, lovingly crafted by an elderly woman who reminded me of a stereotypical grandmother. When we paid our \$25 entrance fee, our group was informed that those of us new to the dungeon – my partner and I – would need to complete the BDSM 101 course being offered later in the day to be allowed

entrance to the play party following the bazaar. As luck would have it, we could not attend the play party that evening, and sadly had to leave before the class started, but this occasion did give me cause to further interrogate the concept of introductory courses at dungeons.

These classes, generally referred to across communities as “BDSM 101s,” are often required for practitioners to attend if they have not “played” in that dungeon before, even if they are well-established individuals within BDSM communities. Though there are often classes offered beyond this that teach different skill sets and offer primers on different types of activities – needle/bloodplay, ropework, and electroplay, just to name a few (Weiss 2011). As I found through reading different descriptions of 101 courses on FetLife, the kinky social networking site akin to Facebook, these offer individuals new to a particular community or new to BDSM more generally the ability to be trained in that community’s expectations for safe and appropriate behavior in play spaces. Courses are designed to outline the rules of a particular space, such as only using phones in designated areas, and often will also go over guidelines for safety practices, such as if a dungeon requires the use of the stoplight system when engaging in play. In this vein of thought, I have prepared this section as a “BDSM 101” in its own right, providing some insight into terms that I will continue to use but which, defined in the context of each participant’s story, might take away from my analysis.

“Dungeon” and “play space” are somewhat interchangeable terms that refer to a space managed by BDSM practitioners in which to engage in physical “play.” Play spaces tend to be more informal, and often occur in sites that are multipurpose. A restaurant can be converted into a play space for an evening or two, but the play space is not a permanent fixture, whereas dungeons are. In addition to being permanent locations – unless they close – dungeons are also larger spaces that can more easily incorporate a variety of play. There are often pieces of

furniture used in play in dungeons, such as St. Andrew's crosses, that are impractical to own at the individual level, either because of cost, size, or the inability for people to pass as "vanilla" if they keep kinky furniture too big or specific to disguise within their homes.² Dungeons often incorporate smaller, more-defined play spaces within them; set up at the dungeon the day Bizarre Bazaar was held, for instance, was a professor-student themed room, a room for ropeplay, and a room for electroplay, among several others. Finally, I will also often refer to a "scene," which is an individual instance of play that can occur within a play space, within a dungeon, or in a private space such as someone's home.

Although I do not discuss them in detail here, "dungeon monitors" are individuals specifically trained within individual communities to police events at dungeons and play parties.³ They observe scenes and enforce rules of the space, including stepping into or ending a scene if something has gone wrong; most other practitioners, except members of one's house, will not stop a scene. "Houses," akin to families, refer to groups of people who willingly partner together to form a smaller, more tight-knit group within a larger community. This concept comes from Old Guard practices, and being a member of a house also implies that you will be trained in certain skills and may have certain expectations to live up to as a house member.

Within the community, individuals can take on numerous identities, but there are a few which are most commonly used, in part because they signify the power relationships practitioners enter into with one another. Bottoms and submissives (subs) are often used

² Vanilla is a non-derogatory term used by practitioners to differentiate between themselves and individuals who do not engage in kink.

³ Surprisingly, dungeon monitors (DMs) did not come up often in interviews, except as tangents or quick asides. Given their theoretical importance in dungeons, that participants glossed over them could be an interesting thing to interrogate in future research.

interchangeably, just as are tops and Dominants (Dom/mes), but there are subtle nuances. Tops and bottoms more often indicate what people like to *do* – in essence, whether they are the *doer* (top) or *receiver* (bottom) in an interaction. Dom/mes and subs more often are used to reflect who an individual *is* – whether they are someone who tends to prefer having power (Dom/mes) or whether they prefer to give away power (subs). Top and bottom are more often invoked in specific situations – “I’ll top tonight,” for instance. Dominant and submissive are categories that extend beyond individual scenes, however. Folks who move between Dominance and submission self-identify as “switches;” there is no corresponding category for movement between topping and bottoming. Finally, I mention that one of my participants is “collared” to her Dom. The relationship of being collared carries very serious weight in the community; I have heard it best explained to outsiders as analogous to marriage, as being collared signifies the level of commitment between individuals, and marks for the entire community the power dynamics between them. As is the case with the practitioner I mention, being collared does not necessitate a romantic or sexual relationship, but can often include a collaring ceremony that symbolized the connection between the collared person and their “owner.”

During many of the discussions of consent that follows, there are also specific terms that arise which are not commonly utilized outside of the BDSM community. “Total power exchange” (TPE) typically refers to Dom/sub (D/s) relationships that exist 24/7, rather than being restricted solely to sexual activities. Similarly, “blanket consent” is invoked to indicate an individual is providing their consent in a singular moment, which extends beyond that scene or interaction and can include activities to which they have not explicitly already agreed. “Consensual non-consent” (CNC) is related, and sometimes synonymous with, blanket consent, and refers to the agreement to engage in behaviors and actions that may not have been

made known prior to giving one's consent, with the agreement that one will not revoke their consent after engaging in those behaviors and actions. Blanket consent and consensual non-consent are sometimes colloquially referred to as "rape play." Topping from the bottom, a phenomenon in which a submissive or bottom attempts to manage a scene over their Dom or top, also falls under this category of consent. While topping from the bottom can sometimes be invoked playfully, as a practice it is generally frowned upon by individuals in the community.⁴

When a person chooses to revoke their consent in a BDSM situation there are certain specific verbal cues that are invoked. As you will see below, not everyone in the community agrees with or abides by these, but they are common knowledge and are often specifically mentioned in dungeons and other public play spaces. Even individuals who may not otherwise use these cues are usually required to do so in public spaces for the safety of all involved. The first of these is what is referred to as the stoplight system. This is a method of checking in with one's partner(s) to ensure that all is well during a scene. "Green" indicates that all is fine and play should continue, "yellow" indicates that a person is reaching their limits with the activity and thus play should proceed cautiously, and "red" indicates that play should cease immediately as one or more person is no longer fine with the way the scene is proceeding. Finally, very commonly heard and even invoked in non-BDSM playspaces is the concept of safewords. These are words that a couple or group of people playing together agree upon to check in with one another and make use of if something during play becomes too intense or otherwise needs to stop. While the stoplight system can be the basis for these safewords, when

⁴ Most notably, topping from the bottom can be scene DD/Igb (Daddy Dom/little girl or boy) and brat play; these are forms of ageplay where practitioners take on a much younger persona and may act like children or teenagers, where brattiness is perhaps expected.

it is not utilized, practitioners are encouraged to come up with words or phrases that would not otherwise be used in that scene – names of foods or locations, for instance – which also allow those in the scene to resist using words like “no” or “stop” even when they wish for play to continue.

Though I do not discuss them in depth, two other concepts are vital to understand the happenings in a scene: headspace and aftercare. Headspace refers to a psychological state of being that is outside of that which participants normally occupy. It is not drug-induced⁵, but instead is brought on by a combination of the power dynamics and individuals’ brain chemistry. Comparable in some ways to being under the influence of drugs or alcohol, falling into one’s specific headspace is often an enjoyable experience, if not a goal of interactions. Related to headspace is the need for aftercare. BDSM is intense – physically, mentally, and emotionally – and thus once a scene ends, people may crash from their headspace, the emotional rollercoaster they endured, or from the rush of brain chemicals. Part of playing respectfully and responsibly is realizing that people need care after a scene has ended, as well as within it – providing food and water, cuddling, tending to wounds and cleaning a partner’s body, in addition to debriefing from the scene, are all essential aspects of aftercare. In several instances, practitioners told me that failing to provide aftercare could be considered a consent violation.⁶

While I have done my best to adequately define these terms, in so doing I certainly cannot capture the full nuance of them. In sharing these definitions with individuals whom I interviewed, I was fortunate enough to engage in vibrant conversations about these nuances,

⁵ Drug use is specifically prohibited in dungeons for the safety of all.

⁶ While I do not have the data to discuss this more in-depth, I plan to pursue a project looking at the carework of BDSM, including the necessity of aftercare.

and in some cases my participants and I simply could not agree on the depth of full definitions. I make this point not to undermine my own work, but to point to the intricacies of all of this, and to mark that the operation of consent in the BDSM community is equally if not more complex than these simple definitions are. Even with agreed-upon terms and prescriptions for behavior, consent is variable and its institution is never identical across interactions.

Literature Review

Having completed several research projects on sexual violence prior to this project, I expected that there must be a significant literature on consent, just as there is with other aspects of sexual and interpersonal violence. I was surprised to find that this was not the case, and that there has been little academic attention paid to consent as a concept. Focusing on only sexual consent, this literature grows even more narrow. However, Melanie A. Beres' (2007) meta-analysis of sexual violence literature, which although published just over a decade ago, is still incredibly relevant. Beres (2007) analyzes the prevalent discourses on sexual consent within academic literature, summarizing them as follows:

Some scholars attempt to disentangle consent as either a physical action (Archard, 1998; Ostler, 2003) or a mental action (Hurd, 1996), with many suggesting that consent is a combination of both (Dripps, 1996; Hickman and Muehlenhard, 1999; Malm, 1996), or a physical manifestation of a mental willingness (Alexander, 1996). Yet others view consent as an agent of moral transformation (Archard, 1998; Wertheimer, 2003), an act that turns an illegal and morally objectionable activity into a potentially pleasurable and morally permissible activity. Pineau (1989, 1996) argued that current understandings of consent are not working and thus we should adopt a communicative model of sexuality so that consent becomes explicit and more easily identifiable. Finally, a few researchers have begun to examine the ways that people consent to sex by investigating the types of behaviours considered indicative of consent (Beres 2007:105).

Her synthesis of these various understandings of sexual consent points to several gaps in the literature, most notably an understanding of what consent is. Furthermore, the power dynamics that affect the ability to give and revoke consent are under-theorized. These are crucial for understanding the ways consent is misunderstood and violated. Moreover, much of this literature assumes consent is binaristic in nature; consent is given or once and only once, with no room for fluidity in interactions. A significant cultural example of this is the move towards affirmative consent, or “yes means yes,” that is so often invoked in conversations about sexual violence and which has been inculcated in state laws about sexual assault in high school sex education curriculum and on college campuses (Chappell 2014). While affirmative consent is meant to support survivors by underscoring that not saying “no” is not grounds for a consensual interaction, affirmative consent stresses an emphasis on verbal consent without interrogating the potential for consent to take other forms. This study challenges the binaristic approach to consent by theorizing consent as interactional and ongoing, rather than episodic, while also illuminating the role that non-verbal communication and interaction plays in the giving and revocation of consent.

While non-pathologizing research on BDSM is becoming more mainstream (Tyburczy 2014; Lindemann 2012; Musser 2014), there is still comparably little work on BDSM and consent. Moreover, there are still gaps in understanding how consent is constructed in the first place, as well as the repercussions of these constructions in instances of consent violations and sexual violence.

Anthropologist Margot Weiss (2011) examines pansexual BDSM communities in the San Francisco Bay Area in her ethnography *Techniques of Pleasure*. In her discussion of consent, she argues that “the community pressure to be safe, sane, and consensual does not ask

practitioners to blindly follow the rules, but rather to negotiate their own relationship to these rules” (Weiss 2011:83). As one of my participants remarked, “Even vanilla people know what a safeword is.” The use of safewords appeared in the 1970s; it was not documented as really being a part of the scene up until then (Weiss 2011:83). Practitioners who push back against safewords and longer negotiations for scenes, while highlighting the importance of safety, tend to belong to communities situated in Old Guard practices. Here, Weiss highlights a contention in the community regarding the necessity of verbal confirmation for a scene to move forward, a critical point that the practitioners I spoke with also articulated.

Kink-friendly psychotherapist Dulcinea Pitagora (2013) highlights a key difference between the operation of consent in non-BDSM contexts with that in BDSM contexts – in the former consent is often assumed, while in the latter, consent is typically discussed and established *before* play so that there are established procedures for revoking one’s consent once in a scene. She concludes by arguing that the “definition of sexual consent remains a contentious and controversial topic. Some accept a broad definition of consent that allows for nonverbal, or implied, agreement, while others insist that sexual consent should always be explicitly stated” (Pitagora 2013). This is a quintessential rift in the way that practitioners understand and initiate consent, demonstrated in my work, and it has very gendered consequences, especially in cases of consent violations. And, as Beres and MacDonald (2015) elucidate in their work on heterosexual women and BDSM, while consent practices in the community may be better in terms of its explicit integration into activity, consent practices may still serve to reify heteropatriarchal norms. While BDSM practitioners typically have a more thorough understanding of consent violations than do non-practitioners, the presence of

rape culture (Hermann 1988)⁷ within the community negates some of this knowledge because of internalized social biases people bring with them into play spaces. Practitioners are most likely largely unaware of these social biases, but they are gendered in nature, and allow for the reification and replication of larger societal power structures within BDSM communities, especially regarding consent violations.

Comparing consent narratives in *Fifty Shades* to those in the online blogosphere from the not-too-distant past, Barker (2013) argues that consent amongst practitioners is much more dependent on the community than it is upon the individual when it comes to enforcement. She discusses the ways in which abuse within the community, as discussed in the blog posts she references, is often not reported to authorities, and how this can prevent survivors from being believed. This is not isolated to the community, but as Barker also points out, the common conflation of abuse and BDSM amongst non-practitioners means that some individuals are hesitant and even defensive about acknowledging when actual abuse occurs, lest that reflect badly on the community (2013).

Finally, in her contribution to the compilation *Thinking Kink* (2015), journalist Catherine Scott discusses some of the real-world consequences of victim-blaming in the BDSM community, reflecting on her being “unsettled by the willingness of people in the BDSM community to blame traumatized people for not being the ones to put a stop to their unpleasant kink experiences” (Scott 2015:87). More importantly, Scott more succinctly than

⁷ Rape culture is a term used by feminist scholars and activists to describe the cultural treatment of sexual violence as non-issue, where sexual violence is normalized at best and ignored or ridiculed at worst (Herman 1988).

any other contributor to the literature on BDSM and consent elaborates on the fact that power dynamics are always at play in how people offer and revoke their consent.

Consent isn't something that just happens once and is then irrevocable, all-encompassing, and non-negotiable - because then pretty soon it no longer is consent but simply a matter of one person pushing to see what they can get away with, a model of sexual behavior still too often accepted as the default interaction between men and women (2015:92, emphasis mine).

