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Consent Lessons from a Queer Kink Community
An Exploration of How Individuals Learn, Live, Embody and
Reflect Critical Consent Practices in Queer Kink Communities

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1. Introduction

I love the rules-of-play stump speech I give to the randoms I hook up with at fetish events—and now to Sam. It's a list of how I want to play, but it's also a list of how I'd like to be treated every moment of my life. Kink normalizes the idea that people will be happy to hear your boundaries, and I love that about kink, because deep down I wish I could have a rules-of-play conversation with my entire existence. (Sly 2023:14)

This reflection by Mx. Sly sums up certain core ideas behind this thesis. People in queer kink communities have found ways and tools to negotiate consent, they have developed skills around knowing and expressing their own limits, boundaries, desires and wishes and they put these skills and tools into practice. These skills, tools and practices are not only important to kink or to the realm of sexuality but are applicable to general social interactions and to how people wish to navigate their social encounters. Sly's wish for applying these practices to the entirety of their existence points to a deep commitment to consent and a strong conviction that it improves their life in some form.

Consent has been heralded as the save all solution to end sexual violence and also to ensure people have self-determined, enjoyable and satisfying sexual experiences. But even though people increasingly are aware of the concept of consent and its importance in the realm of the sexual, the promised drop in sexual violence and the spike in autonomy and pleasure have not seemed to take effect. Additionally, consent has not been clearly or succinctly defined and is mostly understood to be self-evident. Does consent then serve us as a useful tool or is it unable to deliver what it has promised?

People such as Mx. Sly and other kink practitioners seem to both apply consent regularly and still hold it in high regard. There must therefore be something to it. Within queer kink communities, consent is not merely a checklist for managing sexual encounters, but an expansive, relational ethic which is based on mutual care, respect, trust and communication. In these spaces, consent is seen as ongoing, relational and dynamic. This stands in contrast to mainstream understandings of consent which are shaped by a liberal outlook on consent which reduces it to a binary, momentary exchange of permission, which does not usually account for social hierarchies and power structures.

Thus, before throwing consent to the wind I want to turn to people who do successfully use consent to navigate their interpersonal experiences hoping that from how they have learnt the necessary skills, what their understanding of consent is and how it influences their daily

lives we will reach more insight into how consent could still be a useful concept to navigate social encounters, dynamics and relationships.

BDSM has long been pathologized and up until recently the academic literature on BDSM “failed to accurately capture the lived experience of modern BDSM practitioners” (Dunkley and Brotto 2020:658). This gap in the research is now being closed by researchers in various areas (Simula 2023:4) and consent has been widely established as the central tenet of BDSM which distinguishes it from violence or abuse (Bauer 2014:77). However, research on BDSM mostly treats consent as “an uncomplicated given” (Bauer 2021:767) while research on consent is strongly focussed on the practices of heterosexual college students (Fanghanel 2020:270). Additionally, existing research on consent fails to look at already existing knowledge on consent (Beres 2022:137) and “[t]here is an absence of understanding about how sexual consent occurs in practice and how broader social forces influence the perceptions of sexual consent” (Beres 2022:140).

While researches on BDSM stress the importance of consent in it, very little research has looked at consent practices in kink communities in detail. Robin Bauer (2021) has analyzed “how les-bi-trans-queer BDSM technologies of consent disrupt specific sociosexual norms (...) [as well as] limits of these consent technologies” (Bauer 2021:768). But the way in which people in queer kink communities learn, practice, apply and struggle with consent practices has not been studied in detail.

I want to explore the ways in which engagement with a queer kink community shapes individuals’ experiences, understandings, and practices of consent. I hope that this can lead to a clearer understanding of how people learn to practice critical consent, how they apply this knowledge, how it shapes their understanding of consent and how this differs from the mainstream understanding. I hope that this knowledge can serve to further consent education and application so that consent might deliver on what it has promised. My research question in this thesis is: How does participation in a queer kink community influence individuals’ understanding and practice of consent?

With my research I hope to further understandings of how people practice critical consent and what understandings of consent enable interactions based on respect and care. Additionally, because the BDSM community has historically pathologized and continues to be stigmatized and misrepresented, I want this thesis to amplify voices of the community and give a chance for kinky people to represent their own experiences. In doing so I hope for my research to have a positive impact on the BDSM community by contributing to a

destigmatization of BDSM and I am hoping to contribute to the wider society through offering new perspectives on consent and consent negotiations.

In order to gain an insight into how people in queer kink communities practice, view, learn and pass on consent knowledge and tools I have conducted semi-structured interviews in which I asked people of varying levels of expertise in kink questions about consent in their kink practices and beyond. For my interviews I found people who were relatively new to the queer kink scene as well as people who have been part of it for more than ten years and so I managed to capture a variety of perspectives on consent practice inside and outside the kink scene.

I will first give an overview of relevant theories on consent from how it has been established politically and socially as an important concept to how it came to be seen as pertinent to the sexual sphere. I will also talk about limits and critique of consent as a concept and then differentiate between a liberal and a critical understanding of consent which is important for understanding how queer kinky people practice consent. I then present how conceptions of BDSM have developed from pathologization to a sense of queerness. I also present feminist critiques of BDSM and about what role consent plays in BDSM. To finish my theoretical chapter I show how research on consent is relevant to existing scholarship and to society in general. In my chapter on methodology I discuss how I conducted my interviews and how I then analysed my data. Additionally I talk about my own position and try to reflect on how my own position has influenced my research. After explaining the context of my research field I go on to analyse the interviews. To do this I have grouped my analysis into chapters that on the one hand represent my participants' kink learning trajectories and on the other hand group concepts and themes together. This led me to first talk about how my interview participants' experienced and understood consent before joining queer kink communities, then how they learnt about consent in these communities and then how they learnt skills necessary to implement their new knowledges. I then talk about risk, safety and mistakes in consent practices and about consent in relation to societal power structures. Then I talk about how my interlocutors pass their consent knowledge on and how they carry it outside of the kink community and in my last chapter I talk about difficulties and open questions that my interlocutors face and have in their consent practices and understandings.

1.1 Terminology Used

In the context of kink and BDSM there is certain specific terminology used by practitioners and in literature. I give a quick overview of terms used in this thesis here.

- **BDSM** is an acronym of Bondage & Discipline, Dominance & Submission and Sadism & Masochism. In early literature it is referred to as only SM which stands for Sadomasochism. Sometimes it is also written as s/M, S/M or S&M.
- **Kink** is an umbrella term that subsumes “a wide range of non-normative erotic or positive emotion-arousing interests and behaviors” (Sprott et al. 2021:709) including BDSM as well as fetishes, sensations play, role play etc.

The terms kink and BDSM denote different things but are often conflated or used interchangeably in everyday usage (Liang 2022:386) which is why I will use them interchangeably as well unless my interlocutors draw a distinct difference between these terms.

- The kink **Community** is both used to talk about the general public kink scene and also to specific communities within this bigger community and is “perhaps best described as a community of communities” (Graham et al. 2016:899).
- **Play** is to engage in kink activity. To play with each other is to engage in kink with each other.
- The **Scene** is shorthand for “**the kink scene**” which denotes public spaces, communities, meet ups, workshops etc. which revolve around kink. Being part of the scene describes being actively engaged in some form in these spaces, communities or events.

A **Scene** can also refer to a kinky practice or activity that is limited in time.

- **Vanilla** is the opposite of kinky. To be vanilla is to not be kinky.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Positioning of the Theory

When researching and writing the theoretical framework on which I am building my analysis of Viennese BDSM communities I have come across literature that presents considerations around consent as universal claims for how consent is understood and how it can be implemented. However, a majority of the literature I cite and base my arguments on is produced in the Global North predominantly by white authors who have been raised in a eurocentric tradition of thought. I would therefore contend that a lot of the literature I have found and cited, which has shaped my argument and my approach is not universally applicable but eurocentric in nature. A lot of the debate around consent and BDSM is held in academic circles in the Global North and debates which reach the general public around sexual autonomy and coercion such as the #MeToo debate are “largely US-centric and English-language dominated, [thus] most of the mainstream social and traditional media conversations and legal precedents are as well” (Sikka 2022:26). Additionally, Western feminist thought and debate became universalized through Western imperialism and the ensuing financial, cultural and academic hegemony and since appropriated and expanded on by theorists and activists of the Global South. However, this does not mean that these are the only debates around these issues or the only engagement with consent and sexualities. There exist various traditions of thought around issues of consent, autonomy, agreement and sexuality. Examples of these are the consensus principle underpinning social interactions in African societies and which structured many pre colonial African societies politically (Wiredu 1995:53) or the understanding of consent in the context of islamic jurisprudence (Hedayati-Kakhki 2016). These traditions have also been shaped through imperialism and the struggle for liberation and developments of global hegemony. As such the Global South is “a radical space of articulation forged in and through anti-colonial resistance, nationalism and the struggle for women’s emancipation” (Lukose 2018:45) in its own right which presents important contributions to thoughts around consent, BDSM and sexuality. As I interview BDSM community members based in Vienna who have predominantly grown up in the Global North, their understanding of consent, sexuality, bodily autonomy, agreement and communication has been shaped by theories and ideas circulating in the Global North. To provide a framework which makes their experiences with consent learning intelligible I present an overview of theory which explains this Western informed approach to BDSM and consent. I have tried to include marginalized authors in my work but still my theoretical framework is a predominantly Western one. This is not due to

the fact that it is the only or the best way to approach this topic but because I have been influenced by a Western tradition which in turn has shaped my research interest and my research question and because my interlocutors have an understanding based on this Western line of thought and I am trying to make sense of their understandings of consent thus needing to approach it through the theoretical underpinning which shaped this understanding.

This research thus does not have a universal claim on questions around consent and sexuality but a limited and largely eurocentric one.

2.2 Consent

Consent in its broadest definition can be understood as an agreement between two or more parties. It is initially a political and legal term but has expanded its significance into fields such as medicine and intimate interpersonal relationships (Garcia 2023:21). Even though consent is such a pervasive term and concept and so broadly applied, there is not one clear definition of what it means. Manon Garcia positions this as “one of the important problems raised by consent: it is polysemic—it means different things in different contexts and to different people. There is, in other words, nothing simple about the nature of the agreement that consent is supposed to be” (Garcia 2023:24). To understand our conception of the concept of consent today I will give a brief overview of how the use of the concept developed historically in a Western context.

2.2.1 The Liberated Subject and its Choices

During the European Enlightenment, the idea of a social contract between the state and its citizens was used to justify political power, which obtained its legitimacy through consent (Hobbes 1651; Locke 1690). The idea was that individuals implicitly or explicitly consented to giving up some of their rights and freedoms to the state in order to be protected by the state in return. This led to changes on how the population was perceived.

Individuals began to be seen as rational beings, born free and equal to each other – or as naturally free and equal – and as individuals who create their social relationships and institutions for themselves. Political institutions, in particular, began

to be seen as, properly, based on convention – on contract, consent, and agreement.
(Pateman 1980:21)

In this way, consent became a central issue of political legitimacy. Additionally, the question of who was to be seen as a rational and free being, capable of consenting became an important matter and continues to be discussed and shift definition even today. In the age of the Enlightenment for example women were seen as “a source of disorder to the state” (Pateman 1980:21) and as posing “a permanent threat to political order” (Pateman 1980:23). Women were not seen as part of the social contract, but as the property of men and deemed neither rational nor equal. Therefore sexual violence was long “seen primarily in relation to abduction, and the damage done seen first in relation to the ‘master’” (Vigarello 2001:49). This view of sexual violence was based on a sexist system which subordinated women to be objects owned by men and also on a racist regime which racialized these offences and justified racial domination on the grounds of the protection of white women (Stoler 1989). Liberal feminism thus fought for women to gain the status of citizens. This led to women being recognized as full subjects with rights, including a right over their own self and body. This meant that rape was no longer seen as theft but instead, “the gravity of the offence was determined by its threat to the intimate and private body” (Vigarello 2001:88).

However, men still held rights over women and women’s sexuality. Especially within marriage sexualized violence was oftentimes not recognized as such but seen as the right of a husband to his wife. Women’s sexuality was therefore far from autonomous or free (Garcia 2023). The idea and goal of self determined sexuality for women gave rise to the sexual revolution in the 1970s. Feminists theorized how the distinction between a private and a public sphere was part of a patriarchal and capitalist system that pervaded all forms of life. The slogan “the personal is political” stems from the title of an article by Carol Hanisch about consciousness raising groups which were places for women to meet and discuss seemingly private problems. Seeing how these problems were shared among many women led to an “increased awareness of the oppressive mechanisms of patriarchy” (Garcia 2023:99). In the article, Hanisch emphasised that these groups were not merely places to vent personal frustrations but that they had great political significance. “One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution” (Hanisch 1970:76). Realizing the structural nature of patriarchal oppression and its pervasiveness in all spheres of life served to politicise women and as an important step towards collective resistance and action (Garcia 2023).

Issues that were previously deemed as private and therefore not seen as a part of public concern or politics were now linked to systems and institutions of oppression (Garcia 2023). This included issues around sexuality and sex.

With the feminists who arose during the sexual revolution, we can say something further: through sexuality, a certain form of social domination is played out—that of men over women. Some feminists have called this heteropatriarchy. (Garcia 2023:99)

The realization that sex and sexuality is not merely a private concern without any relation to public political debate but at the heart of issues around patriarchal oppression and pervaded by these oppressive structures moved sex and sexuality into the focus of feminist theorizing and activism. If patriarchal power is deeply entrenched in sex and sexuality, these are deeply political and feminists emphasised that a „feminist theory of sexuality would locate sexuality within a theory of gender inequality, meaning the social hierarchy of men over women“ (MacKinnon 1989:316). Feminists recognized that sexuality was tied to questions around patriarchy and male oppression which was kept alive through heteropatriarchal norms and institutions such as marriage. Adrienne Rich (1980) wrote about the suppression and erasure of lesbian attraction and relationships in order to uphold institutions which subordinated women to male power. She writes that in heteropatriarchy „we are confronting not a simple maintenance of inequality and property possession, but a pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness, which suggests that an enormous potential counterforce is having to be restrained“ (Rich 1980:640). Even heterosexual attraction is thus political and a tool of domination and power.

Drawing from these realizations the question of how to navigate these deeply entrenched power imbalances and oppressive forces in sexuality and sex arose. How do feminists have sex? For some feminists the answer to this question is: Not with men. Some radical feminists suggested that the only way for feminists to have sex was to renounce heterosexuality completely and become political lesbians (Coveney et al. 1981). For others the answer to this question is: As freely and liberated as possible. Liberal feminists decided to focus on the liberation of sexuality towards women's choices and preferences and to free sexuality as much as possible from heteropatriarchal confines. This pursuit has led to freedoms of women to have sex and to engage in different sexual activities as they please, but has not led to the hoped for freedom from patriarchal power and oppression (Fahs 2014).

2.2.2 Consent as Pertinent to Sexuality

Academia started to be concerned with the topic of consent only from the 1990s onwards. “Before the 1990s, students and researchers with an interest in reading about sexual consent would have struggled to find an academic literature” (Cowling and Reynolds 2004:1) as the focus of discussion instead “was on the prevalence and incidence of non consenting sex and the crisis of rape, forced sex and sexual abuse against women” (Cowling and Reynolds 2004:1). Once consent started to be seen as a central issue regarding sexuality it was first in a negative sense where the absence of consent was used to demarcate rape and sexual violence and “there has been surprisingly little investigation of how real people negotiate sexual consent in their daily lives” (Cowling and Reynolds 2004:11).

Once rape was seen not as theft but as a violation of an individual's rights and autonomy and sexuality was declared as something that should be lived without patriarchal oppression, consent became a central issue in questions around sex and sexuality. Whereas sexual conduct used to be judged as good or bad or as right or wrong based on sexual morality, now consent has taken the central role in judging right and wrong and good and bad in sexual matters. Sexual morality privileged a “charmed circle” of practices such as heterosexual, monogamous, married, vanilla and procreative sexual acts that were deemed desirable and natural over practices that were deemed “abnormal, unnatural, sick or sinful” (Rubin 1992). Now consent has taken this role and “has increasingly become a crucial criterion for distinguishing ethical from unethical sexual conduct in modern industrialized societies” (Bauer 2021:767). On the one hand, consent is used to demarcate sex from rape, on the other hand, consent is seen as the base from which people can live out their sexuality autonomously and freely. Consent has therefore become of central importance in our conversations and discussions around sex and sexuality. “Today consent carries such weight that it is, according to countless millions of people, the only criterion for distinguishing good sex from bad sex, sex from rape” (Garcia 2023:36). Consent as the ultimate criterion to determine what is good and what is right leads to its important position in issues around sexuality and sex. Consent is called “moral magic” by theorists as it turns something that would constitute a violation if it happened without consent into something permissible or even into mutual happiness when it happens with consent (Marino 2019:52).

Manon Garcia explains this “moral magic” of consent as follows:

[W]e believe that when we consent to something, the result is to modify, as if by magic, our own and others' rights and obligations. Consent transforms that which is

forbidden, making it permissible so that theft, say, becomes borrowing. And an act that would have been rape is, as if by magic, just sex. (Garcia 2023:38)

However, even though consent holds this importance, it is often not explained further as it is considered self-evident (Bauer 2014:75) and the concept of consent remains elusive and magical. Even in academia “[s]exual consent is a concept that is often taken for granted. Many scholars use it without defining it explicitly, assuming a shared understanding of the concept” (Beres and MacDonald 2015:419). However, researchers use the concept in wildly different ways. Consent is for example seen as a boundary between the impermissible and the permissible or it is understood as an agreement which sometimes has to be freely given or enthusiastic to count as consent and sometimes not or it is seen as a disposition or internal willingness or it is framed as a moral transformation (see Beres 2007). These different approaches and the absence of a shared definition lead to a lack of nuanced understanding of what consent is. From research on sexualized violence and rape we gain an understanding of what consent is not but not of what constitutes it in a positive sense (Cowling and Reynolds 2004:11) and how it can be actively achieved (Bauer 2014:75). Even though consent is used to distinguish sex from rape and good sex from bad sex and therefore has a central role to play in sex and sexuality, we do not have a clear understanding of what it is and how it can be established.

There have been attempts to codify consent or at least to develop guidelines that aim at establishing consent. An early example of this is the Antioch Sexual Offense Prevention Policy which was implemented at Antioch College in the US. This policy was written by young students of the college in 1990 and requires students to obtain verbal and mutual agreement to every new step or new level of sexual action. It garnered a lot of public attention and “led to extensive American, and indeed, world-wide controversy and ridicule” (Cowling 2004:20). The Antioch Sexual Offence Prevention Policy as “the first affirmative-consent sex policy” (Garcia 2023:36) sparked a wider debate about affirmative consent and how consent can and should be established and signalled. Affirmative consent aims at moving away from a heteronormative framework in which men are perceived as always consenting and wanting sex and women as having to set boundaries and having to resist if they do not want sex and instead putting the responsibility for consent on all parties involved. Additionally, “it does not require that a woman prove she did not consent, but instead asks what happened to show and demonstrate consent” (Beres 2007:103).

There are different assumptions as to why the Antioch Sexual Offense Prevention Policy garnered so much attention and controversy. On the one hand, it requires methods of direct and open sexual communication which “tend not to be very popular because they tend to be

confrontational and make us feel vulnerable as we expose our innermost desires” (Humphreys 2004:210). On the other hand, “the code was widely felt to impose artificial requirements on an intimate area of life in a mechanical fashion” (Cowling 2004:20). People tend to believe sex and sexuality to be natural, therefore they assume that sex should occur spontaneously and unplanned and that people should automatically know what to do and how to act in a sexual encounter (Humphreys 2004:210). As sex is assumed natural, talking about it seems unnatural and is even regarded as a failure by heterosexual men (Waldby, Kippax, and Crawford 1993:254) as it indicates that they did not manage to follow the seemingly natural order of things sufficiently in order to please their partner. Bauer therefore posits that the resistance to the Antioch College Policy was due to it questioning heteropatriarchal standards and norms around sex and sexuality.

I suggest that the resistance to the Antioch College Code and communicative sexuality was largely caused by its implicit attack on heteronormative ideas about sexuality, namely, that sex is natural and not something that is learned and that the male in heterosexual encounters orchestrates the encounter, which is geared toward his desires and a heteronormative script. (Bauer 2014:87)

Affirmative consent policies are not only a way to ensure explicit consent is given in sexual encounters but simultaneously endangers heteropatriarchal sexual norms of sex as being actively pursued and directed by men and passively allowed by women with a focus on male pleasure and orgasm.

Even though affirmative consent approaches and methods have been met with resistance and ridicule, they have widely taken hold in activism campaigns, policies and laws for rape prevention or definition (Beres and MacDonald 2015:418; Halley 2016:257; Marino 2019:43). Research shows that people most frequently communicate consent through implicit and non-verbal consent cues (Beres and MacDonald 2015:419; Cowling 2004:24), consent education and activism aims at raising the level of explicitly communicated affirmative consent in order to avoid unclarities or misunderstandings of non-verbal clues. However, the assumption that rape and sexual violence happen due to misunderstandings or miscommunication “sustains contemporary rape culture” (Fanghanel 2020:271) as misinterpreting non-verbal signals can be used as an excuse for rape. A focus strictly on unambiguous verbal communication for valid consent “lower[s] the standard for communicative competence, disconnect[s] it from historical-cultural context, and miss[es] opportunities to politicize consent” (Harris 2018:155). Relying simply on a “yes means yes” and “no means no” framework does not account for social power relations, context, coercion or other forms of communication that indicate a yes or no in the absence of clear verbal

clues. Consent education and activism should therefore embrace the complexity of consent and of communication and focus on how people already successfully negotiate and indicate willingness to have sex.

The pathway to more ethical and engaged sex is not to tell young people they need to ask explicitly about willingness to have sex, it is to work with them to make their already existing skills in empathy and social cues more visible and to allow them to see how they translate to the sexual world. (Beres 2022:150)

The focus of consent education should not be on teaching people communication. Most people already possess skills to successfully communicate verbally as well as non-verbally their agreement or disagreement as well as their enjoyment or discontent in a variety of situations. The focus should rather be on how to hone those skills and use them in sexual contexts in order to communicate and negotiate consent. However, consent as a core organizing principle of sexuality has come into question.

2.2.3 Limits of Consent

Consent has firmly taken hold as a moral and legal basis for sex and sexuality. However, there is no agreement neither in academia nor in everyday usage how to define consent or what it exactly is and entails. The concept is therefore vague and ambiguous and it is not exactly clear how to implement it in practice. Even legal definitions of consent differ wildly for example between ages of consent and between what counts as consent from the absence of violent struggle to clear verbal affirmation (Beres 2014:376). Consent is understood to be an important measure of sexual ethics even though as a concept it is vague and messy and therefore its usefulness as a framework has come into question.

Consent, as many scholars have recently argued, has been taken as an all-encompassing term, obscuring the nuances of the conflicting and ambiguous issues that fall within its remit. In its use in everyday experience, it has come to be equated with negotiation, desire, and pleasure, to stand in for the whole domain of ethical sexual practice, a conceptual conflation that is problematic and misleading. (Franklin et al. 2023:2)

Consent is expected to cover any and all moral, ethical and legal issues around sexuality, which is a task beyond its scope. Arguing against contemporary consent activism Joseph Fishel contests: “consent is *absolutely not everything*” (Fischel 2019:13 emphasis in the

original). A few things Fischel lists as missing from consent for it to be everything it is made out to be are: information about all other possible choices, the freedom to try out different aspects of the activity in question and an accounting for the level of experience of the parties involved.

The assumption that consent can cover any and all moral and legal issues around sex stems from differing base assumptions as to what it is and the variety of definitions arising from these differing understandings of the concept. Consent has for example become the distinguishing factor between acceptable and unacceptable sex in two different ways:

First, consent distinguishes between sex that is morally *right* (permissible) and sex that is morally *wrong* in the sense that it is—or should be—prohibited. Second, consent distinguishes between sex that is positively *good* and sex to which one may have moral objections—practices that are not necessarily reprehensible but that are problematic on the moral level—and which therefore is *bad*. (Garcia 2023:38 emphasis in the original)

Consent is used as a framework to not only distinguish sex from rape but also to distinguish good sex where mutual desire and pleasure is present from bad sex where that is not the case. According to Manon Garcia, two different philosophical approaches to consent lie at the basis of this twofold distinction. A liberal understanding of consent demarcates right from wrong sex whereas a Kantian approach to consent draws the line between good and bad sex (Garcia 2023:38).

2.2.3.1 Liberal Consent

The liberal model of consent assumes agreement between free, autonomous and rational agents. This model has been criticised especially by feminists for assuming that people are autonomous and free agents who base their choices purely on reason (Sikka 2022:31). Additionally, the assumption that consent can be freely given obscures deeply embedded structural and social inequalities and relations of power that play a role in how we make our choices (Bauer 2014; Sikka 2022). However, liberal consent and slogans built on it such as “yes means yes” assume consent to be always freely given which “obscure[s] the socio-cultural constraints of class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity, disability and so on, which lace all social and sexual encounters” (Fanghanel 2020:280). The liberal assumptions of autonomy and rationality grew out of androcentric and sexist assumptions valuing rationality over emotions and emphasising individuality over community. Additionally they

decontextualise gendered and racialised dynamics of oppression and subordination and assume subjects to act in a social vacuum. Even though feminist thinkers have been at the forefront of showing how sexuality and sexual attraction and desire is political, the sex-positive movement has depoliticized sex by focussing merely on a liberal form of consent. The aim to not moralize about women's sexual behaviour and instead take consent as the only boundary of sex has led to an attitude where "[s]ex is no longer morally problematic or unproblematic: it is instead merely wanted or unwanted" (Srinivasan 2021:82). In this way, a liberal and sex-positive view of sexuality and consent "risks covering not only for misogyny, but for racism, ableism, transphobia and every other oppressive system that makes its way into the bedroom through the seemingly innocuous mechanism of 'personal preference'" (Srinivasan 2021:84). Once a liberal understanding of consent is the only confine for sexuality, the power structures that pervade our decisions to agree or disagree and that shape our desires are made irrelevant. The liberal model of consent as a rational and free agreement can only distinguish between voluntary or forced activity on a surface level. It does not look at underlying structures or dynamics that shaped the decision and can not account for coercion or societal pressure.

Additionally, this approach to consent as a division between acceptable and unacceptable sex is "consistent with a carceral approach to justice" (Sikka 2022:55) as it advocates for state intervention in any non-consensual sexual activity. This turn towards state coercion and punishment signifies a shift "away from the transformation of socio-economic life [and instead] towards securing women's equality in the preexisting structures of capitalism" (Srinivasan 2021:163). However, reliance on the carceral state system comes at the cost of marginalized groups which suffer from increased state violence and structural conditions of poverty, racism and precarity which increase through increased state violence.

Liberal consent is therefore inadequate if we strive to account for social power dynamics in our sexualities. Consent in this way is a way for subjects to express their autonomy to decide for or against certain things. However, liberal consent is not indicative of pleasure, desire or structural force even though in certain understandings of consent people assume it to be.

2.2.3.2 Critical or Queer Consent

Liberal consent is not equipped to account for societal structures that shape our decisions or to assess pleasure or desire. However, an understanding of consent that draws on Kantian philosophy, according to Manon Garcia, can account for factors of pleasure or desire when

consenting. This “Kantian conception, which is more demanding than the liberal one, also invests consent with the capacity to justify actions” (Garcia 2023:37). Manon Garcia describes how Kantian philosophy leads to an understanding of consent that goes beyond a liberal understanding of agreement and accounts for the wellbeing of the parties involved.

The categorical imperative to act only in ways that you would want to become universalized laws is at the basis of Kant’s moral philosophy. This categorical imperative paired with Kant’s maxime to not use the humanity of oneself or others merely as means to an end (see Johnson and Cureton 2024) leads to a moral philosophy that asks people to account for the wellbeing of others in their actions. Onora O’Neill applies Kantian principles to consent and posits that ensuring the humanity of others is what differentiates “genuine, morally significant consent” from “spurious or morally trivial consent” (O’Neill 1985:258). O’Neill outlines three significant points which ensure consent to be genuine and morally significant. Firstly genuine consent is specific and consent to one aspect of a proposal does not imply consent to all aspects of a proposal. Secondly consent can only be valid if dissent is a real and valid option. Thirdly genuine consent needs to take into account all possible limitations to consent such as coercion, deception and force but also personal history and relations, partial autonomy or cognitive limitations of the other party (O’Neill 1985:258–60). This application of Kantian moral philosophy to consent thus goes far beyond a liberal understanding of consent as an agreement between autonomous and rational subjects and introduces care for each other’s humanity and dignity as an important factor when consenting.

Manon Garcia writes that the issues that are raised with the concept of consent are oftentimes caused by a conflation of liberal and Kantian consent. While the liberal understanding of consent is used and applied, there is also an expectation for consent to fulfill the justificatory power that the Kantian conception of consent delivers (Garcia 2023:37–38). This means that we attribute to consent more functions than it can fulfill because we use a liberal version of consent hoping for the moral implications of a consent that includes care for the humanity and dignity of everyone involved. So what is there beyond liberal consent that can deliver ethical consent? Consent that follows Kantian principles of care and consideration has been termed critical or queer consent (Bauer 2014, 2021; Beres 2022; Sikka 2022).

