

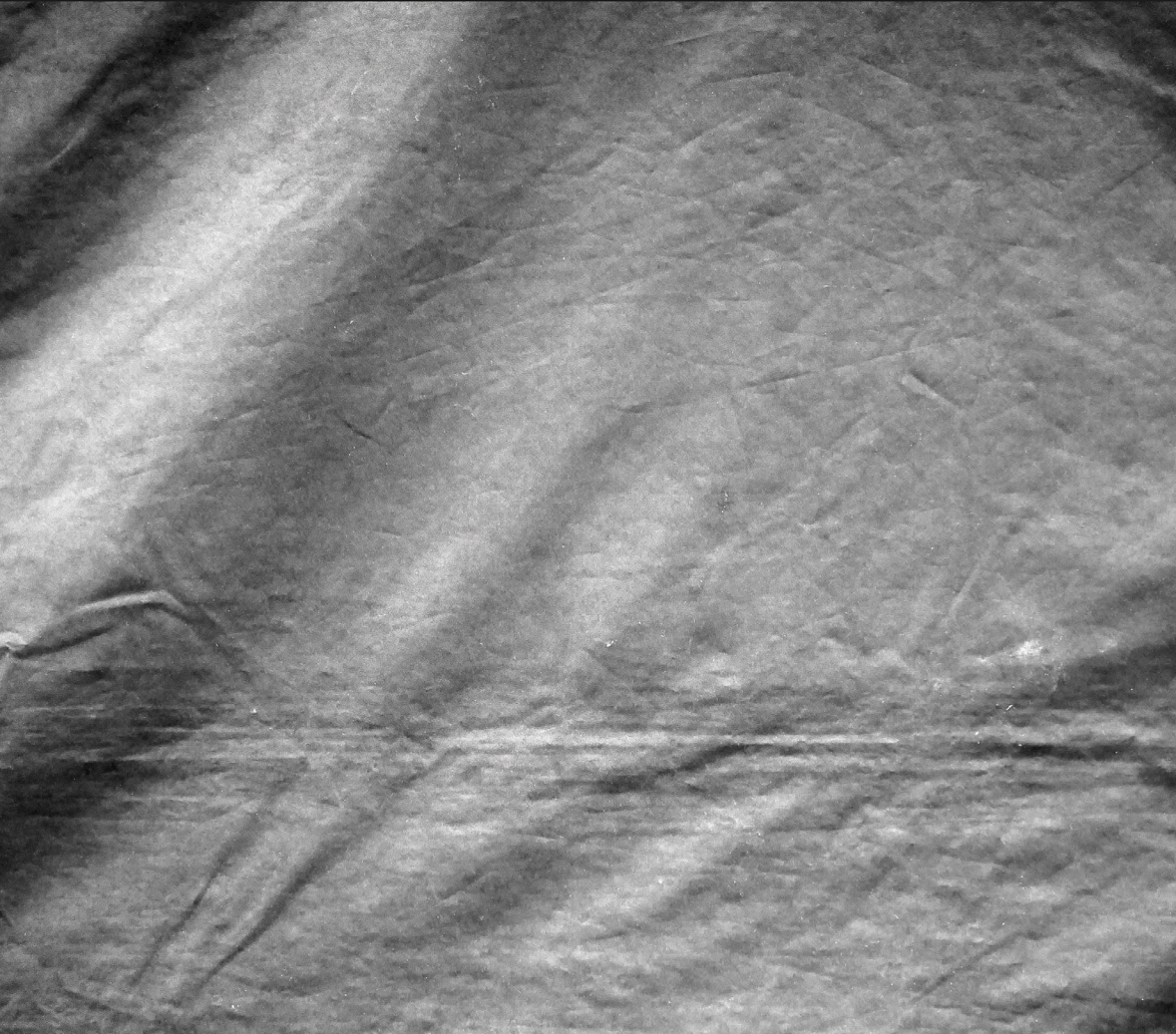


# Dynamics of Sexual Consent

Sex, Rape and the Grey Area In-Between

Lena Gunnarsson

Translated by B.J. Woodstein



# DYNAMICS OF SEXUAL CONSENT

How does sexual consent work? How do we know that another person really wants to have sex with us? Why do people sometimes give in to sex that they are not in the mood for? And how come it is sometimes difficult to draw a sharp line between sex and assault? *Dynamics of Sexual Consent* addresses these questions based on deeply personal interviews with 20 Swedish women and men of various ages and sexual orientations. In doing so, it contributes to understandings of sexual consent and sexual grey areas through its combination of conceptual rigour, analytical detail and empirical richness.

While starting in the legal definition of consent as voluntary participation, the book broadens the discussion to a wider sociological and philosophical sphere where gendered power dynamics and relational dependencies challenge simplistic understandings of voluntariness. Contesting tendencies to see miscommunication as the key problem related to consent, it shows that emotional aspects are often the main factor standing in the way of genuinely consensual interactions. While the analysis is informed by a gender perspective emphasizing the gendered power asymmetries of heterosexuality, it also foregrounds men's vulnerability and the power dynamics of same-sex interactions. A key argument of the book is that, given the contextual and ambiguous nature of sexual interactions, it is impossible to delineate unequivocal and concretely applicable guidelines for what counts as consent. To compensate for the lack of universal, fail-safe rules, what is needed is an intensified collective reflection on consent and sexual grey areas, which can make individuals better equipped to identify and respect their own and others' boundaries.

An empirically rich and conceptually sophisticated contribution to understanding of sexual consent and sexual grey areas, *Dynamics of Sexual*

*Consent* will be of interest to scholars and students of gender studies, sociology and criminology.

**Lena Gunnarsson** is Associate Professor of Gender Studies and Head of Gender Studies at Örebro University, Sweden. Her work explores gendered power dynamics of sexuality and intimacy and has contributed to conceptual debates on gender, sexuality, love and power as well as empirically investigated phenomena such as consent dynamics, sexual grey areas and commodified sex and intimacy. Her work also includes meta-theoretical contributions where the philosophy of critical realism is used to intervene in feminist debates on ontology and epistemology. She is the author of *The Contradictions of Love: Towards a Feminist-realist Ontology of Sociosexuality* (Routledge, 2014) and co-editor of *Gender, Feminism and Critical Realism: Exchanges, Challenges, Synergies* (Routledge, 2017), *Feminism and the Power of Love: Interdisciplinary Interventions* (Routledge, 2018) and *Critical Realism, Feminism, and Gender: A Reader* (Routledge, 2020).

“This book is an essential resource for students, researchers, practitioners, and anyone seeking to comprehend sexual violence. Gunnarsson compellingly demonstrates how the line between consensual and coercive sex is recurrently blurred as sexual encounters often involve mixed feelings and desires and are shaped by gendered perceptions of sexuality”.

**Lucas Gottzén**, *Professor of Child and Youth Studies,  
Stockholm University, Sweden*

“Through close engagement with interviewees’ narratives, Gunnarsson weaves a complex analysis of the individual and collective contexts in which modern sexual desire, agency and activity are navigated. Concluding with a call for society to talk more, and more candidly, about sex, this book makes an important intervention into debates over sexual freedom”.

**Vanessa Munro**, *Professor of Law, University of Warwick, UK*

“In this must-read book, Gunnarsson explores the intricacies of sexual consent and the social contexts that influence the ‘if’ and ‘what’ of sex. The result is a compelling account which broadens our focus to addressing a wider continuum of sexual harm, whilst not losing sight of the powerful role of positive sexual interactions to the human experience”.

**Anastasia Powell**, *Professor of Family and Sexual Violence,  
RMIT University, Australia*

“Sexual wanting is ambiguous, Gunnarsson recognizes in this intriguing contribution to understandings of consent. She does not provide easy answers, nor is she invested in binary understandings of gender, but rather invites us to reflect on sexual grey areas and attend to emotion and affect as key to the negotiation of consent”.

**Mary Lou Rasmussen**, *Professor of Sociology, The Australian  
National University, Australia*



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ROUTLEDGE

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

Designed cover image: Getty Images

First English edition published 2025

by Routledge

4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge

605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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First published in Swedish by Studentlitteratur 2020

*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-87948-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-62844-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-53554-6 (ebk)

DOI: [10.4324/9781003535546](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003535546)

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to express my deep appreciation to the 20 people who bravely and generously agreed to share their often complicated and painful experiences of sex and, in some cases, assault. Conducting research interviews on subjects that people rarely talk about in other contexts is a privilege. Every time I sit in front of a new person and, authorized by my role as researcher, assume the right to ask questions that in most other contexts would be perceived as strange and disturbingly detailed, I feel that I am part of something great. There is so much in human experience that is never articulated. Thank you, all 20 of you, for taking the time and effort to try to put into words one of these domains of experience that still lacks a developed, nuanced and self-evident form of expression. It is my conviction that this is a small step on the way to a deep-going culture of consent, characterized by sensitivity and respect for both one's own and others' needs and boundaries.

This book is a slightly revised version of a book in Swedish, translated by B.J. Woodstein. Thank you, B.J., for an excellent translation and an outstandingly smooth collaborative dialogue about everything from choices of words to continuously updated time schedules. I also want to direct my thanks to the Åke Wiberg Foundation, King Gustaf VI Adolf's Foundation for Swedish Culture and Lars Hierta Memorial Foundation, which helped make sure this book was possible by providing financial support for the translation. Thanks as well to Lucas Gottzén, Lotta Holmström and Moa Bladini for support in the process of making the translation happen.

[I]nsofar as we are social, our bodies can never be wholly our own.  
**Erinn Cunniff Gilson (2016: 87)**

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Rape legislations around the world are undergoing a trend of reform towards consent-based definitions of rape and sexual assault. While the previous standard for distinguishing rape from sex was the presence of enforcement or threat, following the recommendations by international bodies such as the [United Nations \(2012\)](#), today a steadily increasing number of states regard the absence of mutual consent as the defining factor that renders a sexual interaction a criminal offence. In Sweden, the context of the study reported in this book, a new consent-based law of sexual offences came into effect in 2018. Defining consent as *voluntary participation*, the Judiciary Committee motivated the changed legislation by establishing that

modern sexual offence legislation should clearly state that a sexual act against someone who does not participate voluntarily involves a violation of that person's unconditional right to personal and sexual integrity and sexual self-determination. [...] Consent-based sexual offence legislation [aligns] better with the general understanding of sexual self-determination and it represents a natural step towards achieving comprehensive and clear criminal protection against sexual assault.

[\(Judiciary Committee of the Swedish Government 2017: 9\)](#)

The judicial successes of the principle of consent reflect the success of a broader political and cultural feminist movement aiming to redefine the standards of permissible sexual behaviour. While #MeToo was a unique historical event giving major political legitimacy to this movement, it followed on from a long struggle aimed at reshaping the public understanding of sexual

violence, relabelling men's normalized – and, as such, often accepted – acts of disrespecting women's sexual integrity as sexual violations.

While consent is widely embraced as the central guiding principle for this struggle in and beyond the judicial realm, placing us in “the age of consent” (Gilbert 2018: 268), the concept is also contested. Indeed, within the feminist movement itself there are central tensions between, on the one hand, a trend to embrace the principle of consent as that which will enable a full-fledged protection of sexual integrity and, on the other hand, tendencies towards critically scrutinizing the concept of consent due to its overreliance on simplified assumptions about human autonomy, the critique of which have been formative in feminist scholarship (Gunnarsson 2023).

Analysing the interpersonal and societal processes connected to sexual consent, this book is placed in the midst of these tensions around the concept of consent. Through interviews with twenty 22- to 70-year-old Swedish women and men with various sexual orientations, it explores what I call *dynamics of consent*, by which I mean processes where two (or more) people arrive at the decision *that* and *how* they will or will not have sex. While embracing the concept of consent as both meaningful and important, I agree with scholars who highlight the ambiguous boundaries of the concept given the constitutively social and power-laden nature of sexual subjectivity. The experiences analysed in the book range from unequivocal assaults to unambiguous consent-based sex. However, as an important aim of mine is to explore the *complex* and potentially *problematic* character of dynamics of consent, a key focus are those grey-area experiences that problematize the boundary between consent and non-consent.

### Consent as voluntary participation

I employ the Swedish legal definition of sexual consent as *voluntary participation*, which reflects definitions used internationally. I engage in a double move where this notion of voluntary participation is embraced but also destabilized, in that the questions guiding the study draw on the non-obviousness of what voluntary participation means. In this sense, the study links to long-standing philosophical discussions about humans' free will, or lack thereof, the prolonged nature of which shows that it is hardly a simple question. A key assumption guiding the study is that humans are deeply relational beings whose choices necessarily take place with and under the influence of those around us. The constitutively dependent nature of people makes free will a complicated concept, which therefore needs to be carefully explored as a lived experience. The effect of external factors on what we do sexually is often completely unproblematic; indeed, our capacity for being *affected* is mostly a central part of any positive sexual experience, such as when another person's desire increases my own desire. But our basic affectability may also

make us vulnerable to more problematic influences, such as when I do not really feel like having sex but still choose to, in order not to make my partner dissatisfied, or because I feel it is part of my role as a girlfriend. When are such processes of being influenced in our sexual decision-making okay and when are they not? When do they do us harm, and when do they not?

These types of hypothetical situations typically take place at a fairly comfortable distance from the (not too) long arm of the law. Although my study was carried out against the background of legal discussions and definitions of consent, it expands, along the lines of other research (Munro 2005; Wertheimer 2003) the concept of consent to include a moral realm beyond the issue of legality versus criminality. There are types of sexual interactions that most people agree should not be punishable in the legal sense, but which can nonetheless be perceived as illegitimate or reprehensible – as wrong. This study takes a broad view of a spectrum of different types of dynamics of consent, covering in part unambiguous criminal acts but focusing on experiences that stay within the realms of the law but which nonetheless raise questions about the conditions of what would legally be defined as consent or which can otherwise be seen as problematic and friction-filled.

My main aim is to offer a rich and multifaceted view of how people – variously positioned mainly in terms of gender, sexual orientation and age – experience and think of dynamics of consent, with an emphasis on *the problematic*. I ask:

- What do dynamics of consent look like? Which challenges and conflicts can arise – both between and within people – and how are they handled?
- What happens when two people want different things? What happens when a person has conflicting feelings about having sex?
- What experiences and thoughts do the interview participants have about boundaries between what is okay or not okay – morally and emotionally – when it comes to sex?
- How do they make sense of situations that have not felt okay?

My analysis is based on semi-structured interviews with ten women and ten men, with a nearly even spread among heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual people, and with an age range of 22–70 years. The range among the participants serves to generate a broad and multifaceted view of dynamics of consent. It also relates to an important secondary aim of the study, which is to detach the problem of consent somewhat from the heterosexual context that it is strongly associated with in both research and political debate. In many ways, the heterosexualization of the issue of consent is justified, since the central problem that the principle of consent seeks to address is the widespread occurrence of sexual violations committed by men, typically against women. Meanwhile, this heterosexualization and focus on men's

transgressions against women risk making invisible both same-sex dynamics of consent and heterosexual experiences that break with or complicate the dominant pattern. Although the limited number of interviews prevents me from drawing decisive conclusions in that regard, one reason for interviewing people of different genders and with different sexual orientations has also been to shed light on the role of gender in dynamics of consent: How does the constellation of gender identities affect the interview participants' experiences of dynamics of consent? What are the possible differences – and similarities – between women's and men's experiences? Does the pattern look different in same-sex interactions versus heterosexual ones? And do men's same-sex experiences differ from women's?

Comparing experiences from different gender constellations can also shed light on a question that drew me to this project: To what extent do problems around dynamics of consent stem from power structures in heterosexuality, and to what extent are they connected to more general existential conditions related to people's constitutive dependence and vulnerability? As addressed below, previous research highlights normative heterosexuality's basis in a power asymmetry that promotes and normalizes men's sexual violations and blurs the line between sex and abuse. However, an assumption guiding this study is also that fundamental, largely gender-transcending existential factors likely contribute to problems related to consent and to muddying the boundary between the voluntary and the involuntary.

### **The relational, affectable human**

Both in feminist theory and in other critical social theory, humans are typically seen as relational *in their very constitution*. In contrast to the type of liberal theorizing that sees people as autonomous units that only relate strategically to external conditions without being conditioned by them, in this theoretical tradition it is believed that people become who they are by virtue of the relationships they are part of. My critical-realist perspective (Gunnarsson 2011, 2014, 2018) suggests that the relationships that shape human beings take place on a number of different, but converging, levels. Here, I am thinking of our relationships to societal structures and institutions, such as capitalism or the school system, and to discourses and cultural systems, but also of our relationships to natural forces outside of and within our bodies, as well as our concrete relationships to other individuals. That people are *created and shaped* by their relationships with other people is perhaps most evident when we look at a small child, who is not only completely dependent on others in order to survive physically and psychologically, but is also shaped to become who they are to a large extent by virtue of their relationships with others. But the same basic principle also applies to adults, even if their identity is not as easily shaped as a child's.