This articulation of consent in the BDSM community is a vital aspect of this study. The stories my participants shared with me build on Scott's point, and offer insight into the ways in which consent still upholds forms of gendered violence even when it is viewed as fluid and changeable, as it is amongst practitioners.

Methodology

I conducted 27 interviews for this study from November 2016 to April 2017, including one group interview with three participants. Drawing on my own relationships with BDSM practitioners as a member of the community, I first interviewed individuals within my own social networks. Next, I drew on two primary respondents who referred most of my other respondents to me. I also posted a flyer advertising my study on Facebook⁸, which was shared with interested parties outside my own social network. The flyer contained my contact information, which allowed interested parties to reach out to me if they wished to participate, a strategy I employed to protect the privacy of individuals who might not wish to be outed to

⁸ While FetLife and Tumblr would have been excellent to utilize for spreading my flyer, given the presence of practitioners on both sites, at the time of my data collection, each had specific stipulations on how researchers could collect data. These stipulations would have resulted in significantly more time to collect data, if I even gained approval from the websites. Given the recent Cambridge Analytica scandal with Facebook, I will have significantly more to contend with if I use digital spaces as sites of recruitment and/or data collection in the future.

me by a friend. Though I intended to include ethnographic observations in this analysis, and was both approved by the human subjects board and actually did complete ethnographic work, I could not at the time devise an ethical way to observe consent in practice and thus focus primarily on interview data.

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 67, though most were in their late 20s to early 30s. Nearly all of my participants are white, and almost all had some college education or more. Although participants occupy a myriad of identities, I have defined in the BDSM 101 only those most salient to this study. Although I focus primarily on gender over sexual orientation, I would like to highlight that most of my participants identify as queer, and many are in non-monogamous romantic and sexual relationships. While it is possible that “non-normative” expressions of gender, sexuality, and/or relationship formation inform people’s understandings of consent, I have not found that to be the case with my participants, as people of all genders and sexual orientations shared with me similar understandings of consent practices. The few participants whose understandings differed from the majority are explored below.

Participants belong to communities across the country, including those in Utah, Indiana, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Washington D.C., Washington State, San Francisco County, Santa Barbara County, Orange County, Los Angeles County, and Western Canada (which I have lumped in with the West Coast). I spoke with individuals representing at least fifteen distinct communities. Two of the 29 respondents practice strictly privately, and one practices only via digital encounters, and thus are not associated with any specific BDSM community, though I have included their geographic location in the table. For this study, I define community as geographic locale; for smaller

communities, this can encompass several cities to an entire state; for larger areas, such as in California, this tends to focus on a single county, though individuals may traverse counties for events. Most of the community members I worked with had ties to a single dungeon or play space in their geographic region. While academics reading this might not be able to parse out the identities of individuals by having their location revealed, the BDSM community is not as large as one might think; one of my participants, Dave⁹, shared with me a story of meeting a fellow kinkster at a play party on the West Coast who had played with his ex-partner, located in the South. This is but one example of the small networks that comprise the BDSM community at large, but it helped me decide to share only participants' broader geographic region (West Coast, East Coast, Midwest, the South) in Table 1 to maintain anonymity. For similar reasons, I recoded many participants' self-identifications of sexuality to queer.¹⁰

My interview protocol was semi-structured, and approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of California, Santa Barbara.¹¹ I conducted eight in-person interviews and another nineteen via Skype or Google Hangouts. The latter was vital for my interviewing process as most of my participants were in states other than California. Participants located in California were generally not local, and physically traveling to them was a difficulty for them and myself. Moreover, by conducting many interviews at a distance, I could include the perspectives of individuals who otherwise felt uncomfortable participating. Several

⁹ Many practitioners utilize "scene names," adopted names used while in the community (and often on FetLife) that capture their personality and identity within the scene. There were several interviewees who were comfortable using their scene names in this project, but given their connection to other individuals who wished to remain more anonymous, I ultimately chose to use no scene names and instead assign all individuals a pseudonym (though I did let people pick theirs if they so desired!).

¹⁰ There are certainly theoretical objections to be made to this decision, but this was once again a matter of protecting my participants from being potentially outed. Identifying as a pansexual demisexual panromantic bottom, for instance, reveals much more than queer bottom, especially for folks located in smaller communities.

¹¹ See Appendix A for Interview Protocol.

interviewees chose not to turn their camera on, and by using pseudonyms with me, were able to achieve anonymity. In the case of one younger man from a very religious household in the Midwest, not sharing his name or turning on his camera provided an extra layer of protection from potentially being outed to his family. Including the voices of individuals who are marginalized is an integral aspect of doing feminist research (Ahmed 2017; Bhavnani and Talcott 2012), and using these digital methods to conduct interviews allowed me to include the stories of several individuals who I would not have been able to otherwise.

Given that some interviews were in person and others conducted via Skype or Google Hangouts, participants provided either written or verbal consent prior to being interviewed, and everyone was given a copy of the consent form to keep. I also provided a sexual violence resource sheet to everyone prior to the interview, as I suspected that in discussing consent, I would hear stories about sexual violence, which can be triggering even for non-survivors. Given the topic of this study, I stressed both during the initial consent process and throughout the interview that participants had the right to revoke their consent to be interviewed further at any moment.

The shortest interview lasted just over twenty-five minutes and the longest took more than three hours, but most were about forty to forty-five minutes in length. Broadly, the interviews had four areas of focus: learning about the participant's involvement in the BDSM community; exploring how and when the participant learned about consent, including their current definitions of it; elaborating on the process of giving and rescinding consent; and, finally, discussing community treatment of consent violations, including any with which the interviewee had intimate knowledge. As I progressed with the interviewing process, I adjusted my protocol by incorporating questions that continued to arise organically in prior interviews,

while eliminating two questions that I deemed repetitive. These additional questions centered on discussions of the process of reporting sexually violent instances to authorities as well as the various forms that self-policing practices took in various communities.

In-person interviews took place in a location of the interviewee's choosing; several at restaurants, several in private spaces on the UCSB campus, and several in my own apartment. For the other interviews, I ensured that I was in a private, quiet space where we would be uninterrupted on my end. Most of these interviews took place in the evening, and people participated from the comfort of their own homes. In at least three or four instances, participants requested that other individuals be present during our interview. Some of these were more casual happenings, such as a partner being in the same room while they Skyped with me, but several others asked my permission to specifically have a partner sit with them for the interview. In some cases, I had previously interviewed these partners, but mostly these individuals did not overtly participate in my research other than occasionally chiming in during our discussions. While I was initially taken aback by these requests, and reflected upon the ethics of it in my post-interview memos, I realized that my flexibility with the attendance of partners or friends during interviews enhanced the comfort of the individuals with whom I spoke, especially given the subject content. These accompanying individuals, whether they participated or remained silent for the entirety of the interview, were also read the informed consent form and were given assurance they would be anonymized if something they shared was used in my writing. In at least one instance, the presence of a partner prompted deeper background discussion of the community in which the interviewee was situated. In short, the presence of these "extra" people enhanced the interviews, enriching the data I collected.

I also interviewed participants who specifically asked me not to share their stories of sexual violence with their partners with whom I was acquainted, and in at least one case, whom I also interviewed. In both cases, these were partners of my two primary participants, who had yet to divulge their experiences with sexual violence to said partner. I reiterated that the content of these interviews would be kept as anonymous as possible, but it is worth noting the role of secret-keeping when doing work of this nature. While the stories these individuals shared would perhaps have supported some of the analytical points I make later, I ultimately opted not to include them in the interest of keeping these secrets safe from practitioners who will read this and could potentially identify those individuals based on some of the surrounding circumstances (Suki 2010).

At the end of each interview, I answered questions that respondents had about my project, and offered to share my written work with them. As a member of the community myself, and as a feminist researcher, I felt it was important to offer something in return to those who shared their experiences with me. While several participants voiced their appreciation about being able to openly discuss their sexually violent experiences – in at least one instance for the first time ever – I wanted to ensure, to the best of my ability, that I was not inadvertently exploiting the communities with which I was working. Most participants were informed of my own participation in the community prior to our interview, but there were a few who did not realize that until we were already in discussion. Though no interviewees expressed hostility or guardedness, as soon as I admitted my own involvement in the community, I noticed an immediate shift in their candor with me. After the initial interview when this occurred, I made a point of noting my own involvement at the on-set of our discussions, which undoubtedly established better rapport between myself and those I interviewed (Irwin 2006; Davis 2013).

I used a grounded theory approach for analyzing the interviews, choosing to focus on the common themes that emerged from the set of interviews rather than choosing what to focus on beforehand, hence the semi-structured interview protocol (Charmaz 2006). I transcribed and coded all 27 interviews. From this, several themes emerged that I focus on: (1) the construction of consent; (2) different types of consent violations that occur within the community; and (3) policing practices within different communities. After initially coding my interviews, I did a secondary round of coding for each subset of analysis. Specifically, I was looking for differences in construction of consent; indicators of rape culture to consent violations; and types of policing interactions. I found that while there are baseline expectations regarding consent and its acquisition, practitioners use a number of different strategies that are not always in agreement with one another. Individuals of all genders spoke about rape culture, though usually in more veiled ways than I expected; what was especially interesting was how gay submissive men invoked rape culture, both directly and indirectly. Finally, I found that the policing practices that have been devised within communities can be categorized as communal or individual, and within each category, strategies are highly gendered.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

| <i>Name</i> | <i>Age</i> | <i>Gender</i> | <i>Sexual Orientation</i> | <i>Race</i> | <i>Relationship Status</i> | <i>Identity in the community</i> | <i>Geographic location</i> |
|-----------------|------------|---------------|---------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Charlie | 28 | Male | Queer | White | Polyamorous | Dom / switch | West Coast |
| Ben | 46 | Male | Heterosexual | White | Single | Daddy dom / top | West Coast |
| Deshaun | 23 | Male | Heterosexual | Black | Polyamorous | Dominant | West Coast |
| Raj | 19 | Male | Questioning | Indian | Single | submissive | Midwest |
| Dave | 26 | Male | Gay | White | Polyamorous | Switch / puppy | West Coast / Midwest |
| Camila | 28 | Female | Heterosexual | Latino / White | Dating monogamously | Bottom / Switch | West Coast |
| Yasmin | 31 | Female | Queer | Middle Eastern / White | Married, polyamorous | Bottom / pro-Domme | West Coast |
| Santiago | 30 | Male | Queer | White / Latino | Dating monogamously | Dom / master / switch | West Coast |
| Olivia | 25 | Female | Queer | White | Polyamorous | Submissive / slave | Midwest |
| Becca | 27 | Female | Queer | White | Polyamorous | Switch | West Coast |
| Megan | 29 | Female | Heterosexual | White | Monogamous relationship | Sub / slave / occasional top | West Coast |
| Jacob | 27 | Male | Queer | White | Polyamorous | Switch | West Coast |
| Andi | 26 | Genderqueer | Queer | White | Polyamorous | Babygirl | West Coast / Midwest |
| Melissa | 34 | Female | Queer | White | Married | Bottom / sub | West Coast |
| Holly | 47 | Female | Queer | White | Single | Switch | East Coast |
| Stacy | 38 | Female | Queer | White | Separated from husband | Submissive | East Coast |
| Amy | 34 | Female | Heterosexual | White | Polyamorous | Sub / little | South |
| Abigail | 35 | Female | Queer | White | Polyamorous | Sub / switch | South |
| Jessica | 30 | Female | Queer | White | Married, open relationship | Sub / bottom | East Coast |
| Frank | 53 | Male | Queer | White | Married, polyamorous | Switch / sub / slave | East Coast |
| Samantha | 50 | Female | Heterosexual | White | Single, collared | Leatherwoman / boy / pup | West Coast |
| Michael | 19 | Male | Gay | White | Open relationship | Pup | West Coast |
| Lee | 18 | Male | Gay | Asian / White | Open relationship | Daddy / handler / master | West Coast |
| Jack | 23 | Male | Gay | White | Married | Switch | South |
| Bradley | 27 | Male | Gay | White | Polyamorous | Pup / leather boy | South |
| Nia | 25 | Female | Queer | Black | Single | Domme / switch | West Coast |
| Gabriela | 26 | Female | Queer | Latino | Single | Submissive | West Coast |
| Mateo | 27 | Male | Queer | Latino / White | Single | Switch | West Coast |
| Samuel | 67 | Male | Gay | White | Married | Sub | Midwest |

The Construction of Consent

The importance of consent in many kinds of spaces and relationships cannot be ignored, and its necessity within the BDSM community is hard to exaggerate. This was not a new concept for me as I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, but even during casual conversations with practitioners where I had no agenda of learning about consent, it found its way into our conversations. The vitality of consent to BDSM is perhaps best elucidated by its inclusion in several common slogans of the community: “Safe, Sane, Consensual” and “Risk Aware Consensual Kink.” Simply put, there is no BDSM without consent.

One of the things that most intrigued me in the beginning of this project, and given my background working on issues of sexual violence, is that while consent is invoked consistently and constantly, no one has ever been able to provide an answer as to what consent is. It is not that people cannot define consent, but rather that their definitions are never in full agreement with the definitions of others. In a community where consent is the bedrock of all activity, this merited further interrogation. In thus attempting to arrive at a universal definition of consent, I asked all of my participants to define it for me, as they understood and practiced it. What I found is that there can never be a universal definition of consent because it is never simply a situation of “yes means yes” or “no means no,” as much as this oversimplification is lauded and institutionalized in our legal and governmental systems (Chappell 2014). Instead, my participants helped me to understand consent as a fluid, recurring, constantly-being-constructed state of interaction and negotiation between individuals. Integral to this understanding of consent is the notion that BDSM interactions occur between people who, very importantly, care about one another (Hammers 2013; Lindemann 2012) as perhaps best described in my interview with Michael.

Cierra: My first question for you is, what does BDSM mean to you?

Michael: Um, to me it means being able to be open about what you prefer to do in the bedroom. It's not necessarily all about power and domination. It's more about loving and caring for each other within the community.

Practitioners subject themselves to a significant amount of emotional, physical, spiritual, and even intellectual stress when engaging in BDSM activities (Hammers 2013; Landridge and Barker 2007). This is done with a significant amount of care, both about oneself as practitioner, but also regarding those individuals who are open to sharing themselves in these interactions. Consent practices, then, figure into these interactions significantly as a way of not only protecting oneself from harm, but also to demonstrate the emotional labor practitioners invest in their relationships with others.