Robin Bauer contrasts liberal consent with queer consent stating that queer consent, “[r]ather than starting off the premise of an autonomous subject with free will, [queer] consent is (...) considered an affective process that is situated in complex social power dynamics” (Bauer 2021:779). This understanding of consent expands the liberal notion of consent which is “routinely aligned with heteronormativity, individualism, and white

subjectivity” (Franklin et al. 2023:4) by including queer realities and stories which complicate liberal understandings of autonomy, rationality and free choice. Queering consent in this way does not necessarily presuppose queer individuals negotiating and enacting consent. Instead queerness is a form of interruption against heteronormativity that opens up alternatives. “To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things” (Ahmed 2006:565). A queering of consent thus allows for looking at consent beyond heteronormative scripts and expectations. I will talk further about the term Queer in Chapter 2.3.1 and in my Analysis.

This queer consent, also termed critical consent, addresses “the complications of consent through individual social hierarchies” (Bauer 2014:75) and leads to consent becoming something that is negotiated and affective. In order for it to be affective and critical, it requires “an awareness of the limits of consent and of individual agency in negotiating (...) in order to assess the validity of the agreements between partners” (Bauer 2014:89). This assessment is not a one time action but an ongoing process which differentiates it again from liberal consent that is understood as a one time agreement.

This means that critical or queer consent requires an understanding of consent beyond the liberal model commonly circulated, of its limits and of how it can be negotiated and established. Additionally it requires an understanding and assessment of the contexts in which it is given and social dynamics or hierarchies which might influence it. These are skills that have to be acquired and can be honed and trained. Queer consent thus requires people to actively engage with questions around consent and social power dynamics. This engagement can take various shapes from reading literature, engaging with social media surrounding these topics, taking courses, peer discussions, practical experience etc. One way to engage in these topics and acquire a deeper understanding of consent is through the kink community which sets consent as a central principle (Bauer 2021:768; Fanghanel 2020:269) and passes on knowledge about consent within the community (Beres and MacDonald 2015:418; Rubin 2012:118). How this knowledge is produced and passed on within the kink community will be part of my research. The choice of using a kink community to talk about issues around consent is not incidental as BDSM practitioners are at the forefront of developing critical consent tools.

2.2.4 Why Look at BDSM?

To gain a deeper understanding of consent, how it can be established, the role it plays and what it is, looking towards BDSM can prove insightful. „BDSM subculture has for some time been considered an interesting source of philosophical reflection on sexual consent“ (Garcia 2023:64) as it makes sexual consent negotiation explicit and intentional.

[T]he most fruitful arena in which to test each approach to consent may be BDSM. In a way, the philosophical and legal debates surrounding consent in BDSM are a magnified version of debates surrounding sexual consent generally. BDSM practices illustrate how the liberal view of consent can legitimize and normalize sex that was once prohibited. Yet the case of BDSM also demonstrates the limits of liberal consent. In that regard, BDSM shows how a Kantian analysis of human dignity can be useful in pinpointing moral issues that stem from society's antagonism toward particular sexual practices. (Garcia 2023:62)

BDSM places a decided emphasis on consent as the basis for any kinky activity. This emphasis is underlined in research in line with the self representation of BDSM practitioners but also to distance BDSM from attempts to pathologize or demonize it by arguing that consent transforms through its magic actions that would without consent be violence or abuse into acceptable and encourageable actions of realisation of one's own desire and sexuality (Bauer 2021:769). Additionally, the focus on consent in BDSM is important because there is the potential for injuries and accidents to happen, an ongoing and critical consent practice is used to reduce harm or injuries and even though accidents do occur, kink “particularly when practiced by people in touch with s/M communities, has a safety record most sports teams would envy” (Rubin 2012:117). The potential for accidents and injuries results in the limits of liberal consent becoming more pertinent in BDSM as acts with this potential should not be agreed to due to societal pressure or social hierarchies. In opposition to stigmatization and as a response to the possibility of accidents and injury, the BDSM community is concerned with a deeper understanding of consent and “necessitates that both parties consent fully, clearly and often” (Sikka 2022:36).

I do not claim that BDSM communities do not also deal with issues of abuse and consent violations or that all kink communities practice consent in an ideal way. However, I do argue that there are BDSM communities which develop knowledge and tools to implement critical consent and that we can derive valuable insights about consent from their engagement with consent practices.

Not only can a strong emphasis on consent be found in BDSM communities which goes beyond the widely circulated liberal understanding of consent but the engagement with kink communities can also shift the focus of consent from avoiding violation to generating pleasure. BDSM presents “a paradigm shift from consent for harm reduction to consent for enabling pleasure and the exploration of desires” (Banerjee, Merchant, and Sharma 2018:313). In kink communities, “consent is framed as not simply a way to avoid negative outcomes but also an ongoing process that can encourage positive experiences between consenting adults” (Graham et al. 2016:905) and so becomes a way to negotiate pleasure. At the same time, kinky consent practice places the responsibility for consent on all participants involved which challenges heteronormative ideas of men as aggressors and women as passive victims (Banerjee et al. 2018:315). This shared responsibility necessitates people to know more about their own pleasures, desires and limits and to voice and communicate them to others which leads to a more self determined and autonomous sexuality focussing desire and pleasure.

Due to these factors of how BDSM engages with questions around consent, it is “often discussed as representative of what is possible with respect to embedding a culture of consent into society more widely” (Sikka 2022:36). This means that looking at consent practices in kink is useful for deepening our understanding of critical consent and how it can be practised and implemented into more areas of society. Again, not all kink communities are at the forefront of the discussion around consent but especially queer BDSM communities are “an exception in [their] (...) explicit negotiation and establishing of consent beforehand and [their] (...) extensive and sophisticated communication about sex and power in general” (Bauer 2014:75). This is why I chose to carry out my research in queer BDSM communities.

2.3 Kink and BDSM

2.3.1 From Pathology to Queerness

The concept of BDSM as a distinct form of sexuality stems from a history of pathologization of sexualities that deviated from the heteronormative standard. Richard von Krafft-Ebing coined the terms sadism and masochism in his influential work *Psychopathia sexualis* (Krafft-Ebing 1886) in which he described non-normative sexualities. He was a forensic psychiatrist who published works on criminal psychology and legal psychopathology and

was in his days considered “as the world’s foremost authority on sexual behaviour” (Bullough and Bullough 2019:67). The examples he used to describe sadism and masochism were “derived solely from clinical case studies from his own practice, from historical and anecdotal illustrations and from literary figures” (Bauer 2014:7). As he was a forensic psychiatrist working with criminal offenders his sample was strongly biased and referred mostly to non-consensual and harmful acts which had attracted institutional attention (Bauer 2014:7). Krafft-Ebing portrayed sadism and masochism as mental illnesses or sexual perversions and pathologized these practices (Simula 2023:28). Sadomasochism serves as a good example of how pathology is created by the medical community as “until it became a diagnosis it received little attention and was not even classified as a sin” (Bullough and Bullough 2019:207). However, Krafft-Ebing’s work was very influential in the way BDSM was perceived in the medical community and as an extension by legal institutions and the general public.

Studies of BDSM continued to adopt the view of BDSM as a pathological issue for which a “treatment” had to be found up until “well into the late-twentieth century” (Simula 2019:4). Since then, perspectives on BDSM and kink have evolved significantly and research on BDSM is now done in various fields such as biology, neuroscience, sociology, anthropology, theology, legal studies, literary studies, leisure studies etc. (Simula 2023:4) and has generally grown exponentially (Simula 2019). This growing body of literature “suggests that the early theories and diagnostic systems failed to accurately capture the lived experience of modern BDSM practitioners” (Dunkley and Brotto 2020:658). This has since improved and research by outside researchers focusses now strongly on the experiences and interpretations of the kink practitioners (Graham et al. 2016). An example of ethnographic research on BDSM communities is Stacey Newmahr’s ethnographic account of a BDSM community in the US (Newmahr 2011). Additionally, accounts by so-called “insider-researchers” who themselves practice kink have emerged such as Robin Bauer’s research on queer BDSM communities (Bauer 2014). The representation of BDSM has therefore historically changed drastically from an outside pathologizing and morally condemning view to accounts which represent the positions of kink practitioners.

The changes in how academia studies BDSM have led to changes in the medical field as well where BDSM has been recognised as not inherently pathological. This is reflected for example in the distinction that was introduced in 2010 in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) between pathological and consensual, non-pathological practices of BDSM (De Neef et al. 2019:135).

However, societal stigma is still prevalent and goes hand in hand with the criminalisation of BDSM activities which is still the case for countries such as Australia, Canada, England and Wales and the USA. There, any activity of BDSM that involves minor injuries is considered “unlawful regardless of the consent of participants, whereas BDSM activities that do not cross this line [of minor injury] will generally be lawful” (Bennett 2023:188).

In Austria the legal standing of kink depends on public conventions or morality. The Austrian criminal code rules on consenting to injury or harm as follows:

Eine Körperverletzung oder Gefährdung der körperlichen Sicherheit ist nicht rechtswidrig, wenn der Verletzte oder Gefährdete in sie einwilligt und die Verletzung oder Gefährdung als solche nicht gegen die guten Sitten verstößt.

Bodily harm or endangerment of physical safety is not unlawful if the injured or endangered party consents to it and the harm or endangerment as such does not violate good morals/conventions/manners.

(§ 90 Abs. 1 StGB, my translation)

This ruling results in an ambiguous legal definition as there is no clear legal definition for what constitutes good morals or conventions. Therefore, it is on the judges to decide case by case whether this stipulation is fulfilled or not.

This form of unclear legislation and the criminalisation of BDSM “is profoundly negative for BDSM participants and communities” (Bennett 2023:202) as it results in arbitrary enforcement and increases the societal stigma against BDSM even though in academia, non-pathological and non-stigmatized accounts of BDSM have been published.

The groundwork for this change in academic writing towards non-medical accounts of BDSM was established through political activism. The struggles and fights for de-pathologization of BDSM and the development of social recognition are linked closely to the ones of the queer liberation movement.

That shift in approaches to BDSM closely paralleled the shift away from understanding “homosexuality” as a form of deviance in favor of focusing on the ways that all sexualities are socially constructed within the context of social systems that frame some as “normal” and others as “deviant”. (Simula 2019:5)

Early struggles against homophobia resulted in the Gay and Lesbian liberation movements which aimed at reducing marginalisation and stigmatization of homosexuality but had

differing approaches, on one hand the liberationist model which sought to “overthrow the social institutions which marginalised and pathologised homosexuality” (Jagose 1996:37), and on the other hand the liberal ethnic model which constructed homosexuality as an identity and fought for equal rights within the existing system (Jagose 1996). However, these movements still followed naturalised assumptions of a binary division of gender based on which a binary division between homosexuality and heterosexuality follows (Marinucci 2016:43). Additionally, “by placing such an emphasis upon the gender of one’s sexual partner(s), other possible important sources of identity are marginalized, such as race and ethnicity” (Pickett 2021). The essentialist definitions of lesbian and gay identities which these liberation movements relied on led to the exclusion and marginalization of people who did not fit these predetermined categories. This in combination with debates around other non-normative forms of sexualities such as “bisexuality, sado-masochism, pornography, butch/fem, transvestism, prostitution and intergenerational sex implicitly questioned the hegemonic binarism of 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality'” (Jagose 1996:64) which lead to the emergence of queer theory in the late 1970s.

Queer theory posits that “the categories through which identity is understood are all social constructs rather than given to us by nature” (Pickett 2021) and therefore rejects naturalized assumptions around gender and sexuality and instead places an emphasis on their social construction. This central claim of queer theory that concepts such as gender and sexuality are socially constructed rejects ahistoric and universalized understandings of identity categories. This is substantiated by the historically and regionally different meanings of these terms. Once we understand gender and sexuality as socially constructed the binary divisions of female/male and homosexual/heterosexual appear as equally constructed (Pickett 2021).

Moving away from the labels Lesbian or Gay which are bound and essentialist identity categories towards a more open and fluid concept the term Queer is used without a fixed meaning but can be understood as “*whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is *nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence” (Halperin 1995:62 emphasis in the original). Thus queer theory encompasses identities that are positioned against the heteropatriarchal norms of sexuality and by “lacking any essence, queer does not marginalize those whose sexuality is outside of any gay or lesbian norm, such as sado-masochists” (Pickett 2021). Queer is therefore a concept that describes both non-cis-hetero sexual practices as well as a form of deviation and political opposition. Sara Ahmed advocates for retaining “both meanings of the word queer, which after all are historically related even if irreducible to each other. This means recalling what

makes specific sexualities describable as queer in the first place: that is, that they are seen as odd, bent, twisted“ (Ahmed 2006:565). The term Queer thus subsumes not only non-normative sexualities but also a political disposition to go against naturalized norms.

I would insist that queer describes a sexual as well as political orientation and that to lose sight of the sexual specificity of queer would also be to overlook how compulsory heterosexuality shapes what coheres as given and the effects of this coherence on those who refuse to follow this line. (Ahmed 2006:567)

Queer theory therefore lends itself for an analysis of BDSM as it allows for fluid and changing identities and practices which fall outside of the heteropatriarchal norms of sexuality without needing stable and fixed definitions which will invariably exclude certain people.

The openness of the term Queer has also led to anxieties about it being appropriated to “provide a political rationale and coverage in the near future for many of the most blatant and extreme forms of heterosexual and patriarchal power games” (Grosz 1995:249) as long as these power games are in some form non-normative. However, this fear of the appropriation of the term Queer by cis-gender and heterosexual individuals who see themselves as oppressed or marginalized or who use the term to gain benefits such as trust and inclusion in the queer community has not materialised and it remains a politically useful concept: “[T]he historical circumstances in which the term evolved have maintained its affiliation with anti-homophobic politics (...) [and] there is no sign of a change in the term’s fundamental orientation” (Jagose 1996:114). The term Queer has not been depoliticised as a result of its openness and fluidity and continues to signal an opposition to the norms of cis-het patriarchy while including marginalized identities that did not fit under identity categories such as Gay and Lesbian.

There is not one definition of queerness and “many of the common understandings of the term contradict each other irresolvably” (Jagose 1996:99). This is simultaneously a strength and a weakness of the term as it leads to inclusion while it is hard to grasp for a succinct analysis. “By refusing to crystallise in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” (Jagose 1996:99). I posit that the aspect of political opposition and resistance is an important factor in constituting queerness as it has evolved out of a fight against marginalisation and continues to stay relevant through this political struggle against restrictive and marginalizing norms and through a dismantling of their assumed naturalness.

Not only does queer theory allow for the analysis of non-normative sexualities and genders, it also calls into question the so called “ideal of harmonic sex” which Robin Bauer termed as follows:

The ideal sexual interaction has been increasingly constructed as occurring between egalitarian partners whose intimate bodily interactions are devoid of power dynamics and anything that may be thought of as unpleasant emotions or sensations, such as pain, humiliation, shame or discomfort. (Bauer 2014:3)

This stipulates that the ideal sexual interaction takes place between subjects that are equal and autonomous and that this liberal idea of two individuals as equal and autonomous is achievable (Bauer 2014). Sex and sexuality are therefore seen as separate from broader socio-political contexts. However, this liberal assumption of equality and autonomy obscures the power imbalances and hierarchies that are ingrained in sexuality as they are in every part of our lives (Bauer 2014; Fanghanel 2020:280). In kink, these power imbalances and hierarchies present a form of play and can be emphasised, constructed, brought to the forefront, acted out and deconstructed (Beres and MacDonald 2015:429; Fanghanel 2019:146; Liang 2022). Additionally, while sexuality is still “relegated to the private sphere (...), the practice of kink is a crucible that illuminates the social dimension of much other sexual practice [and in doing so it] (...) does interrupt dominant striations of sexual desire“ (Fanghanel 2019:146). Kink therefore has the potential to subvert power dynamics as they are brought out into the public sphere and become a form of play and as such a source of potential pleasure (Bauer 2008:248).

Additionally, instead of thriving to eliminate power imbalances and towards achieving equality, kink recognizes that that is not possible and instead creates an alternative which allows for a conscious navigation of difference and inequality:

Dyke + queer BDSM might, therefore, be understood as creating alternative intimacies and, more specifically, exuberant intimacies, intimacies that reject reason, moderation, mediocrity, harmony and equality as well as reproduction and usefulness. Instead, alternative intimacies celebrate difference, tension, intensity, risk, excess, ecstasy, wastefulness, perversity, campy extravagance, fluidity and insanity, as well as becoming something beyond the human. (Bauer 2014:4)

Queer kink goes beyond normative ideas of sexuality and opens up new ways of creating and practicing intimacies that are not bound by heteronormative standards around sexuality.

In this way kink can subvert our notions around sexuality but also around gender, race and other societal power structures (Bauer 2008; Fusillo 2020; Liang 2022). Instead of presupposing autonomous and rational individuals, “BDSM embraces multifaceted desires and multiple, contradictory selves” (Liang 2022:390) and enables practitioners to engage with others as part of a sociopolitical context instead of seeing their actions as apart from political issues. However, there has also been doubt about how far this critical engagement with power actually extends and whether societal power relations are subverted or rather reinforced in BDSM.

2.3.2 Feminist Critique of BDSM

The recognition that the personal is political is an important feminist milestone for arguing that systems of heteropatriarchy pervade our daily lives (Garcia 2023). Moving beyond a liberal understanding of free and autonomous subjects, feminist theorists have shown how structures of heteropatriarchy pervade our everyday lives (Hanisch 1970). This underpinning of heteropatriarchy shapes our understandings and views of the world to the extent that women are conditioned to submit to male power, some theorists even posit that submission is what defines femininity in patriarchy (Garcia 2021:38–39). Therefore, there has been considerable criticism of BDSM by lesbian feminist theorists who see BDSM as another form of patriarchal oppression and who claim that especially women have been socialised to consent to male dominance which does not mean it is in their own will (Bauer 2014:42).

When we abandon a strictly individual approach and instead adopt a structural one – when we consider that power relations structuring society as a whole affect what happens when individuals have sex with each other—we see that sex is political. In such a context, activities that appear innocuous and consensual may be revealed as seriously harmful, and according to certain radical critiques are necessarily so. (Garcia 2023:117)

Radical feminists have claimed that consent to BDSM is not meaningful as “the psychological realities of ‘consensual’ sadomasochism is so abstracted from the actual social and historical conditions that shape human relationships and erotic desire as to be virtually meaningless” (Linden 1982:7). Due to pervasive power structures that shape us, consensual BDSM is not possible according to some radical feminists. Additionally, even if the practice of BDSM is occurs between partners of the same gender, thus circumventing heteropatriarchal differences in power, these practices are seen as reinforcing and

perpetuating patriarchy and thus harmful to all marginalized people (Hoagland 1982:156; Meredith 1982:97).

These arguments are the basis for critiquing BDSM as another form of patriarchal power of men over women. After all, the sexual revolution has led to a liberation of sexuality for men, not necessarily for women, as the sex that was being liberated was still penile penetrative sex with a focus on male pleasure and ejaculation (MacKinnon 1989). Thus, BDSM and sexual liberation is seen as yet another extension of male domination over other genders. Heteropatriarchy structures lives in a way that people are conditioned to subject themselves to male power (Garcia 2021:36) thus rendering consent to male dominance invalid. This is an important critique as power dynamics influence our ability to negotiate and establish consent (Bauer 2014:76).

However, with an understanding of being situated within social structures that are pervaded with power dynamics, this approach would result in a complete inability to give consent as all our interactions are structured through racism, capitalism and hetero-sexist patriarchy. Additionally, „[t]his conflation of S&M with masculinity and domination unintentionally reunited femininity and passivity“ (Musser 2014:32) rendering women without agency or choice. Assuming that our ability to consent lies somewhere in between “the radical feminist focus on the structural foundations of the subversion of women’s consent and the liberals focus on women as free and autonomous individuals” (Cowling and Reynolds 2004:2), we can suppose that consent is possible to establish especially when trying to address power dynamics. Additionally, uncovering socially constructed norms of sexuality which influence our ability to consent raises questions of consent in other areas as well. There is a lot of pressure by societal institutions to follow heteronormative scripts which makes it reasonable to ask “if anyone truly ‘consents’ to be straight in any way” (Rubin 2012:134). As BDSM is still socially stigmatized and in parts legally persecuted, people are less likely to be pressured into practicing kink than into following the heteronormative script. This is not to say that coercion does not exist within kink but “the overwhelming coercion with regard to s/M is the way in which people are prevented from doing it. We are fighting for the freedom to consent to our sexuality without interference and without penalty“ (Rubin 2012:134). The question on who can consent when and to what is central to considerations around consent in kink spaces as critical consent asks us to consider social power structures and context in our ability to consent.

2.3.3 Role of Consent and Community

In BDSM consent is seen as a central issue. It is the magic that turns violence or abuse into pleasurable, kinky acts. “Consent was the defining characteristic of BDSM and distinguished it from violence, abuse, rape, oppression and so on” (Bauer 2014:77). Consent is seen as a central tenant for the practice of BDSM and „[a]mong the wide range of activities that constitute BDSM, consent is perhaps, in theory, the single unifying and universal characteristic“ (Dunkley and Brotto 2020:637). This strong emphasis on consent is important due to practices of BDSM that could result in serious physical or psychological injury where therefore need to be well planned and consented to in order to not be abusive. In order to ensure the wellbeing of the participants, “[t]he BDSM community has continually developed new models of consent, reflecting a profound commitment to informed, enthusiastic participation” (Garcia 2023:68) therefore being at the forefront of developing tools and practices for a critical application of consent in the context of sexuality, desire and pleasure.

Negotiating consent in the context of BDSM requires participants to have an understanding of critical consent but also of one’s own boundaries, likes, dislikes, limits, reactions, triggers etc. (Bauer 2014:93). However, people who are new to practising kink do not necessarily possess this self-knowledge which is why consent requires work of knowledge of oneself through introspection, reflection and trial and error (Bauer 2014:88). Due to these factors, consent negotiations are never absolute, fixed or perfectly executed but flexible, tentative and constantly improved upon and consent negotiations ideally stay an ongoing, active and open conversation (Bauer 2014:75–106). The skills necessary to negotiate about BDSM activities with (a) partner(s) are learnt, taught, experimented with and improved on within BDSM communities (Beres and MacDonald 2015:418). Especially people who are new to the scene are often instructed by others within the community. “Most parts of the s/M community take a responsible attitude to newcomers, teaching them how to do s/M safely, s/M etiquette, and acquired wisdom” (Rubin 2012:131). The BDSM community is an important resource on topics around consent and negotiation, safe practice of BDSM and other things concerning kink as it is difficult to access this kind of information publicly due to continued social stigmatization of these practices. “The most frequent oppressions connected to s/M come from a society bent on keeping people from engaging in nonconventional sex and which punishes them when they do“ (Rubin 2012:134).

In the face of social stigma and criminalisation of BDSM, kink communities provide a place of reprieve for practitioners and serve “as a source of a good deal of personal meaning” (Newmahr 2011:42). Community draws a line between insiders and outsiders and so creates

meaning between members. “Participants in the scene find in the community a bond created by shared life experiences and shared objectives” (Newmahr 2011:42). In the face of societal stigma and exclusion this dynamic of feeling bonded together against others is stronger and the kink community becomes a meaningful part for those kinksters who engage in the social circles around BDSM (Graham et al. 2016:903–4). Additionally, kink practitioners have indicated that being part of the BDSM community leads to social benefits such as being part of a social network, a sense of community and acceptance as well as personal development as well as benefiting them through providing functional resources such as knowledge, resources and support (Graham et al. 2016:900–903).

Kink communities represent both “*intentional communities*, built on communion, shared values, and beliefs, and *communities of practice*, which arise from a shared foundation of collective experience, knowledge, and information transference” (Jones 2023:66 italics in the original; Bessant 2018). Belonging can be understood as an active process which requires an “active engagement of affiliation and disaffiliation” (Kuurne and Vieno 2022:280) to negotiate belonging. Belonging is thus not passively achieved but results from practicing kink and engaging with the public BDSM scene. This active engagement has been termed “belonging work [which] means actively shaping social relationships and their practices, (...) intentionally, routinely or even subconsciously” (Kuurne and Vieno 2022:281). Belonging is thus relationally negotiated and has to be actively pursued, belonging requires labour and the more spaces and communities are shaped toward someone’s belonging, the less effort is necessary to belong (Kuurne and Vieno 2022). The strong and repeated emphasis kink community members put on consent as a central tenet of the kink community suggests “that issues of safety and consent are a common part of the social norms of the communities” (Graham et al. 2016:905). Because consent negotiation is a shared social value in the kink community, new members “will observe discussions of consent and safety being practiced by established members and then imitate the same practices, leading to internalization of values around consent” (Graham et al. 2016:905). As consent is such a central value for many kink communities, a certain level of understanding of consent is necessary for belonging and acquiring this knowledge around critical consent can be considered as part of belonging work.

2.4 Relevance: Generally and for International Development

Research on consent is valuable as it is “an understudied and undertheorized concept despite its importance to feminist researchers and activists interested in sexual violence” (Beres 2007:93). This falls in line with a general scarcity of research on issues related to sex and sexuality, the field of which “as a whole is underdeveloped. Sex is so loaded and controversial in Western culture that research on it is loaded and controversial” (Rubin 2012:125). As a result, sex and sexuality are still relegated to the private sphere and, “[i]n contrast to the politics of class, race, ethnicity, and gender, the politics of sex are relatively underdeveloped” (Rubin 2012:110).

Not only is sexual consent practice an underrepresented area of study but the studies conducted so far have remained unsatisfactory because they are “almost entirely limited to samples of (heterosexual) college students [and] research perspectives tend to reproduce heteronormative, (...) one-dimensional and reductionist perspectives” (Bauer 2021:768). Studies conducted so far concentrate on gender as an analytical category and miss an intersectional perspective which would provide further understandings for issues of social power. Additionally, artificial settings are used to study consent behaviour (Bauer 2021:768) which does not necessarily represent how people act. Studying how people practice consent is important as the already existing practice should be the basis for any kind of intervention or education on consent. Yet, there “is an absence of understanding about how sexual consent occurs in practice and how broader social forces influence the perceptions of sexual consent” (Beres 2022:140). The lack of this knowledge is not only due to the topic of consent being understudied but also because “current research and scholarship fail to recognise existing knowledge about sexual consent, relegating sexual consent to an epistemology of ignorance” (Beres 2022:137). In order to find effective consent measures and tools that people can and will use in their everyday lives, it is important to consider the ways people already negotiate consent in practice (Beres 2014). As the BDSM scene is a place where consent negotiations happen in a public and observable setting and where people engage with questions and issues around consent, it “offers unique opportunities for research” (Bauer 2021:768).

A deeper understanding of consent is not only relevant to combat sexual violence, however, but has a wider remit, in areas such as healthcare, work contracts, clinical research etc. (Franklin et al. 2023:5). There are important legal and moral considerations and consequences in the practice of consent in many areas of society as it shapes our

interactions with each other and with society (Garcia 2023). Questions of autonomy and self-determination are tied into it as well as social interaction and negotiations of relationships. Active consent practice and boundary setting leads to agency and empowerment as it requires an honest engagement with one's own likes, dislikes and limits and an active conversation and demand to have them met (Bauer 2014:67). In depth research on consent negotiation practices and how the necessary skills are shared within a community are therefore relevant for a wide variety of social situations and contexts as they can and should be applied beyond BDSM and the sexual realm. "The explicit approach to consent practiced by those in the BDSM community is proposed as a model for discussions around consent in clinical and educational contexts" (Dunkley and Brotto 2020:657) as it presents an applied model of critical consent. The way consent is negotiated and practiced in kink can provide useful insights to other areas in which consent plays a vital role to ensure the well being, agency and respect of others. Additionally, knowing the limits of consent or pitfalls in its practice can be extrapolated for other areas.

In the development sector "even basic data about sexual and gender minorities is often lacking" (O'Malley and Holzinger 2018:19) even though such data would assist in „demonstrating the existence of gender minorities, destigmatizing (...) [them], documenting [their] experiences and characteristics (...) and informing policies and programmes" (O'Malley and Holzinger 2018:90). Through doing research on BDSM communities, I hope to make a contribution to the de-stigmatization of non-normative sexual activities and show how the negotiation practices developed for BDSM play can help to deepen our understanding of consent for areas outside of BDSM as well. Additionally, the development sector has traditionally "treated sex as a problem to do with ill-health and violence" (Jolly 2023:465) but recently „some spaces for pleasure" (Jolly 2023:465) have been opened in the sector and contributed to „framings of pleasure in relation to public health, SRHR [sexual and reproductive health and rights] and sexuality education, and to rights, empowerment, and emancipation" (Jolly 2023:465). As kink spaces and communities are little explored in international development research, engaging with them can prove fruitful in uncovering how people engage with their sexualities and how it can empower and emancipate them.

Refocusing our attention on consent away from harm reduction and towards increasing and enabling pleasure also provides a different engagement with issues around consent. It shifts the responsibility of consent onto all participating parties instead of only the possible perpetrator. A focus on pleasure helps our understanding of consent as, „[i]t is difficult to

discuss issues of consent and healthy relationships when most of the research on consent is related to violent sexual activity“ (Beres 2007:106). Researching instances where consent is about pursuing pleasure and desire would give us a better understanding of positive examples of relating and consenting in sexual settings.