Some proponents of this relational view draw the too-hasty conclusion that people are nothing more than the relationships they are part of (e.g. Butler 1999; see Gunnarsson 2014 for a critique). Within critical-realist philosophy, the concept of *emergence* is employed in order to avoid such a conclusion, which precludes the theoretical recognition of people's relative power and autonomy vis-à-vis their surroundings. *Emergence* refers to the process by which something becomes/is qualitatively different from the sum of its parts. From that perspective, a person's being cannot be reduced to the relationships through which they came to be who they are. Rather, people are qualitatively different from and relatively autonomous from the relationships constituting them, with uniquely human qualities such as intentions and freedom. The human autonomy presupposed by the concept of consent is thus no illusion. However, insofar as our individual autonomy relies on our relationships of dependence on factors that lie outside of our control, it is a complex phenomenon permeated by ambiguity (Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000; Westlund 2009).

These philosophical discussions have great relevance to the issue of sexual consent. The whole idea of consent is based on a perception of people as beings with integrity and autonomy, with a will of *their own* that other people must respect. What happens to these assumptions if we insist that a person's own will is in some sense never entirely their own, insofar as it is continuously shaped both by relationships with other people and by cultural beliefs and norms? In a typical sexual interaction, the participants do not bring with them a set of fixed desires and wants on the basis of which they then negotiate with the other about how to proceed. Instead, sex is mostly a process of being continuously *influenced* by what the other wants and feels. There is no neutral, unaffected state in a person that can then be violated or respected and, indeed, this mutual process of affecting one another is often the very "thing" about sex. Although discerning what one wants in the midst of such relational complexity is often not a problem, as we will see in the analysis, some of the problems experienced by the interview participants in this study stem from tensions between their own sense of wanting and the external forces that shape this sense of wanting, while also potentially – and paradoxically – being at odds with it.

### **Sexual consent in the law**

What is sexual consent? To try to answer that question, we can turn to legal texts, to research and philosophy, or to popular conceptions. Considering that legal definitions are a basis for other understandings of consent and since they are expected to be precise, it is appropriate to start by looking at them.

The *UN Handbook for Legislation on Violence Against Women* recommends that member states base their sex crime legislations on a definition

of sexual violence as non-consensual sexual acts. In the handbook, consent is defined as “unequivocal and voluntary agreement” (United Nations 2012: 24). The Swedish consent law was voted through in the spring of 2018 and entered into force in July of the same year. The change followed a 2014 report by the Sexual Offenses Committee, which was tabled in the fall of 2015 and which proposed that the existing rape legislation should be reformed so that criminal liability is no longer based on the presence of violence or threats, but should instead pertain to those who have sex with another person “who does not participate voluntarily” (Swedish Government 2016: 15). Here, as in the UN definition, free choice is emphasized, but the wording used is voluntary *participation*, not *agreement*. One might interpret this as the Swedish proposal placing more emphasis on whether participation in the sex itself *is* actually voluntary, while the emphasis on *agreement* seems to place more importance on the communication between the parties. However, in order to avoid a situation where a person’s “inner position” (2016: 198) becomes legally decisive, the Sexual Offenses Committee added a statement that voluntariness has to be expressed in some way: “It must be clear from the law that the choice to participate must be expressed in order for it to be considered voluntary” (2016: 17). The committee can thus be said to distinguish here between internal and external, which means between, on the one hand, participation actually being experienced as voluntary by the person participating and, on the other hand, this “inner position” being expressed. It needs emphasizing here that voluntariness does not necessarily need to be communicated verbally, but can, for example, be communicated through “active participation” in a sexual act (2016: 17).

In its final bill, the government relaxed these writings somewhat, so that, unlike the committee proposal, it does not specify any formal requirements that the choice to voluntarily participate be expressed in order to qualify as voluntary. Before the Parliament voted through the government’s bill, it was rejected by the Legislative Council, due to, among other things, what was seen as ambiguities in the wording of the requirement of voluntariness, and leading opinion makers (Sundin et al. 2018) believed that the government’s omission of the requirement that voluntary participation be expressed was an important contributing factor behind the rejection of the bill. Despite the criticism, the government chose to exclude the formal requirement that voluntary participation be expressed, but in the Judiciary Committee’s deliberations, which were attached to the bill, it was emphasized that when criminal liability is tested in practice, it will be decisive whether voluntary participation was expressed or not: “The starting-point should be that the person who participates voluntarily in a sexual act expresses their voluntariness to participate in some way and that the lack of such expressions can normally be understood as participation not being voluntary” (2017: 11).

In line with the Sexual Offenses Committee's proposal, the law does not impose penalties on sexual acts where both parties have expressed that they are participating voluntarily, but where one person *feels* bad about participating. In the committee's proposal, it is clearly stated that a person's participation in sex can be judged to be voluntary even if a person deep down does not want to – as long as that person has expressed that they want to:

What has now been said about the choice to participate voluntarily does not in itself mean that the person's inner position should be decisive for whether the participation should be considered voluntary or not. [...] To assess whether participation was voluntary or not, it is basically irrelevant whether a person deep down has been positive or negative towards sexual intercourse.

(Swedish Government 2016: 198–199)

The committee bases this stance on the principle of sexual self-determination, which means that a person has the right to “choose to do something that one would really prefer to avoid” (2016: 199), but also on the principle of legal certainty, which requires that a person cannot be punished for having had sex with someone when the latter has expressed that they want to. The committee, and the legislators following them, are here confirming that the question of voluntariness, at least in a broader non-legal sense, is complex in that people can *choose* to participate in something that deep down they have no *desire* to participate in. It is crucial that this is not about situations where the person is somehow forced to participate against their will, but rather about situations where the person “has both the opportunity and the ability to exercise their right to self-determination” (2016: 199).

So, when according to this new law, does a person *not* have the opportunity and ability to exercise their right to self-determination, so that their possible expression of voluntary participation cannot be considered valid? Factors that disqualify the validity of a person's consent are: if it is a consequence of violence or various types of threats; if the person is in a particularly vulnerable situation – *for example*, due to unconsciousness, sleep, serious fear, intoxication or mental disorder; or if the person is induced to participate in sex by the perpetrator “seriously abusing” the person's dependent position (Judiciary Committee of the Swedish Government 2017: 12). The provision regarding serious abuse of someone's dependent status is particularly interesting in relation to this study's questions and theoretical starting points. Here it is confirmed that a person's dependence on another person stands in the way of their free will. However, the law inscribes itself in a liberal tradition in which dependence is not seen as a fundamental condition for all people, but is instead distinguished as an exception which, rather than *complicating* the possibility of free choice, completely *excludes* it. However, the dependency

position in itself is not sufficient; instead, it is required that the vulnerability resulting from dependency be actively exploited.

Another important change in the new law, which, like the principle of free choice, aims to make the protection of sexual integrity and self-determination more complete, is the addition of the so-called negligence liability. An overarching impulse in this changed legislation is that the responsibility for ensuring that a sexual encounter is based on mutual consent rests with the person who wants to have sex. For example, if there is uncertainty as to whether one person wants to have sex, it is the other person's responsibility to actively find out what the situation is. "Therein lies a requirement for vigilance", writes the Judiciary Committee in the report that was the basis for the new law, emphasizing that this means that not only abuses committed with intent but also those that are the result of negligence in certain cases should be punishable ([Judiciary Committee of the Swedish Government 2017: 9](#)).

### Consent in research

Within the field of legal research, there are a number of studies that investigate the pros and cons of legislation around consent from different legal perspectives as well as how such legislation is best designed ([Andersson 2004](#); [Diesen 2013 \[2014\]](#); [Leijonhufvud 2008](#)). As this is not a legal study, my review of this field will focus on studies that address consent in a sense that goes beyond, but sometimes partially includes or takes into account, the legal sphere. In addition to the legal field, sexual consent is well-researched in the field of psychology mainly through quantitative survey studies. There are also more sociologically oriented studies that, with the help of mainly qualitative interviews, investigate dynamics of consent, often from a gender perspective.

Several scholars have put forth the concern that consent research, especially outside of the legal field, is characterized by a lack of clarity regarding the definition of consent itself ([Anyadike-Danes et al. 2024](#); [Beres 2007](#); [Muehlenhard et al. 2016](#)). Melanie Beres (2007) notes that existing studies are based on different, contradictory and often implicit understandings of the concept of consent. It is generally agreed that consent implies some kind of agreement to have sex, but whether this implies that the person who consents actually *wants* to have sex is unclear. Beres points out that some researchers, through their usage of the term, seem to mean that consent can coexist with pressure, while others emphasize that consent presupposes free choice. The definitional ambiguity is reinforced, in my opinion, by the fact that consent researchers outside the legal field surprisingly rarely relate their definitions of consent to legal definitions.

Another issue that is filled by both ambiguity and sometimes explicit disagreement concerns the difference between what can be described as the internal and external components of consent ([Beres 2007](#); [Muehlenhard et al.](#)

2016). Is consent “a psychological act (where the importance is placed on the individual’s thought process and inner desires), or a physical act (where the emphasis is placed on the behavioural act signifying agreement)”? (Beres 2007: 99). While some researchers emphasize the external, communicative component and, similar to the Swedish legislation, consider a person’s internal state to be irrelevant (Archard 1998; Wertheimer 1996), others have suggested that a person’s internal attitude should be decisive (Chamallas 1988; MacKinnon 2005), something that I return to below. What seems to be the most dominant position in current research, however, is to see both internal and external aspects as equally central components of consent (Hickman & Muehlenhard 1999; Willis & Smith 2022). What complicates matters, though, is that each of these components have their own differentiations. For example, Hickman and Muehlenhard define the internal component of consent as the mental act of deciding to consent, thereby emphasizing the *decision* a person makes rather than the feelings they have about this decision. As I will discuss in more detail below, the distinction between the internal and the external is thus not a simple solution to the complexity of the issue of the concept of consent.

### How is consent communicated?

Among the researchers who have discussed the definition of consent and who focus on its external, communicative component, there are those who have advocated for the establishment of a legal standard for what kinds of behaviour should be interpreted as consensual versus non-consensual (Sherwin 1996). However, other researchers see this strategy as unrealistic, because the communication of consent, like other kinds of communication, is inevitably context-bound (Anyadike-Danes et al. 2024; Beres 2007; Willis et al. 2021). A court decision in Texas, USA, from the 1990s serves as an illustration of how badly it can turn out if an accepted expression of consent is interpreted as *per definition* being an expression of consent. The case was about how a woman was raped by a man at knifepoint, but where the woman was deemed to have consented to sex because she asked her perpetrator to use a condom (Beres 2007). Asking someone to produce a condom is in most cases an expression of wanting to have sex, but not always.

A series of survey studies – among (mainly white, heterosexual) college students in an Anglo-Saxon context – have nevertheless been conducted with the aim of establishing some kind of systematicity in how consent is communicated. Unsurprisingly, this research shows that consent can be expressed and read in many different ways. In an overview of the field, Beres (2014b) comes to the conclusion that it is more common for consent to occur non-verbally than verbally and that when consent is communicated verbally, it

is usually done indirectly rather than directly. When consent is “obtained” verbally, it is more common, for example, to perform an action followed by asking “Is this okay?” rather than asking “Do you want to have sex with me?” Studies also show that explicit, verbal forms of consent are more common when people have sex with someone for the first time, while such verbal consent is uncommon in long-term relationships (Humphreys 2007).

Some gender differences have been identified in terms of how consent is communicated. A study by Terry Humphreys showed that men have a slightly greater tendency than women to view consent as a one-off event rather than as a process. Another gender difference was that men to a greater extent than women (35 percent as compared to 22 percent) believed that consent to initiate a sexual interaction could be interpreted as consent to complete the sexual act (Humphreys 2004). Another study found that women more often than men used verbal means to express consent and were more likely than men to seek verbal expressions of consent in male partners (Jozkowski & Peterson 2013).

A problem with the quantitative survey studies of consent, highlighted by Beres (2007) and Muehlenhard et al. (2016), is that they have difficulty capturing both contextual factors and the complexity that often characterizes human interaction – perhaps especially in regard to sexual interaction. For example, in these types of survey studies, questions are often asked such as whether a smile means consenting to sex, but as Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999) found when conducting one of their studies, it was often difficult for respondents to answer this kind of question, because the meaning of a smile depends on the context. As one woman put it in a comment on the question: “a smile does not mean consent in a bar to a guy I hardly know, but it does with my boyfriend” (1999: 271). These kinds of comments highlight the need for contextualization, which unfortunately is methodologically difficult to achieve with the kind of quantitative methods that dominate the field.

Beres, who began as a quantitative consent researcher, recognized the need for more qualitative research and conducted an interview study with young women and men at a Canadian resort on dynamics of consent in casual sex (Beres 2010). The rather simple conclusion from the study, which is supported by similar studies (O’Byrne, Rapley & Hansen 2006, 2008; Jozkowski & Hunt 2013 cited in Muehlenhard et al. 2016), is that the communication of consent is complex and subtle *and* that this complex and subtle signaling and signal-reading is something that both women and men can handle without major difficulties. Virtually everyone interviewed in Beres’s study stated that it was easy to tell if the other person was willing or not, and they highlighted subtle cues – for example, feeling the other person stiffen when you put your finger under their waistband. Beres points out that the interviewees’ descriptions of how consent and non-consent are communicated were “consistent with ways in which communication occurs in a variety of

social situations and are not unique to sexual activity. It is thus perhaps not surprising that young adults express such literacy in this form of communication” (2010: 8–9; cf. [Kitzinger & Frith 1999](#)). In line with this, the women and men interviewed in another study stated that it was obvious if someone wanted to have sex or not ([Jozkowski & Hunt 2013](#) cited in [Muehlenhard et al. 2016](#)). Yet another study based on focus groups with male students found that participants thought it was easy to read women’s subtle, non-verbal signals of non-consent, citing as examples the woman not responding to one’s touch or her saying she has to get up early the next day to go to work ([O’Byrne et al. 2006](#)).

An important function of these studies is that they challenge a central assumption that appears to underlie many of the studies into how consent is communicated as well as many consent education programmes – namely that at least some of men’s sexual assaults on women can be explained in terms of misunderstandings ([McCaw & Senn 1998](#)). For example, it seems to be in the light of this “miscommunication hypothesis” that a series of studies into the differences between women’s and men’s ways of communicating consent have been carried out ([Hickman & Muehlenhard 1999](#); [Jozkowski et al. 2014](#)). In their review of the existing research, [Muehlenhard et al. \(2016\)](#) conclude that the miscommunication hypothesis lacks firm support from research, which on the contrary shows that men are generally fully capable of reading even very subtle signals ([Beres 2010](#); [Jozkowski & Hunt 2013](#) cited in [Muehlenhard et al. 2016](#); [O’Byrne et al. 2006, 2008](#)).

However, one study ([O’Byrne et al. 2008](#)) showed seemingly contradictory results regarding the question of men’s ability to understand what women want and do not want. The study’s male focus group participants stated that they found it easy to read women’s signals regarding their willingness or unwillingness. When the topic of rape was discussed, however, they emphasized that it can be difficult to know what a woman really wants. The researchers’ interpretation is that men generally have no difficulty reading women’s subtler expressions of reluctance, but that the idea of them misunderstanding signals can be used as a way of avoiding responsibility (cf. [Kitzinger & Frith 1999](#); [Muehlenhard et al. 2016](#)). A Danish study on young people’s experiences of sex and sexual violence ([Bindesbøl Holm Johansen, Pedersen & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen 2020](#)) similarly shows a discrepancy between how the participants understood consent in situations where consent communication worked versus in situations of unwanted sex. When it came to the unproblematic situations, both the female participants and the male ones viewed consent as something you could “sense”. However, when they discussed situations where one party had sex against their will, they tended to see it as a consequence of the unwilling party not being clear enough that they did not want to, rather than the willing party failing in their responsibility to “sense” the other person.

Charlene Muehlenhard et al. (2016) conclude in their overview of the field that, rather than supporting the belief that it is common for genuine misunderstandings to arise, the research indicates that men may choose to “misunderstand” a woman’s signals or, after an assault, to defend themselves by claiming a misunderstanding. Nevertheless, they argue that we should not too lightly dismiss the possibility of misunderstanding, something many feminists are understandably inclined to do because the miscommunication hypothesis divests men of much of their rightful responsibility and tends to shift the focus towards women needing to be clearer in their communication (Beres 2010; Kitzinger & Frith 1999). Muehlenhard and colleagues emphasize that certain patriarchal beliefs surrounding women’s sexuality are a factor that could contribute to misunderstandings. It is often risky for women to express their sexual willingness in a culture that stigmatizes female sexuality and, whatever we think of this cultural pattern, they argue, citing a range of studies, it can lead men to assume that a woman’s no is a strategy to preserve her respectability rather than a genuine no. In line with such an assumption about women’s “token resistance”, for example, several men in one study reported that they had a habit of continuing their attempts at seduction even after a woman indicated that she did not want to – unless the rejection was strong – because they assumed that the rejection was just a way for the woman not to appear too easy (Jozkowski & Hunt 2014 cited in Muehlenhard et al. 2016). Anastasia Powell notes that while people are often able to read the subtle, non-verbal cues that form the core of dynamics of consent, such cues are sometimes ambiguous, requiring a more direct consent communication. Identifying such ambiguity may fail, however, not least due to how deeply ingrained “expectations of men’s sexuality as active/pursuant and women’s as passive/submissive” filter how cues are read, in a way “not readily open to conscious reflection” (2010: 99).