Cierra: Is there a difference between the way consent operates in the BDSM world as opposed to outside of it?

Jack: Yes, I would say so... Giving your consent for something is generally fairly two dimensional. You have an action that you either give permission for or don't give permission to perform or complete it. And it's a two-sided point. In the BDSM community for the large part, consent becomes something with a lot of depth to it because there's a lot of different types of activities and a lot of borders beyond which some people will go which others will not. And for other people those can be completely – *you never know what is going to be too much for somebody*. So it needs to be well defined and not just given as a blanket statement. [emphasis mine]

Jack, a switch, implies here that you do not want to push a play partner beyond their limits, and that is why consent needs to be negotiated regarding the specific activities people plan to engage in within a scene. Neither Jack nor any of my other participants who shared similar thoughts presented this desire to respect others' limits as a method of protecting oneself, but rather phrased these concerns around the well-being of their respective play partners. Samantha, a collared leatherwoman with more than twenty years of experience within the community, explains how consent is contingent upon this shared relationship of caring.

Cierra: You mentioned consent. That’s actually the next question. Can you tell me how you define consent?

Samantha: Honestly, an analogy that I like to use is here’s your playground, your fence and anything within the playground is what is acceptable or workable so that we can explore and enjoy. Maybe some of it is hard because I’m a masochist or [they’re a] sadist, but nobody’s going to come out [harmed]. So you set up the parameters of what we are consenting to and it can get into the boundaries of consensual non-consent where I say “I’m OK, [this is] your boundary”...my Sir and I, we don’t have safe words, we don’t use those words, but it doesn’t mean that he’s about to chop off my head. He’s earned my trust and knows that he can take me to certain levels and then he may push them, but I know in the back of my mind and my spirit, he’s not going to take it further than what I can handle.

While choosing not to use safewords is a contentious topic¹² in the community, and can be a signal of abusive behavior, in this case it instead signals intense trust built between two practitioners over time. Samantha and her partner have played together for years, and she explained that they have built a relationship where her Dom can read her body in such a way that he knows what will be too much without her verbal articulation. This kind of relationship can only occur by paying immense attention to one’s play partners and by having a number of conversations before and after sceneing, as Samantha explained occurred in her relationship. Not all relationships reach a point where safewords cease to exist, but the level of concern certainly remains as high as between Samantha and her partner. Camila, a switch then in a long-term romantic relationship with Santiago, described a similar dynamic:

Camila: I’ve been with Santiago for a while. Even when we do scene, he always, he even still checks in on me even though he has taken this whole time to know about my body movement, to know about, you know, he’s able to read

¹² One way of categorizing individuals in the community is Old Guard versus New Guard. Members in the first category are often described as “old school,” and their understanding of BDSM is more reserved than individuals who are New Guard. These are often differentiated by invoking generational differences, though not always the case. Consent as most of my participants spoke about it falls much more heavily under the guise of New Guard practices; those practitioners in this study who do not use safewords were almost all trained in Old Guard. In my experience, New Guard/Old Guard differentiations focus more heavily in the leather community, a subset of BDSM, so it is unsurprising that Samantha, an older leatherwoman, would invoke this understanding of safewords.

my body well to say, “OK, she can only take so much on this side of her body, let me switch it off to the other side.” Over time he can see that. But even so, when we’re playing in public at a dungeon, he still checks in because, especially if he’s flogging me, he can’t necessarily see me or see my face to be like, “Oh, this hurts.” Or the dungeon is loud enough to be like where he can’t hear me go, “Yellow!” And that’s another great thing about consent is that you negotiate, “Hey, if in the event you can’t hear me, if I lift my hand up or if I drop something, it means stop.” And I think that is really, really important and consent is always going to have to be that way throughout the entire scene, not just negotiating the beginning.

Camila and Santiago’s romantic relationship ended recently but they have continued their relationship as play partners, in large part because, as Camila explained to me, Santiago continues to be attentive to and demonstrate care for her as evidenced by his checking-in with her despite being able to read her body. Camila highlights the importance of this continual consent negotiation; the inability to visually absorb everything simultaneously and the loudness that accompanies playing in a public space are but two examples of potential disruptions to understanding one’s partner’s consent-giving processes.

While consent practices rely on the performance of carework, they also simultaneously depend upon and serve to reinforce power relationships between individuals. Power is always at play in sexual interactions (Rubin 1993), and this is amplified in BDSM scenes. In delineating the construction of the consent within the community, I found that while common understandings do exist, important details such as who is a consenting actor in a scene vary from person to person, with an often-unspoken emphasis on the power dynamics at play. Nearly all of my participants argued that all parties involved need to give their consent, and have the ability to rescind it at will. This was unsurprising, as in my experience this is one of the broadly agreed-upon stipulations of BDSM play. However, what I did not expect was the fervor with which individuals of all identities emphasized the importance of the Dom / top

being able to give and rescind their consent. Yasmin, a bottom who also is a paid pro-Domme, explains how exclusion of Doms / tops can lead to abuse:

Cierra: Who gives consent in a BDSM interaction, whether it's sexual or otherwise?

Yasmin: Everyone has to, in my opinion.

Cierra: Why do you say that?

Yasmin: Because Dominants typically need protection too, everybody needs protection and the right to consent to what is going on. I've seen a lot of Dominants get abused. And it seems ludicrous when you say that, but it does happen.

Cierra: What does that look like?

Yasmin: Just emotional abuse, you know, 'you're not doing it right.' You know, 'a real dominant would do this, this and this.' I've seen this happen.

Becca, a switch, further elaborates, articulating that the argument that only the submissive / bottom – the person having things done to them or giving up their control – can give or rescind consent is a common misconception within the community. She illustrates the importance of a Dom / top giving their consent by offering an example from her own experience as a sub in a pet-play scene:

Becca: I had a pretty funny experience thinking back on it now where, um, I didn't do the world's greatest job explaining what I meant when I said to my event partner, "Hey, let's do some pet play. I would like to be a dog." And he thought he would get an intimate dog girl. Like how cute. Like 'can I sit on your lap?' Like a very cutesie and like kind of mildly animal [girl] during some amount of 'I like eating snacks out of a bowl on the floor and getting patted on the head' sort of thing. But that was not what he got, which was, 'I'm going to be a dog now' somewhere in the middle of the belly rubbing. He was like, 'I cannot do this anymore. It just poked my bestiality button. I need to say for now I'm out.' 'Shit, I'm sorry!' So that was the communication with some fails, and then he was not comfortable as the Dom.

As this humorous example illustrates, Doms and tops, just like subs and bottoms, have limits on what kinds of behaviors they are willing to engage in; in this case, Becca and her partner

stopped the scene, checked in with one another, and engaged in aftercare to ensure they were both alright and to come down from the scene. As Frank and I discussed, there can be more at stake within interactions than mere discomfort on the part of the Dom, as consensually contentious scenes, such as the CNC scene he describes, can be triggering to abuse survivors.

Frank: It's not just me on the bottom [because it] is absolutely possible for me to be demanding something from the top that is not something they wished to do. So both parties have to be able to establish consent. For instance, if I wanted some kind of intense rape play where I was being, at least appearing to be, forcibly sodomized and that person, for them that brings up memories of something that happened to them, it is just completely unfair and unreasonable for me to have an expectation [for them to do that]. So both parties have to be able to do that as one of the mistakes I've seen is forgetting tops and their right to say no as well.

Cierra: OK. Um, how, I mean it's a little obvious how that's a mistake, but I'm like, how, how do we forget that if we do know that it's the same [for both participants]?

Frank: We build a mythology around tops being always in control, especially, especially sort of more Dominants than tops and because of that and because the mythology because it makes it easy for me to submit if I think that you are in some fashion superior to me for certain male submissives.

While most of the people I spoke with agreed that everyone in an interaction should both provide their consent and be able to rescind it, several participants expressed understandings to the contrary. Although Frank is one of the majority, he highlights in the above excerpt an important and common trope in the community, namely the idea that subs hold more power in D/s relationships even though they are on the receiving end in interactions. This is more salient with Dom/sub relationships but is also seen in top/bottom relationships, where the bottom is analogous to the sub. With this myth of Doms "being always in control," as Frank articulated, there exists a built-in assumption that Doms then do not need to provide their consent as they already hold all the power. Control is equated with power such that consenting to do something

is viewed as a sacrifice of one's own power. The people that held these views among my participants were exclusively gay submissive men. Raj explored this with me:

Cierra: This next section is talking about the process of giving and taking away consent. So who gives consent in a BDSM interaction?

Raj: The submissive.

Cierra: Why do you think that?

Raj: Because he / she is agreeing to, um, to give up control, to give up themselves sexually, so they have to give. I'm giving you, I'm allowing you to do this to me.

Cierra: Do you think the dominant or the top ever gives their consent?

Raj: It would depend on the situation. I just, if they don't like something that is happening, then I suppose yeah, they would have to there. So he/she would have to give consent then, but they're not necessarily always having to give their consent.

Samuel, another submissive gay man, articulated this phenomenon nearly verbatim, though it is not part of the 101s or any other formalized learning within communities. While I know from informal conversations outside of these interviews that this articulation of consent is not limited to gay submissive men alone, it tends to come from them more often than any other group of submissive-identified practitioners – Dominant identified individuals almost never express this sentiment – which is unsurprising given that understandings of and enactment of consent is highly gendered (Humphreys 2007; Powell 2008; Burkett and Hamilton 2012; Jozkowski, Peterson, Sander, Dennis, and Reece 2013).

This understanding that only the sub can revoke their consent or stop a scene is a way for subs to attempt a reclamation of control that is theoretically necessarily given up for the D/s power dynamic to work (Landridge and Barker 2007; Rodríguez 2014), and is a way to contest power dynamics without topping from the bottom. As men are taught that they are supposed to pursue sex (Ford 2018) and that they should remain in control during sexual

interactions (Jozkowski et al. 2014), this allows men who are otherwise used to occupying positions of power the opportunity to reclaim control while occupying the subordinate position of sub. Men are giving up power by consenting to negative things, and giving up one's power as a man is socially punishable as men must be strong; in willingly submitting, a submissive gay man is marking himself to be in some way inherently weak. Therefore, for men, the act of submission has a negative gendered connotation associated with it. Nevertheless, submission can be enjoyable. The way that submissive gay men navigate this binary of Dominance/strength and submission/weakness is by claiming that they are the only ones that have power in D/s interactions as they are consenting to things which are simultaneously unpleasant yet enjoyable.

This paradox of desire highlights an important difference in the conceptualization of consent with these respondents in contrast to the rest, and it relies heavily on rape culture. Raj argued that Doms only need to give consent when they are doing something they “do not like,” insinuating that consent is only necessary in the presence of negative or unpleasant interactions. The underlying assumption here, is that requiring consent only for negative things implies that positive things presuppose consent. Men are socialized to perceive that any opportunity for sex is good and therefore if you can have sex, you should. This denies men agency; as other participants discussed, sexual activity that can be good for one person – such as rapeplay, as Frank mentions – can be bad for others in that interaction, signaling the need for full consent from all parties.

Having established with my respondents who can give and rescind consent within an interaction, I was curious as to what that entailed – how do participants know whether consent has been given or not, and how do they know if someone is rescinding it, be that person

themselves or a partner? In exploring these questions in our conversations, several patterns emerged in the research. For almost all the practitioners who spoke with me, confirmation of consent and revocation of it necessarily includes verbal confirmation:

Cierra: How do you know when consent has been given?

Becca: Because they tell you in words, explicit words. So it has to be a verbal thing. It has to be a verbal thing at some point, either in negotiations beforehand, or by talking during the scene. There is no getting out of talking about it at some point in time after you've built a relationship. You can have, you can have some kinds of implied consent involved, but only if you have given that previously.

While not everyone agreed with Becca's assertion about when verbal consent needs to be given, the importance of verbal agreement was reiterated by nearly everyone, with the emphasis from most individuals being that a conversation needs to be had *before* any play begins.

In addition to verbal consent, Yasmin and many practitioners emphasized the role that the body plays in communicating consent, which is unsurprising given the physical intensity that accompanies many kinds of BDSM interactions.

Cierra: Ok. How do you know if somebody has given their consent?

Yasmin: With me or with somebody else?

Cierra: Um, both.

Yasmin: I'm always looking for specifics. I'm looking for that enthusiastic yes. Um, I always stress to my partners the use of safe words. Um, let's say something comes up for them in the middle of a scene and they need to stop it. And it was something that they did not anticipate having happened. Like something emotional comes up. I'm, I'm relying on them to use those safe words and vice versa. I'm with other people seeing when I'm watching them, seeing. I'm always looking at body language, you know, the nonverbal cues because people can say a lot of stuff. The body never lies...If somebody looks like they're uncomfortable, um, you can see it in their face. You can see it in the way that their body tenses.

Those of us who have engaged in sexual activity of any kind know that although we culturally place an emphasis on verbal consent (Beres 2007; Weiss 2011) that is almost never fully adequate for understanding how our partners are doing. This was reiterated in many interviews as participants discussed the importance of paying attention to partner's non-verbal cues as well as what they verbally shared.

Cierra: So kind of flip side of this, within an interaction, who can rescind or revoke their consent?

Jack: Either party, anytime.

Cierra: And how would you know if that had happened?

Jack: Generally by use of a safe word? However, I would, I would generally respond to what you would consider normal signs of distress. Um, as opposed to. I mean, when people get that agitated, sometimes they forget what is the safe, the safe action, "what was the thing that I'm supposed to do to get out of the situation?" and revert to normal signs of distress and that would be a trigger to stop for me.

Cierra: So what might some of those signs of distress be?

Jack: Yeah, um, a verbal exclamation that is unusual or out of place. Any type of struggle beyond what I would consider to be a, you know, within scene type of struggle. Crying or any of those. Or I'm going to [go] nonverbal.

Though other participants alluded to it, Jack most specifically names an occurrence within BDSM scenes that may not be applicable to consent in broader sexual contexts. Sometimes, as players fall into a certain headspace, they are rendered nonverbal, and are thus unable to continue giving consent to activities verbally. I want to stress that this is not considered a bad thing, and that falling into these various headspaces is often part of the dynamic at play within an interaction. However, it does necessitate the need to be able to read your partner's body and physical reactions. While never touted as the *only* way to give consent, this nevertheless plays a critical role in the way that BDSM practitioners communicate with one another during a scene. Bradley, a gay submissive man, not only invokes the responsibility of the sub to ensure

the Dom knows when to stop play, but also indicates that sometimes, even a preventative measure like a safeword fails to encapsulate the complexity of why a scene needs to stop.