Looking at instances of non-normative sexualities or marginalized identities and their way of navigating systems of social power will reveal naturalized and hidden structures that maintain social power and control.

The sexual outlaws—boy-lovers, sadomasochists, prostitutes, and transpeople, among others—have an especially rich knowledge of the prevailing system of sexual hierarchy and of how sexual controls are exercised. These populations of erotic dissidents have a great deal to contribute to the reviving radical debate on sexuality. (Rubin 2012:136)

Considering that many studies on consent and sexuality consider following heteronormative ideas and scripts, a deeper engagement with non-normative forms of sexuality and relating can show consent practices that engage with questions of power and norms. This way of studying BDSM will hopefully also work to increase visibility, understanding and acceptance of kink practices and decrease negative preconceptions. This research will aim for “a voice to be given to stigmatized populations, prejudices to be revealed, and informants’ feelings, lives, situations, dilemmas, and ambitions to be [portrayed in a] nuanced” way (Carlström 2023:296). I thus hope to contribute to the representation and understanding of kink practitioners on one hand and on the other hand to a more critical understanding of consent and its application in a wide variety of fields.

3. Methodology

3.1 Metatheoretical Understanding and Epistemology

The aim of scientific research is “to influence – revise, modify, improve or revolutionize – our present concepts of reality” (Danermark 2012:15). I base my understanding of reality and how we can gain knowledge of it on an understanding shaped by Critical Realism (Bhaskar 2011) which conceives of reality as existing independently of our knowledge of it. However, because social sciences study phenomena which are socially produced, these phenomena

can be influenced by our knowledge of them. The knowledge we have of reality is not objective, direct or absolute but “conceptually mediated” (Danermark 2012:15) and thus dependent on theories but not determined by them. Therefore, “all knowledge in fact is fallible and open to adjustment. But – not all knowledge by far is equally fallible” (Danermark 2012:15). Knowing that we cannot reach absolute truths but that “some knowledge can be closer to reality than other knowledge” (Fletcher 2017:182), sound scientific practice and reflection are important as they influence the quality of knowledge we produce.

Additionally, Critical Realism sees reality as stratified into observable processes and underlying structures and mechanisms which influence the world we observe and produce events in it. The underlying mechanisms are at the centre of scientific inquiry as “it is the business of science to ‘dig deeper’ than the immediate experience of events in the world is able to do” (Danermark 2012:36). Scientific research in line with Critical Realism thus aims to go beyond observable events and tries to point at underlying structures and mechanisms.

3.2 Method

In my research I want to gain deeper insights into the understanding and practice of critical or queer consent of BDSM practitioners. In order to understand what has shaped consent practices of kinksters and to ensure that I represent these practices in line with how my research participants understand them I have chosen a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach allows researchers to look at people’s personal backgrounds, reflections, emotions and the understandings they have constructed to make sense of their experiences (Bogdan and Biklen 2007). I draw from these experiences, emotions and understandings and embed them into a broader context and pre-existing research to construct connections and reach conclusions about implicit structures and principles of social situations which are of interest in qualitative research (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2019:110).

In my data collection and analysis I follow the qualitative content analysis after Udo Kuckartz and Stefan Rädiker (2022). Qualitative content analysis is a method for analysing qualitative data in a systematic and methodically controlled way to show both manifest and latent content of the data (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:39). Qualitative content analysis follows a hermeneutic approach in which our prior knowledge and context shapes our understanding of the data which will in turn influence our prior understanding (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:26). Because our understanding is always shaped by our own context there is no one right or correct interpretation of content but we can propose interpretations which are more

applicable or less applicable than others (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:27). This is in line with a critical realist understanding of knowledge which can never be objectively true but which can come closer to reality than other knowledge. Central to qualitative content analysis are categories which form the basis on which data is grouped and analysed, these categories can be found deductively, inductively or through a mix of induction and deduction (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:39) and the researcher can move back and forth between steps of looking at the data, categorizing, coding and analysing the data (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:44).

In my research I first created categories deductively when grouping the questions for my interview guideline based on the theory I had read and guided by my research question. These first categories were then adapted based on the data I obtained in the interviews and new categories were found inductively working closely with my data. This is in line with the thematic analysis which is one of three basic models of qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:104). This method allows me to work closely with my data and represent the voices of my research participants. As BDSM has historically been pathologized and the practices and practitioners have been misrepresented, giving a voice to BDSM practitioners to represent themselves is one of the aims of this research.

Qualitative content analysis follows various phases which do not have to be followed in a strictly linear fashion but can be repeated once for example the research question, categories or codes have changed (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:106). At the core of qualitative content analysis is the creation of categories, the coding of data and the analysis of the coded data which can happen in multiple cycles (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:106).

The thematic qualitative content analysis proposes seven phases of analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:132–56). First data is collected and broadly analysed with the help of case summaries and memos which are meant to capture peculiarities, things that capture our eye or initial ideas. In a second step, main categories are developed which often can already be extrapolated from the research question or in my case from the structure of the interview guideline. In a third phase, data is coded into these main categories. Through this process of coding, subcategories are created in a fourth step. The data is then coded again into these subcategories. In phase six the data is analysed for its manifest and latent content. Here various approaches to the analysis are possible and which will influence what can be said about the data in phase seven which is the writing down of the analysis and results (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:132–56).

For the first phase I aimed to ensure data collection which is most relevant for my research. I therefore contacted members of BDSM communities in which consent is seen as a central

tenet of BDSM and who have self-reported experience with consent negotiations and practices. I posted a call for interviews in a community wide group chat, explicitly asking for interested people with experience in consent practices and the discussions around them. Additionally, I interviewed both seasoned kink practitioners with more than a decade of experience as well as relatively new members of the communities to see how their views and experiences differed or overlapped to get an idea of currently relevant issues around consent in the community.

3.2.1 Interviews

As, according to the theory discussed, I can expect members of queer BDSM communities to have a certain level of expertise and insight into consent practices I conducted semi-structured interviews in order to collect these experiences and reflections. Qualitative interviews can offer insights into the motivations, reflections, experiences and interpretations of individuals' on their social realities and aim to understand these and place them within a contextual framework (Dannecker and Voßemer 2014:154). Semi-structured interviews allow for comparable yet open data collection as they are similarly structured through questions or themes but also open enough to encourage interlocutors to bring up or expand on certain points they deem important themselves (Dannecker and Voßemer 2014:158–59).

The data gained through qualitative interviews can be used to describe social phenomena or to contextualize them within broader structures and processes which is why they are useful to gather data on how members of BDSM communities negotiate and share knowledge around consent. Semi-structured interviews allow for a flexible approach to collecting data within a pre-set structure (Dannecker and Voßemer 2014:154) to ensure the collection of relevant data but allow for the interview participants to place their own emphasis and follow their train of thought (Dannecker and Voßemer 2014:159). Semi-structured interviews aim to follow the flow of a conversation and allow the researcher to adapt the questions accordingly (Dannecker and Voßemer 2014:160).

To gain an overview of topics and themes the interview participant connects to the topic and deems relevant I start with an open and broad question that invites my interlocutors to tell me about their consent learning journey. This broad initial question also allows for openness and for the participants to structure the conversation because I then ask follow up questions about aspects brought up in this first free flowing answer. This is in line with the goal when conducting semi-structured interviews to stay open for new topics, to engage with the

interview participants and to not stick rigidly to pre-set questions (Dannecker and Voßemer 2014:160).

This format also allows for new themes which I had not considered to develop and be discussed in the interview and provides the space for different approaches to the topic. This can already provide insights into how people approach the topic of consent. I have chosen this method of data collection because I hope to analyze the topics and issues that the participants themselves deem important and relevant and to contextualize these insights within broader frameworks and existing theories.

3.2.1.1 Interviewee Vignettes

To give an overview of the interviews conducted and a little insight as to what position my interlocutors spoke from and what our connection to each other is I give small vignettes here about my interview participants. However, it is important to note that these vignettes contain information that was shared with me during the interviews, I did not ask for personal identity markers beyond names or preferred pseudonyms, age and pronouns and then gathered information that was shared in the interview that might be relevant to contextualize the experiences and thoughts shared with me. I chose to do this because I did not want to choose which identity markers to define my interlocutors by. I rather want to use the information they themselves brought up during the interview as being relevant in the context of the topic.

Interview 1: Sebastian (he/him; 47 years old) academic background, cisgender male, queer, active in the scene for a bit over a year, emphasized the importance of academic contributions on the topic of consent and consent practices and was glad to see insider research being done on the topic. I did not know Sebastian when we met for the interview. I have sent him a list of articles and books that I found interesting regarding consent because he stressed enjoying reading on the subject. The interview was held on 09.09.2024 in German, in a cafe and was 60 minutes long.

Interview 2: Simon (he/him; 27 years old) academic background, trans man, active in the scene for around 7 years, grew up in the countryside and started engaging in kink after his move to Vienna. Simon is mostly part of get-togethers (Stammtische) which are communities or groups which regularly meet to chat and then play and has organized such get-togethers for a while. I did not know Simon when we met for the interview. The interview was held on 13.09.2024 in German, in a cafe and was 56 minutes long.

Interview 3: Erika (she/her; 31 years old) academic background, queer, active in the scene for nearly a year. We had chatted before setting up the interview and played with each other at an event before our interview, we have since stayed in contact and met up to play with each other, for me to give Erika an interview for her own research and to co work. The interview was held on 14.09.2024 in German, in a cafe and was 75 minutes long.

Interview 4: Sasha (any; 52 years old) agender, queer, active in the scene for 10 years. Sasha gives workshops around kink, consent and communication and therefore shared a perspective of both learning and teaching about consent. I did not know Sasha when we met for the interview. The interview was held on 16.09.2024 in German, in a cafe and was 52 minutes long.

Interview 5: Becky (she/her; 47 years old) academic background, active in the scene for multiple years. Becky gave me very detailed examples of consent practices and difficulties. Becky is loosely connected to the public kink community and talks about a parallel community that meets through workshops and plays at home. The interview was held on 17.09.2024 in German, in a cafe and was 77 minutes long.

Interview 6: Violet (she/they; 38 years old) academic background, female and non-binary, active in the scene for 1,5 years. Violet grew up in Brazil and started engaging in kink after their move to Europe. Violet suggested presenting the outcomes of my thesis in the community once my analysis is complete. I did not know Violet when we met for the interview. The interview was held on 17.09.2024 in English, in a cafe and was 58 minutes long.

A guiding principle while conducting my research was to not harm my participants. There are various ethical guidelines for conducting qualitative research, these broadly include informed consent, confidentiality, right to withdraw, assessing risk of harm, deception, debriefing, use of incentives, limitations to the researcher's role and honesty and integrity in the research process (King, Horrocks, and Brooks 2018:33–35). In my research I informed my participants before the interviews about the structure of the interview, broadly the topics I was going to cover and informed them that they could skip any questions, stop the interview at any time and indicate discomfort using consent tools that are widely known in the kink community. Additionally, I informed them about how I would handle their data and that parts of their interviews were going to be published as part of my thesis. I had them sign a consent form which again stated that they could withdraw their data at any given time up until publishing and asked them whether they would like me to use their own name or a pseudonym.

As I asked questions about consent and boundaries, I was aware during my interviews that this might bring up stories of consent being broken which might be painful or traumatic to recount. In order to minimize harm from potentially difficult topics I informed my participants about my research topic and the structure of the questions. The possibility to skip questions or to use consent tools to indicate discomfort were also meant to mitigate harm in this regard. Additionally, I did not directly ask about stories of consent violation and gave the interview partners the room to choose whether they wanted to bring up such instances or not. As consent negotiations are such a present topic in the BDSM communities, I expected interviewees to be aware of what topics and stories might come up for them and even though instances of overstepped boundaries and consent breaches were shared with me, my participants did not show signs of emotional distress when recounting them and had already reflected about these instances.

My interview participants generally were very open and shared their insights, thoughts, difficulties, emotions and experiences with me. I attribute this level of openness partially to the trust provided through posting in the community wide group chat which showed my insider status. Additionally, people in the kink community are experienced in talking openly about topics of sexuality, consent, emotion and desires as they practice this openness with other community members as well. This is because one of the “core beliefs and values within kink communities include (...) the importance of maintaining open communication with partners, negotiation of scenes or play (i.e., kink encounters) to respect the psychological safety of all participants, and the elicitation of consent” (Muzacz 2021:2). Because open and honest communication are such a central tenant in many kink communities, members of these communities are used to and practiced in sharing their emotions and thoughts on topics that relate to their kink practices.

3.2.2 Working with the Data

I recorded all the interviews with my phone's recorder. After each interview I wrote down my impressions and thoughts which serve as part of my memos. These memos serve to capture any ideas coming up during the research process and coming back to them in my analysis. I transcribed all my interviews using noScribe which is a free and open source AI-based software that runs locally on the computer so no data is sent to the internet.

From the interview guideline I developed I used the way I grouped my questions as the first main categories. These were: Understanding of Consent, Kink Background, Learning and

Teaching Consent, Negotiation skills and Reflection and Future Perspective. I then coded my data roughly into these categories. For coding my data I used the software QDA Miner Lite. The first round of coding already led to a shift in categories. I then did a closer round of coding where I developed subcategories from the data which resulted in 61 subcategories within 9 main categories. I then went back and forth between the data, the theory, the categories and my research question which led to various adjustments of the codes, the categories and the research question. In the end this process resulted in the categories which now represent the subchapters of my analysis.

3.2.3 Representativeness of Data

As my data contains rich insights and certain aspects started to repeat across interviews, I think I have a good overview of issues and relevant topics in the field of consent for members of queer kink communities in Vienna. After posting in a community wide group chat I chose to interview the first 6 people who offered to give me an interview to avoid biases when sampling.

The people I have interviewed ranged between 27 – 52 years of age and have varying years and levels of expertise with kink and the practice of consent within it. My interlocutors represent a diversity of genders, sexualities and kink interests but all of them were well-educated and the majority of my interview participants were white and non-monogamous. This is in line with previous studies on the queer kink community: “While this community is highly diverse when it comes to gender, body types, age, sexuality and relationship practices, it is mostly populated by white and often highly educated individuals” (Bauer 2021:770).

Elisabeth Sheff and Corie Hammers (2011) attribute this homogeneity of race and class in kink communities to the increased risk that marginalized people face as “people unprotected by social advantages are more vulnerable to the discriminatory impacts of [the] sexual stigma [against BDSM] than (...) those shielded by racial and/or class privileges” (Sheff and Hammers 2011:199). Additionally, people of marginalized status “might well be reluctant to invest scarce resources in relational forms that can threaten conventional family structures and have the potential to increase surveillance from authorities” (Sheff and Hammers 2011:199). Engaging in socially stigmatized behaviour carries different levels of risk for different people. However, there is also a lack of scholarly representation of people of colour in kink research (Liang 2022:385) contributing to a perceived homogeneity of the scene.

Kinksters of colour have utilised kink to challenge societal power structures and their exclusion from research reproduces dominant structures of othering and exclusion (Liang 2022). My sample therefore reflects broader demographic trends in the queer kink community and in research on BDSM. This points towards a lack of community accessibility and gaps in academic research.

3.3 Positionality: On Being an Insider

As I co construct my research and the knowledge I derive from it with my participants based on our own backgrounds (Huysamen 2020:6), certain information about my own position becomes pertinent to this research as it has shaped my interest, interactions, data collection and analysis. Additionally, the interview is not a neutral site of collecting data but a site in which „both the participant and the researcher perform, negotiate, resist, and construct their identities in relation to each another“ (Huysamen 2020:6). My own position is thus of relevance to contextualizing this research.

I am myself a member of various kink communities in Vienna and have been attending events with varying regularity for around three years. I am queer and have been most active in queer kink communities. My research interest, practice and analysis have been influenced by my own experiences of learning and applying consent practices in and outside the kink community but also through conversations with friends and community members. I therefore have my own answers to the questions I have asked my interview participants and have to be careful not to impose these answers on them and to stay open to different points of views. Acknowledging that as “qualitative researchers we are not separate from the study (...) [i]nstead, we are firmly in all aspects of the research process and essential to it” (Dwyer and Buckle 2009:61) means that the way in which we avoid the reproduction of our own biases is to reflect on our own position. Knowing this and recognizing “the impossibility of neutrality and objectivity within (...) the research process” (Huysamen 2020:6) means that instead of chasing objectivity or neutrality I can acknowledge my involvement, try to mitigate biases, reflect these points at different steps within my research and benefit from the advantages that my own involvement brings to my research.

My involvement in the scene and knowing of ongoing discussions around consent practices resulted in finding a topic of research that is relevant to people in the kink scene and beyond. Additionally, my insider position can allow for more openness in the interviews as my interlocutors can assume a certain shared base understanding of kink and consent and

because I can be held accountable for my research within the community. “Participants might be more willing to share their experiences because there is an assumption of understanding and an assumption of shared distinctiveness” (Dwyer and Buckle 2009:58) with researchers who are part of their field of study which leads to more openness, acceptance and trust. In the context of my research this is significant as sharing openly about one’s own kink practices and experiences with consent can be sensitive and vulnerable topics and require a certain level of trust especially given the misrepresentations of BDSM and the social stigma against it. Additionally to gaining access and trust in the field, being an insider provides a common ground and common understanding from which research can be conducted. Kink communities share certain rules and conventions which differ between groups and have to be learnt by newcomers (Carlström 2023:289). An understanding of these conventions helps me with formulating relevant questions and analysing the interviews conducted.

However, these assumptions of understanding can also lead to oversights as the researcher might be clouded by their own personal experiences or they might neglect positions that differ from or contradict their own (Dwyer and Buckle 2009:58). This could lead “to an emphasis on shared factors between the researcher and the participants and a de-emphasis on factors that are discrepant, or vice versa” (Dwyer and Buckle 2009:58). Nonetheless, an outsider position does not necessarily ensure an unbiased position either. Prior to conducting research, researchers will have collected practical and theoretical information and knowledge about the field of study in order to formulate a research interest and identify relevant questions or topics of research. This process will shape their personal perspective on the topic based on their own background and context and will then in turn influence the research process. This brings the binary distinction between insider and outsider into question as neither position entails complete sameness or difference with participants in the field (Dwyer and Buckle 2009:60) which in turn are also not a homogeneous group. Neutrality is therefore not a useful aim in research because “[t]o claim neutrality as an interviewer, and thus to ignore our own presence in the research encounter and the conditions under which we came to arrive there, is to tell only half the story of our research” (Huysamen 2020:18). Therefore, instead of aiming to achieve neutrality in my interviews I paid attention to my own biases and preconceptions and reflected on how my position influenced the research at various points within the research.

I attempted not to presuppose shared experiences or similarities in thought throughout my interviews by following a loosely structured interview guide allowing my interview participants to set their own emphasis and bring up topics and ideas they deemed relevant. I also held a trial interview after which I asked my trial interviewee for feedback about the phrasing of my

questions and the structure of the interview to ensure my interview allows for an open conversation.

In my research I did not previously know most of my participants and have limited further relationships with them. However, with one of my interview participants I have practiced kink before and after the interview and we have met privately a few times. Having a prior established relationship with my interview participants could lead to biases or inhibitions from both sides. It might influence the way I ask questions or how I interpret responses. My participants could be less open to sharing vulnerable information or present opinions that differ from my own due to a fear of it influencing our relationship or out of a desire to maintain an image I have of them. Additionally, questions of confidentiality and power dynamics become more complex as personal information filters into the interview and information from the interview is carried into the relationship.

However, in this case, my relationship with Erika was from the start one that involved talking about kink, consent and our involvement in the scene so I did not expect an inhibition on these topics. We did practice kink together before the interview but had not formed a deeper relationship beyond that. I also felt that Erika was quite open and honest in the interview and we did discuss potential influences of us having played together on the interview. Erika is also currently doing research and I gave her an interview for her research so a potential hierarchy from researcher to researchee is canceled out. Thinking about whether to include the interview with Erika as part of my research I also thought about the benefits having practiced kink together could have. Experiencing how someone implements consent practices first hand can add insights to my research that a conversation alone cannot transmit. Ralph Bolton notes: “sexual behavior is not easily observed, and I learned more through participation than by simple observation or direct interviewing” (Bolton 1995:148). He therefore argues “for sexual openness and honesty as a way of exorcising the pernicious effects that silence has on sexual well-being in our own and many other cultures” (Bolton 1995:161). To see sexuality as taboo and polluting academic integrity is to play into sex negativity and its consequences. The relationship Erika and I had before the interview was one of friendly acquaintances and did not carry deeper implications of interpersonal hierarchies, commitments or dependencies. Such dependencies or hierarchies would be reason for ethical consideration but the act of practicing kink alone should not be awarded a special status just because it carries a sexual connotation. After all, kink and negotiating consent is what this research is all about and in the end “we must ask ourselves: What right do we have to enquire into the sex lives of Others, (...) if we insist on our right to privacy, to remain silent about our own intimate lives” (Bolton 1995:161)? Additionally, my continued presence in the queer kink communities as well as my ongoing conversations about my

research with Erika and other practitioners also serves as a way to continuously question and test the validity of my analysis and results (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2022:251).

Weighing the potential benefits of being an insider versus and outsider or of not having any personal connection with my interlocutors versus knowing them personally outside the interviews as well, I have come to the conclusion that my research will only have a claim to producing scientifically sound knowledge if I am transparent and reflected in my research rather than avoiding and negating any kind of personal involvement or influence. My insider position has awarded me access to the field and trust and openness by my research participants and I hope to represent their voices and opinions in my research.

3.4 Use of AI

In the course of my research I have used AI to help me in certain steps of my research. After I created my interview guideline, I sent “ChatGPT” my research proposal and asked for suggestions for interview questions. This was mainly to see if I had overlooked potential aspects or areas that would be of interest in my interview to avoid personal bias and in order to see how the chatbot would structure the questions. I have formulated all my questions by myself and changed my structure slightly after I saw how ChatGPT suggested to structure the interviews.

For transcribing my interviews I used the transcription software “no scribe” which uses AI for its transcriptions. I then went over each interview manually, checked the transcription and corrected any mistakes. I informed my participants that I would use AI to transcribe the interviews and as “no scribe” runs locally on my computer without connecting to the internet, their data was not shared to any outside sources.

When translating interview segments from German to English to quote my participants I sometimes consulted translation AI to get suggestions on how to translate certain specific terms or phrases.

I did not use AI to write any of the text in this thesis.

4. Setting the Scene

The kink community has been suggested by members as “best described as a community of communities” (Graham et al. 2016:899). The umbrella of kink community includes any form of practicing kink in public spaces, be it different venues, events and groups but this community is broken down into smaller communities that organize around certain kinks, foci, events, locations or identity groups. This variety is reflected in the kink scene in Vienna as well which is composed of officially registered associations, groups linked to venues such as cafes, bars, clubs, practitioner spaces or dungeons or groups linked to certain practices such as latex crafting, rope bondage or pet play. Additionally there are groups loosely organized through social media channels which organize events or communicate to go to events together. Within the public scene, there is a big overlap between various groups as people often are members of multiple groups. All these groups have different policies on how they can be found, accessed and joined and there are different hurdles set in place on how to become a new member because of safety and privacy concerns. Therefore, there is very limited data available as to the size of the public kink community in Vienna. One estimation can be drawn from FetLife which is “the world’s largest anonymous social network for the BDSM, fetish and kink communities, (...) [which] serves as an interaction space, community organizing tool, and sexual market” (Fay et al. 2016:195). There are currently 21,425 accounts registered on FetLife that have their location set to Vienna [numbers retrieved on the 04.04.2025] (FetLife n.d.). This number however does not reflect how many people are active in the public scene as some of these accounts are by people who do not participate in in person events. But on FetLife there are multiple public in person events advertised each week with multiple events for most weekdays. Additionally, there are a big number of events which do not get announced on FetLife but are announced through private social media channels or through word of mouth in order to have more control over who attends the events. The size of the public kink community in Vienna is therefore hard to pin down but should be around a few thousand members. There is a variety of reasons why people participate in public kink communities, people feel that it is safer than playing privately (Sasha 17: 417-429; Simon 7: 193-194), that they can learn from more experienced members (Sebastian 11: 287-294), that it has a strong social component (Violet 2: 31-32) and that it is a way to find new play partners (Sebastian 11: 287-291). Additionally, it can be a place to satisfy an exhibition kink (Simon 7: 193-194). The social importance of kink communities is central because of the continuing pathologization and stigmatization of kink. These communities thus are a space in which people feel like they can talk freely about a part of them that can be associated with shame or that people hide in their everyday lives

(Becky 20-21: 550-571; Violet 9: 227-231). This falls in line with prior research about kink community members' perspective on the importance and role of the community (Graham et al. 2016).

Because of the entrance barriers set in place in many communities that serve as a safety measure I decided to look for interview partners in a queer kink community that I was already a part of and to post my call for interviews in a community wide group chat. As only people known to the organizers are part of that group chat this would ensure that my interlocutors knew of my insider position.

The community I have chosen to look for interview participants self-describes itself as queer-feminist, kink- and sex-positive. My interview participants considered central values of this community to be explicit communication (Erika 18: 485-487), personal responsibility (Erika 19: 499-503), safety (Sasha 17: 417-429; Simon 7: 193-194, Violet 1: 20), hygiene (Violet 11: 280-283) and the breaking down or questioning of norms (Becky 19: 520-524; Erika 9: 233-235). Additionally, community values include an open and welcoming attitude towards newcomers (Sebastian 20: 558-567), mutual respect (Erika 7: 166) and inclusivity (Becky 19: 520-524). My interview participants also valued a shared understanding of kink and consent (Simon 12: 336-339) but what they emphasised most was the consideration for and importance of consent as a central value. Generally for BDSM communities, "[a]mong the wide range of activities that constitute BDSM, consent is perhaps, in theory, the single unifying and universal characteristic" (Dunkley and Brotto 2020:637) but there is still a difference in how strongly people in different communities focus on consent.

My interlocutors described that this community places a high emphasis on consent in their practices.

Und (...) [in dieser queer-feministischen Gemeinschaft] ist [Konsens] schon sehr ein zentraler Wert von [der] ganzen (...) [Gemeinschaft] und von allen Leuten, die teilnehmen, also sowohl von Besucher:innen als auch Workshopleiter:innen, da wird sehr genau darauf geschaut.

And at (...) [this queer-feminist community consent] is quite a central value of the whole (...) [community] and of all people who take part, meaning from visitors as well as workshop leaders, they keep a close eye on it.

(Sasha 2-3: 61-64, my translation)

This high emphasis on consent in this community was brought up in multiple interviews and searching for interview partners in this community means that I could find people who value

consent and who could share their own experiences, reflections and expertise with me. To draw my sample from this group ensured I would interview people who would have rich insights into the topic of consent. The people I interviewed spoke of other communities they were part of or events they had attended at other locations and thus have experiences from multiple settings and communities. They did generally agree that queer kink communities were at the forefront of critical consent practices and that the emphasis on consent was a central aspect of the queer kink community in contrast to other communities.

Das Gefühl, das ich habe, ist, dass es in der queeren kink community definitiv anders ist als im Rest. Ich kann nicht für die, wenn man es so ausdrücken will, für die cis-het kink community reden. Wenn ich so die Geschichten höre aber da muss man einfach vorsichtig sein, bin ich mir da unsicher, ob die auch so offen und aktiv hinter dem Thema her sind als Ganzes, also Individuen für sich sich mit Sicherheit, aber die queere kink Community glaube ich, für die ist das ein ganz zentrales Thema. Da ist große awareness da und wahrscheinlich zwangsläufig, weil eben das natürlich auch eine Gruppe ist, die jetzt nicht unbedingt immer rein willkommen ist und gewesen ist, ja.

The feeling that I have is that in the queer kink community it is definitely different than in the rest. I can't speak for, if I may call it that, the cis-hetero kink community. When I hear the stories, but one has to be careful there, I am unsure whether they are also that open and actively engage with the topic in its totality, I mean individuals for themselves for sure but I think for the queer kink community, for them it is a very central topic. There exists a big awareness and probably necessarily so because that of course is also a group which is not and has not always been entirely welcome, yeah.

(Sebastian 7-8: 202-209, my translation, emphasis by Sebastian)

Most of my interview participants were part of multiple communities and had visited various venues and events and drew their comparisons both from personal experiences as well as from talking to other members about their experiences. They valued the queer kink community for their special attention to consent.

Also ich fühle mich in queeren Communities viel wohler weil ich habe es gerne sehr klar und sehr einvernehmlich vor allem und ja.

I feel much more comfortable in queer communities because I like things to be very clear and very consensual above all and yeah.

(Sasha 3: 83-85, my translation)

The focus on consent that queer kink communities place create a sense of safety and clarity for members.

The communities my interlocutors frequent are not merely a space to practice kink but also are valued for making social connections and for being spaces in which people feel like they can openly be themselves without feeling judged.

