

Being Kinky: Intimacy, ethics, and the self

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Abstract

Kink has a long history of being condemned in Western society. Even though kink is prevalent in popular culture (and in many people's bedrooms) it continues to be considered abnormal and associated with deviance. Through nine in-depth qualitative interviews, this thesis explores the experiences of kinksters with kink, their engagement with the kink community, and their negotiations of stigma in everyday life. These experiences are analyzed using Foucault's theories on discourse and technologies of the self and Goffman's conceptualization of stigma. The thesis found that while the social condemnation of kink has resulted in members of the kink community struggling to manage their identity as kinksters, they also find joy and a sense of belonging within the kink community. Moreover, through the kink community, kinksters learn to conceptualize and practice consent in a new way; one that is rooted in being an ethical subject. The thesis concludes with a call to challenge the normative tropes and stigmatic assumptions of deviance that continue to marginalize and oppress kinksters.

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Introduction: *Setting the Scene*

“Even though I’m physically restrained, I feel free when I’m tied up.” (Silk)

“Colouring while watching TV makes me happy, just like having Daddy spank me does.” (Crops)

“There’s a certain satisfaction that comes from having a sub begging for punishment.” (Whips)

Despite shifting social and sexual mores in how we respond to behaviors once considered sexually deviant (e.g., homosexuality) and the pervasiveness of kink imagery in popular culture (from the 1960s television show featuring Diana Rigg decked out in a faux leather catsuit, to Rihanna singing about chains and whips in her hit single *S&M*) kink continues to be considered an ‘abnormal’ practice; staunchly in the realm of immorality and associated with mental instability and deviance (Khan, 2014). While law enforcement agencies do not actively seek out individuals participating in kinky activities, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled in *R v. Jobidon*, 1991, that one cannot consent¹ to bodily harm, which ultimately implicates some forms of kink. Furthermore, the Ontario Court of Appeal later used this precedent to rule that sadomasochistic acts are “inherently degrading and dehumanizing” (*R v. Welch*, 1995, para 71). In short, there is a mutually re-affirming socio-legal context: laws shape social understandings while simultaneously being informed by social norms. Moreover, while kink practitioners may or may

¹ In Canada, the parameters of who cannot (and by extension who can) consent to sexual activity, as specified in our sexual offense laws, states that individuals must be of minimum age (usually 16) and not be deemed to be intoxicated or unconscious, (Canadian Department of Justice, 2020). Furthermore, the Canadian Department of Justice (2020) states that any instance in which someone is coerced or forced into intimate acts is considered a sexual assault; it “does not matter if the person is your spouse, your common-law partner or your date”. In other words, for intimacy to be considered ‘acceptable’ in Canada, individuals must be able to consent of their own volition and be of sound mind when doing so.

not be aware of the legal ambiguity of many kink practices, they are certainly cognizant of the overall negative social perception of kink (Fischel, 2019).

Who are the people who do kink? Currently, in most Western societies, if you asked someone to describe a kinky person, a kinkster if you will, they might well describe either a woman dressed in leather brandishing a whip or they might speak of Christian Grey from *Fifty Shades of Grey*. While these images may not be completely inaccurate – there are certainly women who wear leather and brandish whips in the kink community and men who derive pleasure from the consensual domination of their female partner – they are far from representative of the diverse and varied world that is kink. Such imaginings are a result of the exposure to mainstream media’s portrayal; however, like most things represented in the media, these imaginings offer but a (stereotypical) glimpse rather than a true reflection of what kink is, and who kinksters are (Khan, 2014).

At its core, this thesis is about those who do kink; but in order to describe who kinksters are, we must first ask, what is kink? Kink commonly refers to a wide variety of activities and desires involving “unconventional expressions of pleasure-seeking” (Jones, 2020, p.2). It is self-tying in your room while you listen to music to decompress from a long day at work. It is sitting in your jammies while ‘Daddy’ makes you breakfast. It is continuously bringing your partner to the edge of orgasm and then denying them, while they beg for release. Each of these scenarios is kinky in its own way, while simultaneously being different. There is no one way or ‘right’ way to be kinky. It is for this reason that kink-positive scholars problematize the widely held assumption (in broader society) that kink is an innately sexual practice (Connolly, 2006) arguing that there are so many different types of play,² many of which have nothing to do with genital

² Play is the commonly used term to refer to engaging in kink.

stimulation nor the cultural conceptualization of sex (Hebert & Weaver, 2015; Newmahr, 2011; Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984).³ Indeed, Ortmann and Sprott (2013) maintain that the vast reach of what can be considered kink makes it very difficult to draw conclusions on what a ‘typical’ kink practice may be; it is difficult to attach any one definition. Kink means everything and nothing all at once. In many ways, kink is defined in its absence – by what it is not. Put another way ‘vanilla’ or ‘normal’ intimacy is when there is no kink; when kink is present, intimate acts become ‘abnormal’ and therefore deviant.

As we will see in Chapter One, *Kink: From Pathology to Community*, much of the existing research on kink starts with the premise that kink is deviant, and kinksters are somehow ‘abnormal’ (Khan, 2014; Fischel, 2019; Jones, 2020). Moreover, as Jones (2020) notes, most of the academic inquiry about kink and the kink community has been done without respectfully attending to the perspectives of kinksters. Indeed, there are disturbingly few research studies that have been conducted on kink and the kink community that are not formulated with negative preconceptions about kink. And so, not only do misconceptions continue stigmatic assumptions but they become ever more entrenched and kinksters are delegitimated by the very tropes that frame them as deviant.

In this thesis, I endeavour to address the pervasive silencing of the kink community by asking kinksters about their lived experiences. As such I pose the following research question: in the face of social condemnation and assumptions of deviance, how do kinksters navigate and negotiate ethics, identity, and stigma? To answer this question nine in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals who self-identify as members of the kink

³ Kink practices are not all sexual, but in the kink positive scholarship (and the participants in this thesis) consistently speak of kink as resulting in closeness, and deep feelings of connectivity (see for example Fischel, 2019; Newmahr, 2011); accordingly, this thesis uses the umbrella term ‘intimacy’ to reflect this.

community. The interviews focused on 1) the experiences of kinksters within the kink community; 2) the role kink has played in shaping kinksters' understandings of intimacy; 3) the social standards and behavioural expectations within the kink community, and; 4) how the widespread perception of kink as a deviant activity conditions the identity of kinksters.

Thesis Outline

In order to explore the experiences of members of the kink community, we must first consider the history of kink and the formation of the kink community. Accordingly, the first chapter, *Kink: From Pathology to Community*, attends to the historical shifts of the way kink has been conceptualized in Western society by examining clinical-based scholarship coming out of psychology, the portrayal of kink in Western media, and the small body of kink-positive research which includes some scholarship on intimate experiences in the kink community.

The conceptual framework is developed in Chapter Two, *Theorizing Kinksters, Self, and Society*. Here, we start with Foucault's concepts of power, knowledge, discourse, and technologies of the self before moving on to consider how Goffman's work on the presentation-of-self and stigma 'fill out' the theoretical lens. Next, Chapter Three, *Poking and Prying into Kink* provides a discussion of the methodological approach and the methods used in this research project. Chapter Four, *The Kinksters: A brief introduction* offers a short description of each of the participants interviewed for this study.

The findings are presented in Chapter Five, *The Experiences of Kink*, where we examine the main themes that emerged from the interviews with participants. Indeed, this chapter begins by examining how participants came to be members of the kink community. We then examine their experiences with consent and the predatory behaviours that exist within the community.

Chapter Six, *An Analysis of Pleasure: Being a kinkster* examines these findings through the theoretical lens discussed in the second chapter. Drawing from the themes that emerged in the interviews, the ways in which the participants constitute themselves as ethical subjects as well as how they navigate the stigma associated with kink are examined.

Finally, the conclusion situates the findings from the previous two chapters within the socio-political research on sexuality, kink, and identity. By doing so, attention is brought to the harmful framing of kink as deviance, as well as the social benefit of a reconceptualization of what it means to be a member of the kink community. This thesis concludes with a brief discussion of ideas for future research. A final note, as we will be exploring a community with its own, and quite specific, terminology, the thesis contains a Glossary; Glossary terms are **bolded** the first time they appear in the text.

Chapter 1. Kink: From Pathology to Community

This chapter presents an overview of the relevant literature on kink and the evolution of narratives surrounding the construction of deviant sexual practices in contemporary Western society. In Part One we examine the understanding of kink in psychological⁴ research; literature that largely focuses on the construction of **masochism**, **sadism**⁵, and sexual deviancy. Part Two shifts the focus to research examining the representations of kink in popular culture and pornography. Finally, the third section of the chapter attends to what kink-positive⁶ scholars say about the kink community and its practices. Together, these bodies of scholarship paint the picture of the scholarly conceptualization of kink, but also the world kink practitioners navigate. This chapter concludes by positioning this thesis as part of the small academic kink-positive scholarship.

Kink as Pathology: The Kinky Brain

Clinical-based scholarship on kink has evolved significantly over time. This literature is generally separated into two distinct bodies: the early scholarship (1900-1990) focused on the causes of what are (assumed to be) sexually deviant practices, while the more recent work (1990 onwards) attends to diagnostics and therapeutic interventions. This section examines these two

⁴ For the purpose of this literature review, psychology is used as an umbrella term for the field of psychiatry, psychology, and counselling.

⁵ While there are so many more forms of kink, clinical researchers have largely focused on the pathologizing of domination, submission, and **sadomasochism** and understanding the root cause of it as a form of neurosis (Dunkley & Brotto, 2018). Therefore, this section focuses exclusively on these practices.

⁶ Kink-positive is when kink is presented in a non-judgemental fashion and absent of preconceived assumptions of deviance.

bodies of literature before introducing the limited literature advocating for kink-positive therapy for clients who practice kink.

Early Psychology

Much of the pre-1990s psychological research about sadism and masochism is rooted in the assumption that something must have happened to the individual as a child to create the predilection (which is framed as a neurosis). Freud (1920), from whose work psychology has taken much, considered the erotogenic forms of masochism and sadism (see also Freud, 1924). Notably, Freudian scholarship argues that masochism (associated with the feminine for Freudians) – is the product of an unresolved Oedipus complex⁷. Thus, men who experience masochistic fantasies are said to fantasize about experiencing the humiliation that they see as characterizing copulation for women (Freud, 1924; Brenner, 1959; Loewenstein, 1957).

While masochism was associated with femininity, Freud – and subsequent Freudian scholars – understood sexual sadism to be an exaggeration of violent aggression innate to masculinity (Freud, 1916; 1920; 1924; Loewenstein, 1957; Berliner, 1947). They argued that this aggression, which could become a necessity for sexual release, could manifest in physical acts and/or through psychological domination rituals of humiliation (either of which would be recreating or mimicking the actions of the father) (Freud, 1924). In short, sadism and masochism practitioners wish to either emulate the sadistic figure (their father) or be beaten and humiliated by him (their mother) (Freud, 1924).

While Freud focused specifically on the Oedipus complex as being an essential component of sadism and masochism, other early clinicians did not agree. While still explaining

⁷ The Oedipus complex is a psychosexual theory that describes an individual that desires their opposite-sex parent and garners feelings of jealousy and anger towards their same-sex parent (Freud, 1916).

deviant fantasies as caused by unhealthy childhood relationships with parents, these clinicians argued that the neurosis was largely caused by childhood trauma (Brenner, 1959; Berliner, 1947; Bromberg, 1955; Loewenstein, 1957). These clinician-scholars concluded that masochistic fantasies were a subconscious manifestation of unhealthy parental relationships characterized by abuse or neglect (Brenner; 1959; Bromberg, 1955; Loewenstein, 1957). For example, operating in this tradition Stolorow (1975) argued that sexual masochism may serve as a coping mechanism for those that had traumatic experiences in their youths since they (subconsciously) believe they deserve to be hurt. Brenner (1959), by contrast, argued that sadism and masochism are the results of a fixation on an early disappointment in an individual's life, which subsequently created a sense of self in need of restoration (see also: Bergler, 1961; Olinik, 1984). As such, this body of literature asserts that the desire to inflict pain/punish (sadism), or to receive pain/punish others (masochism), is a mechanism to cope with unresolved psychological or emotional stress caused by parents during childhood.

Modern Psychology

Since the 1990s a new body of psychological literature has emerged that challenges the underlying assumptions – that sadism and masochism are deviant sexualities and inherently problematic – of these earlier scholars. It is to this literature that we now turn. This modern clinical scholarship has seen new theories about why people engage in kink gain prominence. Sexual sadism and masochism are increasingly being described as behaviours that fall under the umbrella of 'normal' sexual paraphilia (Meyer & Levin, 1990; Dunkley & Brotto, 2018). Moser and Kleinplatz (2006), suggest that most adults in the general population have engaged in kink at one point or another in their lives. As such, clinicians now endeavour to understand why people

seek out kink as a form of pleasure (Connolly, 2006; Dunkley & Brotto, 2018). Challenging early psychology's analysis of unresolved Oedipal complexes and unhealthy parental relationships as causes of kinky fantasies, modern researchers have found that kink practitioners are psychologically and socially well-adjusted individuals that typically show no signs of abnormal childhood relationships (Weinberg, 2006; Moser, 2002; Baumeister, 1997). Moreover, numerous empirical studies have suggested that kink practitioners have relatively good psychological health (Moser, 1999; Connolly, 2006; Dunkley & Brotto, 2018). For example, Connolly (2006), argues that kink should be understood as a recreational activity, rather than a manifestation of psychopathology (See also: Williams, 2006).

Interestingly, while sexual masochism and sexual sadism are no longer classified as mental disorders in the *DSM-V*, researchers have found that many clinicians continue to pathologize kink practices (APA, 2013; Ford & Hendrick, 2003). For example, Kolmes, Stock, and Moser (2006) report that there are still numerous clinicians who perceive kink practices to be unhealthy coping mechanisms and who continue to associate kink with unresolved abuse and trauma (Ford & Hendrick, 2003). Notably, however, this modern pathologizing of kink as a symptom of abuse or trauma does not exclusively link the abuse or trauma to childhood or parental relationships (Wiseman, 1996). In other words, according to these clinicians, regardless of when, where, or at whose hands the abuse or trauma took place, it manifests in a predilection to kink.

Kink-Positive Clinical Practices

In response to the above detailed kink-as-pathology approach, research on clinical practices have started to analyze the impact of associating kink with mental maladjustment. This

research has found that although kink practitioners overwhelmingly seek out therapy for reasons separate from their involvement in kink, the role of kink in their lives is often scrutinized. Not only can this focus be damaging to the client/clinician relationship (Nichols, 2006), but Dunkley and Brotto (2018) found that kink, much like sexual orientation, can be an uncomfortable topic to discuss for clients. They assert that kinky clients, fearing a negative reaction, may experience increased anxiety and be far less forthcoming during therapy sessions, which may thereby greatly decrease the likelihood of successful therapeutic counseling (Dunkley and Brotto, 2018).

In light of the above, clinical scholars recommend that, unless the patient is presenting personal difficulties with kink, that kink practices between consenting adults justify neither a diagnosis nor psychological intervention and should be treated as any other leisure activity (Dunkley & Brotto, 2018; Connolly, 2006; Weinberg, 2006). This approach has shown promise as kink-positive therapy with patients is largely successful in creating an environment in which patients feel comfortable discussing any aspect of their lives, regardless of its affiliation with kink (Dunkley & Brotto, 2018).

Kink as Deviance: Kink in the Media

Ironically, at the end of the 20th century, just as clinicians were declassifying kink as a pathology, feminist scholars⁸ started to take a particular interest in the representation of kink in the media. However, before unpacking the feminist response, this section will begin with a presentation of the explicit and subtler representations of kink in mainstream media. Once this discussion of kink in popular culture is complete, we will be positioned to consider the range of

⁸ It is important to note that there is not one unified theory or approach to feminism. There are sex positive feminists who are more kink-positive than are (arguably self-named) radical feminist academics. Because of their ability to dominate the conversation, radical feminists are often referred to as mainstream feminists in this thesis. This distinguishes them from sex positive feminists whose work is subsequently examined.

arguments put forth by feminists. This section concludes with a discussion on how these feminist scholars have framed the use of kink in pornography.

Popular Culture: From Wonder Woman to Fifty Shades of Grey

Over the last two decades, scholars have increasingly paid attention to the presence of kink in popular culture (Khan, 2014; Weiss, 2006; Newmahr, 2011). In North America (and Western society more generally) the most visible kink subculture remains gay leather (Newmahr, 2011). The gay leather subculture is built around the wearing of eroticized leather clothing (e.g., tight leather pants, chaps, cut off vests); ‘leathermen’ also often sport leather (e.g., harnesses) and metal (e.g., cuffs, chains) accessories associated with **BDSM** (Bondage, Domination, Submission/Sadism, Masochism). While this trope remains in evidence, there are more covert illustrations that permeate popular culture (Newmahr, 2011; Weiss, 2006), to which we now turn.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the pervasive framing of kink as deviance, kink in mainstream media is not only present but is generally accepted as a feature in entertainment (Jones, 2020). For example, Call (2013) argues that comic books have a history of introducing various kink elements in more-or-less inconspicuous ways such as Wonder Woman’s lasso of truth and bracelets of submission – both of which are used to subdue men. Furthermore, in a covert representation of female domination, several Wonder Woman issues feature the Amazonian both spanking and paddling her love interest (Call, 2013; Fawaz, 2016). Another representation of kink in American comic books is the Catwoman persona. Catwoman is often portrayed in her skin-tight leather – aptly named – catsuit, wielding a whip, and crawling on all fours while purring; all of which is used to sexually entice and dominate male counterparts

(Mafe, 2015). Certainly, both Wonder Woman and Catwoman are not explicitly kinky but neither are they exactly covert. Call (2013) argues that as soon as someone becomes attuned to kink, it becomes very apparent that comic books are filled with kinky imagery and subtexts; imagery and subtexts to which people are simply oblivious (see also Parry & Light, 2014).