### The complexity of wanting

The research that has examined how consent is *communicated* has in most cases not addressed the question of the second, mental component of consent – how people arrive at the decision to participate in sex. This may reflect an assumption that that component, unlike the communication component, is relatively self-evident or straightforward. However, there is a considerable amount of research on so-called *consensual unwanted sex* (Foster 2011; Impett & Peplau 2002, 2003; Wilkinson 2008), which has highlighted the complexity of people’s motivations for participating in sex. Shantee Foster (2011) defines consensual unwanted sex as saying yes to a sexual activity despite having no desire to have sex. The relative decoupling of the act of consenting from the inner experience of the sexual act is in line with the Swedish Sex Crime Committee’s distinction between inner position

and expression. In another study on consensual unwanted sex, it is noted that sex can be unwanted while voluntary (Wilkinson 2008: 1). From that point of view, the basis for consent lies in a *choice* or *decision* to participate, while the desirability of sex is more about the emotional experiences the decision is associated with.

The idea that a person can give valid consent even though they have no desire to have sex can, however, go against our instincts, not least in a wider patriarchal context characterized by women's sexual needs (and non-needs) being subordinated to men's. That is why some feminist theorists advocate that all sex that is not mutually desired should be seen as, by definition, non-consensual (Chamallas 1988; MacKinnon 2005). For the radical feminist and legal theorist Catharine MacKinnon, this is not only a moral position but also something that should be regulated juridically: "An equality standard [...] requires that sex be welcome. For the criminal law to change to this standard would require that sex be wanted for it not to be assaultive" (2005: 244). Although there are obviously considerable problems – not least in terms of legal certainty – with criminalizing all sex that is subjectively experienced as unwanted (see Halley 2016 for a critique), the idea behind that type of argumentation is well worth taking note of. If someone does not want to have sex but still "consents", it is difficult to see how that can be an expression of voluntariness, because why would someone voluntarily choose to participate in sex if they did not in any sense want to?

As seen in Foster's definition of consensual unwanted sex above, however, the term "unwanted" is often used in a limited sense that refers only to the lack of a lust-driven motivation to have sex. Zoë Peterson and Charlene Muehlenhard (2007) offer a more developed approach to distinguishing *wantedness* from *consent*: "to *want* something is to desire it, to wish for it, to feel inclined toward it, or to regard it or aspects of it as positively valenced; in contrast, to *consent* is to be voluntary or to agree to do something" (2007: 73, emphasis original). As examples, they consider how a person may not want to go to work on Monday morning but is still willing to do it or, conversely, that someone may want to go out for a drink with their friends but still decides not to and instead stays home to study.

Peterson and Muehlenhard's far from simple definition of *wantedness*, based on an enumeration of a number of different ways in which one can want something, suggests, however, that perhaps it is the complexity of *wantedness* itself that we should look more closely at. Indeed, the main purpose of Peterson and Muehlenhard's article is to present a multifaceted conceptualization of women's volition regarding sex, where the overarching point is that wanting/not wanting does not constitute a simple oppositional relationship. The article is itself actually a consequence of a "moment of horror" (Muehlenhard & Peterson 2005: 16) that they report that Muehlenhard and another research colleague experienced when they suddenly realized that in

a previous study their survey questions about whether or not respondents wanted to participate in sex forced the respondents into a too-strong contrast between “wanting” and “not wanting” that had no bearing on their experiences. In the study, which investigated the occurrence of so-called token resistance to sex, respondents were asked to write about instances where they had wanted to, were willing to, and intended to engage in sex but for some reason indicated that they did not want to. However, it turned out that this categorization did not fit in with the women’s experiences. Instead, most wrote about ambivalence:

Many wrote about wanting sex in some ways but not in others. Many distinguished between wanting the sexual activity itself and wanting its consequences. Some wrote about wanting to engage in sex but being unwilling to do so; others wrote about not wanting to engage in sex but being willing to do so.

(Muehlenhard & Peterson 2005: 16)

If we previously distinguished between inner position and expression, and between wanting and consenting, here Muehlenhard and Peterson raise the possibility of tensions and conflicts in the inner position itself: what one wants is far from always unambiguous or one-dimensional. This is supported by other studies. One study, for instance, shows that adolescent girls can simultaneously feel motivated to have sex (e.g. feelings of pleasure) and not to have sex (e.g. feelings of vulnerability) (Tolman & Szalacha 1999). In steady relationships, it is common for women in particular, but also for men at times, to “agree to” sex even though they have no sexual desire, out of concern for the partner’s sexual needs, to create closeness, to avoid conflict or because they do not want to hurt their partner (Impett & Peplau 2003; O’Sullivan & Allgeier 1998). In popular terms, when performed in steady relationships this is sometimes referred to as “maintenance sex” (Savage 2015). A study of college students’ “sexual decision-making” process similarly states that more than 80 percent of respondents reported being in a situation where they felt ambivalent about having sex (O’Sullivan & Allgeier 1998; also see Abma, Driscoll & Moore 1998; Raphael 2015). In line with this, Peterson and Muehlenhard (2007) advocate that *wanting* should be understood as multidimensional and occurring on a fluid scale, where we can both want things for different reasons (and therefore can both want and not want something at the same time) and may or may not want something more or less strongly. Rather than seeking to straighten out such ambiguities by distinguishing between variously connoted volitional terms – e.g. wanting versus consenting or wanting versus being willing – my approach is that it is more fruitful to accept the multifaceted and to a significant extent unresolvable ambiguities inherent in volition itself.

## Perspectives from legal philosophy

Discussions about sexual consent are permeated with and ultimately motivated by normative assumptions about how people ought to relate to one other and about what is right and wrong. The common assumption is that sexual violations should be combated – but, beyond that, perceptions may diverge as to what exactly constitutes a violation. These normative aspects also permeate and motivate the social science research I described above, but usually in an implicit way. In legal philosophy, however, we find explicit and elaborate normative reasoning about consent. Whereas psychological and sociological research remarkably rarely relates to legal definitions of consent, legal philosophers have engaged in systematic reflections on the concept of consent relating both to the legal context and a wider moral realm (Munro 2005; Wertheimer 2003).

Vanessa Munro (2005) advocates that the standard for what should be considered permissible in a sexual interaction should be lower in law than in a wider moral domain. Her review of different perspectives in the field shows that rather than being based on simple distinctions between wanted and unwanted sex, the discussions typically focus on moral boundaries between different types of reasons to (choose to) participate in sex. Although there are differing views (MacKinnon 2005; see Halley 2016), there is considerable agreement regarding legal definitions of consent, namely that as long as a person *expresses* consent, it must be considered consent – unless there are conditions that make a person incapable of validly consenting. While sharing this view, Munro argues that we nonetheless can – and should – have a higher standard for consent in a broader moral sense. She highlights different variations of the so-called *reciprocity model* as a more “demanding” alternative to the legal model’s minimalist definition of consent. In stronger versions of the reciprocity model, the standard of permissibility is particularly high. Here, some theorists contend that a sexual interaction is morally legitimate only if it is governed by purely sexual principles such as mutual sexual desire, pleasure and attraction (Kittay 1997; Pineau 1996). Similarly, Martha Chamallas (1988) argues that sex that one participates in for instrumental reasons, that is as a means to achieve a desired consequence from the sex, is not morally legitimate. She also endorses the principle that in order to be seen as genuinely consensual, the people having sex must perceive the sex as something they themselves would have initiated if the other person had not done so.

Munro argues for what she herself characterizes as a weaker variant of the reciprocity model, which refrains from specifying what *kind* of motivations should form the basis for someone participating in sex. Instead, she argues that the moral permissibility of a sexual act is based on the participant doing it because of an expectation of getting something out of the sex *based on their own preferences and values*. In order not to dilute the meaning of “one’s

own preferences and values” in a way that allows them to accommodate all possible forms of tactical adjustments, Munro adds that, to qualify as genuinely one’s *own*, they must remain true even in the light of the person’s critical reflection around the context in which the decision to consent is made. Here, Munro’s position seems to be based on a certain understanding of the concept of autonomy, in light of the accepted idea that consent, in order to be fully morally valid, should be an expression of the consenting person’s autonomy or self-determination (Miller 2022). How to distinguish autonomous from non-autonomous preferences, choices and actions is the subject of intense philosophical discussion, but a widespread view is precisely that in order to qualify as autonomous they should withstand critical reflection of the kind specified by Munro (Dworkin 2015).<sup>1</sup>

An obvious problem with the models of consent that specify what *kind* of motivations should govern sex is precisely that, somewhat paradoxically, they risk undermining autonomy. In a too p(m)aternalistic way, they create a hierarchy between “right” and “wrong” reasons to have sex, which can ultimately backfire on the people the model is intended to protect. Munro’s autonomy-focused model dictates certain procedural criteria for how people can be sure that they *themselves* really want to have sex, but does not translate that into any substantive ideas about what kind of sex people should want if they act autonomously. However, Munro’s focus on reflection seems deeply marked by a rationalist tradition of thought that may not be particularly applicable to a sexual context, where liberation from rational reflection is often a central – and fully legitimate – driving force. A more reasonable interpretation of Munro’s proposal, however, would be that we should collectively promote good conditions in which people can reflect on the context in which they have sex – not at the moment when they make a sexual choice, but as an ongoing process.

## Gender and power

But let us pause for a moment to reflect on the idea that people’s choices to engage in sex should stem from their *own* preferences and values. Munro highlights a central philosophical difficulty in determining exactly when someone’s preference can be seen as their own rather than as something imposed from outside. As highlighted by Shaun Miller (2022), a person’s choice to consent can be based on a so-called adaptive preference, obtained as an adaptation to what they think is possible (cf. Stoljar 2014). While theorists in a liberal philosophical tradition view the self-determination of individuals as relatively unproblematic, the idea of human autonomy has a far more precarious status for more structurally and relationally oriented theorists, who note how forces beyond our control not only shape the choices we make but also what people we become. While many feminist theorists argue that the concept of autonomy

is both meaningful and necessary even in a patriarchal context that in many ways limits women's freedom of choice (Mackenzie & Stoljar 2000; Westlund 2009), others emphasize that one of the basic mechanisms of the patriarchal structures themselves is to undermine women's autonomy to men's advantage.

One of the theorists who has formulated the latter idea most pointedly is MacKinnon (1989), who conceptualizes women's sexuality as entirely dictated by their position as sexual objects for men (see Gunnarsson 2013 for an elaborate critique). According to MacKinnon, objectification is not only an external force that prevents women from living out their true subjectivity and sexuality, but women *become* the objects that the male power structure makes them into. A central mechanism here is the *eroticization* of men's power and women's subordination. As addressed above, MacKinnon has also contributed to the debate on sex crime legislation and her view of the radical extent to which patriarchy limits women's autonomy has led her to dismiss the idea of consent altogether: "rape law takes women's usual response to coercion – acquiescence, the despairing response to hopelessness to unequal odds – and calls that consent" (1989: 168). Carole Pateman is another prominent feminist theorist who similarly questions the meaningfulness of the concept of consent for women in patriarchy: "Unless refusal of consent or withdrawal of consent are real possibilities, we can no longer speak of 'consent' in any genuine sense" (1989: 72).

Even though it is radical feminist theorists who have most uncompromisingly advanced this type of argumentation, interestingly we find similar reasoning among poststructuralist theorists too. While their feminist and philosophical stance stands in sharp contrast to the radical feminist framework, like the latter, they question the liberal tradition's belief in individual autonomy. In a piece on the concept of consent, for example, Judith Butler (2011) highlights that people's consent cannot be seen as originating from the individual's inner core, given that people's very subjectivity – including their desires and wills – is shaped by power structures. She points out that "consent [is] 'manufactured' or organized by powers to which no one has ever really consented" (Butler 2011: 8), referring to Antonio Gramsci's famous argument that the exercise of power in modern societies is often carried out through a hegemonic ideology that makes people believe that things that are not in their interest actually are. Translated into the domain of patriarchy, such hegemonic power is operative for example through the way that images of ideal femininity shape women in ways that make them choose to do things that are in the interest of men, thereby reproducing their own subordination.

### **The relationship between normative heterosex and violence**

Several researchers who work on sexuality and violence have, like MacKinnon, emphasized the connections and overlaps between normative heterosex and sexual violence, but with significantly more nuance and without

MacKinnon's deterministic approach. Without completely erasing the difference between voluntary and forced sex, they have highlighted the grey area between them (Gavey 1999, 2005; Gunnarsson 2018, 2023; Hansen 2023; Powell 2008, 2010) and conceptualized men's sexual violence against women in terms of a continuum (Boyle 2019; Kelly 1987). In this line of reasoning, "a consent deficit can be said to be built into normative heterosexuality" (Gunnarsson 2023: 3), in so far as "[m]any rapes merely extend traditional heterosexual exchanges, in which masculine pursuit and female reticence are familiar and formalized" (Gilbert & Webster cited in Kelly 1988: 74). While Gilbert and Webster's piece was written long ago, it is hardly outdated, as confirmed by #MeToo. It may be connected to Jozkowski and Hunt's study mentioned above, in which some of the male participants saw nothing strange in their habit of continuing their attempts at seduction even when a woman expressed that she did not want to have sex. As one man put it:

If it [her refusal] is real soft, it's like that's not really clear to me, you know, so I'm going to try again. And if it's still soft, it's like okay, I've got some options here. I could probably convince her, you know. I might try a little something here on the neck or you know, just to kind of wear her down.

(cited in Muehlenhard et al. 2016: 471)

In a lecture, consent researcher Harry Brod is reported to have summed up this pattern by stating that "[a] lot of what we as young men learn as seduction is really more like preparatory sexual assault training" (Bennett 2017).

The problematic patterning of normative sex and its implications for consent are discussed by many researchers in relation to the concept of *sexual scripts* (Beres 2014b; Frith & Kitzinger 2001; Healy Cullen et al. 2023; Holmström, Plantin & Elmerstig 2020; Rodgers et al. 2023; Williamson et al. 2023). The term was coined by John H. Gagnon and William Simon (1973) and conceptualizes, simply put, how women and men tend to interact with each other sexually in ways that follow culturally accepted and strongly gender-complementary "scripts" for how heterosex should go. Such scripts create expectations about what kind of action should follow another, which can prevent people from figuring out what they themselves really want and make it difficult for one party to interrupt or change the direction of a sexual interaction in the middle of a scripted course of action. The fundamental gendered principle in the normative heterosexual script is that men are expected to actively seek sex, while women's role is to wait for men's advances and respond to them in a way that does not express an overly autonomous sexual desire.

Feminist scholars (Beres 2014a; Frith & Kitzinger 2001; Jackson 1978) have developed the theorization of (hetero)sexual scripts. In line with Muehlenhard and colleagues' reasoning about women's "token resistance" (2016),

they show how the patterning of sexual scripts is a breeding ground for violations, in so far as the notion that women should not too actively express their sexual desires means that when a woman does not express sexual willingness this may be interpreted as part of the sexual game and as an encouragement to the man to continue his seduction attempts. The dominant heterosexual script also prescribes that it is normal for men to be more sexually driven and for women to be more emotionally driven in the sexual act, which normalizes sex solely steered by the man's sexual desire (Frith & Kitzinger 2001).

What makes things so complicated is that women are often voluntary participants in these patterns precisely because they have also been socialized into the heterosexual script. As Powell puts forth, gendered discourses about sex, and their accompanying “unwritten rules”, “are not simply imposed by society onto individuals; they are taken up by individuals and embedded in their perceptions, feelings and practices, operating largely below the level of conscious reflection” (2010: 86). Feminist scholars are wary of the idea that women sometimes indicate unwillingness while actually wanting to have sex (Beres 2010), presumably because this idea challenges the consent advocacy slogan “no means no”. However, research shows that this type of behaviour does exist (Muehlenhard et al. 2016), which is indeed logical in a heterosexual culture that emphasizes men's role as sexual conqueror and “ignitor” of women's sexuality. Expectations on women not to be “too” sexually autonomous and active – which could lead to them being considered “sluts” – encourage women to “choose” a more passive or responsive stance, which is complemented by someone else taking a more assertive role. Furthermore, the role as sexual object is closely linked to feeling validated as a woman in the prevailing heterosexual logic, meaning women can often take pleasure in channelling their sexuality through the role as an object of arousal rather than an aroused subject. There are intense debates among feminist scholars about these issues (Lamb & Peterson 2012). For example, what should we think about young women who “support each other in being sexual in public and shocking ways, through pole dances, stripteases and even proclaiming they are sluts” (Lamb & Peterson 2012: 760) – is it an expression of sexual freedom or an adaptation to an oppressive order?