Cierra: Who takes away their consent or revokes it from an interaction and how do you know if this has happened?

Bradley: So back to the, um, the, you know, we have our safe words, the general ones, you know, green, yellow, red, these mean the scenes stops. Ultimately, I feel it falls on the sub to revoke that. Otherwise the Dom might not, wouldn't, shouldn't assume, what you're not communicating to say that this is, this is still ok. So it's really up to [the sub] to let their partner know, like, "Ok, I'm done. You're not doing this. No. More."

Cierra: So is it like you consent beforehand and then you check in with each other throughout a scene?

Bradley: I'm into rope-playing. We actually don't use safe words, as safe words in this instance are useless because it doesn't say, it doesn't tell [your partner] where the problem is, you know? Rope play is very communicative. Words like, "this finger is going numb," that's indicative of nerve damage. And so "I need to come out of it, I need to be transitioned out of this." Yes. During the scene. It's very much you're going to have to check in with your, with your other, no matter what the activity might be.

However, this is not necessary for everyone, as evidenced by some participants' choice not to use safe words with their partners. Verbal consent alone, especially when marked by safewords, is not always sufficient to understand what is going on in a scene, and, as most of them attested to, many practitioners rely on a combination of verbal and nonverbal cues to check in with their partner during a scene to ensure everyone is still consenting to what is happening.

Different Types of Consent Violations

Practitioners who spoke with me identified two broad categories of consent violations. The first of these, what Becca called the "Newbie Fuck-up," is much more common within the

community. Generally, newbie fuck-ups are consent violations resulting from an individual's inexperience within the kink community. In contrast with newbie fuck-ups are purposeful predations. The key distinction between these two categories of consent violations is the assumed intent of the individual.

I will continue to use newbie fuck-up and purposeful predations to describe these two categories, and I want to explain why I do not use already-established terminology to describe the latter category. As you will see in reading about them, the various incarnations of purposeful predations are nearly synonymous with sexual assaults or rapes. However, participants almost never used that language to describe these scenarios. This is not uncommon when conducting research on sexual violence (Littleton, Tabernik, Canales, and Backstrom 2009). The topic of sexual violence is still so taboo that many people do not have the vocabulary necessary to discuss it adequately, and moreover, many survivors do not claim what has happened to them as sexual assault or rape. As a researcher, this is a frustrating reality to contend with, but it is important from a feminist perspective not to use already-established labels for these kinds of acts that participants themselves did not employ. In other words, while there may be utility in categorizing these purposeful predations as simply sexual assault or rape, this erases the nuanced experiences of the people who endured them, especially if these individuals do not describe themselves as victims of sexual violence. Just as we employ survivor instead of victim to describe individuals who have lived through sexually violent experience to show them respect, I similarly opt not to label intentional consent violations as sexual assault or rape.

I want to note that while there was no discernibly-gendered patterning in the identities of individuals who commit newbie fuck-ups, most of the individuals who commit either kind

of act occupy Dominant or top positions within the community, as illustrated in the excerpts throughout this section. I will continue to elaborate this, but note here that it has important consequences for thinking through the gendered work that is at play in preventing and responding to consent violations in the community.

Finally, I also want to elaborate a little on the process of entering the kinds of spaces that participants describe in these stories. Though they are often warm and welcoming to newcomers, practitioners take many precautions when admitting individuals new to the scene into the public community. Olivia, a queer switch from the Midwest, details the process of admitting someone into a dungeon or play party, as well as some of the potential consequences of violating the rules.

Olivia: In our personal community, we're actually extremely careful with who is even allowed in. Um, 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 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 walk 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, it's actually really serious... They will be either, depending on how bad the infraction was, will be warned and given a second chance or they will be completely banned from the property.

I preface my discussions of the two types of consent violations to highlight that even before there exists the possibility of a consent violation, the community has employed measures to guarantee the safety of its members. While I cannot speak for all those represented in this study, the process Olivia describes above appears to be a standard across communities.

In stories my respondents shared with me about cases of newbie fuck-ups, the emphasis tends to be on the accidental nature of these violations. A typical newbie fuck-up mirrors the following pattern: play is occurring when someone's consent is violated, usually that of the submissive or bottom in the scene, but not always. Play is immediately stopped, with either a Dungeon Monitor or by a member of that person's house stepping in if the violator does not quickly realize that something has gone wrong. Aftercare is a vital part of all scenes, but becomes exceptionally important in these instances, with individuals not participating in the scene coming together to take care of the individual whose consent was violated. Simultaneously, someone more experienced explains to the violator what happened (e.g. you forgot their safeword, you violated a limit they set, etc.) and the person responsible for that consent violation is usually quick to apologize. As Becca explains, there exists some expectation that newbie fuck-ups will happen.

Cierra: In talking with other folks, a common theme is that, especially with folks who are newer to the scene, they might accidentally overstep somebody's boundaries or 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 safeword or I'm doing something you definitely –

Becca: – like newbie fuck-ups?

Cierra: That's a good way to describe it! Yeah. Newbie fuck-up.

Becca: I definitely have a bit more leniency with that, but I just, I take it as a serious safety issue...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.

Captured in the name Becca came up with for this phenomenon – and which came up in my discussions with many other respondents – is an understanding that in trying something new, people are bound to make mistakes. Amy, a submissive from a Southern community,

highlighted in our conversation the need to protect newer players, especially those in submissive or bottom positions, because of these inevitable mistakes.

Cierra: Can you tell me a little bit more about that versus like the, the newbie fuck-up, like maybe if you heard or seen these happen before, like what happened in these situations?

Amy: As a concept, I think, you know, the newbie fuck-up is so prevalent on, on both sides, right on the side of it, the newbie tops as opposed to the newbie bottom, who doesn't understand that they have consent that they have to say. Um, I would say that in general, you know, that the two strongest reactions are to scorn the sexual predator, but also to sort of protect the newbie bottom because most people have had that experience as a newbie where, or I shouldn't say most people, but a lot of people are familiar with the experience of the newbie who basically played [and] got put into a bad situation.

In every story I was told, there was an emphasis placed on these newbie fuck-ups as educational moments. In my experience, emphasizing mistake-making and recovery from those mistakes is often included in workshops and sometimes in 101s as well. It is a taken-for-granted assumption by the players in a community that newcomers partaking in play will lead to mistakes, there is still an expectation that newbies will learn quickly from their mistakes and not replicate them. Megan, a sub on the West Coast, explained this with more detail.

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

Megan: Oops, newbie mistakes. The community tends to kind of circle around that person and then mentors them to teach them how to really handle the scene properly. A lot of times if they've gotten to 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. Um, I've seen it where the entire community just bands together and says, "Nope, you're done. You're not playing. We're going to make sure that people like [know how to play safely] especially the newbies. So, OK, just start over."

When an individual commits multiple newbie fuck-ups, especially of the same variety – such as forgetting someone's safe word – they will start to garner more negative attention and face

further consequences, potentially eventually equating to being blacklisted from the community, as described below. While newbie fuck-ups are both expected and forgivable as long as perpetrators demonstrate they have learned from their mistakes, the same cannot be said for cases of purposeful predations.

Purposeful Predations

The second type of consent violation, though less common in the community according to those who spoke with me, is still a common enough occurrence that nearly everyone shared an instance of it with me. These instances are situations wherein a person's consent is purposefully violated. One example of this that was shared with me early on, and which I used as a probe during other interviews, was a story of a woman who had been tied up during a ropeplay scene and then raped. Sex of any kind had been identified as a hard limit by this woman, and the man who raped her agreed they would not engage in any remotely-sexual behavior.¹³

While newbie fuck-ups are committed by people of all genders and identities, this is not the case with purposeful predations, as Yasmin discussed with me.

Cierra: Can you tell me a little bit more about, um, the kinds of folks who you have observed? Not really facing any kind of punishment, I guess for purposefully violating somebody's consent. Also like demographic type stuff, like do these tend to be dominants, do they tend to be men, any of that kind of stuff?

Yasmin: From my own personal experience, and based on some of the members of my house – I run a safe house for the BDSM community – it's tended to be,

¹³ Though all practitioners do not agree, there is a consensus that BDSM is not inherently sexual, though it is often used alongside or during sexual activities.

unfortunately, dominant men and also dominant women surprisingly. So I'd say the common denominator is the dominant.

Almost all of the stories I heard involved submissive women being violated by Dominant men they were playing with, regardless of the relationship between the two.¹⁴ The only stories my participants shared about bottoms / submissives being perpetrators were in the hypothetical, and only Yasmin shared knowledge about a Dominant woman perpetrating a purposeful predation. This is not to say that only Dominant men commit consent violations, or are culpable in the culture of sexual violence that occurs within the BDSM community, but just as with sexual violence in the broader population, men are more often perpetrators and women are more often victims. Megan explains one of the common themes with purposeful predations, a practice articulated by many others, of experienced Dominants, usually men, attempting to attract new submissives, typically women, and responses to this within the community.

Megan: Um, 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 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 at different club nights, these people will be banned from those events because they are known to be an unsafe player.

Consequences for purposeful predations are much more severe than they are for newbie fuck-ups. While the same initial steps as outlined above occur following a purposeful predation, there are several nuances in this process that differ from newbie fuck-ups. First, in these situations, it is more likely that a DM or another person at the play party will step in and stop a scene, as Becca talked about having to do in various scenes.

Cierra: What if there is a very blatant consent violation that's beyond mistake?

¹⁴ Sometimes these couplings were romantic and or sexual in nature, but sometimes they were simply play partners with no other formal relationship.

Becca: I've definitely made it pretty clear to some people that they probably shouldn't come back before, hasn't happened often, but there have been a few times. I mean when we've had to talk to people individually saying please stop doing this like three times in a row. And they just don't modify their behavior at all. That's problematic.

Taking the context of the violation into account, individuals may be removed from the event, play party, or dungeon. They also may face bans from future events at that location, or within that greater community for a certain period. If a violation is serious enough, perpetrators may be blacklisted from the community altogether.

Rape Culture in the BDSM Community

Although it may be counterintuitive given the emphasis on consent and the occurrence of consensually non-consensual interactions, rape culture is alive and well within the BDSM community, which many of my participants inadvertently brought up. Victim-blaming, a feature of rape culture, describes the way that sexual violence survivors are assigned fault for have been violated, rather than assigning fault to the perpetrator (Suarez and Gadalla 2010). Examples of this in the community most notably include fellow community members outright denying that an accused person would have committed a violation, relying on the reputation of that person as “good” as an indicator that nothing bad could have happened. In instances where well-known or firmly-established individuals within the community are accused of consent violations, contestations can come down to a they said-they said situation, as both Yasmin and Santiago discussed with me.

Cierra: So what if like there is somebody who purposefully violate somebody else's boundaries?

Yasmin: Unfortunately it comes down to who that is. Um, if they're very popular in the scene, I've seen nothing happened to those people. Um, if they're lower on the food chain, so to speak, I mean they can be banned from various clubs or public parties.

Santiago, who is currently active in the same community as Yasmin but has experience in other communities as well, expanded upon this understanding of people not being recognized as violators as endemic to a larger culture of sexual violence. Notably, the case to which Santiago refers to centered around a rare instance of a *false* rape accusation, made by a stripper against three men on the Duke University lacrosse team in 2006 (Block 2016). Nevertheless, his understanding of how this story played out in the media is informative.

Santiago: Predatory behavior generally, that's the one thing. The community definitely looks out for things being posted about people who violate someone else like limits or sleep or they perceive their preferred themselves to be one kind of person are dominant to. And I've seen, I've seen clubs ban people from, for their behavior. Sometimes it's involved in let's say stretching consents. Um, but I mean it's a community so it's just like any other group of people...there's people on both sides who want some kind of favorable thing for their friends.

Cierra: The community reacts pretty much the same way?

Santiago: Sure. It depends on your relationship with those involved. *If you're friends with the victim, you're protected and you want the person who hurt your friend to pay. If you're someone, if you're a friend of the, I guess we'd call it the accused, you would want either the accusations proven or the benefit of the doubt given to your friends. We see it on the news all the time.* Every time there's some accusation, whether it's against a congressman or someone prominent enough that we hear about it in the news, there's always the two sides...[like] in the case of those two Duke lacrosse players a couple of years ago went to a party and ended up raping a stripper, a prostitute or something, and basically the entire country wanted these guys in prison. And then you had the people close to the two players who were accused [saying they did not do it]. *That's basically how the community breaks down. Either people care enough to be on one side or the other or they just sit back and watch and see what happens* (emphasis mine).

Popularity often plays out in situations of purposeful predations, where even if multiple people accuse someone of violations, their status in the community may protect them from facing

consequences. Even if perpetrators are punished, it is not uncommon for victim-blaming to occur in the process. Abigail, a sub from a Southern community, had an in-depth discussion with me about what victim-blaming in these instances can look like when someone makes an accusation.

Cierra: It almost sounds like the way that you described that is reification of like, victim-blaming almost, like when this big bunch of drama stirs up, is that like what you're meaning?

Abigail: So it's not even victim blaming. It's like yeah, there is victim blaming. That definitely happens and stuff that most conversations they go back and forth. A lot of it ends up turning into more of a delegitimization. 'This person is a great person, so couldn't have violated your consent. You just misunderstood. You're too sensitive. You didn't speak up and say anything that was happening. So how could they have known that that was something you weren't okay with that kind of stuff?' Or just asking like, 'Well did you do this, did you do that? Did you do this?' Like a kind of attacking people?

Abigail's hesitance to call these verbal harassments victim-blaming illustrates how engrained rape culture can be. Demanding to know how a survivor responded to an attack and invoking a person's "goodness" to negate their culpability in a consent violation are but two examples Abigail – and many other participants – recounted in our conversations. These two specifically are indistinguishable from the kinds of harangues levied at sexual violence survivors outside the community as well.

Rape culture is not only prevalent after a consent violation occurs, but is often wrapped up in the circumstances leading to a violation. In Megan's case, she explained to me how the practice of safe-word shaming, a practice beyond simply disagreeing with the necessity of using safewords, can contribute to experiencing a consent violation.