Interestingly, while covert representations of kink are arguably subtly normalizing, overt representations are largely deployed to either scare or generate laughter in the consumer (Prior & Williams, 2015; Khan, 2014; Fischel, 2019). In particular, the stereotypical gay leather ‘twink’ is regularly used in popular culture as a comedic device (at the ‘twink’s’ expense) (Khan, 2014; Newmahr, 2011). These representations typically feature a petite, effeminate gay man (the ‘twink’) next to his burly ‘macho’ partner in a parody of gender presentations (Prior & Williams, 2015). In contrast, the horror genre has regularly utilized the leathered up ‘gimp’ as an antagonist to generate fear (Khan, 2014). Khan (2014) explains that the ‘gimp’ in media is shown to be a grotesque representation of a, presumably gay, sexually **submissive** man. He is generally portrayed wearing a hood, teetering the line between sexuality and perversity, and more often than not the villain in popular media; a rapist, a murderer, or both (e.g., American Horror Story: Murder House).

Notably, however, it would appear that as social mores, values, and expectations change so has the representation of kink within popular culture including a dramatic shift at the beginning of the 21st century. Perhaps the most prominent example of this shift is the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series which features a rich, handsome, and **dominant** man who becomes enamoured by a young virginal woman (Musser, 2015). The book series hit the world by storm, selling more than 100 million copies worldwide and spending over 100 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list (Bosman 2014). It was labeled ‘Mommy-Porn’ by the media, as women

around the world became enthralled by the fictitious sexually explicit kink scenes (Case & Coventry, 2018). The series' depiction of kink was notably intended to neither incite laughter nor instill fear in the consumer; instead, it featured kink as a form of eroticism (Parry & Light, 2014; Musser, 2015).

Feminist response

It is precisely the popularity and mainstreaming of *Fifty Shades of Grey* that has resulted in feminists becoming interested in kink. Indeed, feminist scholars examining the impact that *Fifty Shades of Grey* has had on sexuality and sexual identity (Barnett & Johnson, 2013; Parry & Light, 2014) found that the series appears to have translated into an increased willingness of women to not only to speak out about their sexual urges and desires but also to consume other erotic materials (Musser, 2015; Davis, 2013). Accordingly, some feminist scholars frame the series as liberatory (Parry & Light, 2014). For example, Davis (2013) argues that the free expression of women's sexual fantasies and desires that has been growing since the publication of the series is a positive development.

Other feminist scholars, however, have focused on the **Dominant/Submissive (D/S)** relationship of the main characters (Parry & Light, 2014; Musser, 2015) and are critical of, what they deem to be, the romanticizing and eroticization of a physically and psychologically abusive relationship; abuse that is 'read into' the kink portrayed⁹ (Musser, 2015; Tripodi, 2017). Indeed, Case and Coventry (2018) argue that the depiction of kink in *Fifty Shades of Grey* "reinforces heteronormative patterns of sexuality" and "romanticizes the abuse" inflicted on the female

⁹ It is important to note that kink-positive scholars have also brought up the fact that the relationship depicted in *Fifty Shades of Grey* could be viewed as abusive for other reasons (van Reenen, 2014). However, in this case these feminist scholars saw the D/S relationship and the kink itself as a form of abuse.

protagonist (p. 633). Davis (2013) contends that the control enacted by the (male) protagonist onto the (female) character demonstrates characteristics of intimate partner violence (See also: Musser, 2015). Furthermore, this control, while generally consensual, is interpreted as reflecting, reproducing, and reinforcing patriarchal gender roles characterized by men commanding and controlling women within heterosexual relationships (Musser, 2015).

Pornography

Much like the feminist scholars who oppose the eroticization of the kink relationship portrayed in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, some feminist academics have contested kink in pornography (e.g., MacKinnon, 1987; Attwood, 2007). As with the kink-as-abuse framing of the *Fifty Shades of Grey*, these feminist scholars claim that the presentation of kink in pornography is inherently problematic (Khan, 2014). This scholarship maintains that even (vanilla) pornography which (they argue) portrays the objectification of women for the male gaze (in other words exclusively for the pleasure of men) is profoundly harmful to women (Attwood, 2007; Wright, 2010; Case & Coventry, 2018); add kink and the harm increases exponentially. In part, the argument is that ‘hardcore’ pornography (i.e., characterized by the graphic depiction of aggressive and/ or violent intercourse) is filled with the explicit and dehumanizing objectification of women in submissive roles being dominated by men (Wright, 2010; Musser, 2015); over time violence is normalized and consumers – first desensitized and then ‘addicted’ – desire evermore ‘hardcore’ kinky content¹⁰ (Attwood, 2007; Wilkinson, 2009).

¹⁰ It is important to note that the notion of a progression of increasingly risky or dangerous sexual desires resulting from exposure to pornography is highly contested. Research has demonstrated that there is no definitive causal link between pornography consumption and a drastic change in the consumer’s sexual fantasies and desires (Taylor, 2020).

It is not only anti-pornography feminists who take issue with kink depicted in pornography, kink-positive feminists are also critical. However, while the former group argues that the normalization of pornography is connected to porn-addiction the latter group questions the way kink is represented – in the media, the clinical literature, and by anti-pornography lobbyists and activists. For example, Cruz (2015) suggests that because there are no discussions about or evidence of consent, pornography illustrates abuse rather than safe and ethical kink. Moreover, kink-positive scholars suggest that pornographic actors are often instructed to engage in high-risk acts without a thorough consideration of the potential danger for the actors or viewers who may attempt to recreate the scenes without proper training (Fritz & Paul, 2017).

Kink as Leisure: Kinky people

Now that we have delved into the history of kink as a pathology and the feminist response to its representation in media, we turn our attention to what kink is as a practice. There is a handful of kink-positive authors who examine the social perception (Olson, 2007), psychological impact (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013), and criminality that has often been associated with kink (Fischel, 2019; Khan, 2014). This section, however, focuses on the kink-positive literature that pertains to the experiences of kink practitioners and the kink community.

Understanding Kink

Unsurprisingly, kink-positive scholars have generally opposed the pathologizing of kink as a deviant sexual identity and practice (Case & Coventry, 2018; Olson, 2007; Zussaman, 1998). For example, Green (2015), challenges the normative tropes that have been used by some feminist scholars (e.g., that kink is a form of abuse) and instead argue that it is possible to engage

in kink in ethical, healthy, and consensual ways – even when it involves combining pain and pleasure.¹¹ Indeed, kink-positive literature has meticulously documented how consent is an integral part of the kink community and its practices; indeed it is precisely this careful attention to consent that distinguishes kink from abuse (with which it is routinely being equated) (Newmahr, 2011; Williams, Thomas, Prior, & Christensen, 2014; Khan, 2014; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013).

Ummni Khan (2014), one of the foremost kink-positive scholars, has examined kink in both the social and legal spheres. In her ground-breaking book *Vicarious Kinks: S/M in the Socio-legal Imaginary*, Khan unpacks how laws and culture have shaped kink in Canada. To this end, Khan explores the impact of the socio-legal context for practitioners. Khan argues that the social construction of kink as deviant has led to the mischaracterization of kink in the legal sphere. In fact, she maintains that in Canada, court cases involving kink have historically been tried as sexual assault or abuse cases; something she suggests is linked to the social perception of kink as innately violent. Khan explains that all too often when kink comes up in court cases, the judge and jury find themselves unable to distinguish between consensual acts of kink and non-consensual acts of violence¹².

Kinky Community

According to Kleinplatz and Moser (2006), the association of kink with abuse in the legal sphere has engendered anxiety in kink practitioners regarding the potential consequences

¹¹ The combination of pain and pleasure are key components of sadism and masochism; what Freud and other clinicians have historically pathologized.

¹² For example, Khan (2014) notes that in court rulings, “the judge’s assessment of what counts as ‘sexual activity’ is circumscribed by a vanilla sensibility” which inadvertently impacts their rulings (p.256). Indeed, she argues that in the seminal case of *R. v. Jobidon* (1991), Supreme Court Justice Gonthier “imposed a pathologizing gaze to unequivocally define the experience of pleasure derived from pain as a perversion suffered by people with ‘frail’ or ‘unstable’ minds” which continues to shape the court’s condemnation of kinky activities (p.247).

should their private interests be made public (see also: Newmahr, 2011). Kink-positive scholars have found that it is this fear, coupled with seeking a sense of belonging that has led to the creation of the kink community (Newmahr, 2011; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Fischel, 2019) – something that has become easier in the age of technology (Ortmann and Sprott, 2013).

Kink-positive scholars argue that while there are many different subcultures, divided by a range of interests, they often come together to engage in activities as one large community (Newmahr, 2011; Olson, 2007; Fischel, 2019). In the last decade, researchers have started to examine the inner workings of this kink community and in the process shed light on the nature and range of community activities (Newmahr, 2011; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). For example, Newmahr (2011) conducted an ethnographic study in which she became an active member of the kink community, conducted interviews, and reported her findings. She found that community gatherings were typically either: (1) educational events, wherein someone with expertise would offer demonstrations (e.g., displaying **flogging** techniques); (2) food-centered, where people came together to have meals at local restaurants and cafes; or (3) play parties, where people participated in kink activities (e.g., engaging in rope tying). These types of gatherings were also found to be typical for the participants in Ortmann and Sprott's 2013 study.

Kink scholars have also found that while kink communities actively try to foster healthy, safe, and welcoming spaces (Newmahr, 2011; Barker, Downing, & Attwood, 2012; Barker, 2013), it is not uncommon for kink practitioners to report sexual misconduct from the leaders in the communities (Barker, 2013). Scholars have found that while kink activists endeavour to separate themselves from the stereotype that kink is abusive and/or violent, there continue to be those in the kink community who leverage their power to take advantage of newcomers (Barker,

2013; Weiss, 2011). Such findings not only cast doubt on the safety of the kink community but also on the safety of kink as a practice.

Safety in the Kink Community

Given the potentially risky nature of many kink acts (e.g., **breath play**, **blood play**, **bondage**), the safety of those involved is of utmost importance for members of the kink community. An important component of participant safety in kink is ensuring consent (Olson, 2007; Fischel, 2019). While critical of the emotional abuse portrayed in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, kink-positive scholars do laud the attention it brought to some of the safety practices that are an important part of kink (Barker, 2013; Leistner & Mark, 2016; van Reenen, 2014). The depiction of the fictional couple's use of safe words, discussions about personal boundaries, and openness about needs and desires are, according to researchers, characteristic of negotiations in the kink community (Musser, 2015; Newmahr, 2011; Khan, 2014; Weiss, 2006; Olson, 2007). Moreover, the ongoing consent negotiations depicted in the series (Musser, 2015) is something that kink-positive scholars consider to be a trademark of consent in the kink community (Fischel, 2019; Newmahr, 2011). Moreover, Williams et al. (2014) found that the kink community has developed codes of conduct¹³ – to encourage agency and responsibility amongst participants – of which informed consent is an essential component (see also Fischel, 2019; Newmahr, 2014). The kink-positive scholars who have conducted participatory research within the kink community have found that an important part of engaging in play is following these codes of conduct at

¹³ There are two codes of conduct that are generally used in the kink community: Safe, Sane, and Consensual (SSC) and Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK). They largely mean the same thing; however, RACK was developed as kink practitioners argued that there is always a level of risk associated with kink and safety can be hard to assure (Williams et al., 2014).

community events, whether they be implicitly stated or not (Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Newmahr, 2014; Fischel, 2019).

Concluding Remarks

The literature presented above provides a general overview of the kink scholarship. Historically (and arguably still today) this scholarship has been rooted in assumptions of deviance and pathology. Certainly, we see social condemnation echo through the decades. Early psychological research told us that kinky fantasies were the result of neurosis, while mainstream feminists problematize kink as romanticizing abuse. In trying to make sense of the practice of kink, both groups of researchers start from the assumption that kinky desires are ‘abnormal’. That said, we have seen a shift towards more nuanced (and less judgmental) research and even the emergence of the small body of kink-positive literature. While the kink-positive literature presented in this chapter examines the kink community in Western societies generally, it remains limited: to my knowledge, no study provides a comprehensive account of intimacy practices in the kink community through the lens of ethics nor an account of the experiences of its members with stigma. Drawing from, and building on, the kink-positive scholarships of Khan (2014), Fischel (2019), and Newmahr (2011), among others, this thesis seeks to provide an account of the experiences of members of the Canadian kink community by documenting how they navigate in ethics, identity, and stigma. As such, this project endeavours not only to add to the growing body of kink-positive literature but also to provide insight into the kink community’s conceptualization of ethical intimacy.

Chapter 2. Theorizing Kinksters, Self, and Society

In the previous chapter, we explored the literature that currently exists about kink and examined the ways it has historically been framed as a form of sexual deviancy – highlighting that sexual deviancy has a long history of being deemed (or perceived as) a moral failing in Western society. This thesis asks how those who engage in kink experience and negotiate not only the kink community but also this social condemnation. This chapter will present the select scholarship of two theorists whose work is used to build the conceptual framework to answer those questions: Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman. Foucault offers us a discursive approach that provides a conceptual point of entry to think about macro-level social dynamics. However, it does not tell us how this plays out at the micro-level of interactions between individual social actors. For that, we need to turn to interactionist theories; the work of Goffman is particularly useful as it offers not only tools to make sense of everyday social exchanges, but more importantly, his conceptualization of stigma provides a way to think about interactions with and by those that have been deemed deviant. Accordingly, the chapter begins with Foucault's concepts of power, technologies of domination, and technologies of the self, before moving into a discussion of Goffman's theories of the presentation-of-self and stigma. The final section of this chapter focuses on how these theoretical concepts can be used in conjunction with one another to provide a lens through which we can gain insight into how members of the kink community navigate their identities and interactions.

Foucault: Power, Knowledge, and the Self

Before fully diving into what Foucault defined as the technologies of the self, we must first understand how Foucault conceptualized power. Foucault (1982) believed that power structures society, therefore in order to understand society, we must understand the power which permeates it. For Foucault (1978), power exists in all places at all times. He argued that power in modern societies is not a repressive tool, but rather, a productive part of a “network of relations” that are in a perpetual state of transformation (Foucault, 1977, p.176). It follows that there is not one locus or source of power, but rather it circulates in and through the social body. Indeed, for Foucault (1978) “power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization” (p.92). In other words, power exists everywhere and this power is unstable and ever-changing. Furthermore, Foucault rejected the idea that power is unidirectional; for Foucault power is not “a general system of domination exerted by one group over another” (p. 92) but rather a dynamic process.

Power- Knowledge

Foucault (1990b), asserted that a key component in understanding power is recognizing its relationship to knowledge. Whereas in the past, in the context of sovereign authority, the monarch exerted power over the lives and bodies of ‘his’ subjects, in modern democracies power is realized in and through knowledge (Foucault, 1990b; 1988). Thus, knowledge is produced, legitimized, and circulated through social systems (Foucault, 1990a); systems that contribute to the creation of norms. Moreover, Foucault argued that power is in a dialectic relationship to knowledge. He noted that “power cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people’s

minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets” (1982, p.780). For example, as part of the conceptualization of kink as deviant, various treatment interventions were developed to ‘fix’ the ‘pathology’ within kink practitioners (Wiseman, 1996). Part of the process of ‘treating’ kink practitioners was understanding why these individuals had such fantasies; understanding how they were ‘different’ from the norm (Olinik, 1984).

Technologies of the Other

Now that I have laid the groundwork for understanding how Foucault conceptualized power/knowledge, in this section I consider how, for Foucault, power operates in relation to technologies of dominance. Within the technologies of dominance, two ideas are important for my analysis: (a) the normalizing effects of discourse and (b) the production of ‘normal’.

Foucault, as we saw above, believed power and knowledge to be intrinsically linked. He introduced the notion of discourse to describe ideas or ‘knowledges’ that “can act to constrain and subject people to certain ends, identities, and modes of behavior” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 8). Furthermore, he argued that discourse is a vehicle of knowledge; where ‘common knowledge’ is produced, reproduced, and over time emerges as dominant (Foucault, 1980; 1988). In other words, power relations are perpetuated through discourses.

These dominant discourses regulate behaviour by constituting reality through the meanings that are ascribed to social practices and personal conduct; behaviour that is deemed normal or abnormal (Foucault, 1990a). For example, Foucault (1990b) discusses how the discourses surrounding sex and sexuality in history have shaped them. In different periods of history, homosexuality has been viewed as either normal or abnormal with ‘knowledges’ about homosexuality disseminated through social systems and becoming dominant (Foucault, 1990a).

Through the power-knowledge relationship, discourses surrounding homosexuality, and sexual orientation as a whole, have evolved from simple words describing behaviours to signify something which shapes understandings and perceptions. Whereas homosexuality used to simply refer to the behaviour (i.e., men having anal intercourse), it was transformed to mean an identity; a profound part of who a person is.

As stated above, Foucault argued that knowledge and power are in a dialectic relationship. It is through knowledge, that discourses of normalcy emerge, are perpetuated, and ultimately take on the status of ‘truth’. Foucault argues that in contemporary life “judges of normality” have emerged; ‘judges’ that establish how “the universal reign [of the] normative is based” (1977, p.304). These “judges of normality” (e.g., the clergy and psychologists) affirm and legitimate norms of morality and behaviour; a normalizing gaze that becomes a mechanism of governance (1977, p.305). This dispersion of power by virtue of “judges of normality” speaks to the mechanisms by which discourses about what is considered ‘normal’ are disseminated through various social institutions and, in the process, how (desired) norms are reinforced (Foucault, 1990a). For instance, “judges of normality” pathologized LGBTQ+ identities by classifying homosexuality as a form of mental illness in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* published by the American Psychiatric Association, where it remained until 1987 (Rubinstein, 1995). This pathologization resulted in LGBTQ+ people being medically deemed (and subsequently socially perceived) as undesirable and somehow ‘wrong’.