So I knew for sure things that are related to kink. I knew for sure that I am bisexual. I knew for sure that I am, I am not polyamorous but I am someone who can be attracted and in love with more than one person. So that was actually one of the reasons why I started to really like going to those places. Not necessarily for the kink per se. But rather just like... Here I can be normal.

(Violet 9: 216-219, my emphasis)

Queer kink communities provide in which people feel like they do not have to hide parts of their identity and can be themselves fully. This applies to non-normative forms of sexuality, gender and relationship models but goes beyond these. My interlocutors have repeatedly spoken about how these communities are also places that accommodate neurodivergent people and foster diversity in general.

[Diese queer-feministische Gemeinschaft] ist, aus meiner Sicht, super neurodivers auch. Und das ist so ein richtiges sparkling, bubbling, very colorful Ding. Und die durchbrechen auch so ein bisschen (...) dieses Dungeon-Schwarz, alles ist Leder, bla bla bla. Also (...) [diese Gemeinschaft], habe ich das Gefühl, ist viel vielfältiger, was das angeht.

[This queer-feminist community] is from my point of view also very neurodiverse. And it's such a sparkling, bubbly, very colourful thing. And they break a bit (...) with this dungeon-black, everything is leather blah blah blah. I feel like (...) [this community] is way more diverse in that regard.

(Becky 19: 521-524, my translation)

Queer kink communities are not only queer in the sense that they are frequented by queer individuals but they break norms of relating, of sexuality and gender, of kink and BDSM roles and aesthetics and create open, friendly and diverse spaces that allow for accommodations for a variety of people. For further research on the overlap or interplay of neurodivergence and kink see Gunning et al. (2023) and Rosqvist et al. (2024).

Generally, my interview participants valued the queer kink communities for their upholding of consent as a central value. They expressed that it led to more safety, enabled them to learn and improve on consent skills, and contrasted it to the lack of consent practices in other communities but also in the general public.

And to me, like, there is, like, the safest place. Because I never had someone like, especially coming, again, from Latin America, never had someone coming to me and asking, do you want a hug? It was just something that, like, you know when you're a little kid, people just come and they're like, oh, I'll give you a kiss and so on. And you're like, ahhh. (laughs) So, yeah, so, like, for me, like, it's something that I learned a lot about this, like, very direct consent.

(Violet, 1: 20-24)

My research is thus based on data from participants in the public kink scene of Vienn who move in circles and communities where consent is of central importance. I can therefore expect my interview participants to be aware of current discussions around consent and to be at the forefront of critical consent practice.

5. Analysis

5.1 Consent Journeys

My interview participants all provided me insights into their own understandings of, or experiences with consent before encountering spaces in which critical consent was verbalized, practiced and expected. These are examples of how society treats, teaches, understands and applies consent beyond communities which focus strongly on consent. All my interview participants talked about consent in relation to children (Becky 1:4-22; Erika 7-8:180-198; Sasha 20-21:512-526; Sebastian 21:580-585; Simon 19:512-521; Violet 6:126-131) either in relation to their own childhood or regarding how the treatment of children traditionally lacks consent. They all therefore situated consent as belonging to all spheres of life starting in childhood instead of it belonging purely to the realm of the sexual.

[Es beginnt] eigentlich schon total früh, (...) dass irgendein übergriffiges Familienmitglied sagt, "Oh ja, mah bist du nett" und deine Wange kneift oder sowas und das ist ja auch schon eine Form von Konsensverletzung. Und das ist ja bei

Kindern eigentlich total häufig, dass das gemacht wird von irgendwelchen aufdringlichen Verwandten oder von den Eltern selbst, je nachdem. (...) Und ich habe das Gefühl, bei Kindern ist es halt immer, wenn Erwachsene ungeduldig werden, dann wird überhaupt nicht mehr geschaut, was das Kind will. Und das sind irgendwie so, ich glaube, das sind die ersten Konsensverletzungen, die man halt erlebt.

It actually already starts really early that some intrusive family member says oh you are so sweet and pinches you in your cheek or something like that and that is already a form of consent violation. And that's actually quite common with children that that is done by some pushy relatives or by the parents themselves, depending. (...) And I feel that with children, whenever adults become impatient they don't look at what the child wants at all anymore. And those are the first consent violations that one experiences.

(Erika 7:180-188, my translation)

In childhood people collect their first experiences with boundaries, bodily autonomy and lack thereof. Erika observes that children are not awarded bodily autonomy especially in situations in which adults grow impatient. The way children are treated and whether their consent is considered, shapes their understanding of consent. Interactions with adults and with other children model consent practices for them. Children lack the social power to defend their bodily autonomy and the interactions between adults and children are shaped by an imbalance of power. These instances of lack of patience and consent breaches vis-a-vis children thus also model consent practices in general vis-a-vis people who possess less societal power than their counterpart. The disregard for children's consent is so normalized that examples of their consent being regarded are considered exceptional. Becky recounts that her mother's regard for her consent stood out as unusual.

Ich bin draufgekommen, was mir nicht so klar war, ist, dass ich [Konsens] eigentlich sehr in meiner Kindheit gelernt habe, weil ich erstaunlicherweise eine Mutter hatte, die, ähm, das sehr gefördert hat, dass, wenn wir gesagt haben, wir wollen was nicht, dass sie uns nie gezwungen hat, irgendwas zu tun, jetzt Tante, Onkel umarmen oder die Hand geben oder etwas aufessen oder ich weiß nicht was. Und ich hab das damals eher so als, also ich hab mitbekommen, dass das ungewöhnlich war, weil alle rundherum erwartet haben, dass man als Kind zu tun hat, was von einem erwartet wird. Und meine Mutter hat sich da aber sehr dagegen gestellt und hat das durchgedrückt.

I have realized, something that wasn't clear to me, is that I actually learnt [consent] in my childhood because I astonishingly had a mother who fostered that when we said that we do not want something that she never forced us to do anything, like hugging an aunt or an uncle or shaking their hands or finishing food or I don't know what else. And at the time I saw it more as, well, I realized that that was unusual because everyone expected that as a child you have to do what is expected of you. And my mom was very opposed to that and remained steadfast.

(Becky 1:4-11; my translation)

The fact that Becky's mother maintained the boundaries of her children was unusual to Becky as a child and she still presents it as something astonishing. This points to how pervasive and normalized the disregard of children's consent is in our context. According to feminist theorists society is deeply structured by patriarchal domination (Garcia 2023:129). This domination plays out on multiple axes of men over women, whiteness over racialised people, ability over disability, adults over children etc. This whole dichotomy becomes naturalized in dividing between the normal and the deviant. Becky's astonishment at her mother's behaviour results from it not being normalized in the patriarchal logic but rather categorized as deviant. Children's bodily autonomy inhibits patriarchal control and is therefore not awarded importance in a patriarchal system.

However, this is not exclusive to children but is applicable to any form of identity which is categorized as not the norm, as deviant in this patriarchal logic. Identity markers which are used to determine social hierarchies, such as gender, thus have an influence on whether people learn to expect their consent to be considered or not.

I was raised as a girl, I had lots of problematic things, including not learning how to give consent to someone. Or that I could be, I don't know, that I could be outspoken about it.

(Violet 6:128-130)

I come from a culture where there are, like, this very macho thing. Nowadays it's better, but I was growing up in the 90s. So you had the typical bizarre things of, you are on a public transport and there is someone harassing you, basically. And you are not supposed to say anything, you are just supposed to move away and stuff like that. So that's, like, the thing of actually confronting is something that I had to learn as an adult.

(Violet 1:9-13)

The ways in which children are taught and modeled consent is something that becomes internalized and in Violet's case, they had to actively unlearn these patterns of behaviour. Multiple layers of marginalisation such as in Violet's case age as well as gender led to the internalization of silencing and avoidance in the face of consent breaches rather than self-advocacy or confrontation. This is because heteropatriarchal social structures work towards conditioning people to subject themselves to male power (Garcia 2021:36). The tools needed to give consent to someone or to defend one's own boundaries were not taught to Violet as a child because being brought-up as a girl did not award them the rights to bodily autonomy. Rather, they were taught to evade unwanted behaviour as a form of protecting themselves and maintaining their boundaries.

People in marginalized positions who lack social, economic, political or cultural power in society or in certain social situations are taught to not expect their boundaries to be considered. This is due to patriarchal structures which assign power over others to people according to a patriarchal hierarchy. Being in a position of power within the patriarchal logic means to be able to overstep the boundaries of people who rank lower in this hierarchy with impunity. Compliance with this system on the one hand is ensured through internalisation since childhood, on the other hand, some people experience serious ramifications if they advocate for their boundaries.

Die eigenen Grenzen kennen und auch sich trauen, sie zu kommunizieren. Ja, das ist auch wieder ein Gender-Thema, weil viele Frauen haben negative Erfahrungen gemacht, (...) wenn sie Cis-Männern Nein sagen, bis hin zu körperlicher Gewalt und dadurch lernt man nicht wirklich gut Nein sagen, sondern man lernt eher Beschwichtigen und solche Sachen.

Knowing your own boundaries and daring to communicate them. Yeah, that is a gendered issue again because many women have had negative experiences, (...) when saying no to cis-men, up until physical violence and through that one doesn't learn well how to say no but rather how to appease someone and things like that.

(Sasha 18:433-437, my translation)

Not only is the consent of people who possess less societal power not considered but advocating for oneself can lead to physical harm. Heteropatriarchy sustains and defends itself through "a pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness" (Rich 1980:640) and this cluster of forces ensures patriarchal power and

control over others. Part of this control is being able to infringe on people's bodily autonomy with impunity. This is sustained through normalization, naturalization and downplaying of consent infringements but also through physical violence when questioned. Social power dynamics are deeply entrenched in how society handles consent, whose boundaries are maintained and respected and whose boundaries can be overstepped. Social power therefore leads to being able to overstep limits and boundaries of people with less power and when this is challenged, some people resort to violence to maintain these privileges.

However, often violence is not necessary as these scripts become naturalized and internalized. This naturalization and internalization becomes apparent as the reversal of this script stands out as unusual or odd. Sebastian recounted an example where his bodily autonomy was considered by people in a more powerful position than him and he recounts this as something remarkable as it seemed odd or unusual. Sebastian encountered consent as part of the interpersonal realm for the first time as part of his conscription service:

Da durfte tatsächlich, da durften Vorgesetzte einen Untergebenen, eine untergeordnete Person, nicht ohne deren ausdrückliche Zustimmung berühren. Das heißt also, wenn man zum Beispiel die Uniform schief hatte, musste die Person fragen: Darf ich Sie anfassen? Und man konnte sagen ja oder nein. Was ja gelebter consent war aber das wirkte damals fast skurril nach so einfachen Dingen zu fragen.

At that time superiors were not allowed to touch a subordinate, a subordinated person without their explicit approval. That means, for example, if someone's uniform was crooked the person had to ask: May I touch you? And one could say yes or no. Which was lived consent but at the time it felt almost bizarre to ask about such simple things.

(Sebastian 1:8-12; my translation)

Sebastian describes this as his first contact with active affirmative consent being practiced in interpersonal relationships. This act of the superior asking the subordinate whether they may touch them seemed bizarre to him because a lack of active communication was the internalized norm up until this point and continued to be the norm after the conscription service until he started practicing kink (Sebastian 1). Additionally, considering the power dynamic between superior and subordinate, the societal expectation is that superiors do not have to ask for permission to touch a subordinate.

Generally, my interview participants described rare occasions of active consent negotiations or a complete lack thereof before entering the kink scene. Consent as a topic was either not

covered at all in school (Simon 1:6.7) or sparsely covered as part of sexual education but only talked about through negative examples of consent breaches and violations (Erika 1:7-11). Generally, Erika feels that consent is only talked about in mainstream society when it has been violated:

[Generell] wird eigentlich Konsent wenig thematisiert und wenn man es so anekdotisch erfährt, geht es immer nur um die Konsentverletzungen, aber niemals darum, wie man es setzt. Und das finde ich höchst problematisch eigentlich, wenn ich so darüber nachdenke.

[Generally] consent is not being talked about and when it comes up anecdotally it is always about consent violations but never about how to establish it. And I find that extremely problematic actually, when I think about it.

(Erika 6:149-151)

Consent is talked about in mainstream society as a topic in relation to sex and sexuality but generally it comes up when talking about consent violations. This is in line with what Cowling and Reynolds (2004) describe as the development of academic engagement with consent which grew out of a struggle to combat sexualized violence. This form of societal engagement with the topic of consent leads to an initial awareness that consent in a sexual context is something that is relevant and important. However, there is little deeper or critical engagement and therefore a lack of understanding of how to establish and negotiate consent persists. This is not to say that people's sexual experiences were nonconsensual before their entry into the kink community but that consent negotiations were rather non-verbal, tentative and that people were lacking concrete tools or guides which is in line with research on how people negotiate consent (Beres and MacDonald 2015:419; Cowling 2004:24). Becky talks about her first relationship which she was in before joining the kink community:

Ich würde sagen, dass Konsens ein Thema war, aber kein bewusstes Auseinandersetzen damit, sondern schon, man möchte natürlich nichts tun, was der/die andere nicht tun will. Wir waren super vorsichtig, aber auch nicht sehr explizit darin, was man will. Also schon ein bisschen, aber halt, also da ging es nicht um Konsens, weil man eigentlich das Gefühl hatte, man spürt, was der andere will oder nicht. Aber dadurch haben wir auch vieles dann eben auch dann wahrscheinlich einfach sein lassen, weil wir auch nicht wussten, weil wir keine Tools hatten.

I would say that consent was a topic but not something we consciously dealt with but

instead of course you don't want to do anything that the other person does not want to do. We were super careful but also not very explicit in what we wanted. I mean, a little bit, but it wasn't really about consent because we kind of felt like we could sense what the other wants or doesn't want. But because of that we probably didn't do a lot of things, because we didn't know, because we didn't have any tools.

(Becky 2:42-47, my translation)

As the awareness that consent is an important part of sexuality is spreading but tools and consent practices are rarely discussed, people struggle to put it into practice. Additionally, people assume sex and sexuality to be natural and spontaneous occurrences which deters people from speaking openly about them and questioning norms around them (Humphreys 2004:210). This combined with the fact that consent behaviour and practice have rarely been modeled for people in other areas of life means they do not have blueprints on how to actively negotiate consent. This leads to a higher potential for boundary transgressions on the one hand but also limits peoples' experiences because they do not possess the tools to articulate their desires and delimit possibilities of acts they would like to engage in. The limited engagement with consent constricts peoples' experiences and possibilities whereas consent tools and skills are a way to engage with others in more self determined ways. Kink presents a paradigm shift because it is an area where consent is not seen as only a means to reduce harm but instead as "enabling pleasure and the exploration of desires" (Banerjee et al. 2018:313). In kink communities, "consent is framed as not simply a way to avoid negative outcomes but also an ongoing process that can encourage positive experiences between consenting adults" (Graham et al. 2016:905). As such consent can serve to further pleasure and desire and expand the possibilities of experiences people have access to.

The general sentiment in my interviews was a hopeful one though as my participants felt that societal engagement with consent was growing and that consent education was now present in some schools and kindergartens (Sasha 20:512-516; Simon 19:514-518) and discussions around critical consent are reaching more and more people. Additionally, information on consent is more widely available and more accessible due to the internet (Erika 24-25:631-658; Violet 12:287-290).

Generally, my participants understand consent as pertinent to all areas of life, starting with the treatment of children and their bodily autonomy. Most of them have experienced consent breaches in their childhood and were modeled behaviour in which societal power dictates whether one can expect to have their boundaries considered or not. A position of lower societal power resulting in one's consent being disregarded is on the one hand internalized

as it is behaviour that is modeled since childhood but also partially enforced through physical violence. Consent was generally not discussed, except for cases of consent violations or sexual violence. This leads to a societal awareness that consent is an important part of sex but a lack of deeper understanding or critical engagement. This means that people lack knowledge and tools to put affirmative consent knowledge into practice beyond tentative and self-taught attempts.

5.2 Learning Consent

The ways in which my interview participants gained a deeper understanding of critical consent are varied but all converge at the point of kink and queer kink communities which they stated as being a central source of their knowledge of critical consent (Erika 2:29-37; 5-6:136-139; Simon 1:4-17; Becky 2-3:48-68; Violet 1:14-25; Sasha 1:4-10; Sebastian 1-2:12-45). Kink and kink communities were for all of them either the main source of knowledge about critical consent or the main reason they started to learn more about it. This included reading literature on consent and kink (Sebastian 10:278-281) or reading kinky Fan-Fiction (Erika 5:137-138). Erika describes that over the time she has been reading Fan-Fiction, the focus and description of consent has grown a lot from Fan-Fiction of a few years ago being “borderline problematic” (Erika 1:19) to now recognizing that authors have a duty to educate people on consent when depicting BDSM practices (Erika 1:18-26). This means that the number of authors of Fan-Fiction who feel that they have a duty to educate their readers is growing and they represent consent negotiations and tools such as safe words when writing sex scenes or kinky scenes. This models how people in fiction apply consent tools which readers can learn from (Erika 20:535-536).

However, consent practices and tools are not limited to kinky spheres. BDSM is not the only area in which these are used and practiced. Becky describes that parallel to learning to practice critical consent in kink, she encountered consent tools as part of live action role-playing where safety tools such as safe words are put into place in case players want to indicate their discomfort for example in torture scenes (Becky 4:100-109). Another way through which people learned about consent is through engaging with feminist literature and ideas which for Sasha was alongside kink one of the main sources of knowledge on consent when they started engaging with the topic (Sasha 1:6-8).

Additionally it is important to note that while consent is seen as the basis of BDSM practices (Dunkley and Brotto 2020), critical consent is not seen as a central value in all kink

communities. However, the queer kink communities my interview participants see as positive examples for how they value and understand consent, are spaces in which people learn about, expand on and practice critical consent. Generally, queer kink communities can be seen as especially focussed on explicitly negotiating consent and at extensively communicating about topics around consent (Bauer 2014:75). As discussed in the previous chapter, my interlocutors had a very limited understanding of consent before entering the kink scene.

Also ich habe zum Beispiel consent so als Wort das erste mal beim BDSM Jugendstammtisch erklärt bekommen (...) und dann war ich so ach so, ja klar, Zustimmung, weiß man ja, dass man. Aber ich glaube dieses Ausmaß oder was für ein Prinzip da dahinter steht und für welche Handlungen das alles schon gilt, das ist mir dann erst eigentlich durch die Community so wirklich bewusst geworden.

For example, the word consent as such was explained to me for the first time at a BDSM youth get-together (...) and then I was like oh, yeah, sure, agreement, one knows that one. But I think it was only through the community that I really realised the extent of it or the principle behind it and all the actions it applies to.

(Simon 1:12-17, my translation)

People did have a prior understanding that consent was important in the sexual sphere but in a liberal sense of two autonomous individuals agreeing to something rather than a critical view of consent. This critical view is something they gained as part of the queer kink community where they realized that the topic of consent was more expansive and nuanced than the liberal model of consent stipulates. Consent is not only seen as a one time agreement but as something that is practiced with care and with the intent to ensure the humanity of others which leads to “genuine, morally significant consent” rather than “spurious or morally trivial consent” (O’Neill 1985:258). Additionally, in the queer kink community, people do not apply consent only to the practice of kink or sexual activities but to everyday interactions. Violet describes how when she first entered the queer kink scene, people approached her and asked how she would like to be interacted with.

I arrived there and I was like okay I don't know anyone. And then people were coming and saying hey is it okay if I sit here with you? And I was like of course. Or would you like a hug or would you like a cuddle or do you want me to show you around and so on.

(Violet 12:299-302)

Here consent is not only applied to the practice of kink or in the realm of the sexual but in everyday interactions between people. This direct and explicit form of consent behaviour can feel unusual as in mainstream society, consent for these things is often either not negotiated or negotiated non-verbally. In the queer kink community people model consent behaviour in many day to day actions establishing consent as a basis of social interaction.

I don't know, even like consent with pronouns and so on. Like don't assume the pronouns of people. Don't go around touching people even if they are doing something very close to you. Ask first and don't stare at them and stuff like that.

(Violet 5-6:117-125)

Asking how to address people, whether you can watch them even if they are in a public space, asking before touching people and even asking before individually messaging people from a common group chat (Violet 8:178-186) are practices of obtaining consent for basic social interactions which people in queer kink communities apply in how they engage with each other. In queer kink spaces consent is understood to be at the basis of all social interaction, not only kinky or sexual ones and consent becomes a community wide value.

The way newcomers are taught this central value of consent and the necessary consent skills is not mainly through active teaching or through pushing for a specific rule set that is presented to newcomers. Rather the central value of consent is modeled for new members as they can observe consent being practiced actively and explicitly in the community. As such a central value in any social interaction, members of queer kink communities start to implicitly expect a certain level of attention to consent.

I think there are some sort of rules [in the community]. I'm not so sure actually. (..) Yeah, I think there is some sort of unspoken things that are expected. Like, I don't know, you're not going to go around groping people. (laughs) Things like that. But to be honest, I don't really know if it is written somewhere.

(Violet 11:275-277)

As consent can not be easily defined and depends heavily on context, it is hard to set clear rules in place. Rather than explicitly teaching rules of behaviour in the queer kink communities, consent is practiced and modeled to newcomers and there is an expectation that they follow these behaviours.

Ich habe auch ein bisschen den Eindruck (...) dass es auch quasi so mehr ein Kultivieren ist im Sinne von korrigierend einwirken als wirklich ein "Hier sind die

Unterlagen und lern das auswendig und akzeptiere das." Das ist wirklich mehr Osmose habe ich den Eindruck weil man weiß ja nie wieviel die Leute dann tatsächlich mitbringen.

I somehow have the impression (...) that it is more of a cultivation in the sense of a corrective influence than really a "here are the documents, memorise them and accept them". I get the impression that it really is osmosis more than anything because you never know how much people already know.

(Sebastian 12:328-331, my translation)

Rather than having hard-and-fast rules, queer kink community see consent as a central value of social interaction and model behaviours in which consent is paramount to newcomers. Because "negotiation of consent is a shared social value, members of the community will observe discussions of consent and safety being practiced by established members and then imitate the same practices, leading to internalization of values around consent" (Graham et al. 2016:905). The expectation is therefore, for newcomers to learn how to behave in this way by being part of the community performing explicitly or implicitly the work to belong to these spaces by following the norms, values and expectations (Kuurne and Vieno 2022). If people behave otherwise they are corrected but there are no rules about what consent is precisely or how to implement it best. Learning critical consent is not just ensuring to verbally ask for willingness to engage in a certain activity, it is much rather a honing of already existing "skills in empathy and social cues" (Beres 2022:150) and encouraging people to apply these in any form of social interaction.

This form of active modelling of consent practices and of explicit engagement with consent is what sets queer kink communities apart from other spaces in which people can learn about consent tools or critical consent. Other ways in which my interview participants learnt about consent such as Fan-Fiction, live action role-playing and feminist thought as well as literature on consent are forms in which people can gain first understandings or theoretical knowledge about consent. In queer kink communities however, the knowledge transmitted is not merely theoretical or limited to safety tools for situations in which one reaches a boundary (such as it is the case for live action role-playing). Instead it is put into practice and continuously practiced and these communities provide a space in which critical consent is not only talked about but included into many social interactions and so it becomes lived.

Und der Kink-Kontext hat halt doch den Vorteil, dadurch, dass man immer alles neu aushandelt und dann auch mit wechselnden Personen etwas macht, in platonischen,

freundschaftlichen, romantischen, sexuellen, wie auch immer Verhältnissen, hat man einerseits viel mehr Praxis und viel mehr Übung darin und andererseits, finde ich, kriegt man es viel vorgelebt. Also ich finde, so wenn ich an die rope jams¹ denke, bei denen ich halt am häufigsten bin, die Praxis da wird super vorgelebt. (...) Als ich am Anfang hingegangen bin, war ich total eingeschüchtert und war so, wie soll ich mir diese ganze Dinge immer merken? Aber auf der anderen Seite, man macht es und dann wächst man rein. Und das ist immer so. Man wächst ja immer an den Aufgaben.

And the kink context does have the advantage, because you always negotiate everything anew and because you do things with different people with who you have platonic, friendship, romantic, sexual or whatever other relationships, you on the one hand have way more experience and way more practice at it and on the other hand, i think, you get it modeled a lot. I think, like when I think of the rope jams², which I attend the most, the practice is modeled there in a great way. (...) When I first went there, I was super intimidated and was thinking, how should I always remember all these things? But on the other hand, you do it and you grow into it that way. That is always the case. One always grows with one's tasks.

(Erika 6:153-160, my translation)

Queer kink communities represent a space in which people actively put consent knowledge into practice and where they see others putting this knowledge into practice, where they can ask for feedback, make mistakes, try again etc. Consent practice is not only linked to sexual partners in the private sphere but it is something that is continuously practiced with different people and discussed openly. These kink communities thus represent “intentional communities, built on communion, shared values, and beliefs” (Jones 2023:66; Bessant 2018) due to their shared value of and understanding of consent. Additionally, they represent “communities of practice, which arise from a shared foundation of collective experience, knowledge, and information transference” (Jones 2023:66; Bessant 2018) which in this case is the practice of BDSM and consent negotiations around it. These communities thus are very valuable sources of knowledge about consent that goes beyond theoretical engagement and discussion as the actual application of these theories and discussions becomes a focal point. This form of experience is invaluable because it makes consent knowledge tangible, practical and embodied.

¹ Rope jams are events where people meet up to practice rope bondage together in an informal setting.

² See footnote 1.

Bei den Kink-Workshops ist halt dann auch immer gleich die praktische Anwendung dabei, und dieses Ausprobieren. Und mir auch dadurch mehr Gedanken darüber machen. Also ich habe schon viel feministische Literatur gelesen, aber das ist dann sehr theoretisch. Und im Kink ist es halt dann viel greifbarer für mich.

The kink workshops always involve practical application and trying it out. And through that thinking more about it. I've read a lot of feminist literature but it's very theoretical. And in kink, it's way more tangible for me.

(Sasha 10:245-248, my translation)

Sasha's emphasis on practically applying kink knowledge stems from the fact that outside of kink there are rarely spaces in which we can try these things out, reflect on these practices and so create a deeper understanding of what consent means in practice and not only in theory.

Ich finde, vieles, man kann es zwar lesen oder hören, aber man muss die Sachen ausprobieren, gerade Grenzsachen, das muss man spüren und das dauert eine Zeit. Und nur durch das Üben erkennt man auch, dass diese Beschränktheit, dass man es eben nicht immer schafft, dass man ab und zu nicht so bei sich ist, und dann ist mehr Verständnis da.

I think a lot of things, you can read or hear them, but you have to try things out, especially things that concern boundaries, you have to feel them and that takes time. And only through practising you realise that this limitation, that you don't always manage it, that sometimes you're not so present in yourself, and then there's more understanding [for these instances].

(Sasha 16-17:405-408, my translation)

This focus on trying things out and putting them into action highlights the embodied part of consent. Because there is a difference between understanding something in theory and grasping it in practice, practicing consent skills is an important part in learning them. As BDSM is an embodied practice and "seeing something from the outside without embodying or experiencing it might indeed limit one's capacity to understand a phenomenon" (Bauer 2007:189) consent skills necessarily need to be applied and practiced in order to gain a deeper understanding for them.

Moving away from a liberal understanding of consent which sees it as a rational act between two rational agents, consent is recognized to be based not only on reason but also on

feelings, on the body, on the irrational. Critical consent introduces the body, feelings and context as important components when negotiating consent.

These components can not be fully understood or theorized but require practice, readjustment, empathy and being in tune with one's own emotions and desires. This undermines the binary between consensual and non consensual that a liberal understanding of consent operates under and opens up spaces for imperfect consent, for practices in which people were better or worse at establishing consent and at feeling, maintaining and communicating their boundaries. Additionally, practicing consent rather than learning about it in theory is important because direct and open sexual communication "tend to be confrontational and make us feel vulnerable as we expose our innermost desires" (Humphreys 2004:210). Even if we approve of and advocate for open sexual communication in theory, putting this theory into practice can be difficult as it makes us vulnerable in front of others. Trying this form of communication out and practicing are important because they require more than just knowing consent theory. They require people to dare to be vulnerable and to trust that the other person will react with openness, care and empathy to our vulnerability.

The way in which queer kink communities practice consent in everyday social interactions and provide spaces in which people can learn about and practice critical consent leads to an internalization of these practices and values.

Irgendwie ist das auch meine Erwartungshaltung inzwischen, jetzt wo ich so ein bisschen weiß, worauf man sich einlassen kann, dass auch Konsent eigentlich immer ein Thema ist.

Somehow it has become my expectation by now, now that I know a bit what things you can get into, that consent is basically always a topic.

(Erika 23:622-624, my translation)

Because consent is so ubiquitous in queer kink communities it is something that becomes expected in many contexts. This way consent becomes an internalized value that can be applied to a myriad of social situations. Now a lack of consent is what stands out and what people notice as odd or unusual in contrast to their engagement with consent before participating in queer kink communities where actively lived consent stood out to people as unusual.

How strong the focus on consent is differs between different kink communities. My interview

participants appreciated the focus and emphasis on consent that certain queer kink communities in Vienna provide and contrasted it to other communities in Vienna:

Ich glaube ich habe Glück weil ich angefangen habe mit (...) [dieser queer-feministischen Gemeinschaft] und nicht mit irgendwie ein bisschen problematischeren mehr heteronormativ geprägten Örtchen.