Megan: I've actually heard a lot of people tell me that in previous play they have been challenged or made to feel inadequate because they had to use their safe words, because they had to protect their consent, they had to protect their

limit. ‘Oh, you’re just, you’re a crappy submissive and you’re not a good play partner. You can’t do these things. You’re not good enough now because you stick up for yourself.’ Um, my sister and I, we actually were doing a scene for a friend of ours who worked professionally as a professional sub at [a particular dungeon]. And she had to yellow out because of one of the toys, which is really intense for her. And afterwards, I mean, when she yellowed, we stopped. We checked in, we found out what was going on. She said, ‘Hey, this is just way too heavy for me right now. Can we move on to a different toy?’ I’m like, ‘Oh yeah, sure. No problem.’ Afterwards when we were doing our cool down and our cuddle session, she was apologizing profusely for having to code out. And both of us were like, ‘What are you doing? No, that’s your right to use your safe word!’

Cierra: Yes.

Megan: We have to honor that. And we have to let them know it’s OK. ‘We can’t play with you anymore if we break you,’ and she had told us that with previous partners, that was never their response when she had to code out quick. ‘God, this always happens. We hate playing with you because you never can take it.’ That right there, we were just livid at the other people and we’re like, ‘No, we’re going to reassure you. We’re going to let you know that you are doing exactly what you are supposed to do. We respect you for caring about yourself enough to tell us when a limit was getting reached.’

While Megan and her sister managed to support the woman they were playing with, from this story it is likely that she had not been so lucky with other play partners. Their partner’s response harkens back to my previous point regarding the onus that is often placed on submissives and bottoms to advocate on their own behalf. More importantly, though, it illustrates how choosing to do so can come at a personal cost. Being told that you are a bad play partner for choosing your personal safety over the pleasure of your partners should be an indication that perhaps you should not play with those individuals any more. But in many cases it is not so simple, especially if you have a relationship beyond that scene with those individuals. While Megan’s story highlights how she and her partner avoided committing a consent violation, Bradley and Frank share stories of their own consent violations that demonstrate just how insidious and invisible rape culture in the community is, and how that directly impacts practitioners.

Frank is an older sub from a community on the East Coast, who was one of four or five participants that shared information about a controversy that arose regarding a major kink event in their area. This event, held annually, brings together multiple communities in the area, with many workshops and vendors, and of course a significant amount of playspace. Given its size, there are also many, many practitioners in attendance, mostly local but some visiting from communities further away. The event is held at about the same time every year, and I conducted my interviews with this bunch of practitioners right before and after the one-year anniversary of the controversy. Although details varied in specificity from participant to participant, my happening to connect with them via my interviews was fortuitous as in that community there were more conversations occurring than usual around consent violations. Basically, there had been a number of consent violations at this event the year proceeding, which people expected to have been adequately addressed both during and after. People who reported consent violations to the DMs or the lead organizer at the event felt that nothing had been done to address what happened. Frank describes his experience with a consent violation at this event, but he also does so in a way that lets those who violated his consent off the hook.

Frank: And I think part of his 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. 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 going on.

Cierra: Yeah.

Frank: So I didn't, as I said I didn't go this year and I didn't go last year. Um, but I believe the year before my owner was concerned, was fine with and didn't even realize it because we were doing a, a sort of a puppy play thing and people touched me that she hadn't cleared to touch. I couldn't perceive that because if you have a mask on, you're on hands and knees, you can't really, we don't see, you know, with those masks on, you don't see or perceive.

Cierra: Did you perceive [what was going on]?

Frank: I couldn't tell that that occurred. She, she obviously didn't [know that I didn't know and it] got her upset about it but she didn't tell me until later. So they're very crowded and people have a tendency to be, uh, to not necessarily be on their best behavior. It's not always. So I think there have been some concerns about that. Also, the guy who runs it did not handle challenges to his, uh, to how things ran very well. I do know at least one person from years ago who had attended events of that person's – I'm going back years – who felt that their consent didn't, they weren't treated well, and they actually advise [people not] to go to any of his events.

Multiple times in his story, Frank emphasizes people not being on their best behavior while in large numbers at BDSM events. The safeties that communities put in place for these kinds of events are supposed to prevent these opportunities for violation from happening, so there should be no reason to assume, then, that violations will occur. Moreover, there should never be an assumption that purposeful violations will occur, as was the case with Frank and was with Bradley, below, as well.

Additionally, Frank's experience is an example that illustrates the role that privilege plays in protecting serial violators. As Frank alludes to at the end of the story, and harking back to the bigger controversy of this annual kink event, is that multiple people had issues with consent violations not being properly handled at events run by this man, which I can confirm as I interviewed several of them with varying degrees of knowledge about the situation. Given this Dom's status, however, many folks in the community turned a blind eye to it, which in turn led to rifts in the community. The solution that many of these practitioners came to in the two weeks I interviewed people in this community was that they and their friends in neighboring communities would boycott this event and establish others in its place, which they successfully did, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Bradley's story takes place in a different community on the East Coast at a leather bar. As we were wrapping up our interview, he wanted to tell me a story he had alluded to earlier dealing with play and being intoxicated.

Bradley: Well I did have a thing about, you know, personal consent as far as like being up at the bar y'know, it is hard too, especially when you're around drunk people when they're not supposed to.

Cierra: Yeah?

Bradley: But, I've actually had one particular violation where I was like, you do that again? I will break your hand on. I was selling Jello shots with Daddy and that individual, I was just wearing a jock strap and nothing else. He was touching my ass. So, you know, I'm, I'm ok with the general. It's like ok, whatever.

Cierra: Ok.

Bradley: That's when he put his hand down the front of my jock strap.

Cierra: Oh geez.

Bradley: I had an issue with and I knew he was drunk. I couldn't make it. And I also, I'm like, I took his hand very firmly and it's like, and just like, 'no, you do that again, I'll break your hands off.'

Cierra: Yeah.

Bradley: Um, it's kind of how, I don't want to bring politics into this as much, but you know, 'she was wearing that therefore she was asking for it,' how I'm wearing this because I look good in it or I feel I look sexy and good, not because I want everyone and their brother or whatever to touch me.

In this instance, though he is hesitant to do so, Bradley directly invokes one of the most common tropes of rape culture as a mirrored example of his own treatment at the hands of other men. While the gay leather bar is not entirely analogous to strictly-BDSM locales such as dungeons and play parties, Bradley did share several other consent violations that occurred in these locales and which operated in similar ways, namely people with whom he was unacquainted touching him without his consent because of his identity as a submissive and the way in which he was dressed. Though one of the foremost rules in BDSM is that you should

not play under the influence of drugs or alcohol, it does still happen. Moreover, as both Frank and Bradley explicate in their narratives of consent violations, people illustrate entitlement over the bodies of others, especially when those bodies belong to submissives. Sadly, as Bradley discusses, these submissives sometimes feel that there is no point in trying to speak with someone about a consent violation – such as if they are intoxicated – and in other cases, such as in Frank’s, sometimes it is impossible to know who has violated your consent. So what is a practitioner to do in these cases? As I explore in this next section, calling the police is almost never an option for BDSM practitioners. As a result, individuals in the community have developed highly-gendered strategies for preventing and responding to sexual violence in the community.

The Problem of Reporting Consent Violations

Consent violations that occur in BDSM interactions are almost never brought to authorities outside of the community. In her research with a small BDSM community in the Midwest, Karen Holt (2016) attempts to identify how practitioners deal with consent violations when they do not involve legal authorities. Her findings indicate that, at least in this small community, violent vigilante retaliation is not uncommon. While I do not deny that this occurs, using many of the stories shared with me during my interviews as evidence, I do challenge Holt’s suggestion that individuals in the community may not recognize criminal acts that ought to be reported to the police. The community emphasis on consent renders this misunderstanding of violence impossible for practitioners. Rather than being unable to identify abusive or violent behaviors, it is the lived danger of identifying as kinky that often prevents people from bringing these matters to the police. For example, Becca shared with me a story about a friend who was in an abusive relationship with her partner. Becca and her friends

believed that calling the police might be a good idea to help extricate this friend from her abusive partner, except for the fact that they all identified as kinksters, including the friend in the abusive relationship. She explains why they chose not to seek legal help.

Cierra: Why do you think the police don't get called even in like those situations?

Becca: How are they to tell that some of my bruises are bruises I wanted and some of my bruises are bruises I really didn't want? That's, I think the biggest thing for people, that they have no idea how to deal with that. They're just gonna look at it through the lens of obviously this must be domestic violence in a very forward, you know, man beats his wife kind of context, and not think to look at any other subtleties...I think a lot of those, that kind of thing people know about that's going on and they think the cops are just going to take one look, ok, I know what's going on.

In Becca's friend's case, things would not have been clear cut for authorities, as she was not being abused physically but had marks on her body that might have indicated otherwise. While this might have helped her case, it also brought with it the danger of potentially being outed, which is a concern for many practitioners. Living as a kink-identified individual has real-world repercussions with potentially devastating effects on a person's life once they are outed (Bezreh et al. 2012; Haviv 2016; Stiles and Clark 2011), even though many individuals involved in the community who have been studied up to now occupy privileged positions due to their racial and class backgrounds (Sheff and Hammers 2011). These dangers do not exist in the same ways for all communities, though, and individuals in locales with more liberal attitudes towards sexuality, such as California and Washington D.C., may face little to no worry about potential repercussions when choosing to live openly. However, even in communities where the danger of being out is lessened, consent violations within the community still go unreported. One participant, Dave, explained that although stigma may

factor into perceptions of BDSM practitioners during the reporting process, the problem of how consent violations are treated more generally is a central reason for not reporting.

Dave: Outside the BDSM community, in the vanilla world, nobody gives a shit about consent; that's why rape culture is such an epidemic problem. People don't understand what it is, lots of people don't care, and in lots of cases where someone's consent is violated the discourse around it tends to be more about justifying how the person who violated [the consent of another person] didn't actually violate it. [It is] less about helping the person who was violated. So if we already have that system going on where people are just having normal vanilla sex, then why on earth would people go outside of the community when it's like, 'So I was tied to the cross – which, like, I wanted that – and then he beat the shit out of me – which I found pleasurable – but then he did this one thing which I didn't like and I told him to stop and he didn't and that's the problem...'

Lee, a Daddy Dom on the West Coast, shared similar thoughts as Dave's, though he also highlighted other fears practitioners might also have.

Lee: Clearly there is a reason that police don't usually get called in to deal with some of these because there is a fear that there will be action taken...something bad can happen to you. So there's quite a lot of fear, a fear of the police and fear of [the person] who did it.

Given that the treatment of consent violations by legal authorities is so well-documented that the reporting process is often colloquially referred to as “the second rape” (Campbell, Wasco, Ahrens, Sefl, and Barnes 2001), it should come as no surprise that reporting is simply not an option for many kink-identified individuals. Only one of my respondents could recall an instance where police had been called regarding a BDSM interaction gone wrong, and it was because the couple in question were playing in a public space while intoxicated.¹⁵ Finally, as Lee points out, there is a fear that reporting may result in further harm at the hands of the

¹⁵ While this was technically an instance of a consent violation given both informal dungeon rules and formal legal rules about the role of drugs and alcohol in the process of giving one's consent, the individuals who called the police did so because the two individuals were a danger both to themselves and to others by playing while intoxicated.

perpetrator. This is a common reason that sexual violence survivors do not report to authorities, or to anyone else (Du Mont, Miller, and Myhr 2003; Ahrens 2006; Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco and Sefl 2007), so it is unsurprising that this concern would also surface amongst BDSM practitioners, who already occupy a marginalized position because of their “deviant” sexual behaviors. Jessica shared a story that also emphasizes the role that rape culture plays in these consent violations and the choice not to report them.

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

Jessica: Off hand? No, I didn't think about, um, I know that there is one person in particular who is a relatively well known in [the] community [who did not get reported]. *At a party the victim had said, she had played with this person before and it was very, very explicit, 'I do not play when I had been drinking, period. You haven't been very respectful of that.'* But then he had come over and it was like a friendly gathering with this guy and some other people. At some point *she became aware after like heavily drinking* and having a good time and progressing to a point where *she blacked out*, she became aware of her surroundings and she was like, she was like [tied up] and like had her arm, like extended above her head and *she was naked from the waist down. And like some other stuff that it was like very obvious that he had talked to her while she was very [intoxicated] into stuff* (emphasis mine).

Cierra: Yeah. That, that's problematic. Um, do you wanna tell me a little bit more about why you think they didn't or why those reasons are so obvious?

Jessica: Like a lot of people just don't work for things like, first of all, you're a woman and drinking, what did you expect was going to happen when you were alone with this mental person that you've had sex with before? And then on top of that, like *not only are you a woman who's been drinking with this man that you've had sex with before, but you're also into weird shit. You people just fuck everybody anyway. So why does it matter?* Like there are a lot of attitudes surrounding like sexual violence when it comes to, you know, not pure virginal (emphasis mine).

Cierra: Yeah.

Jessica: Females who are saving themselves for marriage and blah blah blah. Like if you are already considered damaged goods by the time that you get to like a law enforcement authority, you're kind of fucked. Unfortunately that does

tend to be the case [and there] may have been other circumstances surrounding, um, the situation why she specifically did not report, but I am not aware of, that's just like some reasons why I could see why they wouldn't.

As Jessica elaborates, both victim-blaming and slut-shaming, two of the most common incarnations of rape culture, play a significant role in the choice to report to police or not; this is not limited to only the BDSM community, but is another common factor in many survivors' choice not to seek legal help (Du Mont, Miller, and Myhr 2003; Ahrens 2006; Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco and Sefl 2007). The added stigma of being a practitioner only further engrains these ideologies. This reality, coupled with the way that well-established players are often protected by the community, means that serial predators such as the man in Jessica's story may never be stopped or made to answer for the violence they have committed.

Policing Strategies and Sexual Violence

In sum, then, reporting consent violations to police is simply not an option for most BDSM practitioners. Since this is not seen as an available avenue for managing sexual violence, the community itself has created multiple strategies to do so. While violent retribution may be one method of dealing with instances of sexual violence (Holt 2016), that was not shared by any of the participants in this study. Instead, participants in various communities have identified four common strategies for combatting sexual violence, all of which are preventative in nature, though, as my participants discussed, they often stem from personal experiences. Two strategies are taken on by individuals while two are more communally based. The two communal strategies are employed by individuals of varying genders, but they are more heavily weighted towards one gender per my interviewees' experiences. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that communal work does not operate in single-

gender groups while individual work is much more strictly gendered. Table 2 details the intersection of each strategy with the gender of the individuals who perform it.