Technologies of the Self

Now that we have discussed how ‘norms’ are perpetuated, the question becomes – how do people navigate their identity in relation to this notion of what is ‘normal’; it is a question to

which Foucault (1977) turned his attention when conceptualizing technologies of the self, which refers to the ways that people work upon themselves to transform their various senses of self in relation to certain ideals. Put another way, it refers to how individuals govern themselves based on the knowledges that circulate through the social body (Foucault, 1977).

As we have seen, social systems work together to produce discourses about what it means to be ‘normal’. Such discourses thus also shape our personal ideas of what we think is ‘normal’, and therefore how we construct our identities (Foucault, 1990a). Foucault argued that people’s identities are produced through these normalizing processes, which consist of “modern complexes of power and knowledge” that operate to create ideas of what it means to be ‘normal’, or ‘abnormal’ (Rattansi & Phoenix, 2005, p. 104; Foucault, 1990b). These meanings, when ascribed to behaviour, indirectly regulate human action (1977). Thus, as segments of the population start to view these behaviors as ‘normal’, they internalize it and become complicit in accepting their own subjugation, which inadvertently further reinforces notions of ‘normality’. In other words, by accepting ‘normal’ and constructing one’s identity to be ‘normal’, the desirability of that ‘normal’ is reinforced.

In *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2* (1990b), Foucault analyzed technologies of the self by examining how individuals ‘problematized’ sexual behavior throughout history. He questioned the repressive hypothesis¹⁴ and argued that diverse sexual practices, and sexuality as a whole, have not always been taboo subjects. Rather he believed that in particular social, medical, and religious contexts certain sexual practices emerged as

¹⁴ Foucault (1990a) argued that the repressive hypothesis is the widely held, but inaccurate, assumption that during the Victorian era sexuality was not only prohibited and repressed (i.e., the social perception that sexual activities should only take place between husband and wife in the context of procreation) but also hidden. Foucault documents that rather than being negated and hidden sexuality became seen as increasingly important under the purview of medial and moral ‘experts’.

‘abnormal’ and ‘immoral’ (Foucault, 1990a; 19890b). Foucault asserted that sexuality had not been repressed, but rather that only certain discourses about sexuality – those made by sources of legitimate knowledge such as the clergy, medical professionals, and government officials – came to dominate and shape what is considered moral and normal. He noted that this disseminated knowledge about sexuality positioned individuals to compare themselves and others to this ‘normal’ standard. Foucault explained that while social institutions encourage a particular ‘desirable’ sexuality, individuals are able to navigate their subjectivity in relation to these norms. In other words, people learn what is ‘normal’ and are free to negotiate their identity accordingly.

To summarize, judges of ‘normality’ permeate the social world and help shape the views of individuals. Foucault (1990a) noted that these norms are then internalized by individuals. Thus, people self-govern in relation to these (morally imbued) norms in such a way as to be ethical subjects (Foucault, 1990a). Foucault (1990b) argued that one becomes an ethical subject by reflecting on the morality of different behaviours before acting. Indeed, he asserted that people self-govern according to morally sanctioned behaviors, which in turn reinforces them.

Goffman and the Presentation-of-Self

Foucault’s insights have opened up a rich reflection that has pushed scholars to think about the dialectic relationship between power, knowledge, and discourse and to unpack the ways power/knowledge/discourse is implicated in the governance of the other and of the self. However, his work does not provide us with the tools to think about how individuals navigate and negotiate their interactions within this social system of governance. In this thesis, I draw on Stacey Hannem’s (2012) argument that “incorporating Goffman’s work with Michel Foucault’s post-structural perspective [provides] a point of entry to develop a more holistic picture of the

phenomenon of stigma and the complex relationship between interaction, knowledge construction, and power” (p.7). Indeed, how people interact is what is missing from Foucault’s conceptualization. Unlike Foucault, Goffman (1963) explored how people behave in certain situations and theorized that individuals present themselves in different ways depending on the situation and those in their company (1959). In other words, Goffman explored the notion of agency¹⁵ in social situations.

Goffman was operating within the broader school of thought known as symbolic interactionism, which is based on the work of Herbert Blumer, who argued that social interactions are ongoing interpretive processes that are characterized by symbols¹⁶ (Dillon, 2010). These symbols convey certain meanings in different social situations and it is through social interactions that these meanings are decoded by individuals (Dillon, 2010). Symbolic interactionism theorists assert that people behave differently based on the situations in which they find themselves because the expectations that characterize each interaction vary (Dillon, 2010; Goffman, 1963).

In the context of symbolic interactionism, Goffman provided seminal work on how identity is constructed in the context of social interactions. In 1959 he developed what he termed a dramaturgical approach – employing the metaphor of the theater with actors, stages, and performances – to make sense of how individuals behave in the presence of others, the meanings they convey, and how they are interpreted. Using a hospital as an example, he called it an “elaborate scientific stage” with doctors, nurses, and patients being the performers, the lab coats and medical equipment functioning as props, and the hospital rooms and hallways serving as the

¹⁵ Goffman (1963) defines agency as one’s capacity to act independently in social situations.

¹⁶ Symbolic interactionist theory argues that people interact with things based on the social meanings ascribed to them. Therefore, things become symbolic, or ‘symbols’, of their meanings; meanings that transcend the physical object (Dillon, 2010).

backdrops (Goffman, 1959, p. 23). He argued that every social situation has these three elements (characters, props, and backdrops); they also have assumptions about the information conveyed by the stage – the role a person is expected to play. In other words, people are socialized to understand how to behave as a patient (the role) when visiting a hospital (the stage). Reflecting on social interaction, Goffman (1959) suggested that individuals perform a particular self to foster impressions that define the social situation for, and evoke appropriate responses from, other individuals in that space (their audience).

Stigma

Goffman (1963) stated that “social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there” (p. 2). He believed that while the ‘stage’ was where interactions take place and convey certain meanings, it is through social interactions that people become aware of the social expectations of others. Indeed, Goffman (1963) asserted that in interactions people are regularly assessed as either normal or abnormal according to norms – widely accepted ways of being that circulate through society. Whereas most individuals fall within the norm, what Goffman terms “normals”, those who possess an ‘abnormal’ attribute are stigmatized (Goffman, 1963, p. 5) or marked as other.

Goffman (1963) argued that these ‘abnormal’ attributes are “deeply discrediting” and diminishes someone “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” in the minds of others (p.3). This is what Goffman (1963; 1967) referred to as the social process of stigma. Indeed, once a stigma is associated with an individual, those without stigma (the normals) “exercise varieties of discrimination” against the stigmatized, “not quite human” individuals (p.141). Thus, stigmatized individuals become categorized as something ‘less than’ and inferior.

Navigating Stigma

Given that societal norms and values have an immense influence on what behaviours are considered acceptable, as well as which emotions are appropriate to express, we (as individuals) adjust our behavior to avoid being stigmatized or discredited. This is what Goffman referred to as stigma management. He noted that stigmatic characteristics may not be immediately perceptible to others, but those with the trait or mark remain “discreditable” should their deviance be detected. So, while a discredited person “assume[s] his differentness is known about already or is evident on the spot”, the discreditable person assumes that their difference is “neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable by them” (Goffman 1963, p. 4). Moreover, Goffman (1963) argued that discredited and discreditable are not two extremes as they “fail to cover a great range of cases” (p. 73).

Indeed, Goffman’s concept of stigma management becomes integral when analyzing the experiences of members of the kink community; which he would have categorized as having “blemishes of personal character” (i.e., personal behaviours and abnormal interests) and “tribal” stigmas (i.e., being affiliated with a stigmatized group) (Goffman 1963, p. 6). As was discussed in the introduction, kink is framed as socially deviant, therefore members of the kink community would have blemishes of personal character. Moreover, those who are part of the kink community would also hold a tribal stigma due to this affiliation by virtue of their willingness to associate with a socially deviant other.

Goffman (1963) argued that there are diverse stigma management techniques that may – depending on the social context may be used individually or together. These strategies include passing, rejecting the stigma, emphasizing alternate identities, concealment, disclosure, using the stereotype as an advantage, and creating social or physical distance.

Passing

First, we will consider the concept of passing. Goffman (1967; 1963) explains that ‘passing’ refers to hiding the stigmatizing attribute and presenting oneself as a ‘normal’ individual. Indeed, people who can pass as normal may hide their stigmatizing traits in their everyday life and perhaps even their personal life (Goffman, 1963). To use a personal example, as a queer woman, to pass as straight I would have to utilize certain strategies to closet my sexual identity. If we consider the aforementioned dramaturgical approach, the role I would play is that of a heterosexual woman, thus I might have a male partner who would be a reinforcing character to my ‘straightness’. The way I dress, do my hair, and the things I own become ‘props’ that are used to create the illusion of heterosexuality. However, being able to ‘pass’ pivots on my falling into the category of discreditable because my stigmatic characteristic (in this case sexual orientation) is not immediately identifiable.

Rejecting the Stigma

The second stigma management technique to consider is that of rejecting the stigma. Goffman (1963) argued that, as the name would suggest, this is the practice of refusing to accept a stigmatized label as part of their identity (see also Munn, 2012). One of the most common ways people do so is by separating themselves from “those types of people”; a stereotypical representation associated with their stigmatized attribute (Goffman, 1963, p.45). Indeed, Goffman (1963) found that rejecting the stigma was an identity management technique used by individuals to distance themselves from an undesirable trait. However, Goffman (1967) also argued that in order to refuse the stigma, an individual must first acknowledge they have the underlying attribute; something that could be damaging to one’s sense of self.

Disclosure

Next, is the tactic of disclosing the stigma. Munn (2012) explains that this technique of stigma management occurs when a stigmatized individual reveals their stigmatized attribute to others; either upfront or “at the appropriate moment” (Munn, 2012, p. 166). Goffman (1963) noted that while disclosure can be a personal choice, it is not uncommon for people to be put in a position wherein disclosure is required (e.g., a parolee during a traffic stop). He also recognized that when someone chooses to disclose their stigmatic trait, they run the risk of becoming a point of reference in society for all like-stigmatized individuals. Moreover, when disclosing a stigmatic trait, individuals open themselves up to rejection and ridicule (Goffman, 1963).

Creating Distance

The final stigma management strategy we will consider is that of creating social or physical distance. Goffman (1963) noted that stigmatized individuals may choose to avoid certain people, places, and even intimacy to “avoid the consequent obligation to divulge information” (p.99). For example, a gay man who is not ‘out’ about his sexual orientation may avoid gay bars, known gay hangouts, and pride events. He would do so to try and protect his social identity from being associated with behaviors and places that might call his sexual orientation into question.

Conceptual Framework: Thinking about kink

Goffman and Foucault are complementary theorists; indeed, Ian Hacking (2004) asserts that “one needs to stand between the two men in order to take advantage of both” (p.277). Thus, we must consider what each theorist has to offer independently before seeking to understand how they are interconnected. Hannem (2012), notes that Foucault’s conceptualization of power and knowledge attends to the larger systems and institutions that govern social norms; norms that

categorize traits as either desirable or undesirable. These social norms shape social behaviour, however, Foucault's macro-level theories on power/knowledge do not provide a framework in which to understand how these socially conditioned behaviours are produced in everyday life; this is why we must consider Goffman's work. Hannem (2012) argues that stigma is a manifestation of the negative social construct attributed to something and thus provides a lens through which we can understand interactions between stigmatized and non-stigmatized individuals. Indeed, Goffman's work on stigma, and in particular stigma management, provides a framework for understanding identity management in social interactions. In other words, a conceptual framework that draws on Foucault and Goffman affords us a lens through which to consider the overarching systems of governance, how the norms are created, as well as the implications of stigmatization and identity management. In short, this theoretical framework provides a point of entry to make sense of the overall governance strategies that influence subjectivity as well as how members of the kink community navigate their personal and social identities.

Chapter 3. Poking and Prying into Kink

This project seeks to provide insight into the experiences of members of the kink community. As was outlined in the Introduction, *Setting the Scene*, this thesis considers the following research question: in the face of social condemnation and assumptions about deviance, how do kinksters navigate ethics, identity, and stigma?¹⁷ While the previous chapter presented the conceptual framework that was deployed to make sense of the findings, this chapter details the methodological approach employed for the collection and analysis of the data. Drawing on standpoint feminist epistemology, the chapter begins with a discussion of the research goals and my positionality as a researcher. The next section focuses on the methods; we start with the ethical considerations, followed by the data collection process, and finally with a description of the analytical approach. The last part of this chapter reflects on the study's limitations.

Positioning the Research

Recognizing that researchers inevitably shape how research projects unfold and the conclusions drawn, I recognize the imperative to be mindful of my positionality throughout the process. In this first part of the chapter, I present the methodological approach taken in this research, including the epistemological and ontological considerations.

¹⁷ As the thesis progressed and the findings emerged, the research question evolved from focusing on the experiences of members of the kink community with consent negotiations to how kinksters navigate ethics, identity, and stigma.

Epistemology and Positionality

Standpoint epistemology recognizes that marginalized individuals observe and understand the world in a manner that is different from the normative framing (Shantz, 2011). Moreover, their lived reality is also often different and unlike the world inhabited by privileged academics. To follow, the production of knowledge should begin with the perspective of marginalized individuals as these social actors can provide insight into a reality that is often ignored (Harding, 1993).

As the name would suggest, standpoint feminism is rooted in feminist theory. Standpoint feminists claim that women's lived experiences are vastly different from those of men and that they can only be truly understood by women (Comack, 1999). However, feminist epistemologies have broadened to include other standpoints such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation; systems of oppression that play out in structural inequalities rooted in power relations (Grasswick, 2011). Moreover, a standpoint perspective provides a critical framework that acknowledges the normative reality but recognizes that the power relations in society result in diverse experiences and perspectives.

That said, it is important to remember that while the knowledge produced in this research is grounded in the narratives offered by the participants, it is ultimately the researcher that relates those experiences through interpretation and analysis (Varga-Dobai, 2012; Alcoff, 2009). Accordingly, it is important that I remain aware of my position as a researcher when undertaking a qualitative study of this nature. I am not a member of the kink community; however, I was sensitized to the challenges confronting kinksters by virtue of people in my social circle. This positions me as neither an insider, nor an outsider, but somewhere in between.

Goffman (1963) considered those who are close to stigmatized individuals but do not share the stigmatizing trait to be the ‘wise’. He conceptualized the ‘wise’ to be ‘normal’ people who feel they can connect to those in a stigmatized group due to their connection to others within that group. Moreover, Goffman argued that the ‘wise’ have a base level of knowledge about the stigmatizing trait as they are regularly exposed to it in their relationships with others. As such, I am positioning myself as one of the ‘wise’ when it comes to kink. I already had a base level of knowledge when it came to the language used by the participants as well as a general understanding of the dynamics that exist within the kink community. This positioned me to build a connection with the participants quickly, which allowed participants to feel more comfortable in sharing their experiences. That said, even with the general knowledge I gained from my social circle, I was not privy to the intricacies of the kink community nor do I have experiential knowledge of what kink means to kinksters or the complexities of navigating that deviantized identity.

Critical Qualitative Research

In this research project, I do not endeavour to ‘give voice’ to the kink community. Alcoff (2009) states that “the practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another’s situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise” (p.132). I did however struggle with the careful balance between trying to not only understand the experiences of members of the kink community but also to provide a respectful account of those experiences. To this end, this section presents the principles I employed: grounding analysis in the experiences of the participants, do no harm principles, and creating positive social change.

Grounding the analysis

Drawing from the kink-positive perspective modeled by Khan (2014) and Fischel (2019), this thesis employed a critical ontological approach to research. Critical social research is framed as being inherently political, endeavouring to address the marginalization of the kink community by deploying a “political model of rigour”, which is “linked to a commitment to political action and participant inclusion” (Ezzy, 2002, pp.55). In this context, the decision to use qualitative methods was political: the kink community is often silenced, meaning it was imperative to provide a forum for kinksters to share their experiences and expertise. It is for this reason that I decided to utilize semi-structured interviews to collect the data; semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility and the natural spontaneity of themes and topics to emerge, as well as the in-depth exploration of participants’ experiences (Tomura, 2009).

Do no harm

Critical social scientists must remain vigilant to ensure research does not further marginalize already stigmatized communities (Hubbard 1999). Consequently, this research is rooted in “do no harm” principles (Ezzy, 2002, pp.55). In other words, maintaining genuine respect for the participants’ experiences while also considering the political impact that can flow from putting those experiences on the record (Mischler, 1986; Ezzy, 2002). This meant utilizing a kink-positive point of view, acknowledging the participants’ expertise, and making sure to treat the data holistically. Certainly, while some of the wording was changed in the interests of anonymity, I strived to ensure that the meanings were respected and stayed true to the information provided by the participants.

Positive social change

Ezzy (2002) argues that part of maintaining genuine respect is sharing the research with the community that helped make it possible. It is important that the findings, which were informed by members of the kink community, be shared with them and not remain in the realm of academia. For this reason, I will create a ‘best practices’ poster based on my findings that will be disseminated within the kink community. The poster will feature the recommendations made by the participants for newcomers to the kink community on how to best negotiate consent and how to identify predatory behaviours. While the topic of this project shifted its focus to encompass subjectivity and ethical intimacy, the comments made by the participants suggest that the kink community would be best served by these recommendations for newcomers. Indeed, the framing for the poster will be that of what it means to be a ‘good’ kinkster and how to identify predatory behaviors.