I think I am lucky because I started with (...) [this queer-feminist community] and not with the somehow a bit more problematic and more heteronormative places.

(Erika 2:31-33, my translation)

Here, a problematic engagement with consent is linked to heteronormativity while a critical engagement with it is linked to a queer kink community. This falls in line with theoretical understandings of critical or queer consent as questioning social norms such as heteronormativity (Bauer 2014). I will talk more about kink and queerness in chapter 5.5. The difference on how different kink communities treat or understand consent plays a role for my interview participants when deciding which workshops to attend or what venues to visit (Simon 7:183-190).

The more importance people place on consent, the more these differences between communities in their treatment of consent become apparent and a deciding factor of where they participate.

Ja, mittlerweile sehe ich ganz oft Sachen, die mich stören, die mich früher nicht gestört hätten, also ich bin mittlerweile schon sehr, mir ist consent extrem wichtig, was dazu führt, dass ich wenn ich teilnehme Workshops oft dann aussetze oder oder den workshop verlass, weil es für mich nicht sicher genug ist.

Yeah, by now I quite often see things that bother me which would not have bothered me before, by now I am very, consent is extremely important to me, which leads to me often skipping parts when I attend workshops or leaving a workshop because it is not safe enough for me.

(Sasha 1:16-19, my translation)

Sasha, who herself holds kink workshops, describes how her growing engagement with consent led to her increasingly observing situations in which she does not feel safe because consent is not practiced in a way that aligns with her knowledge of it.

So not all kink communities understand and practice consent to the same extent or in the

same way. This is something that influences the choices of my interview partners when attending events or workshops. Their participation in the queer kink communities which emphasise critical consent practices is thus not incidental or merely shaped by their queerness but also by their appreciation of critical consent practices which they partially learned in these spaces and which continues to draw them to these spaces. My interview participants have chosen to continue to participate in these communities due to their shared values and an appreciation for the practices shared in these communities.

Participation in queer kink communities plays a central role in how individuals come to understand, practice and embody consent. Kink communities which place a heavy focus on consent practices are places in which members can learn critical consent skills not only in theory but in their active application. They provide spaces in which these skills are practiced, repeated, discussed and modeled for all social interactions. In this way, consent knowledge becomes internalized and embodied for members of these communities and the kink communities represent both intentional communities and communities of practice (Jones 2023:66; Bessant 2018) to which my interview participants negotiate their belonging through an “active engagement of affiliation and disaffiliation” (Kuurne and Vieno 2022:280). The experience of how queer kinky people apply consent in many forms of social interaction, leads to an internalized expectation that consent should always be present and negotiated. The difference in consent practices across kink communities underscores the importance of queer kink communities as they provide spaces in which people feel safe and seen. Ultimately, queer kink communities do not just provide theoretical or situational knowledge of consent but an immersive, ongoing and embodied consent culture.

5.3 Locating Boundaries

Once my interlocutors started participating in queer kink communities and encountered how consent was lived and applied in these spaces, they also learnt about skills which are necessary for negotiating consent in this critical, queer way.

Playfight³ ist eigentlich der Bereich, wo ich so richtig zum Konsent gekommen bin, weil es so spannend ist, dass man (...) sich damit auseinandersetzen muss, auch

³ A playfight is an organized event at which a space is created for people to encounter each other on a mat and physically interact in any way they agreed to or that develops out of their interaction such as playfully fighting, cuddling, rough-housing etc. To playfight with someone you have to enter the mat and invite them to fight with you. Often an initial round of practicing saying no to someone inviting you is held before the playfighting starts.

was passiert, wenn ich ein Nein bekomme. Also einerseits muss ich formulieren, was ich will, das ist super hart und andererseits, wenn ich dann quasi etwas wage oder etwas versuche jemanden aufzufordern [zum Playfight], dann kann es sein, dass diese Person mir ein Nein gibt und das nicht will und was macht das dann mit mir.

Playfight⁴ is actually the area where I was really introduced to consent because it is so fascinating that you (...) have to grapple also with what happens when I receive a no. So on the one hand I have to express what I want which is super hard and on the other hand, when I dare or try to request [to playfight] with someone it can happen that this person gives me a no and that they do not want that and what does that do with me.

(Becky 2-3:53-59, my translation)

These skills of formulating one's own desires and of how to process a rejection are essential skills for negotiating consent. However, these are skills which mainstream society does not necessarily foster because people are usually expected to give their consent to most requests. A no is considered rude or a personal offence and thus societally frowned upon. Changing this internalized negative connotation of a no is therefore quite significant.

I think in the outside world if you actually ask for consent it almost sounds like you have to give it. And in some workshops we even practice to both say no and to receive a no. We're not taking it personally. It's something that is like really powerful.

(Violet 12:306-309)

Consent can only be valid if there is a real option to say no. Especially critical consent that ensures the humanity of the other person can only be morally significant if dissent is a real option (O'Neill 1985:259). However, because in mainstream society a no is considered a personal rejection and thus as something negative, people are conditioned to say yes in many situations. To practice critical consent people have to unlearn these societal structures. Again, these societal norms are pervaded by hierarchies and people in positions of lower societal status are more strongly trained to be agreeable and to not reject others.

I still have a lot to learn. (...) I was in a situation where I didn't feel comfortable. I didn't feel safe. I could totally have said something and for the life of me I couldn't say anything. (...) And it's still, like I keep thinking like what happened. And I think it's a little bit of this still very much ingrained thing like with women. That you have to be

⁴ See footnote 3.

nice, that you have to be, you know, maybe think that the person is not having a good day and stuff like that. So, yeah, for me I think I still have to learn how to say no.

(Violet 14:348-360)

The societal norms or structures of politeness and agreeableness that certain people are taught from a young age onward stand in the way of being able to practice critical consent because people are taught to consider the feelings and limitations of the other party over their own. People are used to going against their own limits or desires to please or appease others because “patriarchy prescribes certain attitudes, desires, and practices” (Garcia 2023). Unlearning these patriarchal prescriptions takes time and effort, first they have to be recognized and then people have to learn to go against them. For many people this has to become a possible option first as people who are awarded a lower status or a deviant status in the heteropatriarchy, are often not used to their consent being considered or to being heard. Many people have made experiences in which their dissent did not matter.

Also zum Beispiel bei meinen sexologischen Bodywork Sitzungen (...) [sind] die Personen (...) oft so überrascht, wenn sie sagen Nein und ich höre auf mit der Berührung sage Danke. Das ist erschreckend, wie selten das Cis-Frauen erleben. Also es haben teilweise Klientinnen zum Weinen angefangen, weil sie es noch nie erlebt haben, dass irgendwer auf ein Nein reagiert und noch dazu positiv reagiert.

Like for example in my sexological bodywork sessions (...) people are often so surprised when they say no and I stop with the touch and say thank you. It is alarming how rarely cis-women experience this. Some of my clients have started crying because they have never experienced someone reacting to a no and what's more, reacting positively.

(Sasha 18:437-442, my translation)

People who are oppressed in the heteropatriarchal system are often not used to having their voice heard or their consent or dissent considered. Being taught to appease instead of saying no in combination with the experience of one's own voice not being heard does not teach people how to recognize and express their own limits, how to say no and how to receive a no. However, only if dissent is a real and valid option can consent be valid.

People entering the queer kink scene thus often need to learn skills such as recognizing their own desires, boundaries and limits, expressing them and being able to advocate for them as well as dealing with the felt rejection when receiving a no. Here the queer kink community offers spaces in which people can practice and learn these things. On the one

hand because these skills are built into activities such as playfights but also because more experienced members of the community support newer members with this process.

My interlocutors described that a lack of knowledge about one's own boundaries, likes and dislikes places more responsibility and need for closer attention onto one's play partner.

Es ist natürlich wichtig, dass Personen auch wissen was ihre eigenen Grenzen sind, ich glaube das ist auch oft dann der Grund warum viele Leute mit ganz neuen Personen, die sich da vielleicht noch zu wenig intensiv selbst auseinandergesetzt haben, nicht so gerne spielen, weil wenn bei der Frage danach was magst du gar nicht? so was kommt wie das habe ich mir noch gar nicht überlegt, mach einfach mal alles, dann (lacht) finde ich das immer schon ein bisschen schwierig. Oder weiß halt dann zumindest, dass ich da sehr vorsichtig rangehen werde und dann noch mal extra mehr selbst kommunizieren muss und nachfragen muss. Also da ist es sicher gut sich selbst einschätzen zu können.

Of course it is important that people also know what their own boundaries are, I think this is often the reason why many people don't like to play with completely new people who perhaps haven't yet dealt with it intensively enough themselves because if the question what do you not like at all? is answered with something like I haven't even thought about that yet, just do everything, then (laughs) I always find that a bit difficult. Or I at least know that I will approach it very carefully and that I have to communicate more myself and check in. So it is definitely good to be able to assess oneself.

(Simon 14:382-390, my translation)

People who do not yet know their own boundaries or limits might think that they do not have any. However, experienced kinksters know that saying one does not have any boundaries is rather a sign of inexperience and know that they have to be more careful and check in more regularly than with people who know their boundaries and know how to communicate them. In doing so, more experienced members of the community support newcomers in the process of finding their boundaries and limits by looking after them, watching their body language, checking in with them and carefully guiding them.

Sometimes you can come across someone who is not very used to [practicing consent]. And this is very common, at least in my experience with women. And sometimes you ask, oh, is that okay? And then the person just says yes. But you can read that it's not. And you don't know how to navigate that. So I actually... With one of

my other partners, I was actually talking about this, oh, I had this very awkward situation that the person clearly didn't look fine. But I didn't know what to do. And then they were like giving me advice like, oh, hey, you can actually ask the person for more specific questions and stuff like that. And like, oh, do you prefer this or that.

(Violet 10:256-263)

Violet's example on the one hand demonstrates this care and attention experienced practitioners have towards newcomers. Critical consent includes thinking about the level of expertise someone possesses and how that influences their decisions and their agreements. Because people outside the kink community most frequently communicate consent through implicit and non-verbal consent cues (Beres and MacDonald 2015:419; Cowling 2004:24), looking at body language and non-verbal clues is an important part of ongoing consent practice. Especially because people are conditioned to not say no and to ignore their own boundaries, the body becomes a source of information on whether people are okay in a given situation and focussing purely on unambiguous verbal communication for valid consent "lower[s] the standard for communicative competence, disconnect[s] it from historical-cultural context, and miss[es] opportunities to politicize consent" (Harris 2018:155).

However, because in kink people strongly believe in peoples' agency to make decisions even if they cause them discomfort, Violet struggled to proceed with the conflicting feedback they received and talked about it with a partner to gain insight from their experiences. This is how with the support of the community Violet has found a way to deal with such situations in the future and is able to support newcomers even better while they are still learning to recognize, verbalise and assert their own boundaries. Importantly, the responsibility of consent here is seen as falling on both parties but more strongly on the more experienced part. This goes against societal norms and expectations which paint consent "as exclusively a woman's concern" (Garcia 2023:118), reinforcing sexist gender ideas about men as sexually always wanting and women as having to resist. Because kinky consent divides responsibility among all people involved keeping in mind what level of expertise people possess, it rejects these heteronormative ideas of men as aggressors and women as passive victims. Instead people who "decide to give up control (...) [and] those who have traditionally not had the power to give consent" (Banerjee et al. 2018:315) are awarded agency and responsibility in their interactions.

The community plays an important role in learning these new approaches to consent as it provides a layer of safety. This safety stems from community members and leaders making sure that people practice BDSM responsibly in the public kink spaces.

Na, ich weiß einfach, dass da einfach die Leute nicht einfach sich selber überlassen werden, sondern ich meine [ein community leader] geht ja immer herum und es wird immer geschaut und auch, ich habe das auch schon ein zweimal erlebt, wenn da nicht wirklich hundertprozentig klar ist, ist das alles in Ordnung so gibt es auch schon mal die aktive Nachfrage, einfach man wird nicht sich selber überlassen.

I just know that people are not just left to their own devices but [a community leader] always walks around and there is always people watching out and also, I have experienced that already twice, if it is not a hundred percent clear that everything is alright then there's sometimes an active enquiry, you're simply not left to your own devices.

(Sebastian 12:334-338, my translation)

Practicing kink in these queer community spaces ensures that there are multiple people looking out to make sure people practice kink responsibly and that consent is being negotiated and kept throughout. Sasha also stressed that the big advantage of the public queer kink community is being able to learn from experienced community members where knowledge and information can be confirmed from multiple sources in contrast to playing privately with a person who might use someone's lack of experience to their own advantage (Sasha 17:417-429). Sebastian also urges newcomers to profit off the openness of the community (Sebastian 20:558-561) and says it is paramount for people to ask questions:

Also nicht nur zu lernen, dass man das Recht hat Fragen zu stellen sondern dass es einfach notwendig ist Fragen zu stellen. Ja. Weil im Endeffekt wenn man den Führerschein hat muss man auch wissen, wie das Auto funktioniert und was passieren kann und das ist an der Stelle nichts anderes. Also da geht es auch in gewisser Weise, ja, da geht's auch um Leib und Leben. Kann es gehen, wie gesagt, ein blauer Fleck verheilt schnell aber ein Trauma ist da eine andere Sache.

So not only to learn that one has the right to ask questions but that it is simply necessary to ask questions. Yeah. Because in the end, if you get a drivers license you also have to know how the car works and what could happen and in this instance it is the same. In a way, yeah, it is also about life and limb. It can be, as I said, a bruise heals fast but a trauma is another thing.

(Sebastian 20:563-567, my translation, emphasis by Sebastian)

Sebastian therefore sees the responsibility of ensuring safety and being informed on all

people involved. More experienced members have a responsibility to look after newer members but these newer members also have the responsibility to inform themselves about kink and consent practices, potential dangers and how to mitigate them. Sebastian sees this as imperative because of the potential risks of practicing kink in uninformed ways. The kink community here is a valuable source of information and people have to responsibility to make use of this availability of information.

Different layers of safety and protection are therefore at play in queer kink communities, especially when it comes to inexperienced members. In the case of newer members, more experienced members pay more attention and care to ensure everyone's safety and wellbeing.

This care and attention is done on the one hand to ensure the safety of inexperienced people but also to ensure the safety of their more experienced play partner. Sasha recounts why they do not participate in workshops in which consent is not treated as a central issue:

Das Hauptthema für mich ist, wenn ich teilnehme irgendwo, ich möchte nicht in einer Täterrolle enden, weil die andere Person nicht nein sagen kann oder so und das wird oft vernachlässigt finde ich.

The main issue for me is if I take part anywhere, I do not want to end up in the role of perpetrator because the other person can not say no or something like that and I think that is often neglected.

(Sasha 1:19-21, my translation)

Sasha describes that practitioners try to ensure to not overstep boundaries for the safety of their play partner and also for their own safety. Playing with people who do not know where their own boundaries are, requires more attention and care as the boundaries become apparent when they are crossed. Being the person who crosses previously unknown or unexpressed boundaries also carries a risk as hurting or harming others is something that is impactful and not something that Sasha wants to grapple with.

It is important to note that inexperience or societal norms are not the only factors that can inhibit people from saying no or indicating when their limits are reached. Another reason for people to go beyond their own boundaries that my interview partners mentioned was the desire to please a play partner (Erika 27:727-730; Sebastian 2-3:61-66) or not being in tune with oneself (Sasha 6:144-145).

However, my interview partners did also describe going up until their limits or slightly beyond

as something they aspire to in kink.

Weil, ja, also bis auf die Dinge, wo ich relativ klar weiß, dass ich das nicht haben will, versuche ich jetzt mir auch nicht genau vorzustellen, wo ist jetzt exakt die Grenze, weil ich ja dann wahrscheinlich eine Spur davor sonst aus sagen müsste. Und ich will aber wissen, wie sich die Grenze anfühlt. Und deswegen kann ich es nicht wissen.

Because yeah, except for the things where I know quite clearly that I don't want them, I try not to imagine in detail where the limit exactly is because then I would probably have to say stop slightly before. But I want to know how the limit feels. And that's why I can't know it.

(Becky 23-24:642-645, my translation)

Reaching a limit and experiencing what it feels like here becomes a goal of kinky play or something that is actively wanted. This form of liminal experience can serve to gain self knowledge or as a desirable experience in itself.

This form of boundary transgression is described as something that can be done in a setting that is safe enough to allow for these transgressions. Simon explains that he likes to feel an emotional bond to people he plays with because he feels safer (Simon 16:449-452) which in turn enables him to go further in their play.

Das kann dann auch dazu führen, dass ich eher bereit bin auch Sachen mit denen ich keine Erfahrung habe, aber die ich einfach gerne mal ausprobieren möchte, also neue Sachen, dann eben auch auszuprobieren und dann vielleicht über ehemals gesetzte Grenzen hinausgehen kann also natürlich auch kommuniziert, so so hey, bisher war das immer eine Grenze, aber ich würde gerne diesmal weitergehen.

That can lead to me being more willing to try things with which I do not have any experience but which I would just like to try out, as in new things, and to me being able to maybe go beyond boundaries I set previously, of course communicated like hey, that until now was always a boundary but this time I would like to go further.

(Simon 16-17:452-457, my translation)

Simon sees an emotional connection and the resulting feeling of trust and safety with a person as necessary to go beyond previously set boundaries and to try out new things. As with newcomers, playing when boundaries are unknown, not clear or when they cannot be applied the same way, requires increased attention and care from a play partner. Simon thus

prefers to play in this way with people that he trusts and has an emotional connection with. Erika shares this sentiment of wanting to try out new things or wanting to go beyond her own boundaries with people that she trusts (Erika 9:218-227). This form of going beyond one's own limits due to curiosity, pleasure or self-exploration differs from societal norms of people pleasing and ignoring one's own boundaries as in this instance it is done deliberately with the goal to gain something for oneself and not to appease someone else. Additionally, this form of boundary transgression to create liminal experiences goes against the liberal ideal of harmonic sex (Bauer 2014:3) which excludes discomfort as a valuable experience. Queer kink here welcomes experiences outside people's comfort and sees transgressing one's limits and boundaries as a source of joy or pleasure or self knowledge.

What leads to being able to explore one's own boundaries and limits in this way is the knowledge that a no is a possible and valid option.

Das ist ja das, was Konsent erst so richtig möglich macht, dass ich weiß, dass ich mit meinen Emotionen oder mit dem, wie ich mich fühle, nach außen gehen kann, das kommunizieren kann und das zerstört die andere Person nicht. Und die andere Person ist stark genug, das nehmen zu können, auch wenn es gerade mit dem eigenen Empfinden jetzt nicht zusammenpasst oder Enttäuschung hervorruft oder so.

That is what makes consent possible in the first place, that I know that I can externalize my emotions or what I feel, that I can communicate that and it does not destroy the other person. And the other person is strong enough to take that even if it does not match their own feelings or causes disappointment or something.

(Becky 17:458-463, my translation)

In order to practice critical consent that allows for people to explore their boundaries and try out new things, being able to change or end any action is an important basis. Knowing that one can say no or stop at any given moment without social repercussions enables people to be able to go beyond previously established limits because these limits or boundaries are often ways to keep oneself safe. Once the safety is also given by the outside because one can trust that a no will be heard and accepted, the safety of these boundaries and limits can be left behind and people feel free to explore what lies beyond.

The queer kink community is a space in which people can learn more about themselves by finding their boundaries, reflecting on them, playing with them, feeling and experiencing them. This is possible because members of the queer kink community create a safer and

trustful environment in which people are informed about possible pitfalls, pay attention to others, their body language and their wellbeing and where people interact with each other with a sense of responsibility and care. This allows for newcomers to find out about their own limits and boundaries and also for more experienced people to explore what these boundaries feel like, what it feels like to go beyond them or to expand them. Boundaries are not seen as fixed or rigid by my interview partners but understood to be flexible, context dependent and a potential source of pleasure, self-experience or self knowledge. Consent skills and tools are ways to navigate and reach these pleasures and satisfy desires for liminal experiences (Banerjee et al. 2018; Graham et al. 2016). Once people feel secure that their boundaries will be respected and looked after, they are able to venture beyond them or stretch them and explore what lies beyond. This does not reflect societal norms of agreeability or of avoiding discomfort because precisely the option to say no and the trust to have it respected, enables this form of exploration of the unknown, the uncomfortable and the liminal.

5.4 Safety, Risk and Mistakes

People entering the queer kink scene learn new and critical ways of negotiating consent and skills around recognizing and expressing their own desires and limits. These are necessary as a kind of safety mechanism for practicing non-normative and potentially harmful acts.

[Beim Erkunden der eigenen kinks] war natürlich auch die Frage: Wie kannst du safe sein wenn du Dinge tust die potenziell gefährlich sein können? Wie kannst du quasi deine eigene Sicherheit auch gewährleisten, vor allen Dingen, wenn man eine Person vielleicht nicht so gut kennt.

[When exploring my own kinks] of course the question arose: How can you be safe when you do things that could potentially be dangerous? How can you ensure your own safety, especially if you don't know a person very well?

(Sebastian 5:124-127, my translation)

Kinky practices include acts that have a potential to be physically or psychologically harmful. These practices thus require certain care and knowledge or expertise. Because kinky practices are marginalized and pathologized there are no social norms of conduct for kinky spaces and this information is not always easily available. This is why newcomers need to learn certain skills and norms of behaviour from the kink community which provides a space of acceptance in the face of social stigma (Graham et al. 2016:903–4). To ensure a certain level of safety, there are certain tools and guidelines that are widespread in the kink

community and which people use as aids for critical consent. However, there are no official hard set rules. There are people who do follow certain strict rulesets and encourage others to do the same but my interview partners remained critical of clear and strict rules.

Ich habe das Gefühl, es gibt so gewisse Menschen in der Community, in der ich mich bewege, die teilweise recht fixe Regeln predigen. Und da frage ich mich, wie viel Flexibilität angebracht ist in Bezug auf solche Regeln.

I feel like there are certain people in the community that I am part of who sometimes preach quite rigid rules. And I ask myself how much flexibility is appropriate with regard to such rules.

(Erika 15-16:410-112, my translation)

Certain rules seem to be sensible at first glance but as there is not one fixed definition of consent that can encompass all its nuance there cannot be strict rules on how to implement it. Sasha recounts that engagement with the topic of consent keeps bringing up new facets: "The more I engage with the topic, the more complex it becomes" (Sasha 6:154-155, my translation)⁵. This sentiment of consent being a topic that can never be fully understood because it is too complex and expansive is shared by other interview participants as well.

Ich glaube nicht, dass man ausgelernt hat. Und das verändert sich ja auch praktisch [dadurch dass], man was Neues [weiß], (...) es geht halt ganz viel darum, anderen Menschen Respekt entgegenzubringen. So in der Basis geht es ja darum, dass wir uns gegenseitig respektieren und deswegen unsere Grenzen gegenseitig wahren. Und dazu gehört ja mehr, als nur zu sagen, möchtest du das, möchtest du das nicht. Und ich finde, wenn man Konsens dann so weit denkt, dann glaube ich hört das nie auf.

I don't think that the learning ever stops. Because it also changes practically, [through knowing] something new (...) it's also a lot about respecting other people. Basically it is about respecting each other and therefore respecting each other's boundaries. And that involves more than just saying do you want that, do you not want that. And I think if we take our thinking about consent that far, then I don't think it ever ends.

(Erika 6-7:162-170, my translation)

Through adopting a critical or queer perspective on consent it becomes something expansive that concerns all social interactions. As social interactions are complex, relational,

⁵ Original quote: "Je mehr ich mich mit dem Thema beschäftige, umso komplexer wird es".

context dependent, in flux and pervaded by power hierarchies, so is critical consent. Rather than aiming for the liberal ideal of sexual interactions devoid of power dynamics (Bauer 2014:3), critical consent strives towards respect and mutual care (Garcia 2023; O'Neill 1985). Rather than trying to eradicate power dynamics, people try to acknowledge these and base their interactions on respect and empathy rather than an unachievable ideal of equality.

Due to the influence of power hierarchies and the ever shifting contexts, consent cannot be easily defined or be broken down into rules we can follow. In lieu of specific rules, there are certain frameworks that queer kink communities uphold which community members should follow to ensure their safety and wellbeing. The two most famous ones are safe, sane, consensual (SSC) and risk aware, consensual kink (RACK) which both provide a guide for how kink should be practiced (Williams et al. 2014). Simon talks about these principles and the expectation that people follow them in the queer kink community.

[Das ist] höchstwahrscheinlich auch wieder sehr abhängig von der Community, aber ich glaube dass es in einigen communities, oder vor allem die in denen ich mich aufhalte auf jeden Fall erwartet wird, dass wenn man dort spielt, dass man diese Prinzipien auch kennt und einhält.

[That's] most likely again very dependent on the community but I think that in many communities, or especially the ones I am a part of, it is definitely expected that you know and follow these principles if you play there.

(Simon 12:336-339, my translation)

People in the queer kink communities know these principles and often aim to follow one or the other. However, SSC has been critiqued by community members. On the one hand sanity is a pathologizing and vague concept.

Der Begriff sane ist problematisch für mich. Wer definiert, was ist sane? (...) Und auch, werden potenziell Menschen mit psychischen Erkrankungen ausgeschlossen, die aber einen Großteil unserer Gesellschaft ausmachen.

The term sane is problematic for me. Who defines, what sane is? (...) And also, people with mental illnesses are potentially excluded but they make up a majority of our society.

(Sasha 14:337-341, my translation)

Requiring to play sanely is not specific while also being ableist and exclusionary to anyone deemed not sane by society. Sanity is not only “a stigmatized psychological term that has no real bearing on BDSM practice” (Fanghanel 2020:273), this requirement also creates problematic categorizations and exclusions. The requirement to play sanely denies people with mental illnesses the possibility and agency to decide whether and how they would like to engage in kink and is therefore considered problematic by Sasha. Sanity has historically been a concept with which people who were deemed Other were disciplined, controlled and excluded from society (Foucault 2013 [1964]) and the practice of BDSM itself has been pathologized as a mental disorder or perversion (Dunkley and Brotto 2020:658; Krafft-Ebing 1886). Queer kink practitioners question themes of rationality and sanity and queer kink can be understood as “creating alternative intimacies and, more specifically, exuberant intimacies, intimacies that reject reason, moderation, mediocrity, harmony and equality as well as reproduction and usefulness” (Bauer 2014:4). Because these alternative intimacies break societal standards of relating and heteropatriarchal rules and norms, the concept of sanity which is a heteropatriarchal tool of control is rejected and subverted in intimacies which go beyond the need for sanity, reason, harmony or safety.

My interview participants had another critique for the acronym SSC with the word safe.

Safe gibt es nicht. Und darum finde ich den Begriff auch, er spiegelt so eine falsche Sicherheit vor. Es ist nicht safe, egal was man macht, außer man liegt in einem Bunker, flach am Boden und bewegt sich nicht vielleicht, und selbst dann kommt vielleicht eine Überschwemmung.

Safe doesn't exist. And that's why I find that the term feigns a wrong safety. It's not safe, no matter what you do, except maybe you lie in a bunker flat on the ground and you don't move, maybe and even then there's maybe a flood.

(Sasha 14:343-346, my translation)

Complete safety can never be achieved because there will always be variables that cannot be controlled or that are unexpected. The aim of social interaction in queer kink is not sanity or safety but instead it celebrates “difference, tension, intensity, risk, excess, ecstasy, wastefulness, perversity, campy extravagance, fluidity and insanity, as well as becoming something beyond the human” (Bauer 2014:4). My interview participants acknowledged that consent is not a way to ensure full safety but rather saw it as something that can be used to mitigate harm and ensure best conduct possible.

Man kann immer wieder einen Konsent überschreiten und das wird passieren. Das geht gar nicht anders. Wichtig ist, dass man bereit ist, das auch irgendwie anzunehmen und miteinander zu bearbeiten oder in Kommunikation zu bleiben oder so. Also ich fürchte fast, gerade in solchen Bereichen, wo wir ja gerade da rein gehen, dass man so Grenzauslotungen macht oder so, wird das immer wieder passieren. Und das ist auch okay. Ich glaube, da tun wir auch irgendwie zustimmen.

You can always breach someone's consent and it is going to happen. There's no way around it. The important thing is to be prepared to accept that somehow and to work on it together or stay in communication or something. I suspect that especially in areas like this where we aim to explore our boundaries and stuff like that, it will happen again and again. And that's okay. I think we kind of agree to that.

(Becky 10:255-260, my translation)

Rather than assuming that consent can keep us fully safe, it is important to acknowledge that mistakes can and will happen. Especially as kink can be a way to discover one's own boundaries and limits but also to transgress and expand those or to explore what lies beyond as discussed in the previous chapter. This is something that people have to be aware of in order to be able to accept mistakes, work on mending them together and to stay in contact and communicate. Additionally, risk or danger can be a big part of the appeal of BDSM (Fanghanel 2020:273). Negotiating consent for kinky play thus includes an awareness of the risks and consenting to these risks as part of the activity. This is why people I spoke to prefer the framework of risk aware consensual kink.

