

Conversational Phases in BDSM Pre-Scene Negotiations

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Introduction & Background

Sexual consent has, and continues to be, a nebulous and ill-defined topic of academic, sociological, and social inquiry (Archard, 1998). Consent in BDSM contexts is even more poorly defined, despite its central importance to the subculture. The existing literature notes this significance (for example, Barker, 2013; Jozifkova, 2013; Langdrige & Butt, 2004). However, academic investigations are yet to examine the ways in which consent is constructed by BDSM practitioners, particularly through language and interaction. Through the application of an ethnomethodological (EM) and conversation analysis (CA) framework to audio-recorded pre-scene negotiations of BDSM practitioners, a preliminary investigation into consent in BDSM contexts shows there are distinct conversational phases during pre-scene negotiations.

Research on the lived experiences of BDSM practitioners has seen a marked growth in the last decade. Writings on kinksters, their experiences, and their practices have begun to move away from pathologising a ‘deviant sexuality’ and are beginning to explore the nuances and techniques involved in ‘what it is that we do’ (WIITWD). Many note the central importance of consent to the BDSM community yet none delve into the process by which consent is actually constructed in the kink community (Chatterjee, 2012; Hopper, 2011; Lindemann, 2011; McLachlan, 2011; Stiles & Clark, 2011; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Tsaros, 2013; Turley, King, & Butt, 2011; Victoria, 2014; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013).

Academic and activist Meg Barker notes that for BDSM practitioners “consent has occupied a place of central importance” (2013, p.896). Her analysis of emic writings on enthusiastic consent¹ explores the dynamics involved in gaining consent and notes that “the conversations themselves can be erotic, and create norms of having such dialogues” (2013, p.904). Consent conversations as the norm within the BDSM context is similarly taken up elsewhere. Tsaros highlights that explicit negotiation of boundaries and consent in BDSM contexts are the norm within these spaces, while in ‘vanilla’² sexual encounters “all actions can be assumed to be consensual” until consent is explicitly withdrawn (2013, p.865). This distinction between vanilla and BDSM sexual interactions highlights

¹ Enthusiastic consent refers to consent explicitly gained through dialogue between individuals (Barker, 2013, p.904).

² ‘Vanilla’ refers to either individuals not involved in BDSM or sexual behaviours which do not involve BDSM. It is sometimes used as a pejorative in the community.

the importance of furthering research on the constructions of consent. By exploring the processes by which consent is experienced within BDSM contexts, the complexity and malleability of consent in all contexts, sexual or not, is emphasised (Taylor & Ussher, 2001).

Consent and its malleability is one of two narratives identified by Langdridge and Butt (2004) in their analysis of BDSM textual discourse. Their analysis focuses on two narratives arising from the collected online texts: 1) the explicit negotiation of consent and 2) the rejection of the pathologising of BDSM. In their analysis of the former, they contend that subscribing to the tenet of ‘Safe, Sane and Consensual’ is “*the key condition for membership*” in BDSM (2004, p.42, original emphasis). They suggest that this notion of ‘Safe, Sane and Consensual’ is the difference between pathological sexuality and a sexuality “worthy of respectful sexual citizenship” (2004, p.44).³ Langdridge and Butt’s analysis of consent highlights that communication and negotiation are not only necessary but expected in BDSM relationships, and thus kinksters new to the scene come to be socialised in its importance by experienced practitioners.

In noting the danger of inexperience in potentially crossing the boundary between consensual play and violence, Jozifkova’s (2013) article highlights socialisation as one of the key themes in literature on BDSM. Hopper (2011), for example, focuses on the processes that one must undergo in order to become a socialised kinkster. To become a socialised kink practitioner, he suggests, requires navigating several complex stages; processes of introduction, peer association, the learning of sexual scripts, and the learning of behaviours appropriate to the chosen role identity (*cf.* Hopper, 2011, p.7).⁴ Turley, King, and Butt (2011) expand on this notion of socialisation by noting that engaging in the process is often viewed to be an exciting change from normative sexual behaviours by their participants. Involvement in BDSM became not only a rejection of normative social mores, but also a way to achieve transformation or healing and to escape everyday realities of human existence (Turley et al., 2011, pp.131–133).

Thus it can be seen that while there are numerous key themes and focal points within the current BDSM literature, the central importance of consent cannot be understated. Much of the literature notes the significance of consent to the experiences and study of kink but few specifically explore the ways in which consent is constructed and negotiated by practitioners themselves.

³ Other consent frameworks used within the community include Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK), Personal Responsibility in Consensual Kink (PRICK), and the “4Cs” (Williams, Thomas, & Prior, 2014). I am grateful to the Reviewers for bringing the 4Cs to my attention and regret not being able to include a more in-depth discussion of these different frameworks at this time.

⁴ Hopper’s notion of socialisation in order to become an accepted member of the scene is echoed in Langdridge and Butt’s suggestion that adherence to the tenet of Safe, Sane and Consensual is “a key condition for membership” in the community (2004, p.42).

Methods

Academic investigations of BDSM have been influenced by numerous perspectives, both theoretically and methodologically (Turley et al., 2011, p.125). Given the central importance in BDSM of ‘meanings’ that are culturally learned, enforced and reproduced (Weille, 2002, p.134), this plethora of methods used to study kink is unsurprising. For this project it was determined that a synthesis framework of ethnomethodology (EM) and conversation analysis (CA) would provide the greatest likelihood of achieving an explication of the meanings present in pre-scene consent negotiations. By using an ethnomethodological perspective this research project attempts to discover the minute details of society-in-practice (Sacks, 1984; Schegloff, 2007) within the BDSM community as it relates to pre-scene consent negotiations. In utilising an ethnomethodological perspective, the practical minutia of these negotiations are treated as “anthropologically strange” (Garfinkel, [1967]1984, p.9) and the research proceeds in a fashion that will demonstrate the processes and meanings of these actions. That is, the analysis is grounded in the conduct of competent members and thus the research questions become elucidated by the data – the answers provide the question “in the participants’ own terms” (Schegloff, 1997, p.75).