Data Collection Methods

Now that we have considered the methodological approach to this thesis, we can turn our attention to the specific qualitative research methods that were employed. I begin with the ethical considerations of this project, before moving onto participant recruitment, the data collection process, and a general overview of participant demographics. The final section focuses on coding and data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of participants in this project was of the utmost importance not least because, as Newmahr (2011) found, kink practitioners have lost employment and even custody of their children when their involvement in kink becomes known

(see also Fischel, 2019). Accordingly, a number of protocols were implemented to protect research participants. Participants were advised on multiple occasions that their participation was voluntary and subject to ongoing consent. An oral, rather than written, consent form was chosen as an additional strategy to further safeguard the anonymity of participants (so there is no written or electronic record of the name of the participants). Moreover, all audio recordings were deleted upon transcription and verification and all transcribed files were password protected and stored on a password-protected computer. In addition, any notes taken during the interview were shredded upon analysis.

Keeping with the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board requirements (see Appendix A for Certificate of Ethics Approval), I anonymized each audio and textual file during the transcription process and gave each participant, as well as any individuals they mentioned, a pseudonym. This anonymization process also included changing certain colloquialisms and phrasings which could potentially identify a participant.

Participant Recruitment

The recruitment of participants began in September of 2018. A poster (see Appendix B) was posted on the kink platform Fetlife¹⁸ and subsequently shared with members of the kink community who expressed interest in displaying it at their events or in their play spaces. I also distributed the poster through my personal networks, by emailing it to members of the kink community for further distribution. I also turned to kinksters in my social circle to learn the best ways to reach out to members of the kink community. These friends were willing to share my information through their personal networks and to advise potential participants that I was

¹⁸ Fetlife (fetlife.com) is a popular online platform for kinksters. Similar to other popular social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, etc), it allows users to create profiles, post media content, as well as make event announcements.

trustworthy. After each interview, I asked the participants to share the recruitment poster with any other members of the kink community that they thought might be interested in participating in the study.

It became evident during this process that personal networks, whether they be online or in-person, were imperative in recruiting participants.¹⁹ While the posters may have been effective in getting the word out in the kink community, evidently the combination of the use of the poster and non-probabilistic snowball sampling²⁰ was quite effective. Considering the small size of the kink community, and ongoing stigmatization, having trusted individuals promote the research through their networks allowed a rapid and effective recruitment process.²¹ Moreover, the rich data collected suggests that having a trusted individual vouch for me may have made participants feel secure enough to share personal experiences freely.

Data Collection

The qualitative data was gathered through one-on-one, in-depth interviews (see Appendix C for the interview guide). In addition to general demographic questions, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions about their experiences within the kink community in general, as well as specific questions about their kink practices (e.g., their thoughts about consent, how it how was negotiated in the kink community, challenges, and consent breaches). To encourage individuals to reflect more deeply, participants were asked to recall a particular **scene** they engaged in and describe the consent negotiations process that had taken place.

¹⁹ Participants often made it clear that they only reached out because someone they trusted had showed them the recruitment poster and told them they could trust me not to judge them or out them.

²⁰ Neuman (2006) characterizes snowball sampling as a method by which existing study participants independently recruit future participants amongst their social circles. Thus, the group of participants grows like a snowball rolling in the snow. This sampling technique is often used in hard to reach populations, such as sex workers, as they may be difficult to access.

²¹ Out of the 9 participants, 4 were recruited through snowball sampling.

The interviews were conducted between September and November of 2018, with most taking place in October. Prior to meeting with participants, I advised them of the sensitive nature of some of the questions and indicated that a private location might be more appropriate given the nature of the topics that would be discussed, however they were free to choose any location in which they felt safe and comfortable. One elected to meet in an office at the University of Ottawa, six in their homes, and two in a private room of public play spaces. The city in which the participants resided was a key factor for the scheduling of interviews. As I reside in Ottawa, scheduling interviews with participants from the Maritimes, British Columbia, Quebec, and other Ontario regions required planning to accommodate travel²² and individual schedules.

I began the interviews by introducing myself, explaining the scope of the project, and outlining ethical safeguards. As per the requirements of the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board and broader research guidelines, I provided my participants with a consent form that detailed the purpose of the study and addressed issues of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity. I informed all participants that no one other than my supervisor and I would have access to the interview data and that I would be doing the transcriptions myself. At this time, I informed them of the security measures outlined in the Ethical Considerations section of this chapter. After oral consent was attained, I signed the consent form (see Appendix D), provided them with a copy for their own records, and turned on the recorder.

On average, the interviews lasted approximately one hour, although two went well over two and a half hours. Conducting interviews was a learning experience. Reflecting upon the interviews with the benefit of hindsight, I recognize that I did not probe as consistently or deeply

²² No participants were required to travel, nor incur any costs, in order to participate in this study. Any travel that took place was a result of outside influences (i.e., travelling for work or personal reasons) but did allow for me to meet up with participants I may not have been able to otherwise.

during my first interviews as I did in the later ones. Moreover, I had not considered the emotional toll hearing graphic stories of breaches of consent – as someone with a history of sexual assault – would have on me. While it did allow me to build rapport with the participants with similar lived experiences, it was occasionally difficult for me to emotionally distance myself from the situation and remain professional. A particularly challenging moment emerged when a participant described a situation in which I considered they had been sexually assaulted, but they did not problematize the behavior and indeed considered the exchange to be completely “*normal*.” This is an example of what can be considered an ethically important moment for a researcher. The inner struggle I faced while hearing this story (and that continues to bother me) was something I had not considered prior to beginning the data collection process. Certainly, as a researcher it is impossible to prepare for every single scenario, however, I felt woefully unprepared for the ethical dilemma which I faced in this instance. Although I am still uncertain whether I made the correct decision, I chose not to voice my concerns with the participant and to continue the interview.

Demographics

As stated above, this project gathered testimonials from members of the Canadian kink community. While the next chapter will give a more in-depth introduction of each participant, this section is intended to provide an overview of participant demographics. In total, there were nine participants: five from Ontario, two from Quebec, one from British Columbia, and one from the Maritimes. Participants ranged in age from their early twenties to late fifties. While gender identity and sexual orientation were never explicitly asked during the interviews, all participants volunteered this information when asked how they identify within the kink community. Five of

the participants identified as cis-women, three as cis-men, and one as genderqueer. Two participants identified as **heteroflexible**, two as heterosexual, two as bisexual, two as pansexual, and one as homosexual. In terms of how they identify with the kink community, one identified as an **alpha submissive**, two as **switches**, one as a dominant, one as a submissive, one as a **bottom**, one as a **little**, one as a rope person, and one as a sadist. One of the participants identified as being Latino, while all the others identified as being white.

Six of the nine participants had been part of the kink community for at least eight years, with the majority having sought out kink as young adults. Only one participant had been part of the kink community for less than a year. All of the participants explained that they found themselves wanting to explore kink and join the kink community after realizing that they were unfulfilled by so-called normal (i.e., vanilla) forms of intimacy; for three of the participants their experimentation with kink occurred after the end of a long-term relationship.

Analytic Strategies

The digital recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized.²³ Through the process of careful verbatim transcription, I began noting the themes and trends that were emerging. I did not wait until after I finished conducting all the data to begin transcription, instead transcribing immediately after the completion of each interview. This allowed me to adjust the interview guide and provided new avenues for probing in subsequent interviews.

I employed thematic analysis using the qualitative coding software *NVivo* to make sense of the data. Thematic analysis is a method that involves segmenting and classifying data into themes or patterns (Ayres, 2008). As was stated above, I began identifying themes while

²³ Any information that might have identified a participant was altered or removed; including any other individuals (e.g., partners, friends, community members) that were named during the interview.

transcribing the interviews. These primary themes were identified by drawing on the topical and theoretical literature and seeing what content was reflected (or not) in the interviews (Ayres, 2008). I re-read the interviews and coded them three times, which provided me with secondary codes that originated from the shared experiences of the participants. All three rounds of coding were about teasing out what themes emerged from the data and draw possible links to the literature and the conceptual framework for the project, while also keeping an open mind for anything else interesting that could emerge. Each round of coding helped to ensure the accuracy of the data interpretation and allowed for theme refinement as time went on (Ezzy, 2002).

Using *NVivo* analysis software allowed me to build and refine my code book, as different themes and trends appeared. While not an exhaustive list, codes used included: exploration, consent negotiations, predatory behaviour, identity management, safety, and community. These main codes were then divided into sub-codes (or what *NVivo* calls child nodes) to allow greater specificity. For example, the main code of exploration had the following sub-codes: exposure, experimenting with kink, identifying preferences, and defining intimacy (see Appendix E for the code book).

After coding was completed, I was able to use *NVivo* to pull up each code and read across the interviews. Starting with the theoretical concepts discussed in Chapter Two, *Theorizing Kinksters, Self, and Society*, I used Foucault's technologies of the self and Goffman's stigma as a theoretical lens. Applying Goffman's and Foucault's theories together, provided a point of entry to make sense of participants' decisions and behaviours in various situations, as well as the ways they were conditioned by broader structures and processes.

Limitations

As with any research project, this one has limitations. The generalizability of this study is limited in scope due to the small sample size. Not only is the kink community a small subset of society but having the parameter that the interviews be conducted in person, rather than virtually, further limited the potential pool of participants. In addition, the choice to recruit participants through personal networks and snowball sampling meant that the population interviewed was shaped by that initial contact (Neuman, 2006). Thus, the findings of this study cannot be considered representative of the experiences of all members of the kink community in Canada. That said it should be remembered that this is an exploratory study that endeavours to contribute to the small body of kink-positive literature, provide insight into ethical intimacy practices and increase knowledge about a community that has historically been stigmatized and marginalized. Moreover, because I interviewed participants from various locations across Canada, the findings do not speak to a set of unique characteristics of one community.

Chapter 4. The Kinksters: A brief introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, *Poking and Prying into Kink*, interviews were conducted with nine members of the kink community from various parts of Canada. In this chapter, the reader is introduced to the participants as individuals. These are people with varied experiences, who have come together to be part of a community; one where they have been able to engage in practices that may have otherwise been only fantasies. That said, in the interests of protecting confidentiality and anonymity – and mindful of the relatively small size of the community – potentially identifiable characteristics have been changed.

Clamps

Clamps, is a white woman, in her early 30s, who identifies as a heteroflexible alpha sub (submissive). Clamps is a single mother of two teenagers who lives in Ontario. During her interview, she explained that she found her ex-husband to be “*controlling, but not in the way that feeds my soul,*” which is how she found herself seeking out kink to satisfy her craving for domination. Clamps joined the kink community approximately two and a half years prior to the interview; after being introduced to it by a friend. She identifies as an alpha sub because, while she enjoys being controlled and dominated, she only appreciates such behaviour when it comes to intimacy; she told me that she “*does not submit easily.*” Clamps describes herself as a strong woman, but “*craves*” the freedom that comes from letting go and submitting to a partner. Clamps also expressed a desire to be part of a **24/7 master/slave** arrangement with a partner, should the “*right guy come along.*” Despite this desire to be ‘**owned**’, Clamps relishes her current single status and the freedom to explore her sexuality.

Hook

Like Clamps, Hook is a white woman, in her early 30s living in Ontario; she too is a single mother. Hook, however, identifies as a straight switch; she explained that she prefers “*to be in charge during vanilla sex, but [likes to] switch it up when it’s time to get kinky.*” After leaving what she described as a “*sexless marriage,*” Hook found the kink community while searching for sexual partners. Hook, watched kinky pornography with her now ex-husband – her first sexual partner – but her husband had always been unwilling to experiment. When the relationship ended, she quickly sought out the experiences about which she had been fantasizing. At the time of the interview, Hook had been part of the kink community for a little over two years. She had developed strong friendships in the kink community, and told me she “*finally felt like [she] wasn’t a freak for loving sex and wanting to use toys to make it more fun.*”

Whips

Whips is a Latino bisexual dom (dominant) man in his late 20s who currently resides in British Columbia. When he started experimenting with kink at the age of 18 under the mentorship of a **Master** in his community, he found that “*kink was the most natural thing when [he] started exploring sex and [his] sexuality.*” During the interview, Whips explained that when he was a teenager and first watching pornography, he had been “*instantly gripped with the kinky shit; the kinkier the better.*” Indeed, his very first sexual encounters involved bondage and domination, something that he is now shameful of because “*[he] really didn’t know what [he] was doing and could have really hurt someone.*” After being part of the kink community for nearly a decade, “*being a dom is just part of what makes [him] the person [he is], just like being bi does.*” Whips opened up about the difficulties of finding a committed relationship as a young

kinky person. He explained that he struggles to find a partner that meets both his intimate needs and shares his personal interests; something his vanilla friends (who are aware of his kinky interests) tease him about.

Silk

There was never a time in her life that Silk, a pansexual white woman in her late 20s living in Ontario, was not interested in bondage. She explained that she used to play out kinky scenarios with her dolls as a child “*where Ken was like rescuing Barbie and she was all tied up and he’s like taking her away from like sex slavery.*” Even though Silk admits to wearing rope under her clothes as a teenager she only joined the community four years ago, in part because she only learned about bondage and rope as a practice when she attended a presentation that featured a non-sexual **Shibari** demonstration; it was this presentation that prompted her interest. Before becoming part of the kink community, Silk had relationships, but always felt like something was missing, and she would “*get bored and move on.*” Silk revealed that when she first joined the community, she started as a rope bottom, but over time, and due to various experiences, she has found herself primarily practicing rope use on others. Silk explained that she does engage in other forms of kink, but that rope is her favourite and she identifies as a “*rope person*”²⁴ within the kink community.

²⁴ Silk identifies as a rope person, which is why this thesis identifies her as such. A rope person/practitioner means that they engage in bondage or Shibari with rope as the tool.

Crops

Crops, a bisexual white woman in her late 20s, identifies as a “*baby girl*.”²⁵ After coming across kink forums online, Crops started doing research ultimately discovering *Fetlife.com*²⁶ where she was able to connect with other kinky people in her area. Even as a young adult, she knew that she liked sex to be “*on the rougher side*,” but after meeting other members of the local kink community, she found herself exploring her fantasies further. Although she had a long-time partner with whom she practiced kink in the past, she only found her baby girl identity approximately two years ago when she started dating her current partner (who she lovingly calls “*Daddy*”). Crops spoke of the challenges of maintaining a kinky relationship in a vanilla world, wherein she does not feel comfortable expressing that part of herself. For example, she recounted times when she was in public and almost outed herself: “*ask[ing] ‘Daddy’ something, but then catch myself and either call him dear*” or by “*accidentally start saying Daddy and then scramble[ing] to make up something for my actual dad.*” She describes these instances as both funny and embarrassing.

Plugs

About a year ago after she accompanied one of her friends to an Ontario kink club, Plugs, a straight white woman in her early 20s, joined the kink community. In fact, Plugs met her partner at a gathering for younger members of the community; a partner with whom she “*started really exploring [kink]*.” It is through this relationship that she learned that she enjoys bottoming

²⁵ Baby girl is a synonym for ‘little’, typically used when describing a male big/ female little **age play** relationship (e.g. daddy/ baby girl dynamic).

²⁶ Fetlife.com is a popular social media platform created by, and for, kinky people across the world. It allows members to create and disseminate information to others with profiles on the site; this includes writings, pictures, videos, as well as event information.

and found her identity within kink. Although Plugs has attended many play parties and educational events, she remains cognizant that she is still new to kink and that she “*loves getting in on with toys, but [she does] not see [herself] doing some of the hardcore stuff²⁷ anytime soon; if ever.*”

Cuffs

Cuffs is a gender-queer submissive white gay man²⁸ in their early 30s who lives in Quebec. As a teenager, they knew that they were gay, and “*liked to bottom during sex*”, but they also knew something was “*off*.” After spending several years finding sexual encounters unfulfilling and thinking that there was something “*wrong with [them]*,” they found kink; in particular power exchanges. Indeed, while finding sexual partners had never been a challenge for Cuffs, they only started finding “*the right kind*” of partner once they started looking within the kink community. They acknowledge that dating is still a challenge, but that they are “*finally getting off emotionally and physically*” during intimate encounters.

Paddles

As a teenager, Paddles would seek out pornography that incorporated the use of force, but “*assumed [he] was fucked up*”; something he was glad to learn was not the case. Paddles is a heteroflexible white man, now in his late 20s and living in Quebec who “*loosely identifies as a switch*.” Since joining the kink community, a little under a decade ago, he has developed various

²⁷ During the interview, Plugs referred to **full body torture**, **heavy beatings** and blood play as what she considers ‘hardcore’.

²⁸ Cuffs explained that they typically identify as a gay man, but that they can express their gender-queer identity comfortably in the kink community. They expressed preferring the they/them pronouns, therefore this thesis will be using these gender-neutral identifiers.

relationships with kinky partners, but it was not until a **heavy body play** demonstration that he “realized that while [he enjoys] tying up and spanking and all that jazz, it’s the rush of forcing a partner into a hold that turns [him] on, not having them just sit there and behave.” While he accepts that switch is the label that most evidently fits his orientation, he prefers the **predator/prey** power exchange over the more ‘traditional’ dominant/submissive dynamic. Paddles has been exploring and engaging in various forms of heavy body play and, in particular, **wrestle play**; his preferred kink practice for approximately two years.

Cross

The final participant is Cross. A pansexual white man in his late 50s, who identifies as a sadist. Being an older man, Cross’s experiences with the kink community is different from that of the other participants. He has been an engaged member of the community for over 20 years; the last decade of which he has traveled widely giving demonstrations and speaking at various kink events. However, Cross did not always have the notoriety or leadership role he now holds in his local Ontario community; as a young man, he was married to a woman “*who had been horrified by [his] sadistic tendencies.*” He insists that “*wanting to beat and humiliate a partner and have them beg on their knees*” is only fulfilling if it is desired by all parties involved; this had not been the case with his ex-wife. After his marriage ended, Cross spent several years trying to understand his desires before finally attending his first kink community gathering. During the interview, Cross explained that one of the key reasons why he continues to play such an active role in the kink community is “*so young people have someone they can trust. To teach them and tell them they’re normal*”; something he wishes he had as a younger man.