Ich finde es viel besser, (...) sich über die Risiken bewusst zu sein und dann entscheiden, möchte ich das eingehen das Risiko oder nicht. Weil dann ist man auch viel eher darauf vorbereitet, wenn irgendwas nicht so geht, wie [geplant].

I find it much better to be aware of the risks and to then decide whether I want to take that risk or not. Because then you are more likely to be prepared if something doesn't go as [planned].

(Sasha 14:346-349, my translation)

Being aware that no action is without risk and that we can mitigate those risks but never eliminate them fully gives people more autonomy and freedom to decide whether they are willing to take certain risks or not. This awareness of risks also makes it easier for people to react when something goes wrong as they are expecting this possibility. This approach requires a critical understanding of consent as a liberal model of consent assumes an

agreement once made to be valid and lasting. “The methods of liberal consent have nothing to do with recognizing dignity and respecting humanity, only with establishing the fact of formal agreement” (Garcia 2023:60). Once this formal agreement has been established it is taken as valid and as stable or immutable. A model of liberal consent does not account for risks and can therefore not accommodate mistakes or mishaps the way critical consent practices aim to do.

My interview partners all framed consent negotiations as a negotiation of risk and security. Simon for example recounted that he is very careful when selecting people he will play with to mitigate risks. To my question whether he had encountered any difficulties when negotiating consent he replied:

Nein, ich habe eigentlich das Glück gehabt oder vielleicht treffe ich auch so eine sehr starke Vorauswahl oder vertrau das sehr auf mein Gefühl bei gerade, also gerade bei Spielpartner:innen, mit denen ich intensivere Sessions haben möchte. Also da treffe ich mich oft auch für so ein Vorgespräch vor einer Session mal an einem neutralen Ort (...) wo ich auch noch mal so reinfühlen kann in mich ob ich mich safe fühle mit der Person zu spielen, ob wir so diese dasselbe Verständnis haben, wie, also und ich finde man merkt einfach auch dann in so einem Gespräch sehr schnell wie sensibilisiert eine Person selbst ist.

No, I've actually been lucky or maybe I make a very strong pre-selection or trust my instincts a lot, especially with play partners with who I want to have more intense sessions. In that case I often meet for a preliminary talk before a session in a neutral place, (...) where I can assess also emotionally whether I feel safe to play with the person, whether we have the same understanding, how, and I think you simply notice very quickly in such a conversation how sensitised a person is themselves.

(Simon 15:410-417, my translation)

People try to mitigate risks when practicing kink through consent negotiations before playing, sometimes these happen at a separate space and time to ensure the context is not already charged with expectations, anticipations or nervousness or to keep people from slipping into a kinky role or position. However, even though Simon ascribes the fact that he has not made negative experiences to his strict selection of play partners he still frames it as being lucky thus implying that he is aware that this way of selecting play partners cannot ensure full safety. There are other ways in which people try to mitigate potential harm by gaining insight from talking to more experienced members (Sebastian 11:287-294), regular check-ins with play partners that extend beyond play sessions (Sasha 7:179-184, Sebastian 10:270-275,

Violet 8:201-207) and communicating about what the person needs after a session or if something went wrong (Sasha 15:358-364, Sebastian 16:448-450). All these measures are meant to ensure the wellbeing of everyone involved. Once people act out of a deep care and consideration for each other, mistakes and things going awry are seen as learning moments rather than impermissible missteps.

Ich sage auch den Leuten immer, es wird sogenannte Abstürze geben, wenn man viel spielt, ich finde das Wort nicht so geeignet, aber ja, dann kommt es dazu, dass irgendwas ganz schief geht, egal wie sehr man sich bemüht. Und in meiner Erfahrung ist das eigentlich nie ein Problem, es ist eher, also eher, dass man was daraus lernt und dass auch die Verbindung und das Vertrauen viel stärker werden kann, dadurch, wenn man, relativ wie man umgeht damit. Wenn natürlich da beide anfangen, "aber du hast gesagt", "aber du hast nicht", das ist schlecht. Aber sonst, ja, ist das eher unproblematisch.

I always tell people, there will be so called crashes when you play a lot, I don't find the word very appropriate but yeah, then it happens that something goes awry no matter how hard you try. And in my experience that is never a problem, rather that you can learn from it and that the connection and the trust can become way stronger through it, depending on how you deal with the situation. Of course if both sides start to say "but you said", "but you didn't", that is bad. But other than that, yeah, it's rather unproblematic.

(Sasha 14-15:349-355, my translation)

When engaging in kink activities people will come across instances in which people experience unexpected emotional upheaval or get hurt physically in unintended ways. This is expected to happen even if people act with care and respect for each other and try to mitigate risks. However, if people are aware of the risks they expose themselves to, accept this risk as part of play and work on contingency plans or stay in contact and try to mend such things together, these experiences can serve as learning moments and strengthen their bond. As Becky also emphasised, what is important in such instances is to accept that something went wrong and to work on repair together. Mistakes or unintended outcomes are thus seen as inevitable but depending on people's reactions to them they can serve as positive experiences of learning and bonding. Mutual care and respect and the aim to ensure each others' humanity enable such positive experiences of mistakes. This is part of a critical understanding of consent rather than a liberal understanding (Garcia 2023). My interview partners agreed that care and respect are crucial for negotiating critical consent which allows for mistakes or mishaps to happen.

But it's also a matter of like I think compassion and vulnerability honestly because you have to trust someone to kind of be open to let that stuff happen. Whatever is gonna come out of it. But at the same time also like understand that there is like some shared responsibility.

(Violet 14:343-346)

Engaging with each other in caring ways and being open with each other are seen as required for the level of trust and connection that allow for engaging in activities together of which the outcomes are uncertain. Critical consent requires this mutual care and respect which allows for repair and connection in the face of mistakes or problems. Mistakes are additionally framed as shared responsibility which forgoes the need to assign blame and victimhood and reinstates everyone's agency in choosing risky and dangerous activities.

There are also somewhat predictable potential negative side effects of kink that can occur, such as drop. The term drop is used to describe feelings of sadness, loneliness, dread or sorrow that people sometimes experience after engaging in kink which is "a natural physiological consequence following the rush of endorphins and adrenaline that people often experience during BDSM/kink headspaces and activities" (Ansara 2019:12). BDSM activities can lead to the release of many different hormones and depending on someone's mood and constitution the wearing off of these hormones can trigger feelings of sadness, loneliness or sorrow. People who have experience practicing kink know to expect drop and include this possibility in the risk assessment of a situation and see it as a natural part of playing with bodies and emotions which can behave in unpredictable ways.

Körper können sehr konkrete Einschränkungen bedeuten. Körper können auch bedeuten, dass ich zwischendurch einfach meinen Konsent ändern muss. Genauso ist es mit Emotionen. Meine Emotionen können sich genauso ändern, wie mein körperliches Befinden, aus egal welchem Grunde. Ich kann mich jetzt gerade sehr gut fühlen, ich kann eine Person sehr, sehr, sehr toll finden und ich kann danach den Drop meines Lebens haben. Und das kann passieren aufgrund von unterschiedlichen Dingen.

Bodies can impose very specific restrictions. Bodies can also mean that I have to change my consent in the middle of play. It's the same with emotions. My emotions can change exactly like my physical state for whatever reason. I can feel very good in one moment and find a person really really great and afterwards I can have the drop of my life. And that can happen due to different things.

(Erika 28:749-752, my translation)

BDSM can never be risk free but only risk aware because it involves people with their background and context, their bodies and their emotions, all of which can behave in unforeseen ways or result in different limitations. The possibility of drop adds another variable to any consent negotiation. Reactions to certain acts can differ from day to day and according to a person's disposition which is why engaging in BDSM always carries a certain amount of risk but also why consent knowledge is constantly growing, shifting and expanding.

If mistakes are reflected upon and used as learning moments, new knowledge about consent can be drawn from them. This means that consent knowledge is constantly shifting and improved upon.

Was für mich eine positive Entwicklung ist, dass mir vorgekommt, in den letzten Jahren wird auch mehr auf die Grenzen der Top-Personen geachtet. Also ich weiß, früher hat es immer nur geheißen, die Sub oder Bottom-Personen sagt nein, einige Leute finden es immer noch absurd, dass man als Top oder Dom ein safeword hat, aber ich finde das total notwendig und wichtig und versuche ich auch den Leuten beizubringen in meinen Workshops, weil es kann einem als Top so schnell zu viel sein und die andere Person ist noch nicht einmal am Anfang.

A positive development for me is that it seems to me that in recent years more attention is being paid to the boundaries of the top person as well. I know that in the past it used to be all about the sub or bottom person saying no, some people still find it absurd for a top or dom to have a safeword, but I think it is totally necessary and important and I also try to teach people this in my workshops, because it can quickly become too much for a top and the other person isn't even at the beginning yet.

(Sasha 12:288-294, my translation)

This example of a new found consideration for the boundaries and limits of the top shows how general standards of consent and assumed best-practice in the kink community keep developing and evolving. In this case these developments are highly welcomed and Sasha passes these new found practices on to new kink practitioners in their workshops. Through growing experience with things going awry or with risks and their outcomes, practitioners who stay attentive and open to these instances can draw new consent knowledge from mistakes or mishaps. This leads to a growing body of knowledge about consent which is then passed onto others within the communities and which results in queer BDSM communities

being at the forefront of consent discussions setting queer BDSM communities apart from other communities (Bauer 2014:75). This is of course only the case if participants adopt a critical perspective on consent and thus see consent as evolving and changing. My interview participants for example said that they believe that we never stop learning about consent (Erika 6:162). Due to this openness for new and improved consent practices members of the queer kink community continuously improve their own consent skills and knowledges but also the community wide standards and norms. Because consent tools and strategies are constantly improved upon and standards within the community change such as the move from safe, sane and consensual kink to risk-aware consensual kink as baseline guidelines or the realisation of the importance of the limits of the person playing in the top position.

Generally, my interview participants placed value on staying open and committed to improving their consent knowledge and skills.

Ich finde das grundsätzlich immer gut, wenn man sagt, ein Jahr ist um, schauen wir uns das wieder neu an, was hat sich bewährt, was haben wir raus, was haben wir Neues gelernt. (...) Ich glaube, es ist jedenfalls sinnvoll, viel und oft über Konsens zu reden. Und wenn jemand das Gefühl hat, es hängt mir jetzt schon zum Hals raus, dann würde ich das auch noch einmal hinterfragen, weil das Thema ist spannend genug, dass man sich immer wieder was Neues rausholen kann.

I basically think it is always good to say, a year has passed, let us look at this again, what has worked well, what to do we throw out, what have we learnt. (...) I think it definitely makes sense to talk about consent a lot and often. If someone has the feeling, that they are fed up with it I would question that because the topic is interesting enough that you can always draw something new from it.

(Becky 21:582-588, my translation)

Part of practicing consent in a critical way is to stay critical of one's own practices, reflect on them and improve them accordingly. This is a process that never ends because there is always more to find out about consent and because community wide standards keep shifting and evolving. Learning from mistakes and instances of mishap leads to an evolving and dynamic engagement with consent. Becky questions people who become fed up with this ongoing re-evaluation and engagement with consent because one can never know everything about consent or practice it perfectly. Being fed up with it thus points to a frustration that Becky finds worth investigating. The fact that consent knowledge and skills are constantly evolving and shifting does not mean that people have to completely overhaul their understanding of consent regularly. Rather they keep refining it and finding new

complexities or aspects. When I asked Sebastian whether his knowledge of consent was changing he replied:

Mit jedem Gespräch. Es kristallisieren sich schon so Richtungen raus, wo man sagt ok, das würde mich jetzt wundern wenn das umkippen würde, die Schlussfolgerung aber es wächst auf jeden Fall, ja, auch mit jedem neuen kink den man entdeckt merkt man so ah, okay? Da muss ich jetzt drüber lesen und dann merkt man sofort das ist viel komplexer als ich geglaubt habe.

With every conversation. Certain directions do crystallise where I say ok, I would be surprised if this conclusion would be upturned but it is definitely growing, yeah, also with every new kink you discover you realise ah, okay, I have to read about that and then I realize quickly that it is much complexer than I thought.

(Sebastian 11:296-300, my translation)

The dynamic and changing nature of consent and of the knowledge of consent does not mean we have to rewrite everything we know again and again but that due to being concerned with social interactions, the topic keeps bringing up new complexities and facets. These complexities lead to a continuing refinement of practices and skills but can never fully be grasped and accounted for as social and political contexts change and in doing so influence social interactions. Because our interactions do not happen in a vacuum, change is inevitable and the only way to account for this ever changing nature of social interactions is to stay attentive and open in our consent practices to improvements and change. People in queer kink communities see this as a given and their engagement with consent allows for changes and improvements which can result from making mistakes, from learning new information or from new norms of best-practice within the community.

People who are active in queer kink communities learn ways to negotiate consent, tools and frameworks in order to protect people from harm. However, because one can never account for all possible outcomes or situations, rules around consent behaviour cannot be set in stone or all encompassing. My interview participants showed critical reflection of rules and norms that are set in place in the kink communities and are all aware that these norms do not protect people from potential mistakes or mishaps. People showed an awareness that things could always unexpectedly go wrong and that it was important to be aware of potential risks. These risks were framed as something inevitable but not necessarily negative because if handled with care and compassion these mistakes and risks could result in valuable learning moments or ways to bond and connect. Part of critical consenting is on the

one hand this respect and care for each other and on the other hand a critical assessment of hard set rules and an awareness of potential risks.

In queer kink communities safety and risk are not understood as irreconcilable opposites but as both being part of consent negotiations and kinky play. People do not strive for absolute safety but recognize that this is an impossible goal and instead see consent negotiations and kinky interactions as ongoing, relational and context-sensitive which necessitate care, mutual respect and active communication. Mistakes are not seen as failures of consent but as inevitable aspects of navigating complex interpersonal dynamics which can become opportunities for learning and connection. Being critical of hard set rules shows a critical approach to social interactions and allows to account for diverse bodies, experiences, and emotional responses. In doing so critical consent does not rely on control or complete safety but makes staying in relation with oneself and with others a central imperative. Instead of trying to control social encounters people stay open and attentive to change and to possibilities of improvement which results in consent knowledges and skills being ever evolving and changing. This puts queer kink practitioners at the forefront of consent knowledge and skills and highlights the contrasts between queer consent and liberal consent.

5.5 Consent, Queerness and Power

The fact that societal power structures influence our ability to give and negotiate consent has come up repeatedly in the context of gender, sexuality and age. Especially when analysing consent practices through a critical lens rather than a liberal one these power structures are central to our understanding of consent. Genuine and morally significant consent needs to take into account all possible limitations to consent such as coercion, deception and force but also personal history and relations, partial autonomy or cognitive limitations of the other party (O'Neill 1985:259–60).

The fact that critical consent is also termed queer shows a conflation of questioning norms and queerness. This leads back to a definition of queer not as only certain sexualities and genders but as a rejection of or breaking open of societal norms and standards. Erika succinctly summed it up in defining queer as “queer as in fuck you” (Erika 10:268). This quite clear statement of “fuck you” implies non conformity with societal standards and rules and a defiance toward mainstream society. This reading of queer follows Sara Ahmed’s understanding of the term when she writes that to “make things queer is certainly to disturb

the order of things” (Ahmed 2006:565). The “queer as in fuck you” stands for an intentional disturbance of norms and order in the patriarchy and in doing so questions and threatens existing structures of power and hierarchy. This attitude emphasises “the whole subversive nature of the queer community and the whole transgressivity that runs through it” (Erika 10:269-279, my translation)⁶. Queerness is equated to subversiveness and transgression because it questions and threatens social norms and power structures.

Queer consent is therefore consent that questions and subverts social power structures. It has the possibility and power to do so because it de-naturalizes sex and sexuality and understands it as something that is learnt and that our attitude towards it is shaped by social norms and social power (Bauer 2014:87). Additionally, openly communicating about sex and sexuality counters implicit expectations and assumptions around sexuality which are “that the male in heterosexual encounters orchestrates the encounter, which is geared toward his desires and a heteronormative script” (Bauer 2014:87). Sharing responsibility for consent and for social interactions breaks with heteronormative assumptions of action and dominance as male and passivity and submission as female (Banerjee et al. 2018; Garcia 2021). Queer consent opens spaces for everyone’s desire to be expressed and considered and for responsibility of the encounter to be shared therefore enabling self-discovery and agency and sexual acts are not considered natural but socially constructed and learnt.

Queer kink equally is kink that upends or threatens societal norms or norms of sexuality and relating. In this way all kink has the potential to queer norms because it falls outside of societal norms of respectability and the charmed circle of sexual morality (Rubin 1992). Additionally, kink and queerness are connected through their marginalisation in society.

Sowohl BDSM als auch Queerness sind ja (...) eigentlich soziale Randphänomene. Und darin sind sie sich sehr ähnlich und sie vermischen sich auch dadurch, weil beide Bubbles sich miteinander auch identifizieren, durch dieses “am Rande der Gesellschaft stehen”. (...) Ich finde BDSM enthält schon ein gewisses Queering, aber nicht nur. Es kann auch Geschlechterstereotypen und damit verbundene Hierarchien sehr stark verstärken.

Both BDSM as well as queerness are (...) actually socially marginalized phenomena. And in this they are very similar and they also mix because both bubbles also identify with each other through this “being at the margins of society”. (...) I think BDSM does

⁶ Original quote: “den ganzen subversiven Charakter von der queeren-Community und diese ganze Transgressivität, die sich durch zieht”.

contain a certain queering but not necessarily. It can also reinforce gender stereotypes and their associated hierarchies very strongly.

(Erika 11:276-282, my translation)

Practicing BDSM is pathologized and kinky people continue to be marginalized which is a commonality they share with queer people. The struggle for social, legal and political acceptance and recognition of BDSM mirrors struggles of queer acceptance and recognition by “focusing on the ways that all sexualities are socially constructed within the context of social systems that frame some as ‘normal’ and others as ‘deviant’” (Simula 2019:5). Kink and queerness are both categorized as non-normative, deviant forms of sexuality. Kink can therefore be seen as a queer practice, however, in order to qualify as queer these practices have to subvert and question societal norms instead of reinforcing them. In queer kink communities many participants not only queer their ways of relating to others through kink but also through other forms of non-normative relating such as non-monogamy or queer sexualities and gender. This overlap is explained in literature because the “transgression of one norm makes it easier to transgress other norms as well, providing opportunities to find new ways of organizing relationships” (Carlström and Andersson 2019:14). These are relationships beyond heteropatriarchal norms of monogamy, cis-heterosexuality and harmony, leading to alternative intimacies (Bauer 2014:4). Kink is therefore seen as close to queerness because it is also a form of marginalized sexuality and can lead to the transgression of norms of relating but not all kink is queer per se because at the center of queerness lies the subversion of social norms and power structures.

My other interview participants also saw queerness as something that is non-normative and the queer kink community thus is differentiated from other kink communities by this non-normativeness. Sebastian emphasised this as a difference between kink communities:

Das Gefühl, das ich habe, ist, dass es in der queeren kink community definitiv anders ist als im Rest. [In der queeren kink Community] ist große awareness da und wahrscheinlich zwangsläufig, weil eben das natürlich auch eine Gruppe ist, die jetzt nicht unbedingt immer rein willkommen ist und gewesen ist, ja.

The feeling that I have is that in the queer kink community it is definitely different than in the rest. [In the queer kink community] there exists a big awareness and probably necessarily so because that of course is also a group which is not and has not always been entirely welcome, yeah.

(Sebastian 7-8:202-209, my translation, emphasis by Sebastian)

Queerness here is a factor of differentiation which sets the communities apart not due to their inclusion of queer people but due to their difference in awareness of consent and self reflection. Sebastian sees the marginalisation of queer people as a reason for a stronger emphasis on consent in queer kink communities. People who are marginalized in the patriarchy have experienced their consent being not considered by people who possess more social power than them. This primes people for issues of consent and communication.

Ich kann mir vorstellen, dass gerade Frauen oder FLINTA-Personen⁷ generell eine Gruppe sind, die das vielleicht in der Vergangenheit häufiger erlebt hat, dass ein Nein nicht ernst genommen worden ist oder, dass Übergriffe passieren und dass deswegen einfach viel mehr Wert gelegt wird, dass sehr regelmässig über consent gesprochen wird und dass generell vielleicht mehr Kommunikation stattfindet um eben so Übergriffe zu vermeiden.

I can imagine that especially women or FLINTA people⁸ are generally a group that has perhaps experienced this more often in the past that a no was not taken seriously or that violations happen and that therefore much more value is placed on speaking regularly about consent and that generally perhaps more communication happens to avoid such transgressions.

(Simon 3-4:82-87, my translation)

Being part of a group that is oppressed in the patriarchal system results in less social power. As discussed in chapter 5.1, people in marginalized positions or with little societal power are more likely to have their consent dismissed, ignored or transgressed. Therefore, being part of a marginalized group or of a group that is oppressed by patriarchal structures leads to a heightened awareness for these transgressions which can in turn lead to an increased interest in issues around consent. Consent is seen as a way to negotiate autonomy and agency in the face of power inequalities and hierarchies. In this way, certain social positions such as queerness can lead to an engagement with issues around consent as a way to avoid transgressions.

Another factor that predisposes people in any kind of non-normative structure of relating, to increased awareness of consent and communication skills is the fact that non-normative ways of life often lack guidelines or assumptions one can default to. Instead, many aspects

⁷ FLINTA als Abkürzung steht für Frauen, Lesben, Inter, Nicht-Binär, Trans and Agender Menschen

⁸ FLINTA is a german abbreviation for women, lesbians, inter, non-binary, trans and agender individuals which should function as an umbrella term for people suffering from patriarchal oppression but has been criticised for the presumed similarity of these groups of people and for its incoherent application (Kokits and Thuswald 2015).

have to be talked about, negotiated and tried out. When I asked Erika why she thought that queer people were more receptive to issues around consent she answered:

Ich glaube, weil wir halt nicht diesen heteronormativ geprägten Regeln folgen zu einem großen Teil. Ich meine, wie viele von uns sind in irgendeiner Form von ethischer Nichtmonogamie oder Beziehungsanarchie unterwegs, wo man sich auch die Regeln sehr stark einfach selber schreiben muss.

I think it is because we do not follow these heteronormative rules to a large extent. I mean, how many of us are involved in some form of ethical non-monogamy or relationship anarchy where you pretty much have to write your own rules.

(Erika 20:516-519, my translation)

Because queer relationship forms are non-normative there are fewer social scripts which can be defaulted to. This lack of prewritten norms requires people to create their own rules and agreements based on their expectations, wants and needs. Oftentimes this active engagement with how to structure non-normative relationships involves a large amount of communication and self-reflection. This means that people in queer relationship structures are likely to develop their communication skills in the context of relationships, emotions, needs, desires and expectations all of which are also relevant to negotiating consent in kink settings. A shared value for communication is something that connects BDSM and non-monogamy and in part explains the prevalence of non-monogamous relationship styles in queer kink communities (Carlström and Andersson 2019:14).

Moreover, communication becomes an integral part of intimacy and sexuality when heteronormative assumptions and scripts around intimacy and sexuality are not applicable.

Ich spiele auch mit vielen anderen Trans-Personen und ich glaube dass auch da Kommunikation bei allen Bereichen, die so mit Intimität zu tun haben sehr relevant wird, weil viele Leute zum Beispiel vorher einfach mal erklären müssen an welchen Körperbereichen möchte ich angefasst werden, was sind vielleicht Bezeichnungen für meine Körperbereiche mit denen ich mich wohl fühle und da ist dann auch direkt einmal mehr Gespräch vielleicht bevor man intim miteinander wird, egal ob das jetzt Sex ist oder BDSM oder irgendeine Mischung davon.

I play also with a lot of other trans-people and I think that there communication in all aspects that have to do with intimacy becomes very relevant as well because many people for example simply explain beforehand in which areas of the body they want to be touched, what are perhaps terms for my body parts with which I feel

comfortable and that means there is already more talk maybe before being intimate with each other, no matter whether it is sex or BDSM or any mix thereof.

(Simon 4:88-94, my translation)

Performing intimate acts in a non-normative way or space means that social norms as well as implicit expectations and assumptions do not apply and communication therefore becomes more relevant to intimacy. Because miss-naming or touching certain body parts can lead to dysphoria for trans people, communication prior to intimate practices becomes important. For Simon this leads to a deliberate and proactive engagement with communication where he enacts his agency over his own body. This agency in naming body parts and controlling where to be touched is something that is not always granted to queer people by general society. These forms of deliberate communication thus foster trans self-determination and agency and can empower trans people in their intimate practices. Additionally, this form of communication shows that consent is not merely an agreement but involves deliberate and intentional communication about any boundaries, desires and limits that might be relevant for a certain activity or situation. This again is a crucial aspect of queer consent which distinguishes it from liberal consent practices. In relationship structures, sexualities and sex which fall outside the cis-hetero norms, understandings of consent broaden to it being ongoing, situated, explicitly negotiated and based on mutual respect and care.

Additionally, Erika speaks of queerness as generally dynamic and shifting.

Dadurch, dass wir uns ganz stark in Spektren bewegen, die sehr flexibel sind, die sehr dynamisch sind und sich damit immer wieder ändern, glaube ich, ist uns klarer als vielleicht sagen wir der Mehrheitsgesellschaft, dass man diese Dinge auch aussprechen muss und Erwartungen klären muss. Ich sage mal, zu einem guten Teil.

Because we are moving very strongly within spectra which are very flexible and dynamic and which therefore always change I think it is clearer to us than maybe let's say the majority of society that we have to talk openly about these things and clarify expectations. I would say for most people.

(Erika 20:523-527, my translation)

The description of people moving in different spectra acknowledges the dynamic and changing nature of relationships, wants and desires. Once people are aware of change being a part of social interactions and relationships these negotiations about rules, assumptions and expectations become something dynamic and ongoing rather than a one

time static agreement. Realizing that dynamics and agreements change and that agreement to one part of an activity does not imply agreement to all parts of it is one of the markers of morally significant consent (O'Neill 1985:258). A view of relationships as dynamic, fluid and changing can lead to an understanding of consent as ongoing, fluid and dynamic as well. Because queer BDSM can be seen as creating "alternative intimacies [which] celebrate difference, tension, intensity, risk, excess, ecstasy, wastefulness, perversity, campy extravagance, fluidity and insanity" (Bauer 2014:4) and reject reason and moderation, prior assumptions and norms can not be applied to these interactions. This view of relationships therefore primes people for practicing critical and queer consent rather than liberal consent.

Queerness can therefore lead to a heightened focus on consent in multiple ways, through experiences of marginalization and the resulting consent breaches that heighten awareness for the necessity of consent, through non-normative relationship structures which increase the necessity for communication and negotiation and due to an understanding of change as inherent to social interactions and relationships.

However, not only does queerness influence people's engagement with consent but a deepened understanding of consent can also increase the awareness of social inequalities, hierarchies and power structures. This was the case for Sasha where a heightened awareness around issues of consent led to an increased understanding of social hierarchies. This in turn led to an ongoing engagement on how to navigate these in her own personal kink life but also as a workshop leader.

Es ist immer gut [Konsensspraxen] zu üben einfach und auch immer mehr Aufmerksamkeit darauf zu richten, wie gut ist die Person überhaupt in der Lage Konsens zu geben, was sind [da] für unausgesprochene Hierarchien, solche Themen. Und das ist mir auch zunehmend wichtiger geworden und zum Beispiel wenn ich mit Personen interagiere, die weiblich sozialisiert worden sind und die mich männlich lesen, ist meistens schon einmal daher eine Hierarchie. Wenn ich Workshopleiter bin, ist da eine ganz starke Hierarchie zwischen Teilnehmer:innen und mir und da reicht es oft nicht, wenn ich einfach sage, [was] noch dazu einige Workshopleiter sagen "Ist es eh in Ordnung?", das ist schon mal als Frage sehr problematisch und sicher stimmen dann viele zu.

It is always good to practice [negotiating consent] and also to always pay more attention to how well a person is able to give consent, what unspoken hierarchies are [there], things like that. And that became increasingly more important for me and for example when I interact with people who were socialised as female and who read me as male, there is usually a hierarchy stemming from that. If I am leading a workshop

then there is a very strong hierarchy between the participants and me and then it is often not enough if I just say, [something that] a lot of workshop leaders say “Is that ok?”, as a question that is very problematic and of course a lot of people will say yes to that.

(Sasha 1-2:24-33, my translation)

Sasha is very aware of her role in social encounters and any hierarchies that arise due to the gender people assume based on perception and due to her role as a workshop leader. This awareness means that Sasha has to assume that people are socialised to say yes to her in these situations of power imbalance. Sasha identifies as agender but still recognizes that societal power is ascribed to people due to how they are perceived in society rather than how they identify. These power imbalances influence how easy it is for people to say no due to social conditioning and because they might fear repercussions. Sasha is aware of these factors but does not see that as the norm and criticises workshop leaders who do not keep these hierarchies in mind. Simon also talked about a workshop in which transgressions happened from the workshop leader which resulted in him leaving the workshop (Simon 3:64-77) because he decided he did not want to learn from a person that did not practice consent or mention it in a kink workshop (Simon 15:422-424).