Table 2. Gendered strategies for preventing sexual violence in the BDSM community

| | Men | Women |
|------------|--|---|
| Individual | Older, Dominant men seek out new, younger, submissive women to protect them from predators. | Women of all persuasions track predators/violators in online communities such as FetLife and Tumblr; they also reach out to newer members to warn them about these predators. |
| Communal | Men serve on mixed-gender “Safety & Greeter” teams or in otherwise communally established teams to help assimilate newcomers to the BDSM scene and respond to violence in public spaces. | Women in mixed-gender groups form Houses, akin to families, to provide protection to members in group settings such as at play parties and in dungeons. |

Men and Sexual Violence Prevention

As outlined above, there are two types of work that men in the community take on to prevent sexual violence from occurring. Though the way the work is done is the same in theory, the consequences of it vastly differ by gender. Sexual violence is a fact of women’s life in a much more concrete way than it is for men; 1 in 3 women will experience sexual violence in her lifetime, but with our knowledge regarding the underreporting of sexual violence, and the ways that sexual violence affects the women around us even if we are not survivors ourselves, it is a part of all women’s lived experience to one degree or another (MacKinnon 1989; Du Mont, Miller, and Myhr 2003; Ahrens 2006; Ahrens, Campbell, Ternier-Thames, Wasco and Sefl 2007). I do not wish to downplay the effects of sexual violence on men, yet I must emphasize that women endure sexual violence in ways that men do not and never will. We are taught, by virtue of our gender, to expect this kind of violence, but the same cannot be said for men (MacKinnon 1989).

At its core, while doing this anti-violence work in the BDSM community serves the same primary purpose of protecting the community regardless of individuals' gender, it also has drastically different secondary functions for men and for women, stemming from the gendered ways in which this kind of violence is understood and enacted. When men participate in this work, it is usually not because of their own sexually violent experiences, though some participants did share stories of their own consent violations. Instead, as Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz (2015) document in their history of men in the sexual violence movement, this work is taken up by men because of their relationships with women.

What I found in speaking with men and women about men's participation in policing efforts in the BDSM community is that women's status as sexual objects is integral to men's work. Even those who discuss themselves as "good guys," for example, invoke misogynistic tropes of needing to protect women from other men. Doing this work allows men access to the women considered most desirable – submissives new to the community – thus reifying their masculinity within and cementing their position in the hierarchy of the community. Whether men choose to reach out to women individually to alert them to predators in the community, or whether they act on behalf of women who are dealing with "aggressive" men, the role that women actually play in these interactions is that of sexual object. These men are genuinely attempting to aid these women, however, the women's objectification in these encounters allows them to be possessed by these men, which situates them above other men in the community with whom they are in competition (Quinn 2002). Though this objectification looks different depending on the policing strategy men employ, the outcome is the same.

The primary policing strategy that individual men use in anti-violence work in the community is to scour FetLife and Tumblr simultaneously for predators and for new submissive women, “troll” the predators to get them kicked off the sites, and then reach out to them to provide mentorship under the guise of offering these submissive women protection from predators. Well-intentioned though all of this work may be, as Becca points out, this does backfire, negatively affecting these Doms and the women involved.

Becca: A lot of people, especially women, who want to be submissive and are finally told it’s OK to be a submissive...if you combine that especially, I see this a lot, is you combine a young woman who’s getting into bed as a submissive with an older, more experienced, dominant male, dominant Dom to end all Dom’s... They can be downright manipulative. A lot of times I don’t think they quite know that they’re doing it, but that it’s actually not the greatest idea, that some of it is wrapped up in their own self fantasy of being the dominant Dom, Christian Grey Syndrome¹⁶... you can get guys who think they know everything since they’ve done a little research... They think they know fucking everything... [and so] the sub can start leaning on the Dom way too much and since he thinks he is the most competent dominant in the entire universe, he won’t say no. He won’t say stop. He won’t look for help. He won’t ask people anything, that’s not cool for him either.

These Christian Grey Doms (CG Doms), also referred to by practitioners in digital spaces as Tumblr Doms¹⁷, fall into a trap of perpetrating violence themselves by failing to admit their own weaknesses in lacking knowledge. The stereotype from outside of the community – hence the label of Christian Grey Syndrome that Becca employs here – is that this is what all Doms should aspire to be, and so when men enter the community, it is not uncommon for them to attempt to take on this persona.

¹⁶ Christian Grey is made fun of by many practitioners as the literal archetype of the white, capitalist, male heteropatriarch. Most kinky relationships resemble nothing like that between Christian and Ana. Moreover, there is a hearty debate within the community about whether the representations of BDSM are accurate or resemble consent violations we would never tolerate. Becca’s invocation of this is thus very tongue-in-cheek.

¹⁷ “Tumblr Doms” is a phrase used to refer to (usually) men on digital networking sites such as Tumblr who attempt to dominate other individuals, typically with no real experience in BDSM and often mirroring all the tropes associated with Christian Grey. We *all* ridicule Tumblr Doms.

These Doms are thus an example of the manifestation of what Connell terms hegemonic masculinity (2005). Hegemonic masculinity is a theoretical explanation of gender roles that argues patriarchy is upheld through the legitimization of men's dominance over women, and by men's dominance over other men via their categorization in a hierarchy (Connell 2005). Within the BDSM community, CG Doms are an example of hegemonic masculinity as they occupy the top of the men's hierarchy and they maintain the most access to the most desirable women, new (and often younger) submissives. These women are considered most desirable because in being new to the community, they have not yet learned how to protect themselves from predatory behavior and violence, as they have not been taught the difference between abuse and BDSM. This in turn makes it easier for Doms to exercise complete control over women, who, in trying to be good submissives and believing what their Doms tell them to be true, fall victim to abuse without always realizing that is what is happening. The onus is certainly not singularly on Doms to guarantee the safety of all parties within a scene, but depending on the activity, subs may be literally unable to affect what is going on or bring a scene to its end.

Moreover, we cannot ignore the always already existing power structures between men and women brought about by the rape culture we live in, which may make these women fearful of further violence if they reach out to others about behaviors they find problematic. Even as the men are criticized and mocked within the community, sometimes by the same people who revere them, they are considered to be the pinnacle of male Dominance. As highlighted in Becca's quote, this comes with its own problems, including the determination to learn everything by oneself rather than stopping and asking for help when needed, as all practitioners experience in the learning process. Deference to other Doms in search of

knowledge demonstrates weakness by implying that these men should already know how to do all the things, and so many avoid reaching out. As Becca points out this hurts the Dom, but just as importantly, it can also lead to both unintentional and intentional harm to that Dom's sub(s). The work that communal men take on, while seemingly different, has similar repercussions for both the Doms who do the work and the women who are wrapped up in it.

Communal Men

The approach that CG Dom men use to fight sexual violence lures young women in under the guise of mentorship and protection. By maintaining access to these women, men maintain access to the status afforded them by being able to possess these women in the first place. The more communal strategies that other men use are different only in nuance. Mixed-gender groups such as Incident Response Teams (IRTs) and safety and greeter teams allow men to work in tandem with other people in the community, both in person at events and digitally, to provide resources to new members and to stave off predators. Ben, a Daddy Dom who engages in communal work, articulates the negative perceptions that people have of the men doing individual work.

Cierra: How do you know [predators are being kept out of the community]?

Ben: Like, oh we troll the predator sites [on FetLife and Tumblr], oh my God, it's hilarious, because that means that they can't find anybody because every time they add somebody we're right on top of it. That's amazing to me, like I am a safety greeter because I want to support that kind of activity. However, I do know that the guys in these groups, without being 'predatory' do kind of scope out. They do kind of look for the newbies. And so when people heard that I was a safety and greeter, more than one woman said, 'Finally a non-creepy greeter.' I'm like, 'Really? You consider all the guys that taught me to be creepy?'

Ben attempts to distance himself from the work of “trolling” sites for predators, invoking commentary from women about how “non-creepy” he is as a safety greeter, and by implying this online work is only done by individual men. What is most instructive about Ben’s commentary is that while he invokes women’s approval of him, he acknowledges that the men doing online work are exhibiting bad behavior towards women. Ben explains the difficulty for men in doing this work, namely their being labeled as “creepy” and pushy, even as he attempts to include himself in the narrative as someone doing the work – “*we troll the predator sites*” (emphasis added). The language of “trolling” is noticeably different from the rhetoric that women employ in their discussions of online moderating, and turns this attempt to cast out predators from the community into a game. As the Doms “beat” the predators, they uphold their status in the dominance hierarchy as losers inherently cannot occupy the top position in said hierarchy.

What is even more enlightening about this case, and is further information that Ben shared with me about men’s anti-violence work, is that even while he attempts to define himself as “not a CG Dom,” much of what he describes mirrors the work of those men, with the small caveat that he and other communal men offer warmth, openness, and other emotional work that the CG Doms do not. Emotion work is the management not only of one’s own emotions, but also that of others in unpaid situations, such as with friends and family (Hochschild 1972, 1990) and potential sexual or romantic partners. Historically, in American culture, emotion work has been relegated to women. This performance of emotion work that men such as Ben employ in their interactions with submissives makes it impossible for them to fit into the hegemonic ideal as desirably masculine because of this work being labeled “feminine.” Thus, the men that do communal work, like Ben, are performing a form of hybrid masculinity.

In contrast with hegemonic masculinity, hybrid masculinity refers to men's integration of aspects of subordinated or marginalized masculinities – such as overt performance of emotion – into their own performance of masculinity in such a way as to gain access to some of the benefits conferred by performing hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005; Bridges and Pascoe 2014). There are three key features of hybrid masculinities. First, hybrid masculinities “symbolically distance men from hegemonic masculinity” (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Ben is example of this via his labeling of himself as “not creepy” and his affirmation that women see that as well. This distancing by invoking disdain for hegemonically masculine men has been documented before (Rivers-Moore 2012). Second, hybrid masculinities “situate the masculinities available to young, White, heterosexual men as somehow less meaningful than the masculinities associated with various marginalized and subordinated Others” (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Performance of softer, more feminine emotions is one way that this can be done (Young 2017). Ben and other men who perform communal policing are doing the kind of emotional work forbidden to the hegemonically masculine CG Doms. While it may be appreciated by the women to whom the work is directed, communal work more specifically opens up opportunities for expressing emotions that are not available under hegemonic masculinity. Finally, hybrid masculinities “fortify existing social and symbolic boundaries in ways that often work to conceal systems of power and inequality in historically new ways” (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Ben's story of his interactions with two different submissive women illustrates this in practice.

Ben: The[re was a] guy that I was asked [as part of] the safety team to meet with. A little wrote me an email, without ever meeting me, said she had a drink with this guy, said he was cool, but the very next time they spoke he invited her to a nude beach and she was like, “We are too much buddy, too much.” And I was like, “Yeah dude, that's a little forward, you know, what are you doing?”

And so I wrote, so I said, “Do you want me to speak to him? Because maybe he just doesn’t realize that that’s a little creepy.” She agreed, said don’t use [her] name. And they had another friend who was in a place with somebody who, because he wouldn’t take no for an answer, she agreed to have a scene with, and she didn’t like it and after that she only plays with her partner and I’m like, “Do you want me to speak to him? Because he is pushy.” That guy is slightly forward, but I don’t think that they’re predatory.

In a previous excerpt, Ben specifically mentions that the same women who find the men who groomed him to be creepy, do not see him that way. Ben’s attempts to deny his complicity in this kind of hegemonic masculinity is negated by his constant contradictions of himself. This appears again here, where he first articulates “being asked” by virtue of being a safety greeter to speak with a “creepy” man, but then claims he asked not one, but two different submissives to intervene on their behalf with other men, including in one instance where the problem appeared to already have been solved. Moreover, his categorization of predatory behavior which he describes in this excerpt as “slightly forward,” enables these men to continue to harass women, which is at odds with what men doing communal work have articulated trying to prevent or stop altogether. This behavior, while being well-intentioned, is very much savior behavior that reifies misogynistic and paternalistic thoughts of women being unable to contend with the men doing violence to them in the first place. In short, the hybrid masculinity associated with doing communal work maintains gender inequality and sexual violence in the community despite the efforts of the men taking on this masculinity to do otherwise.

Women and Sexual Violence Prevention

When women do sexual violence prevention and policing work within the BDSM community, whether it is individually taken on or part of a communal effort, it offers nearly identical benefits to the community as the work that men do; namely, it serves to make the community safer for all its members. However, the secondary benefits of doing this work as a

women are drastically different than they are for men. As I mentioned before, sexual violence operates within women's lives in an omnipresent way that it simply does not for men. And, unlike the ways in which anti-violence work reifies masculinity for men, there is no parallel reification of femininity for women who do this work. It is important that I note here that most of the women doing this work are survivors of sexual violence themselves, either before entering the community, which was more common, or since becoming a practitioner, which though less common does still happen. Just as importantly, even for those women who were not sexual violence survivors, all women are already survivors of *gendered* violence – we have all been catcalled, groped, harassed, been forced to endure lewd comments or inappropriate non-sexual touching. As such, even while we are not all sexual violence survivors, violence done to women is a tangible part of our lived experiences, and that is illustrated in both the individual and communal approaches that women use in their policing efforts. Also, unlike a more even split with men, women tend to engage in communal work more often than they engage in individual work.

Individual Women

Just as men participate in online moderating as a primary individual tactic of community policing, so to do women. While women also reach out to newer women in the community, this is not limited solely to new submissive women, and the “trolling” which men spoke about doing does not occur. Instead, while predators may be blocked by moderators,

women also hold digital conversations warning one another about predators in the community.

Megan elaborates on this as she discusses the process of identifying perpetrators.

Megan: It's rare that you find the predators in our community because we do a really good job of weeding them out as soon as we find them.

Cierra: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

Megan: Yeah, sure. There's tons of moderators, especially on FetLife and stuff like that. There are moderators for the different groups and if they see the warning signs like users just going after the new females, they show up. The moderators for like the different new besides like the welcome to Los Angeles, the welcome to whatever city or the events in your area pages, the moderators on those sites are amazing and if you as a member reach out to them and say, hey, "This user is harassing me. They aren't leaving me alone. They're sending me inappropriate comments or images." They'll block them and they'll make a public statement. This person is not welcomed and here's why. And it's really good, especially for those, those newbie groups where people, everyone who's new to FetLife goes to those groups.