Chapter 5. The Experiences of Kink

In the previous chapter, *The Kinksters: A brief introduction*, we saw that the participants of this study, while all part of the kink community, have varied experiences. The goal of this chapter is to present the participants' experiences with kink and the kink community and relate these findings to the scholarship examined in Chapter One, *Kink: From pathology to community*. As such, this chapter will be present the three main themes that emerged during the interviews: becoming a kinkster, understanding consent negotiation, and predators in the kink community.

Becoming a Kinkster

Newmahr (2011) noted the reason most people join the kink community is a desire to connect with like-minded people. However, the participants of this study expressed that seeking like-minded individuals is only one of the reasons they originally sought out the kink community and this is often not the main reason that they continue to be involved. Indeed, Becker (1953) argued that when people join a stigmatized community, they go through what he coined as the 'career model'. He considered the action of joining a community to be a series of social processes that change one's conceptualization and experiential relationship with the stigmatizing trait. Becker believed that these social processes follow a "subcultural learning process" wherein new community members are "socialized into new behaviors and states of mind" (p.242). Moreover, Becker (1963) asserted that when exploring marginalized communities, we tend to focus on what renders them marginalized rather than looking at the community in a holistic manner than acknowledges their day to day lives.

In Becker's article *Becoming a Marihuana User* (1953), he outlines that the process of becoming a cannabis user can be broken down into three stages, which will later become known as the 'career model' (1963). He argues that the first stage is to "learn to use the proper smoking technique", the second "be able to perceive the drug's effects", and finally "learn to enjoy the effects" (Becker, 1953, p. 238-239). In his later work, Becker (1963) notes that these stages can be applied to the process of joining marginalized communities, or 'outsiders' as he calls them. Using Becker's conceptualization of 'career model' we examine how participants first began to explore kink followed by kink events, and conclude with a discussion of what it means to be part of the kink community.

Being Kinky

As was noted in the previous chapter, participants started engaging in kink in different ways and through different means. Consistent with the findings of Newmahr (2011), Khan (2014), and Fischel (2019), these individuals sought out kink after realizing that they had unmet intimate desires and needs. All but one of the participants noted that they had felt an absence in their lives or as Cuffs put it, "[I had] always known I needed something different, I just didn't know what that something was."

In Chapter Four, *The Kinksters: A brief introduction*, we saw that as young adults, both Cuffs and Paddles knew that they had kinky fantasies, but did not realize that such fantasies were quite common (see Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006). Indeed, as Cross notes "*I remember being around 20 or so and having this vivid fantasy of face-fucking my then-wife while she was on her knees drooling, choking, and begging for more. Face-fucking wasn't even a thing yet, but I*

remember having this intense desire of having her humiliated and begging for more.” Likewise, Clamps explained that she “would have these fantasies of being dominated almost every day.”

Certainly, all participants were well aware of their kinky desires long before taking their first steps to realize their fantasies. Paddles and Crops explained that they both spent many hours researching kink online. These initial experiences with seeking out kink correspond to Becker’s (1953) ‘career model’, wherein individuals first start with a familiarization process. Similarly, Cuffs revealed that *“I would try and find online forums about masochism. I found Fet[life] pretty quick, but I wasn’t sure I wanted the social aspect at first, so I kept trying to just find like information about humiliation and **pain play**.”* In contrast, Whips explained that, *“as soon as I found Fet[life] I was in. I immediately started looking up people around where I lived and events, so I could meet others. In hindsight, I’m sure part of that was me trying to find someone to get kinky with, but I just wanted to learn.”*

Community Events

During their research into kink, participants also came across kink events. This would correspond with Becker’s (1953) second step in the ‘career model’ which is about becoming informed and knowledgeable about the practices of the community. As Cross’s comment above alerts us, there are various events where members of the community are encouraged to participate and congregate (see also Ortmann and Sprott, 2013; Newmahr, 2011). The participants reported that information about these events is generally posted in online forums, such as *Fetlife*, and many are open to the public. Indeed, all participants explained that their first in-person interactions with the kink community were at one of these events. Whips noted that *“events typically fall into three categories: play parties, where people can get kinky; demo*

events, which are like teaching events with demonstrations; and munches, which are public chill hangouts.” The next sections outline these three types of community events – demonstrations, play parties, and munches.

Demonstrations

Newmahr (2011) found that educational events are a pillar of the kink community and generally a way to engage newcomers as well as educate them on safe kink practices. Consistent with this, participants revealed that these educational events typically feature a lesson of sorts on how to *“correctly and safely perform the kink that is featured in the demo”* (Paddles). Cross noted that *“kink can be pretty dangerous, so it’s important to have these demos so that people can learn how to do stuff as safely as possible.”* He went on to say that *“when people want to do something, they’re going to do it anyway, might as well try and make sure they’re doing it with a better understanding of the risks and how to mitigate them.”* The participants explained that demonstrations are held on a wide range of practices (e.g., **electrostimulation**, **impact play**, bondage) and these events provide a place where *“you go to learn a new skill from an expert. I’ve been to demos that were just about how to negotiate consent to some that had full-on demonstrations and practices of blood play. It’s all about teaching new skills so that you can go home and do it safely”* (Cuffs).

Silk, Crops, and Cross all had their first interactional experiences with the kink community at events that featured a demonstration. Crops *“had seen a post from the local ‘Demo and Discussion’ group on Fet[life], so [she] thought she would check it out.”* She went on to explain that *“the local community really isn’t all that big, so I was immediately approached by one of the organizers who sat next to me and introduced me to everyone and encouraged me to ask her any questions if I didn’t feel like speaking up in front of everyone during the demo.”*

While sharing his experience with demonstration events, Whips noted, *“no matter your experience level, demo events are a great way to learn a new skill. Even if you know what’s being taught, there’s almost always new info, or at the very least, there are other people there that you can potentially learn from.”* For, Cuffs *“any event that has open practice at the end is worth going to because people will take advantage of the space and do other stuff too. You never know what you’ll come across.”* Indeed, the majority of the participants reported that not only were demonstrations important when they were novice kinksters but they continue to attend educational events whenever possible.

Play Parties

As kink-positive scholars (see, for example, Newmahr, 2011; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013; Khan, 2014) have noted, the kink community endeavours to ensure there are secure spaces where practitioners can explore their kink safely (e.g., rope play, bondage, impact play). One of the ways they do this is through play parties. Cross explained that *“play parties that are held in public places [like a club] basically mean anyone who has seen the info on Fet[life] can show up. So, there are almost always a bunch of new people there.”* He went on to note that *“a lot of people show up to play parties to take advantage of the structures (e.g., St Andrew’s crosses, suspension frames, floggers), but may never attend any other kind of event or integrate themselves into the community.”* When speaking about her first event, Clamps explained that she was *“both nervous and excited. I had heard stories from other people I knew – but didn’t know if it was all true because I didn’t really know what the kink community was like. All I knew was what my friends told me and what I had seen on Fet[life].”*

Participants recalled various experiences at play parties, some positive and some negative, but a constant was of the range of kinky activities that were present and on display.

Paddles explained that *“pretty much anything goes at a play party. Some venues have restrictions on nudity and sex, but in my experience, those are the minority.”* He also revealed that while *“I only do non-sexual play at parties, most parties I’ve been to have been full of sex and generally scantily clad, if not full-on naked people.”* Similarly, while speaking about his experiences with play parties, Whips explained *“almost exclusively doing sexual play at parties. I love getting my subs off in front of people. It’s a complete turn on and I like putting on a show, but that’s probably the exhibitionist in me.”* Clamps noted that *“the play parties I’ve attended, I didn’t know where to look because there was just stuff happening everywhere. It’s also a great place to approach others if you’re curious about something; they’ll sometimes just demo it then and there.”* Speaking to the opportunity to try new things, Hook recalled that she *“was able to try out an electric pony²⁹ for the first time at a play party. They had one available and were offering free rides.”*

Munches

The final type of kink event is a ‘munch’; a food-centered get-together held in a restaurant or pub. These are informal events in public spaces that allow kinky people to come together and meet other individuals who share their interests (see also Newmahr, 2011). Crops noted that *“munches are the only events I regularly go to now. They’re just a great place to socialize meet other kinksters. It’s a low-stress environment and people are usually just there to chat and catch up.”* Mirroring this sentiment, Cuffs reported that they find *“munches to be more about getting to know others in the kink community. So, whereas [play parties and demonstrations] are about, like, doing kink. Munches are about getting to know other kinksters.”*

²⁹ An ‘electric pony’ is an electrostimulation implement. It is typically comprised of a wooden workbench that has been modified to have copper wiring across the top which can then be attached to a transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulator (TENS) unit or an electric wand which are used to send gradient levels of electrical pulses. A person can then sit and ‘ride’ the top of the workbench while the wiring conducts the electricity.

Moreover, Plugs explained that *“when I first decided to join the kink community, I attended a munch for younger people. After having gone to a play party, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but I’m so glad I did because I met my boyfriend there.”* Indeed, the participants expressed that going to munches was an integral part of becoming a member of the kink community. As such, the participants revealed that munches were a good place for kinky people to get to know other kinksters before joining the community. Crops advised that *“munches are the perfect place to dip your toes into the kink community. You get to meet other people with a shared interest, which also gives you the chance to talk about kink in a space you know is safe. I always encourage newcomers to come to the munch I host so they can get to know us without the pressure of play.”* Moreover, all participants expressed that socializing with other members of the kink community – for example in munches – is vital to building and maintaining a sense of community; the topic to which we now turn.

Sense of Community

Kink-positive scholars have found that regardless of the specific reason that drives an individual to join the kink community, a key factor is almost always a sense of belonging (Newmahr, 2011; Olson, 2007; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). Green (2016), states that a community provides “a sense of ‘we-ness’; the feeling of collective-being that one experiences through social cohesion, trust, and plentiful opportunities to engage in community activity” (p.45). This brings us to the final stage of Becker’s (1953) ‘career model’ which he theorized pertained to being about to enjoy the community and practices you share with them. Indeed, being able to regularly partake in kink allows kinksters to really become a part of the kink community.

Consistent with this, Hook revealed that when she became part of the kink community, she *“finally felt like [she] fit in somewhere. Like [she] didn’t need to hide a part of [herself].”* Participants reported developing strong friendships with other members of the kink community; people they may not have met otherwise. Crops explained that she *“was able to make friends that [she] likely wouldn’t have met without joining the kink community.”* Whips noted that it was these relationships he built with other members of the kink community *“that really makes [him] feel like [he is] part of a community.”* In fact, all but two of the participants explicitly noted that they are happier in life since they have joined the kink community.

As we saw above, many of the participants started exploring kink through the internet, however, to be a member of the kink community one must actively engage with others. As Cross put it *“online forums are great, but they don’t replace the experience of being with other people and actually building relationships with them.”* In this vein, Cross explained that *“the events are a way for the community to get together, but the members of the kink community are those of us who actively engage in it.”* Silk explained that *“in each local community, there are usually smaller communities that are formed through kink practices or friendships, but it’s still technically one larger community.”*

That said membership in the community can fluctuate. Crops revealed that in her local community *“it’s not uncommon for people to kind of disappear for a while – i.e., not show up to events or post online for a time – for personal reasons or whatever, but they’ll usually show up again at some point. We all know that life happens and that kink is a thing we do, but that it isn’t all we are.”* Furthermore, she acknowledged that *“some people may choose to stop going to larger community events altogether, but will still go to certain munches or post online.”* Most of the participants shared this sentiment; as long as people engaged with other members of the

community in some form or another, that they would still consider them to be part of the community. As Paddles said *“there’s no formal community requirements. My rule of thumb is: if they actually are making the effort to socialize with other kinksters, beyond trying to get some, I would say they’re one of us.”*

Navigating Consent

The previous section of this chapter discussed the experiences of the participants with the kink community; we now turn our attention to their experiences practicing kink, in particular their experiences with consent and kink. This section begins by presenting participants’ understanding of consent before becoming part of the kink community. Next, I document participant experiences within the community and how these experiences have shaped their understanding and practice of consent. Finally, this section concludes by describing the consent negotiation strategies used by the participants.

Understanding Consent

As we saw in the previous section, participants reported a range of reasons for seeking out the kink community – from wanting to learn more about kink to meeting other like-minded individuals. That said, all participants had had sexual experiences prior to engaging in kink. As such, most of them reported that despite having learned that ‘no means no’, in school or from their parents, they found that in practice negotiating consent is considerably more complex. Many participants explained that they had found themselves taking part in acts that they might not have, had they known how to effectively communicate their needs and desires. Both Whips and Paddles divulged that as young men, exploring sex for the first time, they would just “go

with the flow” even if they may not have originally wanted to have sex. This is consistent with what Silk referred to as the “*sex escalator*,” wherein there is a widely-accepted progression of acts that dictate what people “*should do next*.” She explained it as “*you start by making out, then you touch the chest, then you start going below the belt, and next thing you know you’re having sex. There’s no discussion about having sex. It kind of just happens.*” While none of the other participants used the term “*sex escalator*,” most of them shared that their sexual experiences prior to joining the kink community involved having sex without first discussing it with their partner. Indeed, the concept of the “*sex escalator*” and the experiences of the participants are consistent with the depiction of so-called normal vanilla sex in popular media; an absence of consent negotiations and a progression of kissing and touching culminating in intercourse as the goal (Musser, 2015; Attwood, 2007).

Moreover, participants explained that there is a difference between consent and enthusiastic consent. Paddles divulged that when he was younger he would feel internal pressure to have sex whenever he would engage in any form of intimacy; something he now actively tries to avoid: “*I always felt, and I guess still do feel, this internal pressure to have sex if things started getting hot. I hate that feeling. Don’t get me wrong, there are times where it still happens, but generally, I have learned to communicate with partners.*” Mirroring this idea, Silk explained that “*now I stop when things are getting hot and heavy with my partner and check in to see what he wants. If we both want sex, cool, but sometimes we just want to make-out and that’s cool too.*” Silk and Paddles both attribute their awareness of, and resistance to, the “*sex escalator*” to learning about consent negotiations in the kink community. This resistance takes the form of the participants explicitly rejecting the “*sex escalator*” and taking notice of when they found themselves starting to “*step onto it.*” Indeed, resisting these socialized behaviors

when it comes to intimacy speaks to Becker's (1963) notion of the 'outsider' who pushes against what society has deemed as 'normal' behaviors.

Learning to Communicate desire

In Chapter One, *Kink: From pathology to community*, we saw that the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series is largely viewed as problematic by kink-positive scholars save for one key feature that is widely supported; namely that kink is characterized by an in-depth consent negotiation which requires discussing likes and dislikes before, during, and after sex (Barker, 2014; Leister & Mark, 2016; van Reenen, 2014). However, as noted above, in-depth ongoing consent negotiations are not something that the participants considered prior to their engagement with kink. Indeed, all but one expressed that before joining the kink community, they had rarely vocalized their needs during intercourse.

It is precisely how to express desires and wants that participants learned through the kink community. Cross noted that *"most people know what they want; we all have our fantasies. But the goal of bringing up consent at munches and play parties is to normalize talking about them. I want the newcomers to learn that the only way you'll get what you want from play is if you know how to ask for it."* Mirroring this, Whips said *"I remember being new and going to a munch where my mentor and another leader in the community just chatted very openly with me about how to communicate what I wanted from a scene. People all around us would just jump in and offer advice. Just by going to events, you end up learning so much."* As a relatively new member of the community, Plugs noted that she *"tries to attend the teaching events as much as possible because, regardless of the topic of the event, they usually go over what to expect and how to go about trying it out safely; which includes making sure it's some things you actually want."*

Paddles explained that it is important to know (as we examine in the next section) “*what not to do*” but, for him “*it’s way more important to know what you actually want to do. You should be negotiating consent and building scenes around the things you want to do, not what you don’t want.*”

Practicing On-going Consent

While discussing their personal consent practices, most participants began by stating that they discuss safe words and limits first. This speaks to Becker’s (1953) assertion that members of a community begin re-conceptualizing what they had been socialized to understand as normal. In Becker’s work on cannabis use, he notes that frequent users develop a “more emancipated view” (e.g. seeing it as more beneficial than harmful and less harmful than alcohol and tobacco) on the drug which is a result of the reconceptualization of the social narratives around cannabis and cannabis use (Becker, 1953, p.241). Consistent with the finding of kink-positive scholars (Fischel, 2019; Newmahr, 2011; Khan, 2014; Ortomann & Sprott, 2013), all of the participants noted that safe words and limits are routinely used in the kink community and are generally taught to newcomers. But safe words and boundaries are not the only practices utilized by the participants or other members of the kink community. Clamps uses “*a checklist recommended [to her], that is available online with all the kinky stuff*” which she fills out and shares with potential partners. Cross also encourages newcomers to the community to fill out a similar list that includes “*want, maybe, and hell no*” before they start engaging with potential partners. He states that “*these lists aren’t meant to be used exclusively, but they are a starting point of conversation with potential partners, and more importantly, it forces people to consider what they really want out of play session.*”

Certainly, this consideration of a partner's wants during intimacy is a key component of what participants considered informed consent within the kink community; a consent negotiation wherein everyone is open and forthright about their desires and expectations. This supports the findings of Williams et al. (2014), that the first step of consent negotiations in the kink community is an overt expression of interest. Indeed, communication is key, Whips always *"make[s] sure to have a thorough discussion with a potential sub about what I'm willing to give. [He does not] want to lead them to believe [they are] going to have sex if that isn't on the table."* In a like manner, Crops noted *"I would make sure that the top was aware that all I wanted was, let's say a paddling, and that's it. No orgasm, no sex, no fondling. If what I wanted was a paddling, that's all I was after from that top. I want us to be on the same page."*

Indeed, while the first step in consent negotiations involves a discussion of desires, participants asserted that those discussions were only the point of departure; that communication needed to be ongoing and include the continual and ongoing re-assessment of consent not only during but even beyond the scene itself. Whips explained, *"my mentor taught me that I should always start consent negotiations by making sure we want the same thing, but that you should always keep the dialogue open and most importantly always have a debrief after play to make sure everything is cool."* This *"debrief"* is consistent with what Newmahr (2011) described as *"post-play discussions"* (p. 193) which she found was a practice that was encouraged and even normalized in the kink community. Mirroring this, Plugs reported that she and her partner *"always talk about the scene once it's done. It's the best way to figure out how [they] both feel about what just happened."* In fact, Crops noted that *"even though I've been with Daddy for years, we still make it a point to have a debrief after a scene; even if it's something we do regularly. It's a way for us to make sure we're still on the same page."* All of the participants

said they make it a point of having a post-play consent discussion with their partners and all but one said that they have incorporated this form of continual consent negotiation into other expressions of intimacy in their lives.