### Sex wars

There is clear tension within feminist and other power-critical sexuality research that connects to the question of how we should understand people's sexual autonomy. In the feminist so-called *sex wars* of the 1970s and 1980s, this took the form of a bitter conflict. While the radical feminist side of the *sex wars* viewed pornography, prostitution and sadomasochism as mirror images of patriarchy, which feminists should therefore fight, the other, libertarian side instead embraced all (consensual) expressions of sexuality and

considered the radical feminist perspective to be in collusion with the patriarchal oppression of women's sexual freedom (Ferguson 1984).

It is fascinating that the feminist intention of liberating women from the shackles of patriarchy can result in such diametrically opposed positions. This sharp polarization has weakened but is far from dissolved. An example of a contemporary debate making this type of conflict resurface involves E. L. James's hit books and films *Fifty Shades of Grey*, telling the story of a young woman, Anastasia, who enters into a relationship with a rich older man who dominates her sexually. Although the novel trilogy and the subsequent film series were marketed as a BDSM<sup>2</sup> story, a central criticism was that the relationship of dominance in the works does not qualify as BDSM because BDSM is based on mutual consent and Anastasia's consent to the sexual relationship is often clearly lacking (Barker 2013). In Sweden, most feminist voices therefore saw the trilogy as a sad reflection of patriarchal sexuality built on the eroticization of male supremacy and female subordination, problematically legitimized by the fact that Anastasia achieves great pleasure from the treatment she receives (Brors 2012; Jägerfeld 2015). However, in contrast to this view was Sonja Schwarzenberger (2015) and Elin Bengtsson's (2015) articles towards the end of the debate. After first emphasizing the fictional nature of *Fifty Shades* and the fact that readers are fully capable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality, Schwarzenberger's main point was that if a hundred million women get a sexual outlet from reading the story, then it is a welcome challenge to the patriarchal order, which systematically denies women sexual pleasure:

Considering all the taboos, condemnations, violence and economic injustices women suffer, every step towards an independent, free and shameless sexuality is a revolutionary act. Even if it comes in the form of a story whose fiction recreates all of that. What matters is that desire is stimulated.<sup>3</sup>

The feminist conflicts around the issue of sexual liberation stem from an unavoidable tension that feminists have to accommodate in one way or another, namely that in the name of women's sexual freedom, integrity and autonomy there is a need *both* to critically reflect on how women's sexual choices and desires can be hijacked by oppressive power structures *and* to leave their sexuality alone from all such questioning.

### **BDSM and consent**

The feminist criticism of the traditional gender roles in *Fifty Shades* would probably not have exploded if the books were about a BDSM relationship based on clear mutual consent. While some radical feminists in the second

feminist wave of the 1970s and 1980s argued that even lesbian sadomasochistic sex was a form of ritualized violence against women (Bronstein 2011; for a review of the feminist debates on BDSM, see Carlström 2016),<sup>4</sup> this point of view is marginalized in contemporary feminist discourse. The perspective on BDSM, which stands for bondage/discipline, dominance/submission and sadomasochism, has clearly moved in a libertarian, “sex-positive” direction and the practice of BDSM is increasingly framed as a matter of rights and sexual orientation.

The collection of sexual practices categorized as BDSM raises particular questions about consent. The Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) defines BDSM as practices where “consenting people jointly seek pleasure through various forms of power exchange” and, in the case of sadomasochism, the exchange of pain (RFSU 2017). In the mainstream of BDSM culture, which RFSU can be said to represent, consent is thus a central value, often expressed through the slogan *safe, sane and consensual*. Consent has such a central – and explicit – place in BDSM culture precisely because the sex practiced is based on the transference of power from one person to another and often includes physical acts of violence that cause pain. Consent, which is secured before a sexual act (or “scene”) takes place, and so-called safe words that the submissive can use to stop the exchange of power, are what makes BDSM sex rather than an assault, however much it can appear to imitate such a thing (Carlström 2016).

While both pathologizing and radical feminist perspectives on BDSM are increasingly marginalized in public discourse (Glyde 2015), both research and BDSM practitioners themselves have problematized the sharp delineations that the BDSM community often makes between consensual and non-consensual practices. The main point is that BDSM sex, just like “vanilla sex”, is not practiced in a social vacuum but is influenced by power relations that make the participants’ freedom far from absolute (Barker 2013; Beres & MacDonald 2015; Weiss 2011). Meg Barker (2013; now Meg-John Barker) points out that while the BDSM community has long been characterized by ideas that BDSM is never about assault, several prominent female BDSM bloggers have recently written about assault among BDSM practitioners. Barker puts forth that the fact that BDSM is stigmatized by mainstream culture has decreased the space available to discuss the dark sides of BDSM culture. Likewise, the polarization between sex-positive liberty perspectives and radical feminist power perspectives has long prevented a more nuanced examination of how power relations shape BDSM practitioners’ choices. Research also shows that there are norms within the subculture that may undermine people’s ability to say no, such as an absolutist sex positivism that tends to portray sex as something that is always positive, and notions that a “real” dominant (man) knows what his submissive (woman) needs and that “real” submissives can “take” anything (Barker 2013). In her thesis on BDSM in

Sweden, Charlotta Carlström contends that the idea that BDSM is always a game can “seem like simplified reasoning” (2016: 166) because the real power relations between two partners often creep in and affect their ability to exercise their right to set boundaries. For example, one of Carlström’s interview participants, a dominant man, says that his female submissive partner never used her safe word, one reason being, according to him, that she does not want to disappoint him (2016: 167).

Another problem with consent in BDSM sex, highlighted by Margot Weiss (2011) in her ethnographical study of the San Francisco BDSM community, is that while the *safe, sane and consensual* policy mandates that consent be negotiated *explicitly* and *before* a BDSM scene, this is often difficult to live up to in practice (cf. Beres & MacDonald 2015). Some of Weiss’s participants thought that the principle of explicit consent was “ridiculous” (2011: 81). They saw it as potentially important for beginners, but for them it was precisely the experience of completely letting go of control and consenting to *the unknown* that attracted them. Relatedly, Melanie Ann Beres and Jo MacDonald (2015) show that the idea of explicit consent is difficult to maintain because it is always hard to predict how a scene will turn out in detail, which is why much is often instead decided by the dominant party’s responsiveness during the act.

Since in many ways consent has a more central position in the BDSM community than in the context of “vanilla sex”, it seems that this is where we can find the most developed discussions of consent. In the wake of a number of high-profile female BDSM practitioners in the Anglo-Saxon context starting to raise the issue of abuse, the Consent Culture project was started to develop the culture of consent in the BDSM community (Barker 2013). A main theme was to break free from what Barker calls a “neoliberal” understanding of consent as a straightforward expression of the individual’s free choice, and to emphasize the community’s collective responsibility for combatting the conditions that enable abuse or create obstacles to the exercise of one’s right to set boundaries. For example, a stronger focus on positive forms of consent has been suggested, such as actively asking what the other person *wants* rather than assuming that as long as the partner does not use their safe word, what you are doing is okay. Another key idea is to dissolve the dichotomy between the extreme positions of “everyone is totally free” versus “no one is free”, in favour of an understanding that a person’s choice to engage in sex can be the result of both freedom and coercive mechanisms. The idea of collective responsibility for consent is captured well by a blogger named Valentine, who points out that the experience of pressure that may be involved in a person’s choice to engage in a sexual act is not necessarily the other person’s fault, but, nonetheless, everyone in the BDSM community must collectively work against such experiences of pressure (in Barker 2013). One could say that what Consent Culture does here is, in line with Munro’s reasoning

outlined above, to collectively work to improve the conditions for individuals to consent in a genuine way, by aiming to increase the awareness of the contextual factors that influence their decisions.

### Men's consent

Up until this point, my review of the research and discussions about sexual consent has largely been limited to a heterosexual context, where consent as a problem is largely framed as a question of whether or not women want to accommodate men's more or less taken-for-granted sexual desires (Anderson 2004; Beres 2007). In a wider context in which it is mainly men who commit sexual abuse and where heterosexuality is the norm, this is to a certain extent justified. At the same time, the pattern is problematic, because the conceptions of male sexual agency/aggressiveness and female reactivity/responsiveness indirectly support the occurrence of sexual violence (Gavey 2005). Furthermore, this schema tends to make us lose sight of issues of consent in same-sex encounters and in female-driven heterosexual encounters (Beres 2007; Gavey 2005).

I want to pause a little longer to consider the heterosexual context and to highlight the following paradox: as I have discussed, women, as a group, compared to men, are most vulnerable to sexual abuse. On the one hand, men often feel entitled to cross women's sexual boundaries, and on the other hand – and here we find ourselves in more of a grey area – women are often socialized in a way that makes them inclined to put their own needs aside in favour of men's. But at the same time, there is no group that has such high expectations of sexual readiness on them as men. Being a “real man” is closely associated with displaying an active (hetero)sexuality, which puts men who do *not* have the desire to have sex in a vulnerable position.

What Wendy Hollway (1984) refers to as *the male sexual drive discourse*, which conveys that all men by nature always, or nearly always, want to have sex, is a basic structure of our culture (Gavey 2005). The fact that men's sexual readiness is often taken for granted and that a woman's sexual willingness is therefore framed as an irresistible gift to a man can make it difficult for a man to say no to a woman's sexual advance (O'Sullivan & Allgeier 1998), as well as lead to difficulties in imagining that a woman can transgress a man's sexual boundaries (Gunnarsson 2018; Humphreys 2000). A consequence is that a woman often does not learn to consider that men can potentially be *vulnerable* in the face of her sexual desire. In a study by Terry Humphreys (2000), for example, women stated that they never imagined they could “go too far” and make a man uncomfortable through their sexual behaviour. “It always seems like that it's the man whose ready to do anything. We don't have to worry about when they're ready”, as one woman put it (2000: 73, sic).<sup>5</sup> As I showed in a previous study (Gunnarsson 2018), the tendency to take men's

sexual voluntariness for granted also makes it likely that when a man rejects a woman's sexual advance, this will be experienced as a harder blow than if the roles were reversed, which can contribute even more to men's difficulties of denying a woman sex.

Nicola Gavey (2005) uses the term "normative coercion" to denote the sliding scale of unfreedom that people can experience due to culturally dictated expectations regarding sex. While the focus of her study is heterosexual women's experiences, Gavey highlights that the expectations on men to always want sex can also work coercively. While it is uncommon for women to commit physically violent types of sexual assault against men, research shows that the gender gap evens out significantly as we move toward more grey-area-like interactions. A review from the 1990s of research on sexual coercion showed that 4–40 percent of the male respondents in the studies reviewed (which used different methods, hence the wide range) reported having been *coerced* into sex by a woman, compared to 22–83 percent among the female respondents (Byers & O'Sullivan 1998). Regarding experiences of *unwanted sex* – with or without pressure or coercion – a likewise dated study from 1988 found that it was actually a more common experience for men than for women (Muehlenhard & Cook 1988). Most often, when researchers investigate people's experiences of unwanted sex, it is about sex that someone acquiesces to in response to another person's advances. The Swedish population survey from 2017, for example, asked if respondents had "*agreed to have sex even though you didn't want to*" (my emphasis), to which 63 percent of women and 34 percent of men answered yes (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2019). However, when it comes to men's experiences of unwanted sex, it is common that they are a result of the man himself initiating sex, in order to live up to the expectations on men in the heterosexual script (Pascoe 2005; Sweeney 2014; Vannier & O'Sullivan 2011; Wiederman 2005).

### The gender of sexual vulnerability

How are we to understand the meaning of gender when it comes to sexual coercion and unwanted sex? This question is not only about who does what to whom, but also how gender aspects affect how different actions are *experienced* (Gavey 2005; Gunnarsson 2018). Gavey discusses the fact that in surveys men not infrequently describe experiences of being forced into sex by a woman in neutral or even positive terms (Byers & O'Sullivan 1998; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson 1998), something that she states is very unusual in women's descriptions of being forced into sex by men. She raises the question of how these research results should be interpreted. Do men's descriptions reflect what they really experience? Or are they prevented from telling the truth about their vulnerability, because it does not fit with prevailing ideals of masculinity or with widespread views of women

as sexually harmless? Or does the answer lie somewhere between these two interpretations? (Gavey 2005).

What complicates things is that gendered notions of sexual vulnerability versus dangerousness take part in organizing people's very experiences of themselves and the world (Gunnarsson 2018; Marcus 1992). They are not something we can completely shake off, not least as they partly stem from a reality in which men are *actually* a greater danger to women than women are to men. Gavey puts her finger on this complexity by exploring the experience of being awakened by oral sex.

[T]he meaning of a woman giving oral sex to a man who is asleep is profoundly different from the meaning of a man giving oral sex to a woman who is asleep. As soon as the woman awakes she enters into a context deeply mediated by prevailing cultural understandings of men's sexuality as driven and potentially aggressive. Men (as a category, even if it's not true of individual men) are imbued with power and physical strength, which is likely to render woman as the subject of fear, in a situation that is culturally marked as having the potential of danger. [...] The ways in which the bodies involved in rape are sexed (as a man or a woman) fundamentally determines the experience and "reality" of the event, to the extent that it is not clear whether it can really still be rape in the way that we usually understand what rape means, when the aggressor is a woman. (Gavey 2005: 203)

Meanwhile, Gavey is careful to emphasize the importance of avoiding gender determinism – the idea that gender plays such a decisive role can also prevent us from *seeing* both men's vulnerability and women's aggressiveness (Gavey 2005). For gender researchers, it is a considerable challenge to acknowledge the inescapably structuring, difference-producing role of gender without locking people's experiences into gender schemata in a way that reproduces stereotypes and obscures the view of patterns that run counter to them.

### **Beyond heterosexuality**

Discussions about sexual consent and sexual violence are strongly gendered, as a reflection of sexual violence itself being strongly gendered. In light of the evidence that sexual violence is closely linked to men's structural power over women, but probably also due to heteronormative blinders, the focus of the existent research has also primarily been on heterosexual interactions. There is some recent research, however, exploring experiences of consent mainly in the population of men who have sex with men (Daroya 2022; Dietzel 2024; Gaspar et al. 2021; Marcantonio, O'Neil & Jozkowski 2022; McKie et al.

2020; Sternin et al. 2022), while studies of women's same-sex experiences remain very limited (Worsdale & Kosenko 2023).

Studies on the experiences of men who have sex with men indicate that there are significant cultural obstacles to consensual sexual interactions in the gay community. Mark Gaspar et al. (2021) summarize their findings from a study on Canadian men's experiences of sexual coercion: "Many believed that unwanted sex is unavoidable among GBM [gay and bisexual men]: if 'you're gay, it's just what happens'" (2021: 1212). The authors of this study argue that although the problems around consent for men who have sex with men are largely similar to those found in heterosexual, they found that a main difference was the tendency to normalize and minimize occurrences of unwanted sex in the gay setting. They relate this minimizing tendency to widespread, historically rooted perceptions of gay sex as inherently risky, as well as to fears of contributing to further stigmatizing the gay community if problems are addressed (Gaspar et al. 2021).

While research shows that many men who have sex with men report carefully negotiating consent (Dietzel 2024), the hypersexual ideals of the gay scene (McKie et al. 2020) and expectations on men's sexual readiness are pointed out as factors that often lead to practices of "implied consent" (Sternin et al. 2022) and to difficulties of declining sexual advances (Dietzel 2024; Gaspar et al. 2021; McKie et al. 2020). The strict division of sexual roles (e.g. top and bottom) characterizing much gay sex may create rigid behavioural expectations standing in the way of consent (Grundy-Bowers, Hardy & McKeown 2015; Marcantonio et al. 2022). In addition, the online dating apps connecting men who have sex with men have led to particular patterns of negotiating consent, including more precarious ones where consent is established online and not renegotiated when the men meet in person (Dietzel 2024), referred to by Shulamit Sternin et al. (2022) as a form of effectivization of the consent process. While negotiating consent before meeting in person and disclosing one's identity may support consensuality, it works as a factor undermining a genuine negotiation of consent if the online negotiation is seen as final (Dietzel 2024).

Studies on homosexuals' and bisexuals' experiences of sexual violence indicate that this group is exposed to sexual violence to a greater degree than heterosexuals (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2019; Rothman, Exner & Baughman 2011). The latest Swedish population survey shows, for example, that homosexuals and bisexuals are more vulnerable than heterosexuals to the entire spectrum of sexual violence and are more likely to acquiesce to sex that they do not actually want to participate in. For example, while 23 percent of all women and 5 percent of all men stated that they had been subjected to sexual assault through psychological pressure, among bisexual women the corresponding figure was 44 percent and among homosexual men 16 percent (Public Health Agency of Sweden 2019). In this type of study

on experiences of sexual violence, however, it is difficult to know to what extent the violence was committed in same-sex interactions, which is why it cannot be assumed that the results show that sexual assault is more common in same-sex than opposite-sex interactions.