Cierra: So one of the things that I had a, and this could just be up here in this area, but, so I interviewed a couple of folks who talked about what they're calling a safety and greeter team. And so I had one of the members on this team do an interview with me and he was telling me how they have this goal in trying to recruit people to come check out the dungeon and whatnot, and to make everybody feel safe, especially as new folks, [but] that there is even still this tendency for some of those men – and it's almost always dominant identifying men – to still target newbie women. So does that happen with the moderators?

Megan: Kind of like a savior thing as far as the moderators that I don't like. [The ones that I love] are mostly females, it's mostly the female moderators that are the ones that are weeding out all of the predators. There are not going to be too many male moderators on those. I'm not 100% sure why, but the ones that are on there, they're good about saying, no, this isn't acceptable, dude. Knock it off. Yeah. I never really thought about that until you just brought it up. I was like, Oh yeah, that demographic is really heavily swayed female on that.

Cierra: Can you venture like some ideas why that might be the case?

Megan: Honestly, females feel safer with a female who's watching out for them and it's one of those things. The social expectation is that men are predators. So it's very hard to trust a man to protect us from other men.

As Megan explains, the process of women moderators interacting with predators is vastly different than that of men moderators. Both women and men may block these men – and occasionally women – from common sites such as FetLife and Tumblr, but as Megan and other women I spoke with articulated, women offer public explanations for the removal of these individuals from shared digital spaces. This key difference did not come up in discussions of men’s choosing to block perpetrators, nor was the gamification of this process present in discussions of women’s site moderation. Finally, as Megan alludes to, women are much more *visibly* doing this work. I cannot speak to the accuracy of there being more women than men doing the online moderating, but the explanation versus gamification rationales differentially employed by each gender make me wonder about the visibility of men’s work to women; even as this is individual work for both genders, it appears to be much more visible when women do it. Unsurprisingly, the communal policing that women take on is also very visible.

Communal Women

While communal work for women can include safety and greeter or Incident Response Teams, as it does for men, this is not always as common. Abigail, a switch on the East Coast, describes the way that IRTs play out in her community.

Abigail: Most major events [across the East Coast] now have teams that are designed so if any sort of consent incident happens to you, these people are there in their own special red shirts and you go and you talk to them and they’re basically there to hear you and let you feel hurt. They’ll investigate for the purposes of helping the event organizers decide if the person should be like banned from future events or that sort of thing. They’re not really a legal investigative order, mostly their purpose is to just let people feel like they’ve been heard, not tell them how to prevent that from happening to them again or anything like that.

Unlike the descriptions I heard from men about communal work in differing communities – including from men on the East Coast – Abigail emphasizes the emotion work that the IRTs do. While there is a purpose here in protecting the greater community from people doing consent violations in public play spaces, there is an equally important purpose to this work, namely the acknowledgement and affirmation of survivorhood. This is not uncommon in the work that women do, and stems from the lived experiences of sexual violence that many of these women have had or seen other women experience. Abigail also discussed her community’s version of safety and greeter teams, and the way these are gendered.

Cierra: One of the other things that I’m interested in is um, like the self-policing that goes on within the community. [Someone in a recent interview told me that] a new dungeon opened up and so they’ve got what’s called a safety and greeter team. And so these are like self-appointed people, mostly Dom men as it turns out. Um, and there’s some issues there still, but like –

Abigail: Ours are made of wonderful women, they are almost always women or non-male, I’ll say that because some of them are gender fluid in various ways, but are not binary, or [they are] trans. But ours is largely run by women because there’s this great sense that men can’t be trusted in general.

This theme of distrusting men came up repeatedly in my conversations with women practitioners, including in conversations about house formations, which Yasmin and Camila, friends now in the same house, both spoke to me about. Yasmin first explained this concept to me, as she founded a house on the West Coast following a consent violation at the hands of another practitioner several years ago.

Cierra: That’s good. Um, I mean even the fact that you got help in the first place, I mean, you know, that’s really not that common.

Yasmin: [It led to the] establishment of my house last year, so we’re able to provide the community with safe players in education and safe parties.

Cierra: That’s wonderful! Can you tell me a little bit more about your safe house?

Yasmin: Basically it was started last year after this incident with a friend because this friend I've known as person a long time, I trusted them. [The] communication was pretty clear on my side and just feeling like, you know, I could bounce out of the public scene again and just disappear for a couple years, or I can kind of pull my resources, pull my people around me and talk to them a little bit about safety and consent in the scene. And a lot of them really liked the idea of establishing a house on the premise of training each other, making sure our skills are up to par so that we can provide that to potentially new people or people who just want to have a safe partner who understand things like, you know, respecting boundaries, respecting limits, safe words.

Rather than giving into feelings of distrust that she shared throughout the interview, and which she alludes to in the above excerpt, Yasmin pushed herself to give back to her community by reaching out to other women (and some men, too) to create a network of safety in which practitioners could participate. As Camila discusses about being in the house, it does more than just train individuals about how to enact safe consent practices, but which always serves to ensure protection when playing with practitioners outside of the house.

Camila: Yasmin created this group house and it's a house where you're with people that you've known for awhile and you've seen their skill set and have trust [in them]. So if you were at a dungeon and you were sceneing with someone for the first time and you don't know them that well, then you have other people that are close by that can observe so if something were to go down, you have that kind of muscle there to watch. If something were to go down, if I were to say "Dr. Pepper," please, you know, find a way to end this thing and get me out really quick. And so I had to call that out [once] and I even did explain that to the person that I was sceneing with even though he didn't process it or get it. I did have somebody that I trusted there physically to help stop the scene right then and there. I feel as though that not only is it the top or whoever is participating in this scene responsible to call it, but it's always good to have that third person or other people that you trust to intervene at that point when they feel as though that the consent was breached.

While the formation of houses such as Yasmin and Camila's does not necessarily prevent sexual violence from happening, it does attempt to by instilling knowledge about how to engage in BDSM practices safely, sanely, and consensually. Moreover, when members of a

house are out in public together, it ensures that members always have a supportive ally in case something in a scene goes wrong. Much like the IRTs, while this does not necessarily lead to forms of punishment, it does validate and support women who experience consent violations, a consequence that men did not discuss in their understandings of communal or individual work against sexual violence.

Men's Work, Women's Work, and Who is Missing

What I have illustrated in this section on men's work and women's work to police sexual violence in the BDSM community is that as much as it is similar, its effects are not. Women as a gender are motivated to do this work in a way that men as a gender never will be in the same capacity by virtue of the lack of gendered and sexual violence they face in comparison to that which women face. Thus, for women, there exists an underlying motivation to do this work as a mechanism of survival in a world that is already always doing violence on our bodies; women of all races, sexualities, ages, experiences, and identities within the BDSM community do this work. There does not appear to be, in this sense, any discernible differences between women's class, race, or sexual orientation. Men, though they do this work on behalf of women, are not taught to expect this kind of violence and certainly do not experience it the same way. Moreover, the same representation of life experiences and identities is not represented herein; only Dominant-identified men who are sexually attracted to women (note these are not *only* heterosexual men) are represented here. It is no coincidence that the viewing of women as sexual objects is a central component of the identities of the men engaged in this work.

What I find most surprising about these policing practices and their gendering, however, is the group of practitioners that is not visible – submissive men. I worried initially that I was simply but unintentionally erasing them from my narrative; even once I decided to focus on gender, I had no intentions of focusing on Dominant men, as I have ended up doing. As I combed through my data a few more times, and in constructing my chart of participants and their identifying characteristics, I was stunned to realize that seven of my twenty-nine participants are submissive or switch men. Even more importantly, at least four of them shared stories with me about their own sexually violent experiences, almost all of which took place within the community. These men are here, in my sample, and their stories of consent violations are as well, but there was not a single participant of any gender who discussed the ways in which submissive or gay men participate in preventing or are affected by sexual violence. While this is the biggest question left unanswered in this story, it is one I intend to answer in a future project.

Though I do not have the data, I do have postulations for this occurrence. First, in the case of gay men, there is no sense of ownership over women because women are not viewed as sexual objects. Certainly there still exists misogyny and paternalism, as tenets of patriarchy, but this lack of sexual objectification of women means that often, gay men may not form relationships of as intimate a nature with women as do men who *do* see women as sexual objects. Second, as I discuss in the section on consent construction, submissive men willingly give up their social power in the act of submission, regardless of the gender of the person to whom this submission is given. Admitting to having experienced sexual violence is also a way of having power stripped from a person, regardless of gender, as is the purpose of sexual

violation in the first place.¹⁸ While claiming the identity of victim by admitting that you have been sexually assaulted is certainly difficult for all survivors – and a reason that many never claim that identity – I suspect that this kind of admission would only serve to further denigrate the masculinities available to submissive men in BDSM, especially those also identifying as gay. Only future research can answer these questions.

Conclusion

When I began this project, I had little intention of focusing on sexual violence. In the interest of transparency, I was desperately trying to avoid doing more work around it. I had completed several research projects on sexual violence before starting graduate school, one at my community college and one for my senior thesis at UC San Diego. Wanting to move away from only doing scholarship on this issue, I joined nowUCsb,¹⁹ the activist organization devoted to dealing with sexual violence on campus, at the beginning of Winter Quarter 2016. By the end of this quarter, I had been named in direct violation of my own consent as a witness for a court case stemming from a Title IX investigation levied by the sole man in nowUCsb against a colleague in my home department. This case broke apart our organization for a good six months, leaving us loath to trust one another and needing time to recover before recommitting to the work we were doing, especially for us graduate students. The Title IX office opened a secret investigation into the male graduate student, and in an ironic twist, found

¹⁸ Sexual violence is almost *never* about sex, and is *always* about power (MacKinnon 1989; Rubin 1993).

¹⁹ Started the spring quarter before I started graduate school (Spring 2015), nowUCsb was founded by three women who had reported their sexually violent experiences at UCSB and had the university mishandle their cases. Relying heavily on the experiences of women of color – whose sexually violent experiences are often overlooked, if not outright ignored, in favor of the experiences of white women – this organization’s mission is to bring survivors and allies together to combat rape culture and fight for better prevention, education, and protection from sexual violence at UCSB.

him responsible for sexual harassment and retaliation against the graduate student in my department whom he had initially reported. Although it has been two years, as a result of these experiences, we have not had another man join nowUCsb, leaving only women to do this work. My jaded, exhausted conclusion: So much for gender solidarity in the fight to end sexual violence.

As all of this was happening, I was growing weary of studying sexual violence. Between my research, my activism, and personal experiences, it felt like I could never get away from it. I changed topics for my MA, deciding that I wanted to do something fun but valuable – I would conduct an ethnographic study of my local BDSM community to document consent processes. My own relationships with BDSM practitioners made me aware of the importance of consent in the community. I believed if I could adequately document how and why people discussed, learned, and taught about consent, I could devise a way to implement similar teachings in broader ways, such as in K-12 sexual education. In hindsight, it is clear to me that I was not really escaping studying sexual violence as much as I thought, for wherever there are people giving their consent, there are also people having their consent violated. I had included questions about sexual violence on my interview protocol because I knew it would come up, but I was still surprised at how critically it factored into conversations with my participants.

I started interviews and doing ethnographic work, and was surprised every time I finished an interview about how open and warm people were, how much they were willing to share, and how many stories of sexual violence came up both within and outside of the community. As is the nature of conducting social research rooted in grounded theory, I started this project with many expectations of what I would find, all of which were far surpassed by everything I did not anticipate. And, as much as I was trying to avoid it, I was doing what

Barbara Katz Rothman (1986) calls “hard work.” As a feminist sociologist, I find it necessary to reflect on our work and the emotional toll it takes, because in so doing, we often discover the importance of the work we are doing, and can find reminders of why we chose these projects in the moments when we feel unmotivated or disheartened. Since first being introduced to her piece I have without exaggeration reread Rothman’s reflections every two to three weeks, essentially every time I doubted my ability to finish this project or whenever the weight of it on my shoulders felt like too much to bear. And every time I have finished rereading it – even if I needed to read it two or three times to get there – I remembered the point of doing this specific kind of hard work. Despite my best intentions, this is a project about sexual violence. Most of its key actors are, unintentionally, survivors of sexual violence themselves. These are stories that need to be told, not only to offer a voice to those whose stories are so often left unspoken or ignored, but to remind the rest of us that this work is not finished. There is hard work still left to be done concerning sexual violence.

At the same time, this is work that does more than move research on sexual violence forward. While it does center the voices of the practitioners who spoke with me about their consent violations, this project is also important for illustrating the benefits of consent in the BDSM community. Becca shares how her experiences as a practitioner has made her a better partner and allowed her to explore her own sexual interests and desires.

Cierra: Do you think there’s a difference between consent in BDSM interactions, sexual or otherwise, and vanilla interactions?

Becca: You can take kind of your extremely typical hetero-normative vanilla context. People can be lazy and rely on various social scripts and not talk about things. People aren’t taught how to actually talk about what they want, what they don’t want, what they are and aren’t comfortable with, if they’re not taught to bring, um, bring up when they are feeling uncomfortable... People

have a lot of trouble I've seen with being able to actually even articulate to themselves what they're thinking and feeling about that.

Cierra: Why do you think people have trouble with it?

Becca: Women are definitely taught to please other people, keep their mouth shut, that does not help at all. Really doesn't help. It hurts men too, they've got their own roles to fulfill and if they want to deviate from that at all there's quite a number of social stigma...it's just shoving people into roles that they may not necessarily want to go along with. Um, but if you'd been in those your whole life and you don't know what any alternatives are, it's very hard to work against that.

Cierra: So how does the BDSM community then like make that change happen so that folks are communicating?

Becca: Mostly we talk about it and don't ever stop talking about it. Like people will talk to you till they are absolutely blue in the face about how to communicate and what consent is and that you need consent for everything...[I have learned to] check in a lot. I talk to people beforehand a lot. Um, if I feel like I'm not getting, really getting the two-way communication, I'm not gonna feel comfortable to play with that person.

This work helps people to better learn how to communicate about sex and desire, which we are not taught to do, but which is vital for our existence as happy, healthy sexual beings. Becca is but one example of this in practice. Sharing a condensed version of this written work with my participants, I hope they see their narratives reflected accurately, and I believe it will spur further conversation about consent violations, which are not always as vibrant in BDSM communities as these stories demonstrate they should be. My research sheds light on a specific group of practitioners, too, who did not show up in these stories in the ways that I would have expected. By highlighting their absence from these narratives of sexual violence and policing practices, I hope I can provide insight to community members and start a louder conversation about how the anti-violence movement in BDSM can be more inclusive of the individuals being left out, specifically submissive men.