Consent Communication Beyond Words

The above-mentioned discussions are verbal conversations that lay the groundwork for play; however verbal communications are not the only type utilized in kink. Given that certain kink acts (e.g., hoods, gags, vac beds), preclude the ability to communicate orally, codes of conduct are of utmost importance (Khan, 2014; Fischel, 2019). Certainly, the participants advised that should they be unable to use a verbal safe word, that there were non-verbal communications used instead and that the ability to “*read a partner’s non-verbal cues*,” as Cross puts it, is vitally important.

Drawing on the communication skills they learn to help them express their intimate desires, the participants were able to navigate not only verbal consent (in the form of frank and open discussions) but also non-verbal consent as well. ‘Reading’ consent can be challenging. Cuffs noted that while arousal is generally fairly apparent, however, he went on to explain that “*sometimes it’s not the arousal you’re after in a scene, but rather a particular freedom, which can be hard for a new kinkster to spot.*” Crops described the experience of knowing if a partner is enjoying the kink as: “*like, when you give a blowjob and you’re sucking on his balls, you can feel his balls tighten, which usually means he likes it, but if you watch his face closely, you can tell if he wants more or less; regardless of if he’s actually talking.*” Ultimately, she, like the other participants, agreed that it comes down to being able to read people beyond the obvious physiological reaction. Paddles described his process:

Before I play with someone, I always start by talking through a scene and make sure we're on the same page about it. Before I play though, I always establish a means of communication, especially before getting into heavy body play, because when you're physically limited, you need to still be able to communicate if something isn't working. But I also make sure I know to check for signs of discomfort and pleasure. Toe-curling is actually a very common response to orgasms, so that's an easy one, but I also watch for whether my partner is trying to move closer to my touch or away; if they're pressing into my touch, it usually means they're enjoying it.

As a sadist, Cross found that “even when my partner is crying and maybe even bleeding, I focus on if their skin is flushed from pleasure and usually do a quick colour check.”³⁰ That's something you learn with practice and experience.” He went on to explain that “being able to differentiate pain from pleasure isn't something that is exactly intuitive or easy, but part of doing a beating safely is learning how to read the non-verbal cues the bottom is giving you.”

Predators in the Kink Community

Evidently, learning how to communicate desire and negotiate (ongoing) verbal and non-verbal consent are critically important skills for newcomers. As we saw above, some kink practitioners, such as Clamps and Cross, utilize checklists, whereas Whips and Paddles endeavor to have thorough consent negotiations before, during, and after play. Indeed, all participants spoke of strategies to ensure consent; however, the kink community does have instances of consent breaches. In particular, the participants of this study brought forth examples of members

³⁰ A “colour check” is a common phrase in the kink community to mean a safe word check. While safe words can be anything, stoplight colours (green, all is well; yellow, slow down; red, stop everything) are commonly used both in private and public play.

of the kink community taking advantage of newcomers who had not yet learned to “*effectively negotiate consent*,” (Silk).

Predators and Kink

As seen in Chapter One, *Kink: From pathology to community*, feminist scholars such as Mackinnon (1987) and Musser (2015) have historically associated kink with abuse; something from which the kink community has strived to distance itself (see also Berker, 2013). Indeed, the association with abuse is “*something that drives [Paddles] crazy, because it’s simply not the case most of the time.*” Indeed, the kink community strives to offer a safe space in which people can engage in kink ethically and consensually (Green, 2015; Newmahr, 2011). That said there continues to be predatory behaviour within the community and most participants spoke of individuals they consider to be “predators.”

Predatory individuals undermine the kink community’s efforts to distance itself from the disparaging narrative of kink as abuse and can potentially tarnish the reputation of the kink community as a whole. As Cross notes “*the only time you hear about kink in the world is when something went terribly wrong. Either someone died because they were dumb, or someone was sexually assaulted and kink was part of it.*” Clamps was frustrated noting that she had “*always associated kink with liberation, but [she knows] that it gets a bad rap. All because some assholes take advantage of people to get their dick wet.*” This is consistent with the findings of kink-positive scholars who note that the continued reports of abusive behaviour cast doubt on its safety, something that further marginalizes the kink community (Weiss, 2011; Newmahr, 2011).

Predatory Behaviours

Much like learning how to negotiate consent over time, Crops noted that *“it took a while of being part of the community before I really understood who the predators were and how to spot one.”* Hook and Whips explained the signs they look for: Hook is *“always immediately suspicious when the one putting on the demo starts doing the rounds and asking all the young pretty ones if they want to try. Immediate red flag for me”* and Whips said *“you see them at events and they just give a weird vibe. If you watch them closely, you’ll see them like assess the new people. Like if it’s a demo instead of paying attention to the demo, they’ll be watching the crowd picking their next victim. I avoid them like the plague.”*

While discussing predatory behaviours, Paddles was amongst the most forceful of the participants, exclaiming that *“if I see another old man with a harem of twenty-year-old girls that clearly have no idea what is going on, I’m going to lose it.”* While speaking about this, Paddles explained that it is not uncommon for older men who are considered to *“know what they’re doing”* to have several bottoms that they *“take advantage of.”* He views such practices as *“grooming young bottoms that likely have no idea what they’re agreeing to or what is really going on.”* Cuffs explained that predators may forego consent negotiations: *“predators are the ones that target the young pretty ones. They never actually have consent negotiations beyond telling the newbie bottom to call safe word if something goes wrong. If it’s not informed consent, it’s not consent!”* Silk recounted an experience that captures many of the themes identified above:

It was one of the first events we [Silk and her friend Katie] went to and Katie gets approached to be tied by Robert. They set up something for a few days later and when he had her tied up, even though Katie was a virgin at the time and they had never even

discussed sex, he fingered her. Then, the next day he, Katie, and his female partner were all in a relationship together.

Predatory ‘Leaders’

Without a doubt, some kink acts (e.g., blood play, fire play, heavy body play) are more dangerous than others, which is why the kink community holds demonstration events for its members (Fischel, 2019; Newmahr, 2011; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). Cross explained that “*the leaders of the community are usually the ones that are putting on these events and/or the demonstrators at them.*” However, not all leaders of the community are ‘real’ leaders and as Silk noted, some events are “*used by the predators to entrap new people, which is why it’s so important to be careful when a ‘leader’ of the community takes interest in someone new.*” In other words, ‘predatory leaders’ do not host events for the benefit of the community, but rather as a way to fulfill their own desires.

Cross, a kink community leader himself, regularly hosts events to educate and support newcomers. Ironically, one of the reasons Cross continues to play such an active role in the kink community is precisely because of the predatory behaviour of some community ‘leaders’:

I probably would have stopped putting on regular events a few years ago, I am getting old and stuff, but I just can’t stop when there is still a need for leaders that are there to just help and educate others. I would’ve loved to have someone like me when I was starting off, but instead, I just had a few older tops that were so worried I would poach their subs that they refused to help and bashed me to any potential bottom.

The unwillingness of the predatory ‘leaders’ of the community to share information with someone they perceive as competition (while simultaneously trying to play with as many people

as possible), was also noted by Whips, Paddles, and Crops. Whips explained that this behaviour made it difficult for him to learn how to be a dominant because he was denied the knowledge of experienced practitioners. He explained that *“when I was starting off, I would be shunned by these assholes; hell, some of them would bash me without even knowing me. It was all a game to ensure that they would get all the subs, even though they were interested in me.”* That said, he is also thankful he never learned from such people *“I don’t know how much I would trust any of the information that was given by an asshole like that. I see them use coercion all the time, I just don’t trust them or want anything to do with them.”*

Moreover, as we have already seen in some of the quotations above, participants expressed that predatory ‘leaders’ often target newcomers to increase their chances of finding play partners. This is consistent with the findings of kink-positive scholars who assert that predatory ‘leaders’ leverage the power they have within the community to benefit themselves, often sexually (Barker, 2013; Weiss, 2011). While speaking of her experiences with such members of the community, Plugs noted:

At one of the first play parties I went to, the one hosting asked me if I wanted to get on the spanking bench for him. I had never even met him and it just creeped me out, because I had just watched him spank and finger another girl. All I could think about was the fact that he was just with another girl. It made me feel really weird and like a piece of meat.

Similarly, Crops recalls:

*I went to Kevin’s dungeon with Melissa a couple of years ago, because I wanted to attend a play party for once and Melissa didn’t want me to go alone. He legit had a row of subs tied to the wall. His **slave** was puttering around and greeting everyone in her whole corset getup, but there were like five girls, most of them close to my age, all naked and*

kneeling on the floor; dude is like fifty. I remember turning to Melissa and asking her what the fuck was going on, because she had warned me that I should stay away from him, and I remember her saying that he's the only one with a dungeon around here, so he's the only one who really hosts anything.

Although she acknowledged that Kevin is blacklisted from several larger community events due to alleged consent breaches, Crops explained that he is still able to host his own events and that community members attend *“even though a lot of them hate him and wouldn't touch him with a ten-foot pole.”*

Indeed, a key factor that the participants outlined when it comes to the prevalence of predatory ‘leaders’ in the kink community is that many of them have personal play spaces and host events. *“Sure, large cities may have kink clubs that are open play spaces, but smaller communities may only have one or two spaces where events are held; most often in someone's personal dungeon, which means if you want to go, you need to put up with them”* (Whips). In Cross's experience, *“public spaces are safer than private ones. You can blacklist someone from attending events, but you can't stop them from hosting them in their own home.”* Accordingly, Cuffs no longer attends events in private spaces *“unless [they] know the host personally.”* They explained that they had heard *“too many stories of the host acting like everyone who attended was on the menu for them.”*

Navigating Predators

The context sketched above raises an important issue that must be considered: How should abuse and exploitation in the kink community be addressed? For example, Silk shared that her friend Katie's experience (described above) has since been made public to the local kink

community, however, there have not been “*real consequences*”; Robert was “*blacklisted from certain events and spaces*,” but continues to be active in others and Silk “*still hear[s] stories about him doing the same thing to other young girls*.” Similarly, Whips acknowledged that ‘predators’ were rarely prosecuted outside the community, “*people don’t go to the cops but will warn others. They don’t want others to go through what they did, but they know nothing will be done by the cops*.”

Certainly, members of the kink community are not the only ones that may be hesitant to report sexual assault to law enforcement (Bruckert & Law, 2018). However, as Khan (2014) noted in her findings, the Canadian judicial system has a history of being unable to distinguish between consensual kink and consent violations; creating an additional barrier for members of the kink community. Moreover, Khan (2014) found that because kink continues to be marginalized, perpetrators know that any abuse is unlikely to be persecuted, which results in them feeling emboldened to continue. Indeed, the participants that spoke about having experiences with consent violations all expressed that they do not trust law enforcement officials to “*do anything about it*” (Paddles). Cuffs explained, “*I know how most people see kink and the last thing I need is some cop judging me about my sexual preferences when I know nothing will be done about it. Rape rarely gets prosecuted, no way a guy going further than I had consented to during a beating will*.”

Concluding Remarks

This chapter presented the three key themes that emerged from the data: reasons and approach to joining the kink community, how consent is communicated and negotiated before, during, and after a scene, and the presence of predators and predatory ‘leaders’ in the

community. Overwhelmingly, the participants expressed satisfaction in having joined the kink community, which has allowed them to learn a new framework through which to understand ethical intimacy and create bonds with others who share their kinky interests. Certainly, the kink community is not inherently different from other communities but has become deviantized through social processes (Becker, 1963). Unfortunately, the kink community continues to have predatory members who take advantage of others. While not something exclusive to the kink community, it does go against the core safety principles that the community tries to embody. Participants of this study did advise that predatory behaviours are rare, however, they also acknowledged that there are very few, if any, consequences should a perpetrator be called out.

This chapter gave a glimpse of the intricacies of the kink community, the marginalization it continues to face, and how it regulates itself. Indeed, the ways in which members of the kink community practice consent, given that they are aware of the social perception of kink, becomes an interesting example of what we can start to understand to be ethical intimacy. The next chapter will explore the participants' experiences by way of the theoretical concepts of self-governance and stigma management.

Chapter 6. An Analysis of Pleasure: Being a kinkster

In the previous chapter, *The Experiences of Kink*, we examined participants' experiences with the kink community. In this chapter, I draw on the theoretical framework to critically engage with these themes and examine the tensions that emerged around issues of identity and choice in order to shed light on how participants navigate what I have come to understand as ethical intimacy and the social world as kinksters. In the first section, I mobilize Foucault's concept of the technologies of the self to unpack the ways the kink community self-governs and how its members navigate their identity in relation to what they perceive an ethical kinkster to be. The second part of this analysis draws on Foucault's power-knowledge dialectic to discuss how the participants navigate their identities in relation to dominant discourses about kink; this discussion leads to a consideration of the participants' presentation-of-self and strategies of stigma management.

Being an *Ethical* Kinkster

Foucault (1990a) argued that people negotiate their identities in relation to social norms as they endeavour to be/become ethical subjects. He believed that social actors reflect on the morality of their actions and strive to act ethically and with integrity. This section begins with a discussion of the kink community's norms and expectations before considering how the practice of consent in the kink community can be understood through the Foucauldian work on ethical subjectivity. This section concludes with a brief analysis of how ethical subjectivity, and the desire to be perceived as ethical plays out interactionally.

Ethical Community

Chapter Five, *The Experiences of Kink*, provided a glimpse into the inner workings of the kink community. In that chapter, we saw that members are committed to creating a safe space in which people are free to express their kinkiness. The participants explained that one of the ways this is achieved is by having (enforced or assumed) codes of conduct at events. “*All of the play parties I go to use RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink), but even at the munches, there’s an understanding that you should act in a safe and respectful matter even though there’s no play happening*” (Paddles). Certainly, these codes of conduct used can be understood as one way the kink community governs itself.

Moreover, Whips and Crops explained that in addition to having codes of conduct, it is not uncommon for play parties to feature and regularly update security measures (e.g., dungeon monitors) to protect the physical³¹ safety of attendees. These measures are put in place to police established limits and prevent harm by inexperienced individuals trying kink for the first time. The commitment of the kink community to continuously adapt security measures reflects a moral obligation to ensure the safety of its members.

Part of self-governing as a community also entails the regulation of who has access to community spaces. While the participants all agreed that consensual acts of intimacy are allowed at play parties, they also revealed that the welcoming environment they endeavour to foster has limits. Plugs noted that “*it’s great to have new people come to community events, but there are sometimes those that just show up for basically live porn or to try and get laid.*” Indeed, several of the participants believe that there was a significant distinction between kinky people going to

³¹ In this chapter, when speaking about ‘physical’ safety, I am largely speaking about safety in play. I recognize that certain types of play can employ a psychological component (e.g. the use of hypnosis). To clarify, I differentiate between ‘physical’ safety (e.g., physical and psychological health in play) and ‘emotional’ safety (e.g., social and romantic considerations that are not play related).

play parties and individuals, that may or may not be kinky, showing up with, as Whips put it, “*ulterior motives*.” As such, the kink community regulates who is allowed into certain spaces based on motivations that are deemed to be (morally) good. When questioned on how such exclusion is enacted, Cross explained that “*most events will have dress codes which are used to identify the people who weren’t invited so they can be warned of the rules, but there’s usually also dungeon monitors that are ready to kick out anyone overstaying their welcome.*”

Furthermore, while the above-mentioned security measures are used to try and ensure the physical safety of kink community members, maintaining the social safety of community members (and perhaps by extension the community as a whole) is also important. Because the kink community continues to exist on the margins of society part of maintaining a safe community environment is making sure that those that attend events are not at risk of being ‘outed’. Cross noted that “*whenever it’s a private event, you know that everyone there has been vetted by the host or someone trusted by the host. It’s a way to make sure the people there feel safe and not have to worry about your presence there being advertised.*” From this, we can understand that the vetting process is less about the physical safety of the members of the kink community and more about wanting to secure the public identity of its members. Interestingly, this protection extends into public space as well, Paddles divulged that “*there’s an understanding in the community that unless you become friends outside of the community, that you don’t interact while out in public. It’s not to be rude, but more that a lot of people keep that [kinky] part of themselves separate than their everyday life.*”

Ethical Consent

The desire to create a safe space does not only happen at the larger community level but characterizes interactions between members. In Chapter Two, *Theorizing Kinksters, Self, and Society*, we saw that Foucault (1990a) put forth that individuals aspire to be ethical subjects, and to that end, they engage in self-governance. And as we saw in Chapter Six, *The Experiences of Kink*, the kink community fosters a culture of open communication. Silk indicated that all activities need to be discussed in a forthright and unambiguous manner: “*Whenever you’re intimate with a partner, you should always be into it. You shouldn’t feel pressure because you think that’s what your partner wants.*” Relatedly, while it may not always be effective (e.g., the continued presence of predatory behaviours), participants all expressed that part of engaging in kink was ensuring ongoing consent; “*part of having thorough consent negotiations has been normalized in the community*” (Cuffs). Certainly, a significant component of negotiating consent is ensuring the physical safety of all of those involved:

Most people wouldn’t consider having your hands bound to bedposts incredibly risky, but there is an inherent risk. What if the partner randomly faints and you’re stuck to a bedpost? I know it’s probably very unlikely, but whenever you start exploring kink without considering the risks, you put yourself and your partner, or partners, at-risk (Cross).