In a Swedish overview (NCK 2009), the authors state that “the view of men as sexually active and virile makes it difficult to consider men as possible victims of rape and sexual abuse” (2009: 54), which together with the belief that women are not capable of carrying out sexual violence obscures the actual occurrence of same-sex sexual violence. The gendered stereotypes that surround perceptions of victims and perpetrators of sexual violence also mean that society’s treatment of victims of same-sex violence is lacking, which in turn means that relatively few people report such events to the police or seek community support (Davies 2002). The stereotypes also affect the victims of violence themselves, in that men who have been raped often lack the language to make their experiences understandable, which can be related to the hegemonic rape discourses that link men to the perpetrator position (Knutagård 2009).

### Boundaries and grey areas

The Swedish Consent Act was voted through in the wake of #MeToo’s shockwaves across the planet. #MeToo inescapably brought the issue of men’s sexual violence and harassment against women onto the international agenda, after the issue had long been marginalized in the discourse of both feminism and the societal mainstream. #MeToo was structured by a classic feminist logic – if updated by the new social media landscape – according to which normalized forms of male behaviour were reframed, through women’s collective action and digitally mediated “consciousness-raising” (Brunner & Partlow-Lefevre 2020), as illegitimate abuse. This type of redefining of men’s invisibilized and normalized violations – “calling it by its right name” – has been central to the struggle for women’s right to bodily integrity. In a society where men have power over women, men’s exercise of power over women becomes a normalized aspect of what it is to be a woman, and it is often only when women’s positions of power are moved forward that it is possible to even imagine another way of co-existing and to name men’s exercise of power as an evil that can and should be fought.

Both the movement for a consent law and #MeToo can be said to have approached the issue of sexual violence through a *politics of clear boundaries* (Gunnarsson 2023). Indeed, for consent to be accepted as a legally viable concept, its meaning must be unambiguous so that the presence of consent can be distinguished from its absence. #MeToo was also strongly structured by an impulse to put the boundaries in their proper and unambiguous place, according to the pattern “that was *not* a courtship attempt – that was sexual

harassment” or “that was *not* sex – that was rape”. Such a politics of clear boundaries is in line with a long feminist tradition of challenging the widespread trivialization and normalization of men’s sexual violations.

Considering the anti-violence movement’s investment in a politics of clear boundaries, endeavours to destabilize the line between sex and abuse and to speak of a “grey area” can come out as problematic. Amnesty International’s (2020) declaration – “Sex without consent is rape. It’s that straightforward – there are no ‘grey’ areas” – must be read in this light. As Maria Hansen notes, the contestedness of the notion of a grey area has to do with the “fear that it can be used to minimise harmful sexual experiences” (2023: 2). Problematising the boundary between sex and assault is also precarious in that it destabilizes the clear divide between victimized and perpetrator. As I state elsewhere:

Persistent victim blaming tendencies [...] and the tendency of victims of sexual violence to take on undue responsibility for what has happened [...] create incentives for drawing a sharp line between consent and non-consent, toning down any form of ambiguity or ambivalence so that there is no doubt who is to be blamed.

(Gunnarsson 2023: 4)

Despite such risks and the at times indispensable value of the politics of clear boundaries, this book insists on the need for problematising the boundaries of consent. The line between consent and non-consent is certainly in many cases uncomplicated and when it comes to the many abuses that stem from the perpetrator’s exercise of power and lack of respect for the victim, it is hardly relevant to problematize, as I do in this book, what consent actually *is*. However, in line with other scholars (e.g. Gavey 1999, 2005; Haaken 2002; Hansen 2023; Hindes & Fileborn 2020; Powell 2008), I contend that whether we like it or not, there *are* experiences that do not neatly fit into either category of consensual or non-consensual. Rather than eschewing this fact for political reasons, it is my conviction that increased knowledge about the ambiguities of consent is one important factor in the struggle for a deep-going culture of consent.

The 2010 Swedish campaign #prataomdet (#talkaboutit) was in many ways a project about *the grey area* (Gunnarsson 2018; Karlsson 2019). This award-winning campaign, where mainly women shared experiences of sexual assault and the grey area between bad sex and assault, made clear that the politics of clear boundaries does not always serve the purpose of combating sexual abuse in its various forms. Johanna Koljonen, one of the people behind #prataomdet, writes about the need for conversations that can contribute to developing a more nuanced language suiting experiences that do not fit into a framework based on “attributing blame, identifying victims and perpetrators and sorting them into safe boxes”. She makes the point that if

we force all experiences into either “sex” or “assault” and look at victims versus perpetrators in too absolute of a way, we will simply miss part of reality. We need, says Koljonen, *to talk about* this part of reality as well, “so that language in the future is always in place in the cases where it really counts” (2012: 10).

Gavey (1999, 2005) also highlights that accepting that it is sometimes difficult to draw clear lines between violence and sex – and by implication between non-consent and consent – can shed necessary light on the complex relationship between “ordinary” heterosexuality and sexual violence. Too strict demarcations can obscure the connections and overlaps between, on the one hand, sexual assault and, on the other, “ordinary”, normative heterosex characterized by a culture that tends to privilege men’s needs and desires over women’s. The objectifying, subtly “violent” undercurrent of normative heterosexuality is a crucial factor behind *why* the lines between sex and abuse are often blurred. Empirically exploring and analysing – rather than denying – ambiguity thus becomes an important way into a wider understanding of the multifaceted mechanisms of sexual violence.

### **This book’s contribution**

In a research field that is dominated by quantitative survey studies, which have difficulty capturing ambiguity, complexity, processes, meaning-making and contextual factors, this book contributes by qualitatively exploring different people’s experiences of dynamics of consent. Rather than starting from clear categories and seeking unequivocal answers, the study *assumes* that grey areas, ambiguity, ambivalence and complexity are fundamental components of dynamics of consent. Using open-ended, exploratory questions, it seeks answers to how people experience, handle and reflect on such complexity. In order to generate a broad and multifaceted understanding, the study is based on interviews with different categories of people in terms of their gender, sexual orientation and age (see the [appendix](#) for a more detailed description of the method and information about the participants), something that is in contrast to previous studies, which usually targeted a certain category of people – often heterosexual students. Interviewing people of older ages too, as this study does, can shed needed light on problems of consent even among more sexually and relationally experienced people. In addition, older people can reflect on experiences farther back in time, which can further deepen the perspectives on dynamics of consent.

The interviews were structured by the interaction between my basic questions and theoretical interests and the interview participants’ experiences of what was relevant, interesting or problematic for them when it came to dynamics of consent. The starting-point for the interviews was the information the participants received about the purpose of the study. A central theme

highlighted in this information was that it is not always obvious what is meant by the concept of *voluntarily* participating in sex. Based on that description of the problem, the interviews unfolded in an organic way, usually by the participant referring to experiences that they felt were relevant, while I continuously followed up with questions to explore interesting themes further. I also had predetermined questions and themes that I raised in the latter part of the interview if they had not already come up, such as: How do you relate to other people's expectations? Have you had sex even though you did not want to? Is it sometimes difficult for you to know what you want? Is it possible to participate voluntarily even though deep down one does not want to? What is it like when you yourself want to have sex but the other person does not? How do you know what the other person wants?

The book is divided into chapters that revolve around themes that emerged as central in the interview material in the sense that they were associated with some kind of *problem* (tensions, ambiguities, difficulties). As the basic impulse of the study is to explore ambiguity and complexity, simple answers are rarely offered in the book. Instead, the participants' experiences and reflections are highlighted from different perspectives to create a multifaceted picture of their experiences. A distinctive feature of my way of interviewing has been to seek to go deeper into details that we rarely discuss in more everyday forms of conversation, to a greater degree than is perhaps common in interview studies. I believe that this persistent twisting and turning of the kind of silent experiences that rarely become subject to conscious reflection is an important contribution of the book.

## Notes

- 1 Gerald Dworkin regards as the critical element of autonomy "the capacity to raise the question of whether I will identify with or reject the reasons for which I now act" (2015: 12).
- 2 BDSM is an overlapping abbreviation of Bondage and Discipline (BD), Dominance and Submission (DS), Sadism and Masochism (SM).
- 3 In this context, it is relevant to note the research that shows that 31–57 percent of women have had sexual fantasies about being forced to have sex (Critelli & Bivona 2008).
- 4 Among others, Judith Butler (1982) contributed a chapter to the book *Against Sadomasochism: A Radical Feminist Analysis* (Linden 1982).
- 5 It is worth pointing out that this pattern can be said to have weakened somewhat as the role as sexual initiator has become more available to women in the wake of the cultural shift that is perhaps most clearly expressed in the TV series *Sex and the City*.

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# 2

## HOW DOES CONSENT WORK?

There is a pejorative image of sexual consent as an ideal of entering into a kind of formalized contract, where the participating parties express their willingness in explicit verbal terms. As was made clear in the Introduction, this is an incorrect image of consent that lacks support in, for example, Swedish legislation, which does not provide any suggestions for how consent should be expressed and which includes active participation as a way of expressing consent. However, there are variations in terms of how the principle of consent is formulated. Antioch College in California, for example, has become world-famous for its consent policy, which states that “Consent means verbally asking and verbally giving or denying consent for all levels of sexual behavior” (Antioch College 2014–2015: 42). As we have seen, research shows that this type of consent standard is unrealistic, since, in most cases, flirting, seduction and sexual interaction happen through much more subtle means of communication.

Many researchers agree that consent should be seen as a *continuous process* rather than as a limited event (Beres 2010, 2014b; Humphreys 2004; Muehlenhard et al. 2016). This process consists of continuously evaluating the other person’s behaviour and cues in order to find out how they feel about various sexual acts. As Muehlenhard and colleagues write:

For example, suppose that someone is unbuttoning a partner’s shirt. From the perspective of consent as a process, they would observe their partner’s facial expressions and bodily movements as they move from one button to the next, looking for evidence of pleasure versus discomfort. [...] These behaviors can be observed and processed quickly in an ongoing, continuous way. (2016: 464)

The interviews throughout this study confirm this picture of how consent is achieved. They show that it is a fairly uncomplicated process, but as we shall see, the participants' accounts also raise questions about where to draw the line between what can and cannot be taken for granted.

### **Lennart: "It's ridiculously simple signs"**

I will begin with the issue of how it may work when a person understands that the other party is *not* interested in sex. In my interview with Lennart (heterosexual, 65–70 years old), he spontaneously brings up situations where he has been interested in having sex with a woman he met in a pub, but where the response from the woman is lacking. Focussing on the absence rather than the presence of mutual consent is a repeated pattern in the interviews, which, according to my interpretation, is because frictionless interactions based on mutual consent do not lead to reflection in the same way as when there is a conflict between two people's desires. Lennart describes the communication as follows:

*Lennart:* Then the body speaks almost more clearly than the mouth. If you approach someone, put your arm around their shoulders and tilt your head to the side, and then you feel that the person is "no, let go" [Lennart makes a repelling gesture], then you understand that it's not right. Or if you've gotten so far that the person doesn't pull away, but you see that there's no response...I stroke her temples a little, yeah, simply put, grope her, and she's totally, fucking unmoved. Then it's sort of time for "Let's do something else, should we go into the kitchen and make some food?" Just leave it there.

Here we see what I consider to be a relatively typical communication process in the "pick-up context", that is when there is a chance of having sex with a new partner. Both the way Lennart shows his interest and the women's way of showing disinterest are mainly bodily. It follows the template that previous research describes as paradigmatic – you make a little approach, sense how it is received and adapt to that response by either backing off or increasing the interaction. Lennart seems to take for granted that the consent process naturally occurs through this type of retroactive feedback mechanism. However, we can note that when he puts his arm around the shoulders of a woman who then shows that she does not want that bodily contact, he is to some extent sexually encroaching on the woman's body *before* he has obtained consent. An arm around the shoulders is not a sexual act in the way that is regulated by sex crime legislation, but to the extent that it is a gesture clearly motivated by sexual intentions, it may cause discomfort if it is unwanted.

I never ask Lennart what the process might look like before he puts his arm around a woman's shoulders in the way he describes. It seems to me that if he touches a woman in this way after having first – verbally or otherwise – communicated with her without physical contact and by reading her body language, this is decisively different from him putting his arm around her shoulders without first having checked to see what her attitude towards him is. At the same time, there are good reasons to assume that what happens *after* a first, tentative approach of the kind Lennart describes is at least as decisive for the woman's experience of having been encroached upon or not. To quickly read and respect her signals of reluctance can conceivably "repair" the possible damage from his first bodily intrusion.

Lennart's example from the pub makes it clear that consent cannot be understood as a limited event. Since sexual interactions are themselves procedural, the signalling and reading of consent must be as well. Lennart describes how this "signal-reading" continues even after a woman accompanies him home from the pub.

*Lennart:* It's happened when you've been to the pub, classic one-night stand, should we each go home separately or should we go to my house and snog? And then when you get home and take off your outerwear and maybe have had some food or made a drink or tea, you notice that nah, she probably doesn't want to be part of anything more than this [laughs]. And then it's easy not to sit down next to her on the sofa, but instead you sit opposite and then you talk for a bit and then you look at the clock and say "Maybe I should go now". It's ridiculously simple signals. If you sit down on the sofa first and then she sits down here or over there on the sofa [Lennart points, sits down a bit away] or on the chair opposite, well, then you know exactly what roles we're playing.

Here we not only see how the decisions to increase versus decrease the interaction are continuously made even after one person has agreed to accompany the other home. We can also note how the bodily and implied nature of communication contributes to a social agility that reduces the risk of one party losing face. Lennart's subtle adaptation to the woman's signals of sexual disinterest means that she never has to be direct and explicit in her rejection, something that saves both her and him from a potentially uncomfortable situation. Similarly, it is conceivable that, in the previous example, it would have put the woman in a more difficult situation if Lennart had asked "Can I put my arm around your shoulders?" before he did it. The example may seem absurd, but it highlights the problems with focussing on verbal and explicit communication. One can imagine that, at least for some people, it may be more difficult to say no to a clearly stated question, as it requires an

equally clearly stated answer, which may be perceived as more burdensome than many are comfortable with.

**Stella: “If you didn’t want to, you pushed the other person away”**

Lennart’s account is about his interactions with women he had not previously had sex with. What happens if we instead focus on stable relationships? It seems obvious that consent dynamics are different in a long-term sexual relationship than in (approaches to) sex with a new partner (Beres 2010; Willis & Jozkowski 2019). People who know each other well and who have extensive experience of communicating sexually with each other are likely to be able to develop even more subtle ways of signalling consent than people who do not know each other. There is also space for more personal forms of interaction that do not, in the same way as in “pick-up communication”, need to be adapted to the norms and rules of the game that are engaged with by the broader population. A possible problem in stable relationships can be that people take each other’s consent for granted, and that sexual habits and scripts develop that get in the way of the kind of alert vigilance to the other person’s signals that Lennart’s story illustrates. Previous research has indeed shown that the perceived need to obtain consent for sex decreases in direct proportion to how stable the relationship is (Humphreys & Herold 2007).

In my interview with Stella (25–30 years old, lesbian), we talk about where the limit is for what kinds of physical approaches you can make with a steady partner without first obtaining consent, a theme that I will return to below. Here, however, this theme serves as a springboard that takes us to the question of what it can be like to “obtain consent” from a partner. I ask Stella where the limit is for how you can touch your partner without first checking that it is okay.

*Lena:* Where is the limit for you for the kind of touch you can give your partner without first asking, maybe not purely verbally but where you still somehow check that it’s okay?

*Stella:* For me, that line is at my genitals and my partner’s genitals. I would never touch her between her legs if I didn’t have permission. And I would never have done that with any of my previous partners either; it kind of doesn’t exist. Why do people do that?

*Lena:* How do you get that permission then?

*Stella:* It’s something that you do after...like, you’ve been lying there, cuddling, and you kind of notice that both of you are into it. I mean, there is so much that is not said, but for me it is really so clear. If my partner that I’m cuddling with becomes rigid...you notice it pretty quickly without them having to say no. So for me the limit is that if

my partner becomes rigid or starts avoiding me, then I would stop. I don't say "Can I put my hand down your pants now?" I would never ask like that. But you still have to look at each other like this...some form of communication, like "Now I'm going to do this, is that okay?" Or "Now I want you to do this".

It is interesting that it seems easier for Stella to put into words how she knows that her partner is *not* comfortable – her partner becomes rigid, for example – than for how she knows that the other person is on-board. In line with previous research (Beres 2010), it appears that the type of communication that allows both people to know what the other person wants is simple but at the same time so complex and implicit that it is difficult to raise awareness of it and to verbalize it. Just as in Lennart's account, the person's reading of their partner's reluctance takes place according to a kind of retroactive feedback process: Stella does something and her partner responds to this by, for example, becoming rigid, whereupon Stella backs down. But at the end of the excerpt above, Stella also expresses that she can, in a wordless way, "ask" her partner if something is okay *before* she does it. This takes place through eye contact and "some form of communication", but Stella does not get more specific and concrete than that in her description.