While a number of scholars analyzed aspects of BDSM communities (Weiss 2011; Pitagora 2013; Barker 2013; Beres and MacDonald 2015; Scott 2015), research that specifically seeks to depathologize and normalize this sexual subculture, and those smaller subcultures within it is still relatively new (Tyburczy 2014; Lindemann 2012; Musser 2014). As I further develop the ideas I present in this thesis, as a public sociologist, my work will also fall under this umbrella not only as it reaches mainstream readers, but also as I share my findings with the community who made this project possible in the first place.

In addition to the benefits this project has had for myself as a feminist researcher, and for BDSM communities, it makes multiple contributions to scholarship on consent itself. While Beres (2007) synthesizes the significant conversations around consent in the academic community, over a decade later, little headway has been made. This research advances feminist sociological work on consent by examining its inculcation in institutions such as gender while simultaneously building analysis by centering the voices of the marginalized individuals in these communities who shared their stories with me. Moreover, by challenging the binaristic approach to consent that is so commonly held, and by instead establishing consent as interactional and ongoing, rather than episodic, I have illuminated the role that non-verbal communication and interaction plays in consent practices. Centering this understanding of consent is a critical step forward for many disciplines as we examine how people – and institutions – necessitate the construction of consent on a case-by-case basis. When consent is such a pivotal aspect of social life, this work needs to continue, not only for the theorizing of the implications of consent in our lived experiences, but also for the application of it in solving social problems. This is critical both for feminist and public scholars, as our current black-and-white thinking about consent is doing little to stop the many kinds of violence that

stem both from consent violations and from inaccurate and/or purposefully abused notions of consent.

One of my original goals for this work was to take the knowledge I gained about this “deviant” subculture and apply it to phenomenon in the wider world. This Goffmanesque approach to sociological inquiry has helped me to think through larger implications of this work. While my focus here is on its implications within sexuality, consent is an issue in many other facets of social life, which in turn play a direct role in institutional and structural oppression. As a sociologist studying how consent operates in a community where it is essential to social life, I have begun to consider how quintessential consent is for all kinds of social interactions, such as in medical and legal systems. How does the state use the concept of consent as a means of social control over gendered, sexualized, raced, and classed bodies? I anticipate this work is a starting point to explore the power dynamics that affect peoples’ ability to give and rescind consent in these other arenas, as well as the real-world outcomes of those interactions. This project would necessarily need to interrogate the intersections of these power dynamics in tandem with other salient categories, such as race and class, that I could not look at adequately with my sample.²⁰

My thesis also has contributions to make to the study of masculinities. While I did not intend to focus on gender at all when I started this project, one of my first interviews, with Ben, started my thinking about how consent and violations differentially affect men and women in the community. For a different project, I recently read *Some Men* (Messner, Greenberg, and Peretz 2015) which chronicles the history of men in the movement to end

²⁰ As Sheff and Hammers (2011) discuss, much of the work done on BDSM communities, for a variety of complex reasons, does not adequately examine the role of race and class. Unfortunately, I unintentionally replicated that in this work, as most of my participants identify as White and middle-to-upper class.

sexual violence from the 1960s to present. This brilliant sociological work broadened my understanding of anti-violence work and gender and also left me angry, as I remained convinced that there was more to the story. While its focus was on men, ultimately, Messner and colleagues' work is less a study of masculinity and more the study of a social movement; Thus the interrogation of what anti-violence work of this nature does for men's social standing left something to be desired. Additionally, their narrative largely erased survivors, of all genders. My analysis seeks to build upon this point, and while it does not succeed in completely explicating how men are wrapped up in this work, it does make strides to better explain how masculinity and pursuance of anti-violence work are inevitably intertwined. In continuing to study kink from a masculinities perspective, then, I endeavor to take up this case of the missing submissive men – what are their experiences? Why do they appear to be so invisible in these narratives, despite clearly enduring their own share of sexual violence? Can they navigate the power dynamics of already being socially diminished as submissives and admitting to enduring sexual violence? Or is this claiming of victimhood always already at odds with the lower status they hold in the masculine hierarchy identifying as submissive men? And, finally, how can the answers to these questions about submissive BDSM men be used to understand sexual violence in the lives of men more generally?

In keeping with my ethical and social justice commitments beyond, this project is more than academic, as are its real-world applications. This was, from beginning to end, an endeavor bridging my scholarship and my activism. Consent is essential for all of us to live happy, healthy lives as individuals, and as members of a functioning society. Studying sexual violence and consent in any context is often thankless, exhausting work, and it is not easy. Indeed, it is

hard work if ever I have encountered it. But, as much as I might wish otherwise, studying flower arranging would not be all that different.²¹

²¹ This is the tongue-in-cheek example of potentially “not” hard work that Barbara Katz Rothman invokes in “On Hard Work.” As students of social issues, we know by now that all work dealing with social life is difficult.

References

- Ahmed, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ahrens, Courtney E. 2006. "Being Silenced: The Impact of Negative Social Reactions on the Disclosure of Rape." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 38(3-4):31-34.
- Ahrens, Courtney E., Rebecca Campbell, N. Karen Ternier-Thames, Sharon M. Wasco, Tracy Sefl. 2007. "Deciding Whom to Tell: Expectations and Outcomes of Rape Survivors' First Disclosures." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 31(1):38-49.
- Ali, Suki. 2010. "Silence and Secrets: Confidence in Research." Pp. 245-256 in Roisín Ryan-Flood and Rosalind Gill, eds. *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*. London: Routledge.
- Barker, Meg. 2013. "Consent is a Grey Area? A Comparison of Understandings of Consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and on the BDSM blogosphere." *Sexualities* 16(8):896-914.
- Beres, Melanie Ann and Jo E. C. MacDonald. 2015. "Talking about Sexual Consent: Heterosexual Women and BDSM." *Australian Feminist Studies* 30(86):418-432.
- Bezreh, Tanya, Thomas S. Winberg, and Timothy Edgar. 2012. "BDSM Disclosure and Stigma Management: Identifying Opportunities for Sex Education." *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 7(1):37-61.
- Bhavnani, Kum-Kum and Molly Talcott. 2012. "Interconnections and Configurations: Toward a Global Feminist Ethnography." Pp. 135-153 in Hesse-Biber, ed. *Handbook of Feminist Research*, 2nd ed. Los Angeles: SAGE.
- Block, Justin. 2016. "10 Years Later, The Duke Lacrosse Rape Case Still Stings." *Huffpost*. Accessed 17 May 2018. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/duke-lacrosse-rape-espn-30-for-30_us_56e07e33e4b065e2e3d486f7
- Bridges, Tristan and C.J. Pascoe. 2014. "Hybrid Masculinities: New Directions in the Sociology of Men and Masculinities." *Sociology Compass* 8(3):246-258.
- Burkett, Melissa, and Karine Hamilton. 2012. "Postfeminist Sexual Agency: Young Women's Negotiations of Sexual Consent." *Sexualities* 15(7):815-833.
- Campbell, Rebecca, Sharon M. Wasco, Courtney E. Ahrens, Tracy Sefl, Holly E. Barnes. 2001. "Preventing the 'Second Rape'." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. 16(2):1239-1259.
- Chappell, Bill. 2014. "California Enacts 'Yes Means Yes' Law, Defining Sexual Consent." *NPR*. accessed 17 May 2018. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/09/29/352482932/california-enacts-yes-means-yes-law-defining-sexual-consent>
- Charmaz, Kathy. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd.

- Connell, Raewyn W. 2005. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Davis, Dána-Ain. 2013. "Border Crossings: Intimacy and Feminist Activist Ethnography in the Age of Neoliberalism" Pp. 23-38 in Crista Craven and Dána-Ain Davis, eds. *Feminist Activist Ethnography: Counterpoints to Neoliberalism in North America*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Du Mont, Janice, Karen-Lee Miller, and Terri L. Myhr. 2003. "The Role of 'Real Rape' and 'Real Victim' Stereotypes in the Police Reporting Practices of Sexually Assaulted Women." *Violence Against Women* 9(4):466-486.
- Faccio, Elena, Claudia Casini, and Sabrina Cipolletta. 2014. "Forbidden Games: The Construction of Sexuality and Sexual Pleasure by BDSM 'Players'." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 16(7):752-764.
- Ford, Jessie V. 2018. "'Going with the Flow': How College Men's Experiences of Unwanted Sex are Produced by Gendered Interactional Pressures." *Social Forces* 96(3):1303-1324.
- Hammers, Corie. 2013. "Corporeality, Sadomasochism and Sexual Trauma." *Body & Society* 20(2):68-90.
- Haviv, Noam. 2016. "Reporting Sexual Assaults to the Police: the Israeli BDSM Community." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 13:276-287.
- Herman, Dianne F. 1988. "The Rape Culture." *Culture* 1(10):45-53.
- Hochschild, Arlie R. 1972. "Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure." *American Journal of Sociology* 85(3):551-575.
- Hochschild, Arlie R. 1990. "Ideology and Emotion Management: A Perspective and Path for Future Research." Pp. 117-142 in ed. Theodore D. Kemper *Research Agendas in the Sociology of Emotions*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Holt, Karen. 2016. "Blacklisted: Boundaries, Violations, and Retaliatory Behavior in the BDSM Community." *Deviant Behavior* 37(8):917-930.
- Humphreys, Terry. 2007. "Perceptions of Sexual Consent: The Impact of Relationship History and Gender." *The Journal of Sex Research* 44(4):307-315.
- Irwin, Katherine. 2006. "Into the Dark Heart of Ethnography: The Lived Ethics and Inequality of Intimate Field Relationships." *Qualitative Sociology* (29):155-175.
- Jozkowski, Kristen N., Zoë D. Peterson, Stephanie A. Sanders, Barbara Dennis, and Michael Reece. 2014. "Gender Differences in Heterosexual College Students' Conceptualizations and Indicators of Sexual Consent: Implications for Contemporary Sexual Assault Prevention Education." *The Journal of Sex Research* 51(8):904-916.

- Langdridge, Darren, and Meg Barker, eds. 2007. *Safe, Sane and Consensual: Contemporary Perspectives on Sadomasochism*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Liazos, Alexander. 1972. "The Poverty of the Sociology of Deviance: Nuts, Sluts and Perverts." *Social Problems* 20(1):103-120.
- Lindemann, Danielle J. 2012. *Dominatrix: Gender, Eroticism, and Control in the Dungeon*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Littleton, Heather, Holly Tabernik, Erika J. Canales, and Tamika Backstrom. 2009. "Risky Situation or Harmless Fun? A Qualitative Examination of College Women's Bad Hook-up and Rape Scripts." *Sex Roles* 60:793-804.
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. 1989. "Rape: On Coercion and Consent." In *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Messner, Michael A., Max A. Greenberg, and Tal Peretz. 2015. *Some Men: Feminist Allies and the Movement to End Violence against Women*. Oxford University Press: New York.
- Musser, Amber Jamilla. 2014. *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Pitagora, Dulcinea. 2013. "Consent vs. Coercion: BDSM Interactions Highlight a Fine but Immutable Line." *The New School Psychology Bulletin* 10(1):27-36.
- Powell, Anastasia. 2008. "Amor Fati? Gender Habitus and Young People's Negotiation of (Hetero)Sexual Consent." *Journal of Sociology* 44(2):167-184.
- Quinn, Beth A. 2002. "Sexual Harassment and Masculinity: The Power and Meaning of 'Girl Watching.'" *Gender & Society* 16(3):386-402.
- Rivers-Moore, Megan. 2012. "Almighty Gringos: Masculinity and Value in Sex Tourism." *Sexualities* 15(7):850-870.
- Rodríguez, Juana María. 2014. *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*. New York and London: New York University Press.
- Rothman, Barbara Katz. 1986. "Reflection: On Hard Work." *Qualitative Sociology* 9(1):48-53.
- Rubin, Gayle. 1993. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." Pp. 3-43 in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. By Henry Abelove et al. New York: Routledge.
- Scott, Catherine. 2015. "Safe Words: BDSM and the Concept of Consent." Pp. 85-100 in *Thinking Kink*. McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers: Jefferson, North Carolina.

- Sheff, Elisabeth and Corie Hammers. 2011. "The Privilege of Perversities: Race, Class, and Education among Polyamorists and Kinksters." *Psychology & Sexuality* 2(3):198-223.
- Stiles, Beverly L. and Robert E. Clark. 2011. "BDSM: A Subcultural Analysis of Sacrifices and Delights." *Deviant Behavior* 32:158-189.
- Suarez, Eliana, and Tahany M. Gadalla. 2010. "Stop Blaming the Victim: A Meta-Analysis on Rape Myths." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 25(11):2010-2035.
- Tyburczy, Jennifer. 2014. "Leather Anatomy: Crippling Homonormativity at International Mr. Leather." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 8(3):275-293.
- Weiss, Margot. 2011. *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Pleasure*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Young, Kathryn M. 2017. "Masculine Compensation and Masculine Balance: Notes on the Hawaiian Cockfight." *Social Forces* 95(4):1341-1370.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Introduction and Informed Consent

Definitions

1. What does BDSM mean to you?
2. How did you get involved with the BDSM community?
3. Where did you learn about BDSM for the first time?
4. How do you define consent?
 - a. Sexual?
 - b. Other?
 - c. If differences, ask to elaborate on why and what those differences are.
5. How did you learn about consent?
6. What does consent mean in the context of BDSM?

Giving and Taking Away Consent

7. Who gives consent in a BDSM interaction?
8. How do you know if consent is given?
 - a. Physical?
 - b. Verbal?
 - c. Other?
9. How is consent negotiated?
10. Who takes away consent in a BDSM interaction?
11. What happens if someone takes their consent away?
12. How do you know if consent has been taken away?
 - a. Physical?
 - b. Verbal?
 - c. Other?

Violation of Consent

13. What happens if someone's consent is violated?
14. How does the community react to consent being violated?
15. Have you ever had your consent violated?
 - a. **Yes:** Was this within or outside of the BDSM community?
 - b. **Yes:** Can you tell me what happened?
 - c. **Yes:** What happened after this occurred?
 - d. **No:** Can you give me an example of consent being violated?
 - e. **No:** Can you tell me what might happen after someone's consent has been violated?
16. Is there anything that I have neglected or that you would like to add?