Undoubtedly, the mitigation of risk when engaging in potentially risky acts is driven by a desire to act morally. When analyzing consent as an ethical practice, we can see that every step of the consent negotiation process is about ensuring the safety of the parties involved. Moreover, consent negotiations are about the physical safety of the participants, but also their emotional wellbeing. For example, Paddles noted that “*by talking things through with a partner, I also get*

to make sure that we have the same expectations. The last thing I want is to have a hookup, but the other person thinks it's going to turn into something more."

Importantly, these (open and much-discussed) consent protocols not only ensure the safety and security of practitioners, but they are also a mechanism through which kink practitioners present themselves as ethical subjects. As Whips explained, *"whenever you discuss a scene with someone, you obviously do it cause you want everything to go smoothly and so everyone has fun. But, you also kind of do it to protect your own ass. If something goes terribly wrong, you don't want your reputation to be ruined."* All of the participants mentioned situations in which they would self-regulate their behaviour to protect their reputations and *"avoid being seen negatively by the [kink] community"* (Crops). Indeed, participants aim to behave in certain ways with the explicit goal of presenting themselves as morally good, ethical kinksters.

The Role of the Ethical Kinkster

While Foucault provided a framework through which we can understand the desires of the participants to be seen as moral, one's presentation of self as an ethical kinkster can also be interpreted through Goffman's dramaturgical approach. As was discussed in Chapter Two, *Theorizing Kinksters, Self, and Society*, Goffman (1959) suggests that individuals 'perform' in deliberate ways in order to evoke particular responses from others. Participants revealed that they would behave differently depending on the situation. Whips noted *"when I'm playing in public, I tend to make more of a show of checking on my partners. It's not to say that I don't when we're in private, but more like I know there are people around watching. Part of it is obviously checking on my sub, but part of it is me wanting to be a 'good dom' in the eyes of others."* Goffman's dramaturgical approach reveals that in situations such as these, the 'backdrop' of a

play party can result in a person performing their ‘role’ in such a way as to be perceived positively by the other ‘characters’ (members of the kink community).

Moreover, Goffman (1959) theorized that people play their ‘role’ in social situations based on their understanding of their surroundings. The above-mentioned quote by Whips also highlights the behaviour he believed was required for someone to be a “*good dom.*” Similarly, Clamps spoke of learning comportment expectations noting that since she joined the kink community her behavior “*has changed because I now understand that they are meant to be chill events where we don’t necessarily want to draw attention to ourselves.*” Indeed, by attending events, the participants were able to learn what the kink community considers to be the ‘right’ way to practice kink and to be an ethical kinkster.

All of these things combined amount to what can be conceptualized as ethical intimacy. As noted above, for Foucault (1990a), striving to always be an ethical subject is about acting in ‘morally good’ ways. Interacting with others in a ‘good’ way, taking care to have ‘good’ consent negotiations that take into account everyone’s needs and wants, and generally taking care to be a ‘good’ intimate partner. There is a ‘right’ way to practice kink and be an ethical kinkster - behaving in ‘morally good’ ways and practicing ethical intimacy.

Condemning Kink

While the above section explored how members of the kink community actively try to behave morally and ethically, these acts of self-governance exist in the larger social context in which kink is constituted as inherently abnormal. This section explores participants’ experiences of the power/knowledge nexus and how it conditions the ways kink is constituted and how participants negotiate their identity in relation to this ‘knowledge’.

Shameful Discourses

Members of the kink community are also social actors who struggled with shame and fears of judgment when they first became aware of their kinky desires: “*When you have these fantasies and urges and don’t know where they come from or why you have them, you start to think you’re the problem. I thought I was so fucked-up for wanting and getting super turned on for something like that*” (Cross). Indeed, when participants spoke about their understanding of kink before joining the kink community, they deployed words like “*weird*,” “*fucked up*,” “*messed up*,” and “*unnatural*.” This conceptualization of kink, which reflects societal discourses of kink as deviance, shaped participants’ perceptions and they struggled to shift their understanding: “*It took a long time to unlearn all the bullshit that was shown in media about what it means to be a gay submissive dude. All I’ve ever seen or heard has been this really weird stereotype of a twinkie guy leathered up with his daddy*” (Cuffs). Similarly, as a new member of the kink community, Plugs had difficulty “*figuring out what is real and what’s been distorted by society*.”

Navigating Identity

Normalized discourses that paint kink as inherently deviant also perpetuate assumptions that those that practice kink are abnormal. We now turn to consider how the conceptualization of kink as a symptom of psychological abnormality can become internalized by practitioners. As we saw in Chapter Two, *Theorizing Kinksters, Self, and Society*, Goffman (1963) argued that there are three distinct forms of stigma: “tribal”, “abominations of the body”, and “blemishes of individual character” (p. 6). Because of the social conception of kink and the kink community as deviant and thus abnormal, by participating in kinky activities members of the kink community

are considered to have “blemishes of individual character.” Furthermore, unlike with other stigmatized groups whose ‘marks’ are immediately visible (e.g., racialized individuals), members of the kink community may (or may not) choose to participate in a community that is largely defined by their interest in, or engagement with, something deemed deviant. Individuals who become members of the kink community also navigate “tribal” stigma – the mark based on the group to which an individual belongs (e.g., sex workers).

Kinksters and Stigma

As we saw earlier in this chapter, public discourses have created assumptions about what it means to be kinky and members of the kink community are acutely aware of this framing. This reflection provides a point of entry to the final section of this chapter: how participants navigate stigma.

Managing Stigma

As was discussed in Chapter Two, *Theorizing Kinksters, Self, and Society*, stigma is interactionally realized. Goffman (1963) noted that stigmatized people can be either discredited or discreditable; a discredited person’s stigma is instantly known to those with whom they interact while a discreditable person’s stigma is not immediately evident, but there exists the ever-present potential that it will be revealed.³² Thus, members of the kink community are discreditable. When interacting with others in everyday life, as discreditable individuals, members of the kink community must navigate interactions by deciding whether to reveal their

³² It is important to note that Goffman (1963) argued that the difference between discredited and discreditable is always situation based. For example, a person in a wheelchair is discreditable on the phone, but discredited in face to face interactions.

stigmatizing trait. So how did participants navigate and manage stigma? How did they negotiate their social identity? While more stigma management strategies exist, the ones that emerged in this research project were rejecting the stigma, passing, disclosure, and creating distance.

Notably, these strategies were not mutually exclusive, indeed, most participants deployed several different strategies to adapt their presentation of self, according to the social situation.

Rejecting the Stigma

Goffman (1963) wrote that rejecting the stigma is the refusal to acknowledge the mark as part of one's identity. In the context of this research project, this was the least used stigma management technique currently employed by the participants – although many had used it in the past. As previously noted, all participants recognized that there is a social stigma associated with kink and being kinky, and as members of the kink community, they have struggled with what that says about them as individuals. For example, Crops revealed that in the past she would “*only watch kinky porn because that's the only thing that did it for [her], but [she] refused to see what that really meant in terms of who I am as a person*”.

Similarly, Cross explained that “*in my younger years, I was so afraid to even do kink because I didn't want people to see me as that 'weird freak' that likes to beat women because I never associated myself with the stereotypical sadist that you saw in the media.*” Hannem and Bruckert (2017) observed that the “common tactic employed by marginalized persons as a means of protecting their identity is to attempt to separate themselves from existing stereotypes by reifying and supporting the dominant discourse while emphasizing their own difference” (p.177). Indeed, this distinction between how Cross viewed his identity and what he perceived as a ‘kinky’ identity is what led him to initially reject the label of kinkster. However, by differentiating themselves from the stereotypical ‘kinky’ person, participants also reinforced this

stereotype. Notably, while situating oneself as an exception may create distance from stigma, it does not challenge the discourses that shape public perception and contribute to the creation and maintenance of that stigma.

Passing

Goffman (1963) described passing as portraying oneself as someone normal; in other words, as someone who does not have a stigmatized trait. Overwhelmingly, passing was the stigma management strategy most consistently deployed by the participants of this study. Clamps explained that she “*would have a fantasy of being dominated, but then [she] would pretend it didn’t happen and not speak about it to anyone*” because she didn’t want to appear to be “*weird*” for having these fantasies. This fear of social repercussion was something the participants cited as the primary reason that they chose to maintain a façade and pass as, to use Goffman’s (1963,) language, a “normal” (p.5).

Interestingly, for many of the participants, wanting to pass as normal even extended into their intimate relationships. Recalling watching pornography with a boyfriend for the first time, Cuffs admitted:

I remember that he put on some like basic gay porn for us to watch together and having to pretend that was doing it for me. I was maybe 18 at the time and I liked this guy, so I went along with it, but the whole time I was playing a different fantasy in my head.

Looking back, I should have spoken up, because it would have saved us both a lot of time and energy.

In this instance, even though this was an intimate partner, Cuffs decided to continue to play the role of someone who had normal sexual fantasies. By choosing to pass, they were able to avoid

social judgment from their boyfriend at the time, and by extension, from those with whom their boyfriend may have shared such information.

However, passing as normal inevitably takes its toll on an individual. When speaking about interactions with people in his life with whom he is not ‘out’ Whips lamented:

I find myself just hiding a whole part of my life. It's not uncommon for me to have more than one sub at a time, so it's not like I can really talk about my partners without facing more questions. It's just easier to avoid talking about it all together and pretend I'm the single guy they think I am.

Like Whips, many of the participants attempted to avoid scrutiny by keeping certain partners and friends hid from loved ones, a practice that takes an emotional toll on them as they feel like the “*façade never ends*” (Crops).

Disclosure

Disclosing is a stigma management strategy that is used to protect social identity by revealing the stigmatic trait before someone learns of it in other ways (Goffman, 1963). All of the participants explained that as active members of the kink community, they (now) reveal their engagement with kink to intimate partners, but that when it comes to other people in their lives, they continue to be hesitant to do so for fear of rejection. Indeed, when speaking about their everyday lives many participants indicated that they use selective disclosure. Cuffs shared that they need to be “*really good friends with someone*” before they even consider sharing that they participate in kink and are part of the kink community.

Certainly, for most participants, disclosure was something that was used only in select relationships or as a last resort: “*I had an incident a while back where a co-worker noticed some bruising and I had to explain that yes, my partner beats me, but no, not in a bad way. Thankfully,*

we were friendly, and she was chill about it, but I felt weird about it and was just trying to avoid a bigger mess” (Paddles). In short, while there was a potential cost associated with disclosure participants were also mindful of the potential implications of failing to do so – as Goffman (1963) pointed out should others become aware of your (hidden) identity you risk being marked not only as a deviant but also as a liar. Thus, part of choosing to disclose to others that they are kinky involved considering whether or not they were likely to be found out.

Creating Distance

Goffman (1963) argued that avoidance and creating distance between one’s sense of self and the stigmatic attribute is a strategy to preserve an identity that would otherwise be tarnished by stigma. It is a strategy the participants used in conjunction with one or all of the other above noted stigma management strategies.

As was discussed in Chapter Four, *The Kinksters: A brief introduction* and Chapter Five, *The Experiences of Kink*, most participants developed strong friendships with other members of the kink community. For many participants, these friendships transcend the community and they are unlikely to keep these friends separate from their other relationships. However, as previously noted, in certain social settings the participants may not acknowledge other kinksters. Crops described a situation where a fellow member of the kink community arrived at her place of work:

Margot came up to me and just started chatting like we’re great friends. That’s not usually a problem when a friendship would make sense, but [Margot] is in her 60s and I’m in my 20s. My coworkers obviously saw the exchange and had questions. How do I explain that? I’m at work. Not exactly the time or place to chat about what I like to do in the bedroom.

Indeed, many of the participants shared similar experiences in which they did not feel comfortable acknowledging fellow kinksters when they encountered them in social situations.

Furthermore, some of the participants revealed that they may not frequent certain spaces depending on who they are with. While few venues cater specifically to members of the kink community, especially in rural areas, it is not uncommon for venues to host ‘kink nights.’ Cuffs noted that: *“I won’t go to certain clubs that are known for being kinky if I’m with some of my friends that I’m not out to. It’s not even on my radar to even suggest them because I feel like just the fact that I know about them could cause a whole thing.”* Much like Cuffs, the participants that lived in areas with kink clubs shared that they only ever went to those with fellow members of the kink community or friends with whom they had shared that part of their lives.

Challenging the Narrative

Hannem (2012) argues that negative social perceptions manifest through our interactions with others. Certainly, this research reveals that members of the kink community are well aware of the social construction of kink as something abnormal and that those who engage with it are “*freaks*.” To avoid social judgment, the participants largely manage their public identity by passing as a normal individual and selectively disclosing their kinky activities. This fear of being ‘outed’ is something that emerged both in how the kink community self-governs and in the interactions the participants had in their everyday life. Not only does this fear reinforce the notion that the practice of kink is negatively viewed in society, but it results in the kink community continuing to feel the need to be hidden.

Moreover, participants of this study revealed that the biggest challenge they felt when joining the kink community was when it came to navigating their identity in relation to the

normalized discourses of what it means to be kinky – discourses they staunchly reject. At the same time as they utilize stigma management strategies to navigate their public identity, they also are trying to navigate their kinky identities. While some may have chosen to ‘pass’ in the past, most of the participants have shifted to “defensive othering” (Hannem & Bruckert, 2017). Hannem and Bruckert (2017) argue that “defensive othering” is a stigma management strategy in which individuals challenge the narrative about a particular stigmatized group of people. The participants of this study largely agreed that “*everything that is said about kink and kinky people is bullshit*” as Paddles put it. Indeed, while the participants are aware of the stereotypes that exist, they view them as false and inaccurate representations of what it means to be a kinkster.

While the participants may rebuke normalized discourses about kink, they are still wary of the potential repercussions of failing to adequately manage their stigma. Fear of losing relationships was one of the main reasons why participants kept their identity as kinksters largely hidden. Moreover, when they do share their kinkiness with others, many feel compelled to assure the person that they practice kink safely and consensually. Certainly, the overall social construction of kink continues to influence the subjectivity of kinksters and how they manage the stigmas that are attributed to them and their sexual behaviors.

Conclusion: Breaking the Ties that Bind

This thesis started with Silk telling us “*I feel free when I’m tied up,*” Crops expressing her delight “*when Daddy spanks [her],*” and Whips speaking of the satisfaction he derives from “*having a sub begging for punishment.*” We started with the kink community being silenced and discredited and kink continuing to be perceived as deviant – the dark side of sexuality, that which is not vanilla (good) sex. This research project was conceived with the express desire not only to be kink-positive but also to challenge the preconceived notions and stereotypes that continue to stigmatize kink and silence kinksters; to shed light on the ways in which members of the kink community negotiate their identities as kinksters.

Roughly a hundred pages later, we arrive at the conclusion where we must question what we now know. We know that while social perceptions have evolved, especially when it comes to mainstream media, kink continues to be heavily stigmatized. It is apparent that the stereotypes and narratives surrounding kink are the reason why kinksters keep that part of their identity largely hidden and choose to portray themselves as ‘normal’ in everyday life. While this enables them to avoid public scrutiny and judgment, it does not challenge dominant narratives about what it means to be kinky, which may, in fact, inadvertently reinforce them.

We also know that intimacy is complex; that the normal/abnormal binary is deeply problematic. While social discourses regulate behavior, the participants of this study firmly rejected the idea that there is “something wrong” with them, instead, they celebrated their kinkiness. Kink provides a community that has not only allowed them to explore their desires safely but has also opened up new ways of self-expression. Indeed, it is not simply that kink is not ‘wrong’ but, as we saw in Chapter Five, *The Experiences of Kink*, participants experience

“better” intimate experiences and have learned to avoid the “*sex escalator*” in favour of open and honest discussions about their sexual needs and desires.

Intimacy refers not only to sexual intercourse but also encompasses the wide range of sensations/emotions that are the result of physical and psychological closeness. For example, intimacy can take the shape of “*laying next to Daddy while he pets [her] hair*” (Crops), or “*fucking my partner senseless*” (Paddles). Moreover, both of these acts could be considered a form of ‘vanilla’ intimacy, as well as kinky depending on the understanding of those participating in the act. Intimacy like kink is all about the context in which it takes place and how those who are present understand the interaction. The only limit to kink that the participants brought forth is when an act is not consensual; then it is abuse. In this, kink and ‘normal’ forms of intimacy are very much the same.

Direction for Future Research

Research answers questions, but it also – inevitably – raises new ones. It seems that this research raised many questions and as such, highlighted the need for future research. First and foremost, the participants’ assertions that kink is consensual is in sharp contrast to some feminist scholars (e.g., Musser, 2015; Attwood, 2007) who have argued that kink is abusive and that it victimizes women. More research is needed to discern how gender shapes experiences in the kink community, how gender shapes relationships for kinksters, and how gender influences experiences of shame and stigma. In Chapter Six, *An Analysis of Pleasure: Being a kinkster*, we saw that the participants struggled with disclosure generally. Certainly, more research is needed to flesh out the experiences of ‘coming out’ as a kinkster; research into the experiences of members of the kink community disclosing to partners they met outside of kink is of particular

interest. Moreover, as there is still limited kink-positive research that considers the perspective of kinksters, more exploratory research into the kink community would be beneficial. Indeed, research that examines the relationship kinksters have with the kink community or with kink, in general, is important.