At another point in the interview with Stella, she shares how it used to be when she and a previous girlfriend agreed to have sex.

*Stella:* She was the one who was very much "on". If I was...I felt that we had a good enough relationship – or good, the kind of relationship where I could lie down on top of her on the couch and show pretty clearly what I wanted. And she was almost always "on". And you can tell because she starts moving towards me too.

Stella is a feminist and has a certain engagement with the issue of consent. In the interview in general, she expresses that she has great respect for other people's sexual boundaries and, as we will see in [Chapter 5](#), she places a great deal of responsibility on herself to ensure that the other person really wants to. I think it is against the background of this general orientation that we ought to understand why Stella here interrupts her description of how it worked with her ex-partner to sort of defend – or at least explain – her relatively tangible way of showing that she wanted sex. In other situations, simply lying down on top of another person could be perceived as a very intrusive act to carry out without first checking if it is welcome. But Stella explains that it was "that kind of relationship", which allowed her to do it that way – and a key component of this seems to be that her girlfriend almost always wanted sex if the opportunity arose, so one can assume that

Stella could very well take her willingness for granted. I ask Stella to be more explicit.

*Lena:* But do you mean that in order to do such a thing – to lie on top of someone – that a lot depended on there being security in the relationship?

*Stella:* Yes, exactly. I knew that if she really didn't want it, she would push me away. And she wouldn't care so much if I were to lie on top of her, she wouldn't think like that, but it was more like...yeah, well, that was how we showed each other that we wanted to. And if you didn't want to, you pushed the other person away and that was perfectly fine.

*Lena:* Pushed away? [laugh]

*Stella:* Yeah, pushed away, like this [Stella makes a pushing gesture], yeah, like "move".

"That's how we showed each other that we wanted to" is a key sentence here. In this relationship, Stella and her partner had developed certain rituals and codes to signal both desire and reluctance. In another context, these behaviours would perhaps mean something else – for example, I perceived the pushing-away gesture as so brusque that I started to laugh – but in this relationship it had no meaning beyond clearly signalling reluctance. However, when Stella talks about touching a partner's genitals in the previous interview excerpt, she expresses that she sees it as something she would not be able to do in any relationship without first checking that it is okay. She seems to see that demarcation as almost universal and says she has no understanding of people who do that. However, it is likely that there are relationships where this demarcation is not at all as heavily weighted, but rather it is considered okay for one person to touch the other one's genitals without warning.

An important part of Stella's story about her former girlfriend, whom she used to lie on top of when she wanted sex, is the "pushing-away ritual". When Stella lies on top of her partner, she is not just signalling that she wants sex; she is doing it against the backdrop of an unspoken agreement that says that it is perfectly okay for the one who does not want to have to sex to push away the one who does. It seems likely that the greater the scope for a clear rejection, the greater the scope for a firm approach. If, on the other hand, the initiating party finds it difficult to handle a clear rejection or knows that the other party finds it difficult to clearly signal a no, it is likely to work better to employ softer forms of initiating.

### **Nils: "In that case, I could choose to hug her instead"**

While Stella and her ex-partner were very explicit – albeit non-verbal – in their communication about whether they would have sex at all, Nils (30–35 years old, heterosexual) shares an example of a much "softer" type of signalling

system that he and a former girlfriend came to develop. Similar to Stella and her ex-partner's signalling system, Nils's story illustrates how steady partners can develop intricate conventions for how to communicate sexual willingness and unwillingness. A large part of my interview with Nils revolves around the fact that his weak interest in sex is in stark contrast to the expectation that heterosexual men should be sexually assertive. I will go deeper into this theme in [Chapter 4](#), but here I want to focus on the signalling system that developed between Nils and his then-girlfriend in light of the fact that Nils often did not feel like having sex. Nils refers in the interview excerpt below to the sliding scale that in his experience exists when it comes to wanting versus not wanting to have sex. In line with what some research shows ([Peterson & Muehlenhard 2007](#)), he describes the sliding scale as follows:

*Nils:* There is, of course, 'No, absolutely not', and 'Well, I don't feel like it, but if we start cosying up maybe I'll slip into wanting to and really...', and then there's 'It doesn't matter', and then there's 'Yes, that would be nice' and then 'Yes, I want to have sex!'.

Here he talks about how it would typically work between him and his partner when she wanted to have sex:

*Nils:* She made the approaches, but she did it quite mildly. And then I could either meet her – if we were normally here [points with his hand far down on the “wanting scale”] I would climb up a little bit and then I could meet her and then we continued climbing [climbs with his hand upwards on the “scale”] and then we had sex. Or if I was way down on the scale and I stayed there and then instead we just lay there and cuddled and kissed and maybe put on a film instead. So I never had to explicitly say “No, I don't want to”. She moved forward a little carefully and then you could sort of...climb together.

*Lena:* So it happened rather subtly, these “I want to”, “I don't want to”?

*Nils:* Exactly.

*Lena:* And was she usually the one who started it?

*Nils:* Yes, in 95 percent of cases perhaps.

*Lena:* What exactly did she do when she made such a mild approach? Did she caress you or give you any looks?

*Nils:* She pressed herself against me, pressed her breasts against me and really went in for some snogging. She started to kiss me and then it became more intense kisses and then it turned to snogging and when we started kissing I could kind of choose to give her a hug instead, in a less sexual way. If I met her and we started snogging and continued snogging, then it escalated to sex, but if I started patting her head and hugging her and kissing her forehead it became more loving, not sex but just closeness.

*Lena:* And she was very quick at responding to those signals?

*Nils:* Yes.

Nils and his partner can be said to have developed a refined procedure to handle in as “soft” a way as possible the fact that there was often a discrepancy between her desire and his. While it is part of the normative heterosexual schema that men can expect to sometimes get a no from women, conceptions of men having an ever-present desire may mean that a man’s no to a woman can be a more sensitive situation (Gunnarsson 2018). This may shed further light on why Nils and his then-partner developed a strategy where Nils’s sexual no was always wrapped up in a yes to less sexual forms of intimacy. The gradual escalation of sexual intensity opened up the option of a subtle redirection of their intimate interaction that dissolved sharp oppositions between yes and no. I interpret this low-key form of signalling as largely motivated by an effort to avoid overly “visible” rejections that could arouse shame in the rejected person. However, in Stella and her then-girlfriend’s signalling system, being clearly rejected was not associated with shame or other charged emotions, which is why the signalling of sexual interest could take a more accentuated form.

#### **Elias: “It’s really tricky”**

Elias (30–35 years, bisexual) says that it is a consistent pattern in his sexual relationships that he occupies a dominant position. He does not consider himself to be a BDSM practitioner, as he sees BDSM as being based on more formalized rituals and roles, which his own sex life lacks. According to him, being sexually dominant is not something he actively pursues either. Instead, he describes it as him having a very strong tendency to be attracted to people with a certain type of personality and appearance associated with a submissive disposition, which makes them want Elias to dominate them sexually. During the interview, Elias, who is analytically inclined, offers many reflections on the special type of complexity that dominance sex leads to when it comes to how consent is expressed and read.

*Elias:* I think there is a very interesting problematic in this dynamic when someone wants the other person to be so dominant that it crosses one’s boundaries in some way. From a consent perspective, it’s very interesting, because then someone wants there to be no consent [laughs], simply put. It is problematic and interesting.

While the BDSM community is careful to emphasize the importance of consent, as Elias sees it, some of the people he has had sex with wanted “there to be no consent”. It is Elias’s very crossing of their boundaries that

these people found sexually arousing and enjoyable. But is it really as Elias says, that these partners did not want there to be consent? Indeed, on a fundamental level, they do *want* their will not to be taken into account. We are dealing here with an interesting – and, according to Elias, “problematic” – paradox. Its problematic character is reinforced in Elias’s case by the fact that he claims to be basically a rather compliant person who enters the dominant role very much with the aim of satisfying his partner’s wishes, rather than because he likes being dominant. How, then, can a partner convey their consent to “non-consent”?

*Lena:* How is this consent to “I want you not to care if I consent” communicated? How is it communicated in your relationships?

*Elias:* Sometimes we talk about it quite a lot outside of the actual sex. If it’s someone you see occasionally, maybe you’ve talked about what you like before. But that still only goes so far. You still have to somehow know in an actual interaction where the boundaries are and with new people it is difficult. It’s about learning how people work, which happens over time. What is the person into? Are there any limits, some things that would actually be perceived as negative, difficult? And it takes time to get to know the person. But there are also, of course, small signals of consent, or small signals of interest in any case. “Now I want you to take what you want” can be communicated in different ways.

*Lena:* For example?

*Elias:* That is a very good question. It has to do with how people respond to things, that you notice that they respond in a positive way. But that is after an initiative has been taken, then you can notice that the person likes it. But before you’ve done that, hmm...It’s very difficult because here it’s also about a kind of dynamic where you need to communicate in as implicit a way as possible, so that the person doesn’t accidentally take the dominant role [laughs]. So it’s really tricky how it’s done, it has to be as little as possible, like...How do people do it?

Elias sits silently with this question for a while. He is a person who has already given considerable thought to these questions before the interview. When he tries to explain how he reads the desires of a submissive partner, the first thing that comes to his mind is this retroactive feedback process, which we have already touched on above when Lennart, Stella and Nils talked about the seduction stage. Elias is conscious of the problem that this type of communication only takes place *after* he has carried out an act, and while Lennart and Stella address the seduction stage, in Elias’s case we are talking about the sexual act already being under way. While he feels convinced that there is signalling process going on even before he performs an action, he has difficulty putting his finger on what it looks like.

Elias says that the submissive party must communicate their wishes “as implicitly as possible”, so that the illusion of their total submission and lack of control can be upheld. This logic can be said to be an extreme expression of the logic that governs the heterosexual script that I discussed in the opening chapter, according to which the woman must find more passive and implicit ways of expressing her sexual desire, in order not to take on a role that is too masculine-coded. Elias himself calls the pattern that governs his sexual practices “very heteronormative”. However, the heteronormative pattern is challenged on one level by the fact that the partners he has had who were most submissive identified as men.

After his pause for thought, Elias continues to try to put into words how the signalling of consent can take place.

*Elias:* When it comes to taking the initiative for sex, it can be overtures that don’t necessarily become sexual directly, maybe snogging or someone touching you in different ways so that you understand that they want something, the kind of overtures that are sexual but still innocent enough so it’s not like that person is deciding what’s happening. And once you’re then into it, how is it communicated that someone wants something more...? I think it’s communicated in different ways, but I’m having trouble coming up with concrete examples right now. Because the most obvious way is a more reactive thing, noticing someone’s enthusiasm for something, when you’ve already taken the initiative – “Oh, this person really liked that” or “This isn’t really that person’s thing, so okay, now I know it”.

*Lena:* Because sometimes it can also be the case that no, that wasn’t really that person’s thing and then you don’t do it anymore?

*Elias:* Exactly. So it’s more trial and error.

*Lena:* But then maybe one should take it a little cautiously?

*Elias:* Yes, definitely, especially with new people. You test something, notice a response in the form of enthusiasm or that they get into it, and you notice it in different ways. But it’s very intuitive, very much some kind of responsiveness, or what can I say.

Again, we see that a central component of consent dynamics is the continuous, “very intuitive” readings of how the other person responds to progressively intensified sexual acts. Elias emphasizes that a careful escalation is particularly important when it comes to partners one does not know. He thereby implicitly expresses that, when he has a deeper knowledge of what a person likes, he can be somewhat less tentative. However, Elias, who is very verbal and has reflected on consent and sex more than many others, finds it difficult to find words for how implicit consent is communicated *before* an act is performed, even though he “think[s] it’s communicated in different

ways”. Instead, he lands in the reactive component of the dynamic: he tests something, based on his intuition and knowledge of the person; the person provides feedback; he takes in the feedback and continues to act on it and so on. Elias and I continue our conversation on a more theoretical level.

*Lena:* But when it's that kind of interaction, maybe it's hard to be completely orthodox [laughs] with consent, if you know what I mean?

*Elias:* Yes.

*Lena:* That *before* you do something you should know that it's okay – maybe that won't work?

*Elias:* There's some kind of gap there that can't really be filled in. I've thought about that a lot. I actually read something about consent the other day, it was tips on how you know there is consent. And I took it to mean that what was proposed there didn't take this sort of thing into account. It wouldn't really work. And I don't know if there is anything that can work there, precisely because you want to get around...you want the consent to be as implicit as possible.

Elias seems to think here that the principle that consent must be present before an act is carried out may be applicable to certain types of sex, but not to the type of sex that he himself practices, where a key component is that he is not supposed to take account of his partners' will. Although the “gap” Elias refers to is more visible in dominance sex, I would like to suggest that it characterizes all sexual interactions to some extent. Sex is always a *process*, where the turbulent flow of movements takes place in a more or less subtle interplay where one act cannot be easily sorted from others. In order not to become paralyzed, people in all interactions, including sexual ones, have to take certain things for granted, or at least to consider them likely. What things are taken for granted depends on cultural context, on the tacit agreements of the specific relationship, and on one person's interest in and ability to read the other. For example, if a woman moans loudly in pleasure when her clitoris is being caressed, in most situations the caressing party should be able to take for granted that it is okay to let their fingers approach her vagina. However, such an interpretation is not something that takes place in a cultural vacuum, but rather depends on specific preconceptions that it seems “natural” in a sexual act to go from caressing an erogenous area to then, if you get a positive response to this, move on to another erogenous zone. In this particular example, the interpretation that it is okay to move one's hands to her vagina has robust support in the normative (hetero)sexual scripts that present clitoral touching as a kind of “foreplay” to what is defined in these scripts as the subsequent “real sex”, which involves touching and preferably penetrating the vagina. This script and the assumptions and expectations that come with it mean that a person who, for example, because

of abusive experiences, does not want their vagina to be touched, may need to clarify this before a sexual act in order to feel safe in not being touched there unsolicited.

There is an interesting passage in the Swedish Sexual Offenses Committee's report on a new sex crime legislation, which preceded the Swedish change of legislation, which touches on the question of which assumptions one has the justification to make or not make during a sexual act. The question is connected to what counts as a *new* sexual act, which thus requires new consent.

[T]he choice to participate voluntarily [...] pertains [only] to the sexual act for which it has been expressed. Before each new sexual act that is carried out, a new expression is therefore needed in order for participation to still be considered voluntary. It can be anticipated that it may be difficult to determine in retrospect whether the choice to participate voluntarily has been expressed and whether it should have been withdrawn or whether a new sexual act has begun where there is no expression of a voluntary choice to participate. It cannot be a question of a new sexual act if one person moves their hand from one breast of the other person to the other breast. If, on the other hand, the parties are having vaginal intercourse, it is not the same sexual act if they switch to anal intercourse.

([Swedish Government 2016](#): 199–200)

What is so interesting about the passage is that the committee members fail to give any formal definition of where a sexual act begins and ends, but instead use illustrative examples. It points to a certain vulnerability in the principle of consent. Most people are probably prepared to agree that a movement of the hand from one breast to another is not a new act that thus requires renewed consent, while the transition from vaginal to anal intercourse does. However, we can imagine that if we lived in a sexual culture where it was a sexual custom to let anal sex follow vaginal sex, it would not be obvious in the same way that anal sex constituted a new act that thus required renewed consent. Likewise, many sexual acts within our current culture follow certain dominant conventions that make one act seem like a natural extension of another. According to the theory of sexual scripts, for example, penetration of the vagina by the penis is considered an obvious part of – even the core of – heterosexual sex. This means that one can assume that many people see the initiation of such penetration as something that “naturally” follows, for instance, oral sex or caressing, and therefore does not require renewed consent. It would have been interesting if the Sexual Offenses Committee had tackled less obvious cases than moving the hand from one breast to another and starting anal sex, respectively, to see what boundaries they would have drawn.

The principal problem expressed here is that while sex is a process that cannot easily and obviously be divided into separate acts, it is nevertheless necessary to divide a sexual interaction into several different sexual acts, in order to avoid an understanding of consent that accepts that once someone consents to sex, the other person can do anything with them as long as they do not actively withdraw their consent.

**Oskar: “It’s, like, you feel it in the air”**

As we have seen, it seems easiest for the interview participants to describe consensual communication in cases where one makes sure that an action was welcome *after* it has been carried out, by reading the other person’s response. However, when it comes to estimating *before* a sexual act whether it is welcome or not, the participants fumble for the right words to describe how it happens, making Elias doubt whether it is even possible. Stella talks briefly about the communicative process of making sure her partner is happy to have her genitals touched *before* the touching takes place – “You still have to look at each other like this...some form of communication, like ‘Now I’m going to do this, is that okay?’” I never follow up Stella’s statement with a question about precisely how she can communicate without words that “Now I’m going to do this, is that okay?” In any case, it would not be surprising if she, like Elias, had difficulty answering such a question.