Rather than following the “ideal of harmonic sex” which constructs the ideal sexual interaction “as occurring between egalitarian partners whose intimate bodily interactions are devoid of power dynamics and anything that may be thought of as unpleasant emotions or sensations, such as pain, humiliation, shame or discomfort” (Bauer 2014:3), queer kink practitioners aim to highlight and acknowledge power structures and learn how to navigate them. Trying to establish equality and assuming liberal autonomy of subjects obscures socio-political power inequalities and hierarchies (Fanghanel 2020:280).

The heightened awareness for power hierarchies and how they influence people’s ability to negotiate consent for Sasha initially stemmed from visiting kink workshops and from engaging with feminist theory (Sasha 1:4-10). Feminist theory questions patriarchal norms and gender inequalities and is therefore closely connected to the issues discussed. However, certain strands of feminist theory have deeply criticised BDSM as another form of patriarchal oppression (Linden et al. 1982). Seeing submission in BDSM as the opposition to the emancipation of women is something that influenced Becky in her kink journey.

Und ich habe dann aber auch so im Teenageralter gemerkt, dass ich bestimmte Kinks habe (...). Später dann, wie ich begonnen habe, mich mit feministischen Theorien auseinanderzusetzen, (...) da wurde dann eine Szene beschrieben, die

offensichtlich von den Autorinnen als missbräuchlich angesehen wurde, weil jemand da zu etwas gezwungen wird, was sie nicht wollte oder beziehungsweise auch so dieses, die Darstellung der Frau innerhalb eines solchen Settings und ich lese das und ich war so "woah, ur spannend". (lacht) Und dann habe ich mir gedacht, das kann ja nicht sein. Wie passt das zusammen mit dem, ich möchte auf der einen Seite selbstbestimmt und emanzipiert sein. (...) Und aber gleichzeitig zu merken aber das macht was mit mir körperlich. Also das war schwierig.

And I realized when I was a teenager that I have certain kinks (...). Later, when I started to engage with feminist theory (...) a scene was described which by the authors was obviously seen as abusive because someone was being forced to do something that she did not want or rather also the portrayal of the woman within such a setting and I was reading it and was like "woah, very interesting". (laughs) And then i thought to myself that cannot be right. How does that make sense, on the one hand I want to be self-determined and emancipated. (...) But at the same time realising that does something to me physically. So that was tricky.

(Becky 1-2:23-38, my translation)

Becky's experience in essence describes how some radical feminists posit BDSM as oppression and thus as the opposition to women's emancipation. Because, according to Catharine MacKinnon, "[m]ale sexuality is apparently activated by violence against women and expresses itself in violence against women to a significant extent" (MacKinnon 1989:334), violence is a central aspect of male sexuality and desire and male dominance naturalizes, justifies and normalizes violence against women. As men in a patriarchal system have more power than women, they have the power to structure social norms and MacKinnon theorizes that „the sexual domination of men over women structures the social world in its entirety“ (Garcia 2021:35). This results in a system where violence against women is portrayed as normal or ideal as it pleases male desire. Because "[i]t is impossible to understand what we do and what we want sexually if we fail to recognize that patriarchy prescribes certain attitudes, desires, and practices" (Garcia 2023:85), radical feminists hold the view that women cannot truly consent to BDSM because they have been conditioned by the patriarchy to do so even though goes against their actual interests

Due to this theoretical underpinning Becky struggled to unite her feminist and emancipated self image with her kinky desires and interests. Societal power structures are seen as central to the practice of BDSM and informed Becky's doubts. MacKinnon's view leaves little room for the agency of women when it comes to sexual practices as sexual norms and desires have been shaped by male desires which ultimately is the desire for power and violence.

Becky's own understanding of her agency thus clashed with this theoretical understanding of kink.

Interestingly, these tensions resolved for Becky when writing gay fan-fiction.

[Ich] habe dann angefangen, da so Yaoi, [also] Boy on Boy Fanfiction zu schreiben. Nie super explizit, aber eher romantisch. Und ich habe gemerkt, dass mir das super Spaß macht. Nicht nur, weil einfach das Feedback schön war, sondern auch, weil durch dieses Boy on Boy diese Geschlechterdifferenz aufgehoben war. Und ich da eine Bottom-Top-Dynamik machen kann, die nichts mit dem Geschlecht zu tun hat. Und das war so ein Aha-Erlebnis für mich.

I then started to write Yaoi, [which is] boy on boy fanfiction. Never super explicit but more romantic. And I realized that I really enjoy that. Not only because the feedback was just nice but also because through this boy on boy this gender difference was canceled out. And I can write a bottom-top-dynamic that has nothing to do with gender. And that was such a moment of realization for me.

(Becky 9:225-230, my translation)

Writing scenes of romance, sex and kink between two male characters, Becky's perception of submission and domination changed because she was thinking about it without a gender hierarchy present. Because gendered power dynamics are so ever present in our society and because sex is pervaded by these power dynamics a queer perspective can shift our understanding of kink, sexuality and consent. Once the gender hierarchies are removed kinky power play and kinky power dynamics can be understood through new angles and for Becky it helped her understand and navigate her own submission.

Und das war für mich tatsächlich dieser Übergang zwischen, wie komme ich mit meinem feministischen Gedankengut, ich will als Frau mich nicht schwach darstellen, ich darf das nicht, ich reproduziere Rollen-Klischees wieder zu einem, okay, dann channel ich jetzt halt irgendeine männliche Figur und kann als die mich unterwerfen. Und das war super. Das war total, total spannend. Und das hat mir extrem geholfen. Also das hat so quasi alles so ein bisschen ein Tabula rasa gemacht, weil ich habe mir gedacht, okay, ich muss das nicht vom Geschlecht unabhängig machen und ich darf das für mich mir hier erobern. Und es geht nicht darum, dass ich jetzt irgendwelche doofen Klischees damit bedienen muss oder so. Ja, das war wirklich cool. (lacht)

And that for me was actually the transition between, how do I with my feminist ideals of I do not want to represent myself weak as a woman, I am not allowed to do that, I reproduce gender stereotypes, how do I get to a okay, then I just channel some male figure and can submit as that figure. And that was amazing. That was really, really interesting. And that was extremely helpful. That kind of made everything kind of a tabula rasa for me because I thought, okay, I do not have to do this detached from gender and I am allowed to conquer this for myself. And it's not about me fulfilling any stupid stereotypes or anything like that. Yeah, that was really cool. (laughs)

(Becky 9:236-244, my translation)

Because kink is not practiced in a social vacuum but is pervaded by social and cultural norms, rules and power hierarchies, these hierarchies, rules and norms influence not only our ability to consent but also our interpretations of our desires and practices. Queering those practices here helped to recontextualize submission from something that is strongly connotated with passivity, femininity and weakness to something that Becky practices consciously and decidedly as an emancipated feminist. Radical feminist theory which argues that this kind of submission is another form of male domination and conditioning renounces female agency and desire as possible and valid.

Female submission can reproduce and strengthen gender stereotypes and male domination as Erika has pointed out (Erika 11:281-282) but female submission is not inherently falling into structures of male hierarchy and dominance if we are to believe that women have some form of agency and ability to decide for themselves. Once again, whether female submission plays into male dominance is a question of context. In Becky's case, a queering of submission helped to shift her understanding of submission to something that was not defined by male dominance. In patriarchal society, submission is sometimes seen as the definition of femininity (Garcia 2021:38–40). By redefining conscious and willful submission as a product of agency, this definition of female as submissive comes into question. Queering kink practices thus can be a form of questioning gender norms and roles by redefining submission.

A heightened awareness for the importance of communication and for caring and respectful interaction does not just create more inclusive spaces for queer people but also for people who are marginalized in other forms. Accommodations for neurodivergent people were repeatedly brought up as a positive example of inclusion and diversity in queer kink communities (Becky 19:518-524; Erika 9:230-235, Sasha 3:72-76). These accommodations stem from a critical approach to consent which entails a caring and respectful approach to others which results in attention to different needs and capabilities.

Queerness predisposes people to a heightened focus on consent and queer forms of relating necessitate communication about expectations, wants, hopes, boundaries and desires. However, consent practices and communication skills are not something that people learn by way of being queer. Rather, these skills are acquired, practiced, fine tuned and adapted over time. As discussed in chapter 5.1 and 5.2, my interview participants had a very limited understanding of consent before becoming part of the queer kink community and learnt consent negotiation and communication skills as part of their participation in those communities. These communities are valued by my interview participants for their focus on consent and their open and explicit communication practices. The fact that my interview participants see such great value in this focus on consent stems in part from their queerness, from experiences of breached consent and the non-normative ways they relate to others. Societal norms uphold social hierarchies and power structures and both queer ways of relating and being as well as critical consent practices shine a light on these structures and have the potential to subvert them.

The generally heightened focus on consent and communication in these queer spaces has led to a heightened standard or heightened expectations around these issues. The way queer kink practitioners practice consent establishes new norms of interaction for my interview participants.

Nowadays, I actually don't go out so much anymore with like single male guys (...) [or with someone not] from the community. Because you can really, really obviously see the difference. And I got into situations that I just didn't feel safe anymore. And those situations maybe were going to be very common in my former life and so on. And I think it's common still for most of the people who are out there and so on. But like for me, it's just not normal anymore. And I find this very strange.

(Violet 5:99-105)

Being part of the queer kink community, Violet has learnt to expect people negotiating consent and respecting her boundaries and limits. Stepping into spaces outside the queer kink community, mainstream everyday spaces now feel unsafe and jarring in their different approach to consent and communication. The way people in queer kink communities interact with each other with care and mutual responsibility has become the new norm of relating for Violet and general societal norms feel strange and not normal. This highlights how much Violet's consent standards and expectations have changed through her participation in the queer kink community.

Social power structures pervade all our interactions and relationships and queer practices are ways in which these structures are questioned, upturned or subverted. Because queerness is per definition non-normative, queer people need to navigate spaces in which social norms are not applicable or adequate. The way they navigate these spaces is with negotiation, communication, care and mutual respect. This focus on communication and care leads to more inclusive spaces in which accommodations for different needs are created. People who are marginalized due to their queerness are likely to experience consent breaches and transgressions in the heteropatriarchal system. A focus on critical consent can be used to counteract these transgressions and enables self determined pleasure and intimacy. In turn, this focus on critical consent primes people to notice power imbalances and hierarchies and to consider those in their practices and interactions. As the skills and the importance of consent is often learnt when participating in queer kink communities, this participation leads to an increased awareness of power hierarchies and social norms. These norms can be accepted, rewritten, redefined, broken or subverted and queer kink practitioners write new norms of relating which are based on care and a critical awareness of hierarchies and power.

5.6 Modeling Consent

My participants learnt a great deal about critical consent in the queer kink communities which they are part of. This knowledge is shared in multiple ways, through conversations, leading by example, workshops, etc. and is practiced and embodied in the queer kink communities.

My interview participants also talked about the ways they themselves passed on their knowledge to others in different ways. Simon for example organized and led get-togethers for a while for trans, non-binary and intersex people where they regularly talked about consent. Simon explained that for every get-together newcomers would arrive so the organizers made sure to explain the rules, how the evening would be structured and the basics of consent (Simon 13:354-360). In this way Simon took over the role of passing on consent knowledge to new people in his role as organizer and community leader for these get-togethers. For Sasha, teaching people about consent has become a central aspect of their job as sexological bodyworker and as workshop leader where they pass on theoretical knowledge about consent as well as practical exercises and the lived experience of Sasha valuing the consent of the participants and staying attentive to hierarchies within the workshops (Sasha 1:8-10).

But there are also ways in which people carry consent knowledge to people outside the queer kink community. People's new way to view, understand and live critical consent does not only shape how they move through the public kink community, it also shapes their interactions with people who are not kinky in non kinky spaces or at the overlap of these spaces. Due to the expansive way queer kink practitioners apply critical consent skills to many forms of social interactions, kink is "often discussed as representative of what is possible with respect to embedding a culture of consent into society more widely" (Sikka 2022:36).

On the one hand people share their experiences by talking openly about them. Erika said that if consent or a topic related to it comes up in a conversation she does talk about it and she recounts her own experiences more generally "because I think it is important to have positive and negative examples" (Erika 22:752-753, my translation)⁹. Erika herself criticised the fact that consent tends to only be talked about when it is broken (Erika 7:177-178). This is also reflected in academic literature on the topic which is generally concerned with instances of consent violations, rape and sexual abuse and lacks an in depth engagement with how people do establish consent in their daily lives (Beres 2014; Cowling and Reynolds 2004:4, 11). Erika tries to counteract this one sided engagement with consent by sharing her own experiences, both negative and positive, so people can gain a more nuanced understanding of consent.

Violet actively tries to intervene and educate people on issues of consent when she encounters consent violations or people overstepping boundaries in her daily life.

I try to learn how to educate people. Because, for example, when someone is being a bit absurd to you, you can just flip on them and like attack them and say that this is not okay and so on. And it's absolutely right. But on the other hand, the person walks away not learning anything and thinking that you are hysterical or whatever. Just because this is the standard, the stereotypical thing that people think. But when I have enough patience, I'm like hey, you see, I would prefer that instead of doing this, that you would ask me first. Like, is it okay if next time you ask me first.

(Violet 5:106-112)

In mainstream society the expected norms of consent allow for many boundary transgressions and the focus on consent is much lower than in queer kink communities. People who have encountered the norms present in queer kink communities notice infringements or violations of their boundaries as something absurd or hurtful. In these

⁹ Original quote: "weil ich finde, es ist auch wichtig, dass man positive und negative Beispiele hat".

instances Violet finds it understandable and permissible to verbally attack the perpetrator but she recognizes that this might not lead to a learning outcome for the perpetrator. She therefore tries to patiently explain to people how they could manoeuvre the same situation differently in a way that does not infringe on people's boundaries. This shows a deep commitment to consent behaviour and to spreading this behaviour in spaces outside of the kink community. Calling people out on their behaviour and telling them that what they did was not okay in Violet's experience is met with reactions of defensiveness or even with so called gaslighting where people tried to convince Violet that what she criticised did not happen (Violet 7:156-160). The way she navigates this and tries to keep an open conversation with people is by being patient and understanding.

I've learned that, (...) if you try to give them the benefit of the doubt in the sense of like, I'm sure you didn't mean it like that. Even when sometimes you think that they did. (laughs) (...) And then you explain like, hey, this sometimes can make someone feel uncomfortable. Because I'm not making about them, but like, I'm more like about these kind of situations and so on. And then they tend to be more receptive, let's put it like that. But I had already like situations that I was called crazy and hysterical and whatnot. Which I didn't get. Which is unfortunately very common.

(Violet 7:160-167)

The fact that Violet even sometimes pretends to think people did not intend the consequences of their actions shows on the one hand how much she cares about people learning in these instances of transgression and how deeply people feel like they are not to blame when transgressing other people's boundaries. Violet has to carefully navigate these conversations to try to not assign blame or fault or instead be met with defensiveness, manipulation or insults. Because societal norms of consent are on the one hand relegated to the realm of the sexual and because on the other hand consent is shaped by societal power dynamics, people who violate consent often feel self-righteous in doing so. These strong reactions that Violet is met with when she points out abusive or transgressing behaviour are a result of patriarchal structures and power dynamics which disregard the consent of people in positions of lesser power.

Aber ich glaube, das sind halt so patriarchale Strukturen, die stehen [gesellschaftlichen Konsens-Praktiken] sehr im Wege, weil natürlich nimmt es etwas von meinen Privilegien weg, wenn ich mir einfach sonst nehmen kann [was ich will].

But I think patriarchal structures stand very much in the way [of societal consensus practices] because of course it takes away from my privileges if otherwise I could just take [what I want].

(Sasha 20:498-500, my translation)

The fact that in a patriarchal society marginalized people's consent is valued less or not considered at all is a form of patriarchal power over others. People who are awarded power in patriarchy are used to being able to overstep boundaries and violate the consent of people who possess less societal power unhindered and without consequences. This power is sustained and defended through "a pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness" (Rich 1980:640). Calling out and questioning patriarchal powers questions privileges awarded by this system threatens to dismantle these privileges. This is why the response to having harmful behaviour pointed out is defensiveness or insults to the person pointing it out. Violet has been called hysterical and crazy because their attempt to point out hurtful and boundary transgressing behaviour directly questions patriarchal power structures and norms and the words crazy and hysterical are used to discount their experiences, their statements and their actions. The term hysterical has long been linked with femininity and the irrational and historically has been a way to pathologize women (Showalter 1987) and in doing so, discounting their experiences and demands for more equality (Showalter 1993:305). The reaction to Violet's attempts to educate people about consent and to pointing out how their behaviour was harmful and hurtful is thus in line with historical reactions to attacks on patriarchal powers and inequalities.

Boundary crossing can present a form of patriarchal power and violence and my interview participants have found different ways to deal with these transgressions.

Generell, also ich würde mir wünschen, dass (...) diese alten, weißen, entitled Männer einfach mal abgestraft werden, wenn sie wieder ihren Scheiß stänkern. (...) Ich stänkere jetzt inzwischen halt sehr stark zurück und bin so, herst, geht's noch?

Generally I would wish for these old entitled white men to be punished when they talk shit again. (...) I have started to really talk shit back and I ask hey, what's your problem/are you out of your mind?

(Erika 32:859-864, my translation)

Erika has started to react to verbal transgressions by fighting back. Through her growing knowledge on consent she is bolder and more empowered to speak up against patriarchal

transgressions. This is her way of showing that these transgressions are not acceptable and that she refuses to let these verbal transgressions stay a normalized way of interaction. In this way she questions and calls out hurtful behaviour and threatens patriarchal norms by denormalizing and denaturalizing them.

The way in which people share their consent knowledge with people outside the kink community also comes in the form of a less explicit and more passive and embodied way.

Ich glaube, eben dieses, wenn man sich selber mehr klar ist darüber, was man will und was man nicht will, wenn man das deutlicher kommunizieren kann oder auch eventuell dazu stehen kann, was einem wichtig ist, glaube ich, dass es schon extrem hilfreich ist für andere, die noch strugglen oder die sich nicht klar darüber sind, kann das überhaupt funktionieren, wie soll denn das ausschauen, egal ob jetzt Kink oder Poly oder was immer man halt so macht. Aber eben dieses Grenzen setzen, das merken wir eh, dass das eigentlich überall ein Thema ist. Nein sagen, aber auch in einer Form, dass das überlegt ist und nicht einfach nur das Prinzip oder so.

I think this, if you are aware yourself about what you want and what you don't want, if you can communicate that more clearly or perhaps also stand up for what is important to you, I think that is extremely helpful to others who are still struggling or who do not know clearly if that can even work, what shape should that take, doesn't matter whether kink or poly or whatever else you do. But this setting of boundaries, we notice that that is an issue everywhere. Saying no, but also in a form that is deliberate and not just out of principle or something like that.

(Becky 11:298-304, my translation)

Developing skills like knowing and communicating your own boundaries, communicating clearly and being able to say no in a decided but thoughtful way can help others who struggle with these skills because it models this behaviour for them and creates a space in which they are welcomed to do the same. People who possess these skills thus present an example of how boundaries can be set, how communication can be helpful and provide others with a framework of how they could do it. Being aware of boundaries and communicating them is something that is important in any area of social interaction and people who are able to do so with confidence and experience can guide others in doing so. This is an essential aspect of passing on critical consent skills because the "pathway to more ethical and engaged sex (...) is to work with [young people] to make their already existing skills in empathy and social cues more visible and to allow them to see how they translate to the sexual world" (Beres 2022:150). Providing examples of setting boundaries and

communicating with empathy and care for each other can help people to hone these skills and transfer them to more areas of social interaction.

People who participate in queer kink communities thus share the knowledge they gain about consent with others through active communication, open confrontation and passively through modelling the setting of boundaries and communicating those boundaries.

However, my interview participants also recounted instances of actively asking for consent in vanilla spaces. Violet said their understanding of consent “improved a lot coming from” kink (Violet 4:74) and that they apply it in other situations as well.

Nowadays, it's funny, I'm part of dance communities as well, unrelated, but sometimes I actually come and I ask some colleague like, Hey, hi, how are you? Can I give you a hug? But they know that I am from this space and they are like, yes, consent is important. And they make a joke about it. But like yeah, I think it got much better.

(Violet 4:74-77)

This practice of asking before giving someone a hug is something that surprised Violet when they first joined the queer kink community (Violet 12:300-302) where this is standard especially with people one does not know well. Learning about consent and being part of communities in which this practice is standard for social interactions, Violet has taken this and started applying it in other contexts as well such as in her dance community. The fact that this is still an uncommon or unexpected thing to do is shown by the fact that the people there notice it and make jokes about it. These jokes seem to be in a positive light because people from the dance community acknowledge that consent is important but are not used to it being put into practice in this way or in this context of hugs. The resulting feelings of awkwardness or unfamiliarity are given room and aired out through jokes but the explicit communication is recognized as important.

As consent knowledge is always developing and evolving so is its application in non kinky contexts.

Und das verändert sich ja auch praktisch, man weiß was Neues, ich habe früher zum Beispiel nie so stark daran gedacht, also schon daran gedacht, Menschen nach Pronomen zu fragen, aber nie so stark daran gedacht, dass Personen nach ihren Pronomen zu fragen oder auch in Bezug auf Ansprachen vielleicht was zu tun. Und ich finde auch, es geht halt ganz viel darum, anderen Menschen Respekt entgegenzubringen.

And that also changes in praxis, you know something new, for example I previously did not think so much about asking people for their pronouns, I did think about it, but not as much to ask for people's pronouns or also in regard with addressing them to perhaps do something. And I also think it is about showing other people respect.

(Erika 6-7:162-166, my translation)

The importance of asking how people want to be addressed and referred to became clearer to Erika with a growing knowledge of critical consent where care and respect for each other play a central role. This growing awareness that mutual care and respect should lie at the center of social interactions and of consensual behaviour lead to Erika increasing her understanding of what aspects consent applies to and that asking how to address people is a form of respecting their autonomy.

Ich finde das [Konsens-Wissen] überträgt sich ja dann auch in andere Kontexte und immer wenn ich in einem anderen Kontext wieder irgendeine Consentpraxis anwende, dann bin ich so, schau her, wieder was gelernt. Weil es ist eben auch so eine Transferleistung damit verbunden.

I feel like [consent knowledge] transfers to other contexts and always when I apply a consent praxis in a different context then I am like, look at that, learnt something new again. Because there is a transferral of knowledge connected to it.

(Erika 7:170-172, my translation)

The way in which people's understanding and praxis of consent changes through their participation in queer kink communities is not limited to the kink context but extends to other everyday contexts. People apply their new understanding of consent to their practices outside of kink and so influence their own lives and people around them. They notice and point out behaviour that violates boundaries and so threaten patriarchal power over marginalized people.

Additionally, a critical approach to consent and the skills to negotiate consent and set boundaries which people acquired in queer kink communities influence more areas of their lives. Simon stated that for him his expanded knowledge about critical consent also influenced the way he dates in vanilla settings (Simon 2:39-40). Sebastian also told me of a few relationships which did not come into fruition because Sebastian's counterparts did not want to engage with the topic of consent (Sebastian 2:55-60).

People thus have a heightened attention to and awareness of consent not only in the face of consent violations but also see consent as a necessary basis for social interactions, especially so for intimate ones.

For Erika, practicing consent with others also influenced an already existing relationship.

Mein Langzeitpartner und ich sind ja schon über zehn Jahre zusammen und bevor wir unsere Beziehung geöffnet haben waren wir sicher auch zu einem gewissen Maß manchmal toxisch zueinander, beziehungsweise haben wir auch sicher ab und an consent überschritten. Nicht in den großen, sehr stark verletzenden Bereichen aber schon auch im Kleinen. Und das ist mir dann erst aufgefallen, nachdem wir unsere Beziehung geöffnet hatten und ich dann quasi mit anderen Menschen auch einfach ganz anders an consent herangegangen bin.

My long term partner and I have been together for over ten years and before we opened our relationship we were also to a certain extent toxic to each other, and we also overstepped each others consent every once in a while. Not in in big and very hurtful ways but definitely in small ways. And I only noticed that after we opened our relationship and I approached consent very differently with other people.

(Erika 2:41-47, my translation)

Opening her relationship with her partner was not Erika's entry into kink but it does represent a certain queering of their relationship. In doing so Erika started negotiating consent with new people for any kind of romantic, sexual and intimate encounters. These experiences showed her how she and her long term partner overstepped each other's boundaries and broke consent in small ways. Realizing this and learning to communicate more openly improved their relationship (Erika 3:67-86) and Erika's experience can serve as an example on how a growing awareness of consent and developing skills further which are necessary for establishing consent can improve people's lives also outside of sexual or kinky settings.

Sebastian also noted that he is currently realizing where his own boundaries lie, not only in kink but also in everyday life because he is more aware of what boundaries feel like and what it feels like when they are crossed (Sebastian 17:463-471). A deepened and in practice engagement with consent thus primes people to recognize their own boundaries and to see instances of consent breaches and boundary violations. This in turn enables people to advocate for their boundaries or to change harmful patterns of behaviour and so live more self-determined lives. People do not only apply their developing critical consent skills in the realm of kink but carry it into areas of mainstream life where they influence others

behaviours as well. People tend to realize where their boundaries are, when they are broken and point this out or challenge others on it. In this way they spread their knowledge to other people and threaten patriarchal norms of crossing boundaries with impunity when being in a position of power.

Generally my interview participants have noticed a trend in general society of growing awareness for boundaries and consent. Through consent activism and more education around the topic, awareness of the importance of consent is spreading and it has become “equated with negotiation, desire, and pleasure, to stand in for the whole domain of ethical sexual practice, a conceptual conflation that is problematic and misleading” (Franklin et al. 2023:2). An awareness that consent is important has reached mainstream society but it has been presented as the catch-all solution to sexual violence, abuse, rape and even dissatisfying sex. However, because consent is so en vogue at the moment the realization of its importance has spilled outside the realm of the sexual as well in the public consciousness and it is starting to be considered more and more in pedagogy but also in everyday interactions.

Violet generally talks about the awareness of consent in mainstream society as improved:

But like yeah, I think it got much better. And it's something that like... I mean, it's a little bit from the kink community, but I think a little bit of like also from the times we are living now, because the people in the kink community are usually (...) younger people. (...) So the whole thing is, I like to think it's more like societal as well, hopefully. And just this thing like sometimes I go to play with some of my friends' kids and I'm also doing this thing, I'm like, oh, would you like to give me a hug? Or it's not like just enforcing it. And it is something that definitely came from [the kink community], but I never really thought about it before.

(Violet 4:77-84)

Respecting childrens' bodily autonomy and asking for hugs rather than imposing them is a big shift to how most of my interview participants were treated in their childhood. Violet gained this awareness of the importance of childrens' bodily autonomy from being part of queer kink communities where asking before hugging people is an established norm of interaction. When Violet first joined the queer kink community, they were pleasantly surprised at this behaviour (Violet 12:298-303). From there Violet has learnt to apply this norm also outside the kink community in their dance group as well as with children. However, they also see a bigger societal trend of more awareness for consent developing alongside. This shift in public awareness and consciousness is something that they associate with “younger people”

who have been the main targets of consent campaigns, activism and education programmes (Beres 2014:373). Simon also attests this heightened awareness of consent which is expected of and associated with young generations to better availability of information on consent, BDSM and the possibility to exchange information more widely (Simon 4:103-108).

The growing awareness of consent as important for social interactions beyond sex is spreading in mainstream society and Becky sees it as a paradigm shift in how people interact.

Dieses accept a no graciously, das ist schon eine Herausforderung, glaube ich. Aber eine sehr spannende Sache, das zu lernen und das so viel wie man kann praktizieren, damit man darin besser wird. Weil es ja fürs Gegenüber auch so toll ist eigentlich. Also wenn ich merke, dass das eben so positiv ankommt, wenn ich sage, nein, (...) tut mir leid, ich kann nicht, dann kommt jetzt auch in den letzten Jahren mehr so dieses, ah, gut, dass du auf dich schaust, komm gut nach Hause, schön, dass du da warst und nicht, warum gehst du schon. (...) Das ist wirklich ein Paradigmenwechsel. Und geht über den Kink-Bereich ja überall hinaus. Ich glaube, dass wir da sehr viel in die Gesellschaft tragen können, durch diese bewusste Auseinandersetzung mit dem.

This accept a no graciously, it is a challenge I think. But a very exciting thing to learn and to practice as much as possible in order to improve in it. Because it is also so great for your counterpart. Like when I realize that it is received positively when I say, no, (...) I am sorry, I can't then in the last years the response has become more often an ah, good that you are looking after yourself, get home safe, nice that you were here and not a why are you leaving already. (...) That really is a paradigm shift. And that extends beyond kink. I think that we can carry a lot into society through a conscious engagement with it.