Final Words

Research with and for marginalized communities should of course never just be about doing more research, more poking and prying, but rather about affecting change. For too long kink has continued to exist in the margins of society. Even with Wonder Woman lassoing men for information and Rihanna singing that “pain is for pleasure” and “whips and chains excite me,” society has continued to stigmatize kink practices, continued to condemn those that do kink, and continued to define kink (and by extension kinksters) as deviant. The result is not only that kinksters are (often) required to carefully manage their public identity and engage in extensive stigma management, but it also creates a space for predators to take advantage of those who are unlikely to report an assault given the setting and/or context of the relationship.

Moreover, it also robs the vanilla world of the carefully designed consent protocols that have become part of guidelines to what can be conceptualized as ethical intimacy. Our society does not currently consider what it means to be ‘morally good’ when it comes to acts of intimacy. Not only can this be harmful to others, but it is harmful to our self (i.e. unsatisfying intimacy). We should not only emphasize the need for members of the kink community to engage in kink safely, consensually, and without stigma, but also for the wider non-kink community to embrace the knowledges and carefully thought out conceptualization of ethical intimacy. In effect, it is time for kink to come out of the closet (or dungeon).

Glossary

24/7 Relationship	Type of relationship dynamic that is not exclusively limited to scenes and play. As the name would suggest, it is a relationship dynamic that is 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. This does not mean that the participants are constantly 'playing', but rather that they follow pre-negotiated protocols and roles.
Age Play	A type of play wherein one person takes on the persona of a child (Little) and the other of their parent (Big). Typically, this type of play is based on the concept of the big taking care of the little. It is rooted in role play.
Alpha Submissive	A submissive type in which the submissive is assertive in all other aspects in life, except for when they are in a scene.
BDSM	Bondage, Domination, Submission/Sadism, Masochism. Sometimes used as an umbrella term for any kink related activities.
Big/Little Relationship	An age play dynamic umbrella term that encompasses Daddy/Little and Mommy/Little relationships.
Blood Play	An umbrella term for kink practices in which blood is either released or used. The most common forms of blood play are needles, knives, and sutures.
Bottom	General designation for the person that is receiving an action. A bottom gets pleasure from serving and/or servicing others. This could be sexual as much as non-sexual. For example, a bottom may derive pleasure from making dinner for their top every evening as they could by performing oral sex on their partner.
Bondage	Play in which restraints are used. These could include tape, metal or leather cuffs, rope.
Breath Play	Play in which the goal is to restrict the ability of the bottom to breathe. The most common form of breath play is choking, however, implements such as vacuum beds or hoods may offer forms of breath play. Generally, the goal of breath play is to restrict the airways to cause a rush when the pressure is released.
D/S Relationship	A relationship, that may or may not be romantic, between a Dominant and Submissive. This refers to a power exchange dynamic wherein the submissive submits to the dominant.

Dominant	A top type that engages in power dynamics. A dominant receives pleasure from dominating their partner.
Electrostimulation	Sensation play in which electrical current is used at the stimuli.
Flogger/ Flogging	General designation for a whip containing multiple tails. Can also be used as a verb (flogging) to indicate the action of using a flogger.
Full Body Torture	As the name would suggest, it's a kink practice in which sensations are inflicted on the whole body. It can be a sensation or pain play.
Heavy Beating	A pain play in which the top 'beats' the bottom until there is some form of bruising/laceration.
Heavy Body Play	Umbrella term for a type of play that inflicts significant pain and is considered to be more aggressive. The most common forms of heavy body play are punching and wrestle play.
Heteroflexible	A sexual orientation in which an individual primarily identifies as a heterosexual, however, may occasionally have sexual encounters with others of the same gender. While not exclusively the case, typically a person who identifies as a heteroflexible would not be sexually attracted to someone of the same gender, nor would they pursue a relationship with one.
Impact Play	Part of sensation play, dealing impacts using whips, floggers, crops, canes, or just a hand.
Little	A bottom type that engaged in age play. A little enjoys the freedom of youth, as well as things typically associated with children (e.g. colouring, stuffed animals, cartoons)
M/S Relationship	Similar to a D/S relationship. An M/S relationship is one where a Master/Slave power dynamic exists. This relationship may or may not be romantic, although the power dynamic is typically stronger than D/S.
Masochist	An individual that gets pleasure from receiving pain and/or humiliation.
Master	A top type that engages in power dynamics. A master gets pleasure from having their slave give up control to them.

Ownership	Within a D/S type relationship, it refers to the top ‘owning’ the bottom. This means they are in a committed partnership, wherein the bottom is under the care of the top. This does not mean the bottom does not have any agency or is unable to leave, but rather that they have relinquished control to their top. This could be everyday things like what they wear or they may choose to relinquish the control of their finances to their top.
Pain Play	Umbrella term for a type of play in which inflicting or receiving pain is the goal
Play	‘Play’ is the most commonly used term to refer to the practice of kink in the kink community. It’s also an umbrella term used to describe kink practices.
Predator/Prey	Top/bottom dynamic that incorporates animalistic elements. Generally, contains some form of a game of chase in which the ‘predator’ much catch the ‘prey’
Top	General designation for the person doing the action. A top gets pleasure from inflicting the action onto a bottom.
Sadist	An individual that gets pleasure from inflicting pain and/or humiliation onto others.
Sadomasochist	An individual that gets pleasure from both receiving pain and/or humiliation, as well as inflicting it on others.
Scene	Commonly used term to refer to a kink play session.
Sensation Play	Umbrella term to mean a play type in which the goal is to stimulate the senses. Can be sexual or non-sexual sensations.
Shibari	An artistic rope practice that originally emerged from Japan. It is a type of bondage that exclusively uses rope as the binding too
Slave	A bottom type that engages in power dynamics. A slave gets pleasure from giving control to their master. This does not mean they give all control to their master, such decisions are dynamic specific, however, typically a slave does relinquish a large part of their control. A slave is not inherently different from a bottom, but rather it is the title for a particular state of mind.
Submissive	A bottom type that engages in power dynamics. A sub (submissive) receives pleasure from submitting to others.

Switch

Neither exclusively a top nor a bottom. An individual that will alternate between giving and receiving the actions.

Wrestle Play

Type of heavy body play in which the parties wrestle. This can be done in the nude or, in many instances, removal of clothing is part of the game. It is often used as a type of animalistic 'fight' for dominance.

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Appendix A: Certificate of Ethics Approval

04/07/2018

Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

CERTIFICAT D'APPROBATION ÉTHIQUE | CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

Numéro du dossier / Ethics File Number

S-05-18-494

Titre du projet / Project Title

The Negotiation of Consent in
the Kink Community

Type de projet / Project Type

Thèse de maîtrise / Master's
thesis

Statut du projet / Project Status

Approuvé / Approved

Date d'approbation (jj/mm/aaaa) / Approval Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

04/07/2018

Date d'expiration (jj/mm/aaaa) / Expiry Date (dd/mm/yyyy)

03/07/2019

Équipe de recherche / Research Team

**Chercheur /
Researcher**

Affiliation

Role

Christine LEBLANC

Département de criminologie / Department of
Criminology

Chercheur Principal / Principal
Investigator

Christine BRUCKERT

Département de criminologie / Department of
Criminology

Superviseur / Supervisor

Conditions spéciales ou commentaires / Special conditions or comments

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Université d'Ottawa

Bureau d'éthique et d'intégrité de la recherche

University of Ottawa

Office of Research Ethics and Integrity

Le Comité d'éthique de la recherche (CÉR) de l'Université d'Ottawa, opérant conformément à l'*Énoncé de politique des Trois conseils* (2014) et toutes autres lois et tous règlements applicables, a examiné et approuvé la demande d'éthique du projet de recherche ci-nommé.

L'approbation est valide pour la durée indiquée plus haut et est sujette aux conditions énumérées dans la section intitulée "Conditions Spéciales ou Commentaires". Le formulaire « Renouvellement ou Fermeture de Projet » doit être complété quatre semaines avant la date d'échéance indiquée ci-haut afin de demander un renouvellement de cette approbation éthique ou afin de fermer le dossier.

Toutes modifications apportées au projet doivent être approuvées par le CÉR avant leur mise en place, sauf si le participant doit être retiré en raison d'un danger immédiat ou s'il s'agit d'un changement ayant trait à des éléments administratifs ou logistiques du projet. Les chercheurs doivent aviser le CÉR dans les plus brefs délais de tout changement pouvant augmenter le niveau de risque aux participants ou pouvant affecter considérablement le déroulement du projet, rapporter tout événement imprévu ou indésirable et soumettre toute nouvelle information pouvant nuire à la conduite du projet ou à la sécurité des participants.

The University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board, which operates in accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* (2014) and other applicable laws and regulations, has examined and approved the ethics application for the above-named research project.

Ethics approval is valid for the period indicated above and is subject to the conditions listed in the section entitled "Special Conditions or Comments". The "Renewal/Project Closure" form must be completed four weeks before the above-referenced expiry date to request a renewal of this ethics approval or closure of the file.

Any changes made to the project must be approved by the REB before being implemented, except when necessary to remove participants from immediate endangerment or when the modification(s) only pertain to administrative or logistical components of the project. Investigators must also promptly alert the REB of any changes that increase the risk to participant(s), any changes that considerably affect the conduct of the project, all unanticipated and harmful events that occur, and new information that may negatively affect the conduct of the project or the safety of the participant(s).

Riana MARCOTTE

Responsable d'éthique en recherche / Protocol Officer

Pour/For **Barbara GRAVES** Président(e) du/ Chair of the **Comité d'éthique de la recherche en sciences sociales et humanités / Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board**

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Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

WE INVITE YOU TO PARTICIPATE...

Understanding Consent in the Kink Community

Who is doing the study?

The research is being conducted by a University of Ottawa graduate student for the completion of their thesis, articles/chapters, and presentations.

What is the purpose of this study?

The objective of this research is to understand and explore:

- The experiences and perceptions of members of the kink community in regards to consent.
- The relationships between members of the kink community and consent.

This project will contribute towards a better understanding of:

- Experiences of different people involved in the kink community;
- The different myths surrounding the kink community;
- How consent practices could be reconceptualized.

We would like to invite you to participate in an interview lasting approximately one hour at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will involve talking about the different aspects of your experiences with kink. We will be discussing your understanding of consent, practices in which you engage, as well as the negotiation process for those practices.

We ask that if you chose to participate, you bring with you an object which reminds you of a particular scene you participated in. This object will only be used as a recall measure which may help with memory.

Is this confidential?

The interview will be conducted with the strictest of confidence. Only the researcher will have access to the information provided. Your name and any identifying information will not be included in either the transcript or the written report.

Participation

Participants are free to stop the interview, not answer questions, or withdraw from the project (and have their interview destroyed) till such time as the data has been analyzed.

Please note that participants will be selected on a first come, first served basis.

If you would like to participate or if you have any questions and/or concerns, please contact:

Christine LeBlanc:

Appendix C: Interview Guide

CONSENT IN KINK INTERVIEW GUIDE WITH MEMBERS OF THE KINK COMMUNITY

Preamble

As I have already mentioned, we are conducting interviews as part of a research project on consent negotiations in the kink community – we understand the kink community to include a wide variety of different intimate practices. In the interview we will be examining your experiences with consent negotiations in terms of kink practices. This interview may touch on sensitive issues but I assure you that there are neither good nor bad responses to the questions. Moreover, all of your comments will remain anonymous and confidential.

Preliminary Information

1. I want to confirm that the goals of the research have been explained, the consent letter has been reviewed orally and you have had an opportunity to ask questions and receive clarification regarding research goals, methods, researchers' obligations and the rights of the participants or any other concerns.
2. First of all, would you please indicate what pseudonym you would like used in this research? In our conversation we will use your name however, when transcribing the interview, a pseudonym will be used in order to assure anonymity.
3. In a couple of words how would you describe yourself in terms of your identifier within the kink community? I.e. Top, Bottom, Dominant, Submissive, Little, etc.

Open invitation to speak

[Note to interviewer: this is a very open (narrative) section of the interview. The goal is to provide the participant with the opportunity to provide context, explain their experiences within the kink community]

We would like to start with your story. Can you speak to your experience (as X), and how you came to be involved in kink.

- What does being a (*specify identification*) mean to you in terms of consent negotiations?
- What does it mean to you in terms of your more general understanding of consent negotiations?

Part I: The Community

We are now going to move on to examine

1. Based on your experiences, what are the principal roles of consent in the kink community?
2. Based on your experiences, how do you understand consent?
3. Could you describe what you do/did in terms of your consent negotiation practices?

Part II: Consent Negotiation

This part is when we ask that the participant recall an exact kink scene in which they engaged in.

1. What made you want to engage in this scene?
2. How exactly did the consent negotiations take place?
3. What was the duration of the consent negotiations?
4. Did you do anything different for this scene than in past consent negotiations?

Part IV: Wrap-up

1. Do you have anything else to add?
2. Would you be able to direct us to other people who might be interested in participating in the research?
3. Would you like to have access to the transcript of the interview?
 - *If yes, would you please write your email or postal address so we can forward it to you*
[note to interviewer: if yes, provide participant with a password for the transmission of the interview by email]

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your experiences with me.

Appendix D: Consent Form



CONSENT IN THE KINK COMMUNITY

Christine LeBlanc

Masters Student

University of Ottawa

Department of Criminology

Dr. Christine Bruckert

Full Professor

University of Ottawa

Department of Criminology

I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Christine LeBlanc (University of Ottawa, Department of Criminology) for the context of a Master's thesis.

The purpose of the study is to acquire a better understanding of the practice of consent in the kink community. The research is interested in how members of the kink community negotiate consent and how they experience these negotiations.

My participation will consist of participating in one semi-structured in-depth interview lasting approximately one hour. During the interview I will be asked a series of questions regarding my experiences as a member of the kink community in regards to consent negotiations. Specifically, I will be asked questions about my consent negotiation practices; my experiences of consent within the kink community and about a specific consent negotiation process for a scene in which I have engaged.

I have been asked if I am comfortable having the interview digitally recorded. If I agree the interview will be recorded and the interview will be transcribed. If I agree to participate but do not wish for the interview to be digitally recorded, detailed notes will be taken throughout the interview. In either case I reserve the right to delete any information which I consider to, in any way, endanger myself, friends, family or associates. I am entitled to a follow-up interview should I feel that clarification or additional information is required.

I am free to withdraw from the project at any time, before, during or after the interview; refuse to further participation and refuse to answer questions. I understand that since this research deals with some personal experiences it may cause me some emotional discomfort which may, at times, be difficult. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these occurrences. The interview will immediately be interrupted or stopped if I am uncomfortable.

My participation in this study will contribute to the academic, public and activist discourse on consent. I have received assurance from the researchers that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used for the completion of Christine LeBlanc's thesis, as well as future articles/chapters, and presentations on the topic. I understand that my confidentiality will be respected and that during the process of collection and analysis the interview data will only be accessible

by Christine LeBlanc and her thesis supervisor Dr. Christine Bruckert (Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa).

Anonymity will be assured by keeping the personal information collected to a minimum; immediately upon transcription changing any personal or potentially identifiable information including names, agencies, towns/cities, or geographic area and events/stories; and altering any atypical (and therefore potentially identifiable) speech patterns or idiosyncratic use of words/phrases.

All digital recordings, interview notes, transcripts and any other data collected will be kept in a secure manner. Throughout the research process tapes as well as back-up computer disks will be stored in locked and secure location at the research supervisor's office (Christine Bruckert, Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa). Data that is stored on the researcher's computers and will be accessible only through an undisclosed password. The electronic recordings will be destroyed upon transcription. Transcripts and original notes will be destroyed five years after the project is completed.

I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed. I am free to withdraw (and have interview destroyed) until such a time as the data has been analyzed.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Ethics Office for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Tel.: (613) 562-5387, Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is for me.

For all additional information, I can communicate with the researcher, Christine LeBlanc, or her supervisor, Christine Bruckert, whose coordinates are indicated at the top of the first page.

Verbal Consent

The goals of the research have been explained to me, this consent letter has been reviewed orally and I have had the opportunity to ask questions and receive clarification regarding research goals, methods, researcher's obligations and the rights of the participants or any other concerns. I have been given a copy of the letter.

I, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Christine LeBlanc. If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher at the addresses that appear at the beginning of this document.

I agree to participate in the research under the conditions outlined above: Yes/No

I agree to have the interview tape recorded: Yes/ No

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Researcher's signature:

Date:

Appendix E: Code Book

- **Gender Roles**
 - Kink roles
 - Male stereotypes
 - Female stereotypes
 - Other
- **Kink Stereotypes**
 - Trying to fit a mold
 - Learning to fit into community
 - Figuring out what works for me
 - Navigating kink identity
 - Other
- **Exploration**
 - Exposure
 - Experimenting with Kink
 - Identifying Preferences
 - Defining Intimacy
 - Other
- **Predatory Behaviour**
 - Predators
 - Targeting newcomers
 - 'Hoarding'
 - Negotiating a scene, but not the sex
 - Sexual assaults in the community
 - Other
- **Community**
 - Meaning
 - Mini-communities
 - Community 'leaders'
 - Fetlife
 - Friends
 - Lovers/intimate partners
 - Community experiences
 - Other
 - Events
 - Munches
 - Play events
 - Demo events
 - Other
- **Identity Management**
 - Self-acceptance
 - Self-regulation
 - Protecting yourself
 - Vetting

- Internalization of ‘prescribed behaviours’
- Orientation navigation
- Submission and dominance
- Kink VS Vanilla self
- Passing
- Self-talk
- Other
- **Safety**
 - Safe words
 - Codes of conduct
 - Dangers of kink
 - Physical protection
 - Psychological protections
 - Vulnerability
 - Limits
 - Fears
 - Other
- **Consent Negotiation**
 - Checklists
 - Likes/dislikes
 - Limits
 - Nonverbal communication
 - Verbal communication
 - Contracts
 - Protecting yourself
 - Long-term partner negotiations
 - New partner negotiations
 - Evolution of negotiations
 - Aftercare
 - Other