However, the participants’ difficulty in describing this type of communication does not necessarily mean that it does not exist. Above all in a stable relationship, where a common sexual language has been developed, it is reasonable to assume that it is possible to wordlessly make your partner understand what it is you would like to do and thus, *before* doing it, to get a sense of how your partner feels about it. Even when there is no such fine-tuned bodily communication, widespread sexual scripts can make it easier for a person to anticipate what it is the other is about to do and to send signals about whether it is desired or not.

Oskar (35–40 years old, heterosexual) talks about the dynamics of consent in his current marriage. His sex life with his wife has been characterized by some friction, but Oskar also has experiences of it feeling just simple and clear-cut. The following excerpt from the interview with him problematizes the view of consent communication as an interplay between two separate individuals who alternately send signals and read the other’s signals.

*Oskar:* With my wife, I sometimes feel that it’s in the air, that we both feel the horniness or desire, and that we resonate with each other, so to speak, on a very, very subtle level. Where both of us want to and it’s, like, you feel it in the air.

*Lena:* Is that something positive?

*Oskar:* That is positive. When it's in the air, it feels real to me.

*Lena:* When you talk about it, it sounds like it's no longer this "We are two people and we have different desires and so we communicate like, 'Do you want to? Do you want to? Yeah, okay', but that it's more like there just *is* something between you?"

*Oskar:* Yes, exactly.

*Lena:* Like getting a life of its own?

*Oskar:* Yes, something like that.

*Lena:* But do you *know* that your wife wants to?

*Oskar:* It has happened so often that I noticed it. That there is something that just adds up.

The type of communication that Oskar describes here destabilizes the distinction between the sender and the receiver of signals and could be seen as the antithesis to contractual understandings of consent, where two clearly separated individuals with clearly defined wishes *come to an agreement* about how to proceed with their interaction. Here, individuality is rather dissolved to some extent, in favour of the process as such. To describe this process, Oskar uses the Swedish word "resonera", which is a Swedishization of the English verb resonate, or a verbification of the Swedish noun "resonans", which in both a musical sense and a figurative one can be translated as resonance.

If one considers that each step taken in the interplay that constitutes human interaction is extremely small – perhaps lasting for no more than a nanosecond – the question of whether consent is read before or after an action perhaps becomes almost a non-question. Sex instead becomes a seamless flow based on what psychologists call attunement, the interpersonal process of mutual affective accommodation, of "getting on the same wavelength" (Egidius n.d.). Achieving the relative self-dissolution that such an attunement process entails is for many people the ultimate sexual – "real", as Oskar says – experience, something that is in a certain amount of tension with the consent principle's assumptions about clearly defined individuals with clearly defined wills.

### **The transgressive pub milieu**

I have emphasized that consensual communication is always surrounded by certain conventions that help people read each other's intentions. There are both culturally dominant scripts and norms to follow and more relationship-specific agreements, as we saw in Stella and Nils's stories about the structures of signalling they developed with specific partners. Various tacit agreements also govern what people feel is okay or not okay to do without first obtaining consent.

The tacit agreements also vary between different environments in one and the same society. Lennart did not problematize the action of putting

his arm around the shoulders of a woman in the pub, while it is likely that he would be sceptical of such an act if it was carried out in the queue at the bank or at a beach. The pub environment is governed by special conventions which, partly linked to the fact that alcohol consumption loosens boundaries (Jozkowski & Wiersma 2015; Marcantonio, Willis & Jozkowski 2022), make bodily forthrightness more, if not accepted, then at least normalized. At the same time, in the pub environment and in other alcohol-based meeting places, there is a clear and highly gendered conflict between different ideas about what it is legitimate to do without first agreeing and about varying levels of respect for the relatively clear boundaries that exist. Lennart's arm around the shoulders was in no way intended to offend, but was instead a tentative attempt at contact. However, it is important to keep in mind the wider context in which the action takes place, where men's physical violations of women are normative in a way that can affect how women experience even milder forms of unsolicited physical contact. The profound – and completely normalized – gendered conflicts that exist in the heterosexual pub environment, which to a large extent aims to promote sexual bonds between women and men, is made clear by Julia's (25–30 years old, heterosexual) story about how she “maybe three times or so” hit men who grabbed her ass in pub or festival environments: “I don't go here for people to touch me”.

Oskar, who above talked about the sexual “resonance” between him and his wife, here tells me about something he did at a music festival a long time ago. The incident comes up when I ask him if he has any experiences of crossing someone else's line sexually.

*Oskar:* I think I was 17. I was at a festival and under the influence of alcohol and then I just walked into some tent where there was a concert going on and then I saw a very cute girl standing in front of me. She had her hand on one of those poles that hold up the tent and I put my hand on her hand. I don't remember if she took it off, I don't think so, and I just kissed her. I was in a kind of euphoric state and just “Oooh!” And then I stood still and she stood still for a while, but then she went into the crowd and I walked on. And that is something that I have thought about in retrospect. I was sort of in my little bubble where everything was awesome and amazing – that might well belong to this category that we're talking about now regarding young men who grope people at festivals and concerts. In retrospect, I can think: what the hell, maybe she wanted to listen to music, maybe she didn't want a guy to come along and just kiss her like that.

*Lena:* But did it take a long time before you started to think about that event in that way, that you started to problematize it?

*Oskar:* It was probably now, during this interview, I think, that it came up, after we started talking.

*Lena:* It's only then that you thought of it that way?

*Oskar:* Yes, from that perspective, slightly more grown-up, sober. That's just an event that had sort of...been.

*Lena:* It's very normal in a way, a "festival thing" like that...

*Oskar:* Yes, maybe.

*Lena:* ...which many might even see as part of what it's like to be at a festival.

*Oscar:* Yes.

It is only during the interview that Oskar conceptualizes his behaviour as a kind of transgression; before that, it was more of a neutral event. Oskar also puts his behaviour in the context of the many festival- and concert-related cases of rape and sexual harassment that were discussed in Swedish media some time before the interview, some time before #MeToo left its even stronger mark on discourses around consent. It is not improbable that he had been affected by the public discussion of these events in a way that contributes to him seeing his own behaviour in a new light. Having myself been to music festivals as a young person, I comment on the normality of Oskar's behaviour, not to trivialize it but to shed light on why he did not previously think of the incident as problematic. Given the high incidence of sexual violence at festivals, it is clear that there is something in festival culture as such that enables and/or encourages sexual abuse. Approaching a woman in the way Oskar did would have been unthinkable if it had happened in a different environment, for example during the day at a café. The looser boundaries between people's bodies that are often found at a music festival are partly associated with the euphoric feeling Oskar himself experienced and that can be experienced as something positive even by the person who is the subject of such an abrupt approach. But the dissolution of boundaries also entails significant risks – the festival-like state can undoubtedly get in the way of respect and sensitivity.

An obvious factor that comes into play here is alcohol and other intoxicants. In many of the interviews, the influence of alcohol and sometimes other drugs is raised as something that stands in the way of respecting others' – and even one's own – boundaries, as well as for the intuitive reading of signals that we have seen is such a central aspect in well-functioning dynamics of consent (Marcantonio, Willis & Jozkowski 2022). Stina (30–35 years old, heterosexual) talks about how her former boyfriend, who often overstepped her boundaries, "went further" when he drank and that she herself was not "as strong in her no" when she was drunk. Michael (30–35 years, gay) abused alcohol and drugs for a while and talks about the anxiety he felt when he "woke up between two guys, and I have no idea what has happened". Anette (60–65 years old, heterosexual), who for a large portion of her life abused drugs and socialized with other addicts, tells of countless unpleasant sexual

situations that she “just ended up in”. She says that when you are under the influence of drugs you “become something you are not”, and explains a large part of the abusive behaviour she was subjected to from men in terms of how “everything gets distorted” when one is under the influence of drugs. It is quite obvious that to the extent that well-functioning dynamics of consent are based on an ability to read another person’s signals and to respect them, intoxication and other ways of being under the influence stand in the way of a fully-fledged culture of consent. This fact stands in a worrisome, tense relationship with the fact that sex and substance abuse are culturally closely linked.

### Can a partner “grope”?

Both Lennart and Oskar use the word “grope” in the interview excerpts above. Oskar mentions “young men who grope at festivals and concerts” and wonders if his own behaviour can be classified as such groping. In Lennart’s usage of the term “grope” seems not to be as clearly negative, as he uses the word when talking about touching a woman’s face in a not necessarily nonconsensual or intrusive way. This contrasts with the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition groping as “[a]n act of touching or fondling a person clumsily or forcefully and in a sexual manner, typically (esp. in later use) without consent”. Perhaps Lennart’s use of the word can nevertheless be interpreted as a subtle and maybe slightly ironic expression of his awareness of the broader, conflict-laden context in which he, as a heterosexual man, is positioned when he touches a woman with clear sexual intentions.

The word “grope” is most often used when it comes to a person touching someone with whom they do not already have a sexual relationship. However, in the interview with Stella, who earlier in this chapter shared how she and her partner communicate consent, the word also comes up when it comes to touching in stable sexual relationships.

*Stella:* There is a feminist forum on Facebook that I am part of and it has happened that women write that their partner has a tendency to grope them. So these are heterosexual relationships. And it goes like this for me...I understand exactly what they mean, but for me it goes like this...Because I asked my partner: “Do you think I’m groping you when I touch you without telling you first?” Like if I pat her on the bum when she walks by or if I give her a kiss on the cheek just like that. And “Nah, I don’t think so”, she said. But she actually said once that she doesn’t like it when I squeeze her bum, but that was mostly because she found it unpleasant, not because...so I don’t do it anymore since she said that. But it becomes almost absurd with these discussions that are held on these forums, that their partners should ask about every little thing they do. Then it becomes so distorted.

Then you don't trust your partner. Then maybe you'll take it a step further, maybe you shouldn't be with that person. But at the same time, there were completely sick examples of guys who squeeze their [girlfriends'] genitals without any warning – and maybe it shouldn't be like that, then maybe it's gone a little too far. But for me it kind of goes like this...I would feel so uncomfortable if I didn't know I could hug my partner without asking permission first. Some things you ask first or in any case show in some way that now I'm going to give you a hug or a kiss. But it was so...But I also started to think, as I said, because I asked my partner if she thinks it's unpleasant that I squeeze her bum and then she said that's the only thing, otherwise it doesn't matter.

The movement of the word “grope” into the context of the stable sexual relationship raises interesting questions. The feminist impulse behind it goes far back in time. For a long time, in the legal sense, sexual violence in marriage did not “exist”, as marriage was seen as a contract that required sexual availability. Sweden was the first country in the world to make rape within marriage a criminal offence in 1965, which was an important move away from the assumption that as soon as a person enters into a voluntary sexual relationship with another person, they no longer have any sexual boundaries in relation to this person. The feminist Facebook users' labelling of their partners' unwelcome touching as “groping” is another step in challenging such assumptions.

Stella's reflection on the heterosexual women who thought their partners were “groping” them is ambiguous. On the one hand, she is visibly disturbed by these discussions. She herself is involved in the issue of consent, but thinks that the principle of consent has been taken too far here and she says that in a stable love relationship there must be a sense of trust that enables spontaneous physical actions. On the other hand, these discussions made her stop taking certain things for granted with her own partner, leading her to start a discussion that gave her important information from her partner that she probably would not have received otherwise.

In the discussions in the feminist online forums that Stella refers to, it almost seems as if the women who criticize their partners for groping make no distinction between sexual approaches from a partner and someone they have no sexual relationship with. At least it seems to be the assumed absence of such a distinction that bothers Stella. She talks about how if you have a problem with a partner touching you at all without first asking permission, then perhaps the trust that is necessary in a relationship is missing and for Stella this trust creates the space for you to approach your partner physically without needing to check first. However, it is not obvious where the boundary is for what type of approaches need to be “approved” before they

are carried out and which ones do not. As we saw above, when I ask Stella where her boundary is, she answers without hesitation that it is her partner's genitals – and based on that boundary she agrees with the Facebook writers' condemnation of the men who touch their partner's genitals without asking. However, even within the framework of stable relationships, there are great variations in what liberties one can take with each other's bodies without asking for permission in the moment. Suddenly touching a partner's genitals can surely in some relationships be experienced as legitimate and even welcome. The discussions in the Facebook forums show, however, that even in stable sexual relationships there can be clear conflicts about what bodily availability can be taken for granted.

Something worth noting is that it was only when Stella's partner was asked an explicit question about how she experienced Stella's unannounced touches that she expressed a bodily boundary that she had not previously articulated. One interpretation is that before she received the question, she had not reflected on the fact that the unpleasant touch was something she could ask to avoid, as she might have experienced it as a “natural” part of everyday life in a relationship. Another interpretation is that it can be perceived as difficult to tell a partner who has good intentions in seeking contact that that particular contact is not welcome. However, when Stella asked an explicit question about how the bodily contact was experienced, she showed that she was receptive to a setting of a boundary and a new space was opened up for her partner to communicate her needs.

### **Will I get elbowed or will she pull down her pants?**

We now return to the interview with Lennart to further investigate the question of what kinds of sexual acts are perceived as permissible without first checking, and what the consequences might be if the act is not welcome. During parts of the interview, Lennart talks about the dynamic he had with his ex-wife, and it becomes clear that he still feels some bitterness towards this woman and their relationship. Here, he talks about what might happen when she did not respond to his sexual invitations as he wished.

*Lennart:* For example, if she was standing washing dishes or brushing potatoes, I might come from behind like this and touch her breasts and thrust like this [thrusts his body a little forward], saying “Do you need help?” Then it's like an elbow like this [hits with elbow]. “Can't you see I'm busy!” [irritated].

*Lena:* So she got mad?

*Lennart:* Yes. But I've been in a situation like this with other women and then they kind of turned around and pulled down their pants.

There is an undercurrent of mockery in Lennart's stories about his ex-wife, and when he contrasts her attitude with the willingness of other women, it seems to serve the function of putting her down. His mocking and slightly bitter tone is clear here:

*Lena:* Did you take it to mean that she thought you had done something wrong, when you went at her like that?

*Lennart:* Yes...Since she wasn't prepared to put down that vegetable brush, dry her hands and turn around, she was markedly irritated and so she must have felt that I did something she didn't want. And I definitely felt that I had done something that she didn't want. But nothing could be done about that...it could be like that one time out of four maybe, out of four attempts I didn't get that reaction three times. And that one time, I couldn't figure out why. "Not now, can't you see I'm busy, we have to cook now, we have to put the kids to bed".

Of course it is not nice to receive an annoyed elbow from your wife when you try to seduce her. It is also quite clear that the bitterness Lennart expresses when he talks about the situation reflects a broader bitterness about a relationship that towards the end was not satisfactory for either of them. It is nonetheless striking that Lennart, in front of a consent researcher, speaks in such a mocking and irritated way about a woman who rejected him sexually. Lennart also does not show that he is aware of the irony of his complaining how she could not "put down that vegetable brush" and he shows no understanding of how the cascade of demands – including sexual ones – that heterosexual mothers often experience from children and partners, respectively, can have influenced her reaction that evening many years ago.

Perhaps one can also read into Lennart's statement a certain lack of respect for the fact that people's (women's) sexual desire is complex and does not follow a clear template. The frustration that Lennart expresses seems to revolve around the question: Other women have appreciated it when he has done that, as has his wife herself in most cases – *so why does she not do that now?* We can see here the problem with trying to fit human sexuality into different types of templates, where one action is expected to follow another and where the effect of an action one day is expected to be the same on another day. The principle of consent calls for a sensitivity to what the other person wants *right now* and nothing else.

At the same time, I want to explore what Lennart says about him doing the same thing with other women "and then they kind of turned around and pulled down their pants". The statement highlights how one and the same sexual act can be experienced in diametrically opposed ways depending on the "recipient's" perspective. Given that, according to Lennart's own comment,

he experienced this type of rejection at regular intervals and obviously had a hard time with it, one might ask why he did not move a little more cautiously in his approaches. I never asked Lennart about this. However, his way of approaching his wife fits relatively well with the heterosexual script that gives the man the role of the initiator and where a certain firmness in taking the initiative is seen as desirable or perhaps even necessary. To some extent, Lennart's bitterness about the situation can perhaps be interpreted as an effect of the dilemma that heterosexual men can find themselves in due to their role in the heterosexual script. On the one hand, they are expected to be pushy and not too "soft". On the other hand, the forceful initiative-taking entails a risk of being both forcefully rejected and blamed; if the approach does not go well, it can be perceived as offensive to the woman. The interview with Oskar sheds further light on that topic. He tells of two occasions when he accompanied women home from the pub and he explicitly asked if he could kiss them before doing so. In both cases, according to Oskar, it had a more or less triggering effect on the women, who showed in different ways that they would have preferred it if he had just gone ahead and kissed them. Here, however, it is important to be precise in interpreting the situation. These women's reactions should probably not be interpreted as a desire for men to just do what they want without making sure that it is welcome, but rather that they have the ability to sense their signals without having to ask outright.