The author’s involvement with the local BDSM community where the data was gathered is twofold – engaging as both practitioner and researcher. Prior to events, permission was sought from event hosts/organisers to gather data at their events. Posts were then made in the relevant groups on Fetlife⁵ letting event attendees know about the project and what was involved in choosing to participate. Consent forms were signed on the night of the event and participants were free to record their negotiations at a time of their choosing. In total, 7 recordings from 14 participants were collected. The relatively small sample size was not considered a limitation of the study due to the EM/CA framework applied to the collected data. There were 6 male-identifying practitioners and 8 female-identifying practitioners in the sample with various role identifiers. Their experience level ranged from less than twelve months to more than 15 years and the recordings included male-female pairings, male-male pairings, female-female pairings and one female-female-male trio. The recordings were transcribed according to the Jeffersonian notation system (Jefferson, 2004) using audio-editing software, Audacity, to ensure conversational details were able to be included in the transcripts. Following transcription the recordings were examined using an EM/CA framework.

Findings

The structure of consent negotiations in BDSM contexts have not hitherto been subject to academic examination. The data suggests that there are at least four distinct – but not discrete – phases present in these conversations. That is, the phases may be

⁵ Fetlife is a social media site, not dissimilar to Facebook, for BDSM practitioners.

moved through in different orders in any given negotiation or they may blend or overlap with other phases but they are always present.⁶

These phases include [Style], [Body], [Limits] and [Safewords]. [Style] encompassed the type of play to be done, the sensation that the type of play would elicit, the intensity of this sensation, and the toys that would be used in producing this sensation and intensity. [Body] allowed the negotiation of bodily considerations such as the location on the bottom's body where play was acceptable, the position the bottom would assume during the scene, whether touch (sexual and non-sexual) was allowed, to what extent this touch was permitted, and finally, considerations of existing injuries or safety requirements that may impact the play to be had. Often overlapping with [Body] negotiations of safety, injury and touch was [Limits]. During [Limits] the boundaries of each practitioner - though most frequently the limits of the bottom - were outlined and agreed upon. Due to the personal and unique nature of limits this phase showed the least congruence between recordings in terms of how this phase was discussed. Lastly came an examination of [Safewords]. This phase allowed practitioners to negotiate and ensure mutual understanding of how the scene was to be ended in the event that the bottom reached their limits or experienced some sort of unexpected distress. Three ways of ending a scene were identified: 1) the use of the traffic light system where "red" signals the need to immediately end the scene, 2) the use of plain English where "Stop" actually means stop rather than being a kind of mock protest or way of managing pain, and 3) the use of body language such as gestures or hand signals.

Navigating these phases requires kinksters to have and display a certain level of social proficiency. This proficiency ensures that the locally produced understandings of certain terms can be agreed upon. It was shown on several occasions that this proficiency can be shared with others of a lesser proficiency – as an experienced top did with their inexperienced bottom during their negotiation, bolstering his proficiency by displaying her own.

Summary & Conclusion

The findings demonstrate the critical role of norms within BDSM contexts. That is, how ethnomethods and scripting inform and shape consent negotiations. Sandnabba et al. (2002, p.40) note that "little is known about the 'scripting' of more unusual sexual activities, including sadomasochistic sexual behaviour". This is not to say that scripting does not occur in kink situations, in fact, quite the opposite (Newmahr, 2011, p.8). Given the highly ritualised nature of many BDSM interactions, these scripts serve an important function in the performance of complex kink interactions (Sandnabba et al., 2002, p.40).

⁶ There was, however, one instance in which the identified norms of pre-scene negotiations were not adhered to. This recording was identified as a deviant case and, as per the EM/CA framework employed, allowed for greater refinement of the analytic schemes applied to the rest of the data (Silverman, 1985, p.21). Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the deviant case analysis in greater detail at this stage.

These scripts – or rules – create a sense of local orderliness (Lieberman, 2013, p.16). The scripts for negotiations in BDSM contexts are part of an enculturation process where people learn to negotiate by watching others then later reproducing and adapting it for themselves (Lieberman, 2013, p.19; *cf.* Hopper, 2011, p.3). These scripts form part of the accepted foundations of BDSM negotiations – the rules that have come to be seen as “pre-existing the social activity that they organise” (Lieberman, 2013, p.83).

The specific findings of this research contribute to the examination of BDSM as a diverse sexual practice. Studying consent in BDSM contexts enriches broader understandings and applications of consent as well as how it is created, understood, and mobilised in various contexts. The implications for studying consent in pre-scene negotiations are not only sociological in nature but also legal, psychological and medical. The findings of this research highlight that BDSM practitioners are skilful sexual citizens rather than pathological subjects. Through the use of role identifier-specific language patterns and behaviours kinksters cooperatively and collaboratively construct consent in pre-scene negotiations. Consent frameworks, like ‘Safe, Sane and Consensual’ or ‘the 4Cs’, are more than mantras to those within the scene; they have a profound influence on the importance of pre-scene negotiations and enthusiastic consent to the BDSM community.

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