(Becky 11:287-295, my translation)

Being able to accept a no and reacting in a positive way is something that is a valuable and necessary skill for being able to negotiate consent. Learning to do so is a challenge but through repetition and practice people can improve this skill which shows that consent is something that can be learnt and practiced until it becomes embodied. This skill of accepting a no graciously applies to any form of social interaction as here for example with accepting when people want to leave. The fact that Becky sees it as a paradigm shift shows how entrenched previous consent culture and norms are and how transformative new consent knowledge can be not only of personal habits but also of societal norms and social

interactions. Part of this paradigm shift is framing a no as something positive that shows that by setting boundaries people are taking care of themselves instead of seeing a no as something negative and as a personal rejection. This skill of being able to receive a no graciously is something which my interview participants have been learning in the queer kink community as discussed in chapter 5.3. These skills are something that shift previous consent norms of the general public and thus carry a big transformative potential. This goes hand in hand with a growing awareness in the general society about consent being something important not only in the sexual realm.

In queer kink communities people learn new forms of consent behaviour that is set as the norm in these spaces. People who are part of these communities internalize these norms and this behaviour to a certain extent and take these consent practices with them into other non-kinky spaces. In these spaces people pass on their knowledge both verbally by recounting their experiences, by intervening and correcting transgressing behaviour or by talking back against verbal aggressions. Attempts to educate other people on how they have overstepped boundaries or not sufficiently negotiated consent are met with resistance because they threaten heteropatriarchal power structures and hierarchies. Some of my interview participants still continue to try to intervene correctively in such instances in order to spread consent awareness. People also spread their consent knowledges in other ways by modelling consent behaviour outside of kink spaces. In this way the skills and knowledge around consent people have gained through their participation in kink queer communities shapes their own lives, leads to improved or empowered relationships but also transforms consent practices in mainstream society. This way of sharing consent knowledges outside the kink community is happening alongside a growing awareness about consent as something important and applicable not only in the realm of the sexual. Due to information and activism campaigns who have mostly been targeting young people there is more awareness and more openness to topics around consent present in general society. The way consent can be implemented into everyday life is still something people are gradually learning and the skills people in queer kink communities have developed and are using in their everyday lives can be an example on how to transform everyday culture on consent.

5.7 Difficulties and Open Questions

As consent practices are ever evolving, dynamic and context dependent people who practice critical consent continuously keep learning about it. People who participate in queer kink communities are not perfect at these practices and they have not just shaken off societal

conditioning. Even workshop leaders and professionals still struggle with certain aspects of practicing consent and are continuously learning and developing their skills.

Ich merke, dass es mir immer noch ein Teil von mir unangenehm ist, über sexuelle Themen zu reden, was ich absurd finde, aber ich tue es dann trotzdem, aber da merke ich, dieses ganze Thema Sex und so, fühlt sich ein bisschen schwieriger an.

I notice that a part of me is still uncomfortable speaking about sexual topics which I find absurd and I do it regardless but I notice that the whole topic around sex and stuff feels a bit more difficult.

(Sasha 12:298-300, my translation)

Even people who have been practicing kink for years, are working in the area and give workshops are not exempt from societal conditioning around communication, consent and sex and struggle with certain aspects. Communication about sex can feel awkward especially if people are not used to doing it but even if they are. Open and honest communication about wishes, limits and boundaries also “tend to be confrontational and make us feel vulnerable as we expose our innermost desires” (Humphreys 2004:210). This is why people struggle to put open sexual communication into practice even if they advocate for it in theory. A commitment to explicit negotiation and affirmative consent thus also entails sitting with awkwardness and daring to be vulnerable in front of others. People do not need to strive for perfection in their consent practices because they will never be able to control all aspects of a social situation but instead can stay reflective, open and active in their negotiations and interactions to practice critical consent. Even if certain aspects of consent negotiation do not come natural to people they can practice them and they can negotiate valid and critical consent without needing for it to feel seamless or natural.

My interview participants mentioned different skills which they felt they still struggled with or needed to improve. Open questions or difficulties which people encounter when practicing consent can arise from being relatively new to the queer kink scene and as such relatively new to critical consent practices. Because critical consent is more expansive than liberal consent and includes issues around context, power and care, negotiating critical consent can feel overwhelming at first. Erika described that she continues to wonder if she is forgetting anything that is important when negotiating consent (Erika 27:723-725).

Similarly, Sebastian has read a lot about consent and gathered theoretical knowledge and a theoretical understanding about critical consent. However, knowing how to apply this theoretical knowledge in practice is something that has to be learnt as well. The shift from

theoretical knowledge to applying it practically is something Sebastian is still learning. Talking about consent he asked:

Aber wie verhandel ich den auch aus? All diese Dinge. (...) Also, dieses ganze Spektrum zu schauen, vom emotionalen seelischen Zustand hin zu, gibt es irgendeine Körperstelle, die ich heute auslasse? Und das ist immer noch, wie gesagt, ich bin in der Hinsicht noch relativ frisch dabei, immer noch ein Lernprozess.

But how do I negotiate it? All these things. (...) Like looking at this whole spectrum from emotional and mental state to is there any body part that I omit today? And that is still, as I said, in this regard I am relatively new, it is still a learning process.

(Sebastian 2:38-45, my translation)

Putting theoretical knowledge into practice is something people have to learn. Sebastian's example shows that knowing to consider mental, emotional and physical aspects when negotiating consent is different from knowing how to do that exactly. This is why the queer kink communities are such valuable spaces and resources because people observe and learn to put consent negotiations into practice.

Another difficulty can stem from lacking certain skills that are required for negotiating critical consent such as knowing one's boundaries and being able to communicate them. Because mainstream society does not encourage people to set boundaries with others and sees saying no as something impolite or as a personal offence, people are conditioned to say yes rather than no. Additionally, due to heteropatriarchal power structures some people are not used to having their boundaries respected and tend to develop other strategies to avoid having their boundaries actively violated. Violet reflects on this.

I think I still have to learn how to say no. Like for some things are easier than others. (...) But because of this kind of like a people pleasing, if you want, mentality you can end up in situations that you actually do not necessarily want to be. And maybe like a, when something is a maybe, it should be a no and not a yes. So, yeah.

(Violet 14-15:359-367)

Saying no to others is something that is frowned upon and people are socialized to avoid saying no as much as possible in social interactions. This stands in the way of negotiating critical consent as it requires open and honest communication about boundaries, limits, wishes and desires. Additionally, when practicing kink this can lead people into situations which might harm them or be dangerous.

Sebastian described a similar dynamic that makes negotiating consent difficult. He talked about the urge to please another person and that this urge or desire to be liked and to appeal to someone can lead to people not saying no or stop.

Man will ja auch gefallen, man will ja auch einen guten Job [machen], also man möchte ja auch einfach der Person eine tolle Zeit [bereiten] und gerade wenn man halt eben nicht weiß wo die eigenen Grenzen sind, dass man sagt okay weil es kann sein, dass die andere Person vollkommen fine ist nur ich bin dann halt leider nicht fine möglicherweise. Also ich habe diese Situation erst einmal gehabt, (...) es war weniger ein Problem des consent sondern einfach, dass ich auf die Intensität nicht vorbereitet war und dann einfach nicht gestoppt habe. Die andere Person war im Endeffekt okay und ich habe dann nachher erfahren, dass das halt ein Zustand ist, in den sie hineingeht. Ich war die nächste Woche ziemlich fertig und es hat lange noch nachgehallt.

Of course you want to please, you also want to do a good job, and you want to make sure the other person has a great time and especially if you do not know where your own boundaries are it is more likely you say okay because it could be that the other person is completely fine but unfortunately I might not be fine. So I've only had that situation once (...) it was less a problem of consent but just that I wasn't prepared for the intensity and then I just didn't stop it. The other person was fine in the end and I found out after that that's a state that they go into. The following week I was down and it lingered on for a long time.

(Sebastian 19:513-521, my translation)

The way of pleasing people that Sebastian is describing, this trying to make sure that the other person has a good time and is pleased with the interaction or kinky play can inhibit people from stopping scenes which they no longer feel safe in or sure about. Not only the submissive or receiving part in a dynamic has to make sure their boundaries are kept and communicate them but the same applies for the dominant or giving part. Both might feel a pressure to please the other person or stand in a favourable light and thus not communicate their boundaries. All these issues need to be considered when trying to negotiate critical consent. Sebastian described his example as emotionally impactful and significant because he did not expect how intensely his counterpart reacted in the scene. This experience has led him to reconsider when he would and should stop a scene and how much intensity he is willing to go into. Being able to stop mid scene and withdrawing consent are important factors of critical consent which can be complicated by social contexts and considerations. When discovering the public kink scene and starting to play with others, skills that are

discouraged by societal behaviour norms need to be developed and moments such as the one Sebastian described can serve as powerful learning tools for such skills.

Becky has made similar experiences where she tried to sugarcoat the way she let other people know that she did not want to do something (Becky 17:463-468). Through a new play partner she has learnt to communicate more openly and honestly because she felt that her new partner respected her boundaries and did not feel offended or rejected by them. Becky describes her experiences in this relationship as follows:

Was ich dort erlebt habe, war einfach, dass die Kommunikation in den allermeisten Fällen so gut verläuft, dass wenn ich sage, ich kann nicht, ich will nicht oder das nicht, dass das angenommen werden kann. Und das ist ja das, was Konsent erst so richtig möglich macht, dass ich weiß, dass ich mit meinen Emotionen oder mit dem, wie ich mich fühle, nach außen gehen kann, das kommunizieren kann und das zerstört die andere Person nicht. Und die andere Person ist stark genug, das nehmen zu können, auch wenn es gerade mit dem eigenen Empfinden jetzt nicht zusammenpasst oder Enttäuschung hervorruft oder so.

What I experienced there was simply that in the vast majority of cases, the communication went so well that if I say I can't, I don't want to or I don't want that, it can be accepted. And that is what makes consent possible in the first place, that I know that I can externalize my emotions or what I feel, that I can communicate that and it does not destroy the other person. And the other person is strong enough to take that even if it does not match their own feelings or causes disappointment or something.

(Becky 17:456-463, my translation)

Being with someone who is able to accept a no graciously, as Becky phrased it previously, is something that can strengthen one's own capabilities for setting boundaries and open communication. Learning to not appease the other person but rather feeling that one's feelings will not destroy the other person is something that is essential for establishing critical consent. Critical consent in essence is only made possible through honest and open communication. This way of communicating can feel awkward or vulnerable or cause the other person to feel rejected or unwanted. Even so, it is crucial for being able to truly consent and trying to mitigate risks and harm. Again, critical consent does not require people to have perfected these skills. Most of my interview participants talk about instances in which they failed to say no or in which they appeased rather than communicating honestly. These instances can serve as learning moments to improve on consent skills and counterparts who

are more experienced or better at certain skills can enable others to learn and internalize new norms of behaviour and consent.

Simon tries to explicitly take these learnings about setting boundaries and saying no with him into a session in order to improve the likelihood of him setting boundaries within a session.

Und ich muss mich glaube ich auch immer so ein bisschen mental so auf Sessions vorbereiten um mir noch mal klar zu machen es ist auch wirklich okay dann Stopp zu sagen und eine Grenze zu setzen. Also das ist glaube ich schon auch immer so ein Prozess an den ich mich auch selbst erinnere.

And I think I always have to prepare myself a bit mentally for sessions in order to make sure that I know that it is really okay to say stop and set a boundary. I think that that is always a kind of process that I also remind myself of.

(Simon 15:405-408, my translation, emphasis by Simon)

Because setting boundaries during a scene or stopping a scene completely is difficult, Simon tries to remember before going into a scene that this is something he can do and that it is something that is important and okay to do. This mental preparation is a way to counteract internalized social conditioning to be agreeable, to please others and to not say no. With growing practice this conditioning is rewritten and people learn to communicate more openly and honestly over time. Practice, reflections and constant reminders that it is okay to say no help my interview participants in developing these skills. In this way they continuously learn more about critical consent negotiations and skills in their practices. Instances in which people do not manage to communicate their boundaries serve for reflection and to improve consent practices and standards. Additionally, practicing with more experienced members of the community or people who are able to communicate openly and honestly can strengthen these skills and they become internalized as new norms of communication and interaction.

Apart from skills that need further developing or learning how to put theoretical knowledge into practice, my interview participants all mentioned aspects of negotiating consent that they found difficult or questions which they had not yet managed to answer or resolve. These issues or questions can provide insights into current topics of discussion around consent from people who engage with the topic regularly and apply their theoretical understanding of consent in practice. As queer kinky people are at the forefront of developing practical consent tools and norms (Garcia 2023:68), these discussions represent current issues and problems with consent.

One such question is how to rely on tools which are not foolproof. Safewords are popular tools in kink communities and signal an immediate stop. However, this surefire way to end a scene or a session cannot be relied on fully because people might forget to use it, become unable to speak or be scared of the consequences of using it. Sasha tries to make sure that people are aware of this fact.

Ich sage den Leuten auch, wenn sie oft spielen, wird es dazu kommen, dass zum Beispiel die Person gar nicht mehr weiß, dass es jetzt ein Spiel ist und dass es ein Safe-Word gibt. (...) Je intensiver eine Spielszene ist, umso weniger kann man sich auf das Safe-Word verlassen. Umso weniger kann man sich auch darauf verlassen, (...) dass das konsensuell ist. Also man muss dann wirklich auf kleine [Signale achten], dazwischen einchecken und auch, ja, auf sich selbst auch hören, wenn einem etwas komisch vorkommt, dass man auch in der Top- oder Dom-Position dann einfach die Szene beendet. Und das prinzipiell kein Problem, aber man muss sich dessen bewusst sein.

I also tell people, if they play a lot it will come to a point where for example the person does not know anymore that it is a game and that a safeword exists. So the more intense a playscene becomes the less you can rely on the safeword. The less you can rely on (...) it being consensual. So you really have to [watch out for] small signs, check in in between and also, yes, listen to yourself if something seems strange so that you just end the scene also in the top or dom position. And that's not a problem in principle, but you have to be aware of it.

(Sasha 6-7:162-170, my translation)

Consent tools that are used in the kink communities are ways to enable consent and to ease communication but they do not replace the necessary skills, reflection and attentive care that goes into navigating intense play sessions. It is important for people to be aware that these tools cannot compensate for communication and check-ins. However, even communication and check-ins cannot be seen as fully reliable. People might not realize themselves that they have hit a boundary or be able to verbalize that. People might also realize after the fact that they did not feel comfortable with something they earlier agreed to.

The situation in which someone is telling you something but acting in a different way. This is I think the hardest honestly. It can also happen that someone consents to something but then they only realize afterwards that they actually shouldn't have maybe. There is not much you can do about it. You can just try to be supportive and so on.

(Violet 15:370-374)

Playing with other people always induces a certain amount of unknown elements and a certain amount of risk. Because people are not fully aware of their own boundaries and are not flawless communicators there is always a chance that people cannot or will not communicate when something is wrong. It is thus the responsibility of all involved to look out for the safety and wellbeing of everyone and to accept a certain amount of risk involved. Playing with other people always means playing with peoples' contexts, emotions, reflections and social surroundings which all influence how they assess situations and how they make decisions.

This also means people enter the queer kink scene with various different preconceived notions about kink, about kinky people and about kinky practices. However, due to the queering of kink that can be found in these communities, these expectations and notions do not necessarily apply.

Ich finde Vorannahmen von Menschen schwierig. Wenn jemand von vornherein ein gewisses Bild zu mir hat, weil sie mit mir mal geredet haben und dings, das finde ich recht schwierig, dieses Bild dann wieder aufzulösen.

I find presumptions that people have difficult. If someone has a certain image of me from the outset because they've talked to me once and whatnot, I find it quite difficult to dissolve that image.

(Erika 27:717-719, my translation)

Being perceived as a certain role and having expectations of what that entails, assumptions about what people like and what activities they want to engage in are all based on norms people have learnt around sex, sexuality and BDSM. Because queer kink communities queer kinky practices and go beyond societal norms around these practices these assumptions are problematic and often not applicable. Because sex and personal desire is difficult to talk about for many people, these assumptions are often not openly voiced. These assumptions might include what positions people play in but also what these positions entail.

[Ich versuche] zu sagen, okay, ich nehme nichts als gegeben hin. Und nur weil ich mich mit einer dominanten Position identifiziere heißt das nicht, dass zu jedem kleinen Detail nicht auch einfach der consent gegeben sein muss.

[I try] to say, okay, I do not take anything as a given. And just because I identify with a dominant position it does not mean that consent does not need to be established for any small detail.

(Sebastian 2:32-34, my translation)

People make assumptions about what positions people identify with and these roles also carry assumptions about what to do and which activities they lead to. However, Sebastian recognizes that the position of a dominant does not automatically grant him consent to any activity he understands as part of dominance-submission play. These roles and positions carry expectations with them but these expectations have to be negotiated and expressed as agreeing on the roles itself is not consent for any activity carried out in this role.

However, even when agreeing on roles and activities there are still different assumptions and expectations around why and how people want to engage in these activities.

Das finde ich immer noch eine Herausforderung, die spannend ist, aber trotzdem, wir kommen alle mit so unterschiedlichen Vorstellungen rein und wenn ich, also ich merke das bei so neon-code-Partys¹⁰ oder so, da sagst du, bin ich eher das oder das, und dann denke ich mir so, gehe ich jetzt auf masochistisch oder nicht, weil hmm, Tendenzen sind da, aber ich weiß nicht, was die andere Person darunter versteht. Und Schmerz um des Schmerzes willen, das ist gar nicht so das, was ich unbedingt brauche. Aber die Range ist so unterschiedlich und was für manche Leute viel ist, ist für manche überhaupt nicht viel und das ist, also du kannst nicht einfach reingehen und sagen, ja, dann bitte hier spanking oder so, das ist für jeden komplett was anderes. (lacht)

I still find that a challenge, an interesting one but still, that we all arrive with such different conceptions and if I, like I realize when going to neon-code-parties¹¹ or stuff like that where you say am I more this or that and then I think to myself do I go for masochistic or not because, hmm, the tendencies are there but I don't know what the other person understands by that. And pain for the sake of pain that's not really what I want. But the range is so different and what for some people is a lot is for some not much at all and that is, like you can't just go in and say yes, please let's do spanking or something like that, that's something completely different for everyone. (laughs)

¹⁰ Neon-code -parties are kinky play parties in Vienna where people indicate their preferences with neon-coloured luminous bracelets. Different colours indicate what activities participants are open to that night and the side they are worn on indicates the position in which people would like to engage in these activities.

¹¹ See footnote 10.

(Becky 4:86-94, my translation)

Because people's perceptions, reasons, motivations, pain tolerances etc. are varied and changing simply agreeing for example to do a spanking scene together does not indicate how, how long, with what instruments or devices, how much, how strong, how fast, to what goal, how nice or mean, where on the body and in what dynamic if any. These nuances are complex and can mean that two people who really like spanking are not compatible at all in spanking because of any of those factors. Just being into the same things thus does not imply people will know how exactly the other person wants or pictures it. Some of these aspects can be found out in communication or by trying it out.

Und das kann man eigentlich erst in der Szene ausverhandeln und finde ich auch trotzdem immer noch schwierig, weil ich niemanden dazu bringen möchte, mehr zu tun, als er oder sie gerade will. Auf der anderen Seite möchte ich aber anzeigen, dass mehr möglich wäre, möchte aber dann die Person auch nicht unter Druck setzen, dass sie glaubt, es soll aber unbedingt mehr sein. Also das ist eine schwierige Sache, die man auch so ein bisschen am herausfinden ist.

That is something that you can only negotiate in the scene but I still find it difficult because I don't want to force anyone to do more than they want at that moment. On the other hand I would like to indicate that more would be possible but I also don't want to pressure the person that they think it should be more at all costs. So that is a difficult thing that one is also discovering bit by bit.

(Becky 4:94-99, my translation)

A combination of negotiating prior to the scene and then within the scene is according to Becky the only way to resolve these unknown assumptions and differing approaches to certain activities or kinks. In playing together people can find out whether how they practice an activity is compatible with the other person. Here negotiating during play proposes another difficulty which is how to communicate one's desires, wishes and possibilities without putting pressure on the other person. How to gauge where the limits of the other person lie to not push beyond them. To do so people use verbal and non-verbal communication, check ins and look for non-verbal cues. However, negotiating during a scene can be tricky and difficult because play scenes lead people into states in which making a decision can be difficult or in which people might agree more readily or widely to activities.

Was mache ich, wenn jetzt zum Beispiel der Vibe sehr gut ist oder wenn wir sagen, ok, ich merke da geht noch mehr, das können wir ausprobieren, die andere Person hat auch Lust drauf. Ändern wir den Konsent mittendrin oder ist das dann problematisch? Weil es ist ja auch was anderes, ob ich jetzt so ein bisschen im rope-space bin oder auch im subspace bin und dann eher zu Sachen zustimme, als wenn ich das mache, während ich halt quasi nicht in diesen Mindsets bin. Das beschäftigt mich auch noch. Das ist aber auch ok.

What do I do if for example the vibe is very good or if we say, ok, I realize more is possible we can try this and the other person also wants to. Do we change our consent midway or is that problematic? Because it is also a different thing if I am a bit in rope-space or subspace and then agree more readily to things than if I do it while I am not in these mindsets. I am still trying to figure that out. But that's ok.

(Erika 16:413-418, my translation)

Subspace and rope-space are an “altered psychological, emotional, and/or physiological state” (Pitagora 2017:44) which people enter while engaging in kink. This state “tends to be a highly sought-after experience in BDSM interactions” (Pitagora 2017:44) and can be one of the goals of practicing BDSM. Subspace and its namesake rope-space are “often characterized by activation of the sympathetic nervous system, the release of epinephrine and endorphins, and a subsequent period of non-verbal, deep relaxation” (Pitagora 2017:46). This state is desirable for many kinksters to reach but also alters people's understandings and perceptions of certain situations thus limiting their ability to make decisions around consent and boundaries. Due to this reason there are many people in the queer kink community who advise against widening agreements or going beyond previously agreed on activities and limits during play because subspace is a state in which people will more readily agree. Some people compare this to an influence of drugs and alcohol which also alter our ability to consent and set boundaries. However, people might want to negotiate something new when realizing that they have good chemistry and a good gut feeling with someone. In this case subspace just adds another layer of consideration and complication to consent practices. However, as Becky pointed out this negotiation is sometimes necessary to find out how to engage in an activity together. The question of when it is adequate to negotiate something new when already playing with each other is dependent on context and the people involved. Subspace is thus something else people should keep in mind when practicing critical consent.

Critical consent knowledge and practice is a continuous learning process and demands continuous engagements with discussions, tools and norms around consent and power as

well as self reflection and developing of personal skills. Because critical consent is expansive and includes a consideration of and care for each other, people keep learning about it and improving practices. There are also open questions and difficulties people have not yet found satisfying ways to navigate. These reflect current debates and issues around consent because the queer kink community is at the forefront of developing consent practices and tools. My interview participants shared some of their struggles and open questions with me which ranged from needing to develop the necessary skills to set boundaries further as well as how to deal with changing opinions or miscommunication. Additionally, people struggle with preconceptions, expectations and assumptions in kink, some of which are difficult to communicate because they are nuanced and detailed. People's ability to consent also changes depending on the context which is something people need to consider when negotiating consent. All these considerations and open problems show that critical consent is shaped by learning and unlearning social norms, by navigating desire and boundaries and by social situations and contexts. Critical consent is thus always complex, dynamic and relational and requires continuous reflection, communication and care.

6. Conclusion

Looking at how people who participate in queer kink communities navigate, understand and practice consent opens up new ways of understanding consent. Namely, I have shown that involvement in queer kink communities leads to a move away from a liberal understanding of consent which is prevalent in mainstream society toward a critical understanding of consent which centers care and mutual responsibility and is attentive to social power structures. Critical understandings of consent can lead to the self-determined, enjoyable and satisfying sexual or intimate experiences that consent promises to bring about.

In this thesis I thus reframe consent from understanding it as a tool for abuse prevention towards a practice which can enable pleasure, self-discovery, self-knowledge, desire and autonomy. Consent in this context is not seen as a one time agreement that ensures safety or at least negates blame or fault if established, instead it is seen as an ongoing, relational process of care, shared responsibility and trust which is context dependent and pervaded by power dynamics. Critical consent thus subverts the liberal idea of rational and autonomous agents who can consent freely and shows us the politics behind desires, pleasure and intimacy. In doing so critical consent is deeply political as it questions hegemonic norms of

the heteropatriarchy around sexuality, intimacy, desire and relationships and allows for people to operate and relate outside those social norms.

Critical consent opens up spaces for the irrational, the unreasonable, the risky and the liminal. It requires people to develop skills such as setting boundaries and accepting a no and in turn allows them to follow their desires and seek pleasure, fulfillment or self-discovery beyond liberal norms of respectability, rationality, harmony and avoidance of discomfort. Instead of the liberal view of seeing consent as a tool to ensure safety, critical consent allows for people to create the necessary conditions to engage in risky behaviour, to make mistakes and to interact with others beyond societal norms. It thus broadens the possibilities of interaction and experience while maintaining a critical view on power structures and hierarchies.

In queer kink communities critical consent is seen as a central value and members of these communities practice it not only in intimate, sexual or kinky interactions but in many different social situations. This form of interaction is established as a norm in these communities and new members have to learn these consent practices in order to fit in and stay part of these communities. They do so through observation, through discussions and talks, through constant reminders but also through practice, through mistakes and through repeated application. Consent in these communities becomes embodied as a relational ethic and understanding consent goes beyond the rational and theoretical.

Raising consent skills and awareness is the goal of consent education and activism which has promised for consent to solve issues around sexual abuse but also to lead to more self-determined and pleasurable experiences and interactions. However, research on consent has so far strongly focussed on instances of consent violations and on young college students with the aim of violence prevention. With this thesis I contribute to an understanding of consent that focusses not on abuse and violence but on what consent can contribute to our social interactions. I have represented voices of people who practice consent regularly, who reflect on these practices and improve them and who see consent as a valuable and worthwhile practice for social interactions.

This furthers our understanding of consent and hopefully can be used to influence consent education programmes and activism or information campaigns. As current consent education does not sufficiently take into account how people already negotiate consent (Beres 2014, 2022), this research is significant because it shows how people successfully establish consent, how they learn to do so and in which areas they struggle with it. This could help in making consent education more accessible and relevant by for example

moving from spreading the message that consent is important to helping people to develop skills around identifying and setting boundaries. Additionally, this thesis centers voices from a marginalized and pathologized group to contribute to the destigmatisation of BDSM and to show how much can be learnt from queer kink practitioners.

However, due to limitations in my sample and my own theoretical background, this research these findings are not universally applicable and do not account for all experiences and situations. I focus on a urban, predominantly white and Western community and my interlocutors were all highly educated and able bodied. My research is therefore representative of a specific group and does not encompass the full range of queer kink experiences. The perspectives shared here cannot be universalized, but they offer valuable insights into what is possible when consent is treated not as a legal formality, but as an ethical, embodied practice.

Additionally, I have interviewed people who all see consent practices as enriching and valuable and I have only engaged with theoretical critiques of consent. I assume that this form of consent practice can be extrapolated to wider use and into mainstream society because my interlocutors have talked about how they apply these practices in everyday situations. More studies should be done on how critical consent practices could be translated into educational, therapeutic, or activist contexts and on the roadblocks to implementing these practices.

Ultimately, I argue that queer kink communities do not just theorize consent but that they live it. In doing so they model a practice of consent that is not only attentive to social power structures and hierarchies but also generative of pleasure, connection, and self-knowledge. In a society where the dominant narratives around consent remain inadequate these are perspectives in what social interactions based on care and responsibility can look like and how relating beyond societal norms is possible and liberating.

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8. Abstract

This thesis explores how participation in queer kink communities influences individuals' understanding and practice of consent. A focus lies on distinguishing between liberal frameworks of consent which treat it as a binary and rational agreement and critical understandings of consent which see it as relational, ongoing, complex and pervaded by power structures. Drawing on semi structured interviews with six members of a Viennese queer kink community, this research investigates how critical consent is learned, negotiated and reflected on in queer kink communities. Using feminist and queer theory as well as previous research on consent and kink, this thesis analyses how queer kink communities cultivate critical consent practices that are grounded in care, mutual responsibility, trust, and attentiveness to social power dynamics. Consent so becomes a way to enable self-discovery, pleasure and ethical social interaction beyond heteropatriarchal norms.

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht, wie die Teilhabe an queeren Kink-Gemeinschaften das Konsens-Verständnis und die Konsens-Praxis von Personen beeinflusst. Dabei liegt ein Schwerpunkt auf dem Unterschied zwischen liberalen Konzepten von Konsens, welche diesen als binäre und rationale Vereinbarung behandeln, und einem kritischen Verständnis von Konsens, welches diesen als relational, andauernd, komplex und von Machtstrukturen durchdrungen versteht. Anhand von leitfadengestützten Interviews mit sechs Mitgliedern einer queeren Kink-Gemeinschaft in Wien wird untersucht, wie kritischer Konsens in diesen Gemeinschaften erlernt, verhandelt und reflektiert wird. Auf der Grundlage von feministischer und queerer Theorie und bisheriger Forschung zu Konsens und Kink analysiert diese Arbeit, wie queere Kink-Gemeinschaften kritische Konsens-Praktiken kultivieren, welche auf Fürsorge, gegenseitiger Verantwortung und Achtsamkeit gegenüber sozialen Machtverhältnissen beruhen. Konsens ermöglicht so Selbstentdeckung, Selbstverwirklichung und ethische soziale Interaktion jenseits heteropatriarchaler Normen.