### **The failed morning gift**

To some extent, Lennart writes himself into a male tradition of expressing resentment at what some men experience as women's mixed messages: one moment they are happy and horny because of men's advances, while the next moment they get angry. However, the uncertainty regarding how a physical advance will be received is not exclusively a problem for heterosexual men, even if, due to the way normative heterosexuality is structured, they are more likely to find themselves in that sort of position. Mui (20–25 years, bisexually identified, heterosexually active) has also experienced a sexual approach not turning out as she wished. Mui refers to herself as a person with a very strong sex drive. She has often been in situations where she wants to have sex while her (male) partner does not want to. We talk about what she might do to try to "excite" her partner in such cases, which brings us to an incident earlier in her life that contributed to making her cautious in her seduction attempts.

*Lena:* When you say you tried to make him horny, could it be that you started jerking him off or something like that, or what?

*Mui:* No, I never touched him like that. I never wanted to touch him directly on the genitals because it didn't feel right. It was more me massaging him or scratching his back or something like that, which I

know he enjoyed, to [laughs] entice him a little bit. But I never groped him like that.

*Lena:* You say it didn't feel right to touch his genitals. I think I understand what you mean, but can you tell me a little more, why it doesn't feel right?

*Mui:* Before him, there was a guy I slept with. I was 15–16 years old and had read on the internet that guys like being sucked off in the morning, as something to wake up to. But this guy wasn't too happy about it [laughs] and he got very angry. And then I felt that I had done something really wrong. So I couldn't just touch him on the genitals, but he has to touch me first, it feels like...so that I know it's allowed for me to touch him. Or that he...well, shows it, or that we're doing it.

We can start by stating that my opening question reveals that I myself do not see it as too controversial for a woman to touch a man's genitals, even though he has expressed that he does not want sex. In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at the gendered ideas that make this generally seem to be less problematic than if a man starts caressing a reluctant woman's genitals. The fact that I asked Mui if she would "jerk off" her partner to get him in the mood should not be interpreted as me thinking that this is acceptable behaviour. Still, it was such a touch that I pictured when Mui talked about making her partner excited, which perhaps shows that I myself am influenced by the gendered notions I referred to in the opening chapter, which make people disinclined to think about men as vulnerable in relation to women's sexual advances. I ask Mui to tell me a little more about her situation with the failed "morning gift".

*Lena:* You said he got really angry. What did he say? Why did he get angry?

*Mui:* I can imagine it was because it was very early in the morning [laughs]. And he didn't say he was angry but he said "Stop!" [angrily] and then he just turned around and I didn't really dare to talk to him about it. It was the first time I was sleeping with someone I wasn't in a relationship with. I don't know why I was trying to wake him up like that, I just thought...well, in the comments on that post on the internet there were so many positive responses from guys – "Oh, I wish my girl woke me up like that" – so maybe that's what made me see if I could do it so that then maybe he'd tell his friends that I'm great [laughs].

*Lena:* So it wasn't so much that you were horny yourself, but more that you wanted to do something good for him?

*Mui:* Mmm.

Mui's account of the men on the internet who write that they dream about being woken up by receiving oral sex contrasts significantly with her own experience of being met with outrage when she tried to realize this dream

scenario for a man. The idea of a “surprise blowjob” as an extraordinary *gift* strongly contradicts the experience of unwelcome intrusion that one can assume Mui’s sex partner had, given his reaction. What further adds to this contradiction is that Mui did not even perform the act because she herself was sexually aroused. Rather, she made an effort to do something “extra” that would make her value as a sex partner rise in the man’s view.

As I referred to in the opening chapter, many feminist scholars have analysed the grey-area nature of the boundary between sex and sexual abuse. I would like to suggest that one of the many reasons why the boundary can be so unstable is that it depends on people’s subjectivity, which is a highly fluid phenomenon. Both Lennart and Mui’s stories illustrate that one and the same act can be experienced as a gift or an intrusion, completely dependent on the perspective of the recipient. When a sexual act is initiated before it is clear what the “recipient’s” attitude towards it is, the outcome can therefore be very uncertain. Mui might have been able to solve the problem by talking to her partner beforehand about how he would feel about being surprised by oral sex when asleep. However, to the extent that the element of surprise was central to the positive effect she wished to create, that preparation would significantly remove the effect of the surprise. I do not know exactly what was said on the internet forum where men talked about their desire to be woken by oral sex, but I would guess that it is the unexpected nature of such an act combined with the fact that it requires no initiative whatsoever on the part of the man that makes it so exciting for these men. The fact that surprise and even being taken off-guard can be a pleasurable part of sex poses some problems for the principle of consent, if we think of it as suggesting that consent must always be obtained *before* an act is performed.

### **Consent: simple and utterly complex**

The participants describe the consent process as something both very simple and very complex. This duality is not necessarily a paradox. Human interaction generally occurs according to infinitely intricate patterns, consisting of a multidimensional interplay of information transfer that takes place so rapidly that we can only be aware of a fraction of what is happening. The organically arranged and largely unreflective signalling that takes place within dynamics of consent is difficult for the participants to describe in detail. Nevertheless, they are “ridiculously simple signs”, as Lennart puts it.

However, to the extent that consent is understood as something that must be strictly obtained *before* a sexual act is performed, we encounter certain problems. When the participants describe how consent is signalled and read, in most cases they are referring to the type of retroactive feedback process described by previous research, where a small step in the sexual interaction is followed by reading and adapting to the other person’s reaction (Beres

2010, 2014b; Humphreys 2004; Muehlenhard et al. 2016). That dynamics of consent are best understood as a continuous process complicates the question of when a new sexual act can be said to begin and so when renewed consent is required. The continuous process of consent in its ideal form is not so much a series of delimited actions as a relatively even flow, consisting of very rapid exchanges of signals, in which an adaptation to the other person's signals is continuously made. As long as a (new) sexual act is a fairly careful step in the sexual interaction and there is room to retroactively "correct" the interaction based on the other person's response, the question of whether consent is read before or after an act appears relatively irrelevant. What can stand in the way of the continuous reading and correction process are certain culturally constructed assumptions about what kind of action "naturally" follows another. In [Chapter 6](#), we will look more closely at how such sexual templates can make it difficult to interrupt or redirect a sexual act once it has begun.

Sexual scripts and conventions also create certain assumptions when it comes to what kind of physical touch you can give another person without first checking if it is welcome. The analysis in this chapter clarified that where these boundaries are drawn differs between different places and contexts and depending on the parties' relationship to each other (Willis et al. 2021). There are lots of tacit agreements about these boundaries that are held by most people. For example, most people take it for granted that it is unproblematic to kiss their partner on the neck while they are cooking without first checking that it is okay, while it would be unthinkable to do the same to a person standing in front of them in a queue at the till. At the same time, the analysis made it clear that in many situations, there can also be tensions between different people's expectations and assumptions, which means that what is perceived by one person as a neutral or otherwise unproblematic approach is experienced as overstepping by the other. The tacit "agreements" are simply not always real agreements.

Universal behavioural guidelines are of course not the solution to these problems, because sexual interactions, just like other human interactions, only acquire their meaning from the specific contexts in which they take place. Nor is it possible to make sure that no transgressions are committed by everyone always explicitly asking for permission before doing anything new in relation to another person. If that principle is taken to its extreme, it would be required, for example, that a person who wants to move their hand from a person's breast to their other breast would have to obtain an unequivocal consent to this before doing so. Even if this example seems extreme and absurd, it highlights the fact that in sexual interactions we can take a lot for granted, but that it is difficult to formally establish universal criteria for these assumptions because they always depend on culture and context. At the same time, the dependence on culturally bound systems of meaning creates a risk

of misunderstandings and misjudgements – because people take things for granted that *are* not given. *Rather than trying to eliminate that risk, we need to recognize it and manage it.* Continuously reading another person’s state of mind without relying on explicit and verbal communication is an art that people master to varying extents (Alcoff 2018), so even if it is described by some people as “ridiculously simple signals”, we need to be open to the risk of misjudgements (Muehlenhard et al. 2016).

The example of moving one’s hand from one breast to another also highlights how risk-minimizing consent communication taken to its extreme would in most cases stand in the way of the sexual dynamic itself. That idea of consent has been a rich source of material for comedians (Alcoff 2018). But there are less absurd cases, which show the same principle as being problematic. They point to a tension between, on the one hand, a risk-minimizing approach that involves ensuring you get the other person’s consent *before* an action is performed and, on the other hand, the positive charge that can be found in erotic surprise. In dominance sex of the kind Elias describes, the erotic effect of being caught off-guard is clearly accentuated and sought after, but the same principle is at work in the male dreams of being awoken by oral sex that Mui tried to realize. Perhaps it was also the case that the women who “turned around and pulled down their pants” when Lennart came from behind and pressed himself against them would have been less excited if he had advanced more carefully. A totally risk-minimized sexual interaction where no bold movements are made can make the sexual charge take a hit, as we saw in Oskar’s anecdotes about women’s dissatisfaction with his explicit request to kiss them. As I highlighted in my analysis of Lennart’s arm around the shoulders of women in the pub, it is also likely that for many people an overly direct and explicit question may be more uncomfortable to reject than a more physical approach, which shows that even if you explicitly try to find out the other person’s view, it is not necessarily insurance against someone “consenting” against their will.

I cannot emphasize enough that here I am not claiming that mutual consent is an impossible project. However, I want to advocate an unorthodox and non-perfectionist concept of consent that can harbour mistakes through a belief in the ability to correct and repair. The principle of obtaining consent as far as possible *before* an action is carried out should not be thrown overboard, but it should be accompanied by an acknowledgement that it is not always possible to realize it, which is why an equally important part of dynamics of consent is that the person who carried out an action is always open to the fact that they may have made a mistake and are prepared to repair and correct it. This requires continuous sensitivity and communication throughout the sexual interaction and a willingness on the part of both to manage – rather than to deny – the risk that they may have done something that the other person did not appreciate. A basic idea here is that the boundary between the

violating and the non-violating is not only determined by what happens before an action is carried out, but also by how the person relates to the response that their action arouses in the other person and what space there is for the other person to communicate that something did not feel right.

As it is not possible to completely eliminate the risk of doing something unwanted, I also want to highlight the importance of communication also taking place outside of the actual sexual interaction as it is taking place. Here I am thinking, among other things, of the type of communication that is standard among BDSM practitioners, where great effort is made to talk about each other's boundaries and desires before and after a sexual act, in order to minimize the risk of violations being committed during the sex itself. Such communication should not be limited to a BDSM context (Svensson & Chamberland 2015). In Stella's story, for example, we saw how her communication with her partner about how she felt about Stella touching her unannounced resulted in her receiving new, important information about her partner's boundaries. I also am thinking about the need for more collective discussions regarding sex and consent. It is a not unimportant factor that Stella's communication with her partner was a result of her taking part in such discussions on a feminist Facebook forum. In the same way, Oskar's reflection on his approach to a woman at a festival probably developed from the public discussion that had been ongoing about men's sexual violations in festival and concert environments. This book is also part of the collective communication about consent that can contribute not to creating universal boundaries between right and wrong, but rather to increased awareness and reflection about the unspoken and often unreflective assumptions and expectations that govern people's sexual behaviour.

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# 3

## SEDUCTION OR ASSAULT?

The word *seduce* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “to attract sexually”. Further definitions of the term, however, include “to persuade (a person) to engage, esp. for the first time, in sexual activity”, “to entice (a person, esp. one who is younger or less experienced) into having sex, by flirting, persuasion, etc.”, and “to induce (a woman or girl) to have non-marital sexual intercourse”. The word comes from Latin and originally means “to mislead” or “lead astray”. In the history and etymology of the word, one can thus discern the traces of a sexist and misogynistic sense of morality, which interprets a woman’s yielding to a man’s attempts at seduction in terms of falling for a temptation that she really should have resisted. This moral system also seems to assume that it is *difficult* to get a woman to acquiesce to having sex, because the woman’s role is to limit men’s naturally conditioned sexual actions. Therefore, seduction is inevitably associated with a certain amount of manipulation, and perhaps even coercion, on the part of the man.

For most people in Sweden and the rest of the Global North, sexual morality is today relatively relaxed, although far from completely. However, the idea of seduction does not rise and fall with a stale sense of sexual morality in which women’s sexuality is seen as so passive that special efforts are required to bring it to life. Seduction is an interesting concept from a consent perspective, as it implies that a person wants to have sex with another person whose desire is not there to begin with and must somehow be induced. It raises questions about how much manipulation is legitimate to apply in order to get the other person where you want them. Likewise, it raises questions about how much weight an initial sign of reluctance should be given – to what extent, if any, is it permissible to continue one’s seduction attempts after the other has

signalled disinterest or reluctance? As we will see, different opinions emerge in the interviews regarding the question of how much respect one should have for another person's initial signals of reluctance.

**Julia: "Then you've persuaded them until they actually want to"**

In my interview with Julia (25–30 years old, heterosexual), I ask her what it might be like "if one person wants to and the other doesn't", which brings her onto the theme of "persuading" someone to have sex.

*Julia:* Then it's usually...I know that I myself have managed to persuade guys [laughs]. If I want to have sex and they say they don't want to, it's sort of possible to persuade them.

*Lena:* How do you do it?

*Julia:* Probably in a jokey way. And guys have persuaded me too.

*Lena:* How do they do it then?

*Julia:* It's a little less jokey maybe [laughs], it has been...I don't know. But it's a bit more physical – "yeah, come on" and lots of kissing.

*Lena:* You say more physical. Do you mean that they are onto you erotically, that they are trying to...

*Julia:* Yes, but I can be like that too if I'm being completely honest. But somehow, even if you nag and succeed in persuading someone to have sex, it's clear that...then you have persuaded them until they actually want to. After all, there are other situations where it's persuading sex or nagging sex and the other person just lies there and doesn't like what you're doing. But say I'm with a guy and he doesn't want to have sex and then maybe I try to... turn him on [laughs] and then if I notice that he's still not engaged – because I think you do notice – then I wouldn't want to have sex. That would be no fun.

*Lena:* How quickly do you notice it then, how long have you worked to get him turned on, before...has it sometimes been the case that it hasn't worked out and so you've backed off?

*Julia:* Yes. But if it doesn't work out, I think you notice that pretty quickly and then you give up.

*Lena:* And what you're doing to get him turned on, could it be that you're caressing him, kissing him?

*Julia:* Mm.

*Lena:* Touching him on the genitals too?

*Julia:* Yes, maybe if you're already in bed, say you wake up in the morning together and I want to and he says, "Nah, I don't have time" or something. Then it can be a bit of teasing, "Oh yes, we'll have time" [laughs], and then he might suddenly also think it's fun and then it becomes, "Okay, we'll hurry".

*Lena:* But it's interesting, he says, "No, I don't have time". Maybe you can say then that he actually wants to?

*Julia:* Yes, exactly.

*Lena:* But is it different if he were to say "I don't want to"? Has it happened that someone has been clearer about how he doesn't want it but you have still been able to turn him on?

*Julia:* Yeah, it has probably happened. I'm having a hard time thinking of a specific situation...but you might ask, "Why not?" Well, but I think that if he really doesn't want to, then he probably won't stay there and instead will get up and do what he wants to do. Or he could turn over and fall asleep or, you know.

Julia uses the word "persuade", but makes it clear that she is not referring to the type of persuading sex or nagging sex where one person, because of the other person's nagging, gives in without really wanting to. In Julia's case, it is rather about getting a partner to change his mind, by making him sexually excited. In contrast to Mui and Stella's position of never touching someone's genitals without first "getting permission", Julia tells us that touching her partner's genitals is something she can do to get her partner excited after his initial no. At the end of the interview excerpt above, she says that "if he really doesn't want to, then he probably won't stay there and instead will get up and do what he wants to do". Here one can say that she applies the opposite of the principle of caution that is described below by other interview participants. For Julia, it is not enough for her partner to say no – for his no to really be perceived as definite, something more is required. This places high demands on the partner's autonomy and can be contrasted with the principle offered in the new sexual offences law, according to which a person, if they are not *certain* that the other wants to have sex, must make sure of this in some way, such as by asking. Julia makes it clear that she would never behave that way with a new partner, but only with a person with whom she has a steady sexual relationship.

*Julia:* If it's a guy I'm dating or together with then it's like this...I like having sex with this guy and I know that, and he knows that too, so then it's not as strange as...yeah, that you have sex with each other. But when it's the first time, then you don't know each other well enough to be able to say, "Yes, you do, you want to have sex, come on" and just keep going. If it's a guy I don't know, I don't think I'd nag him like that. I think I'd think, well, okay, maybe he doesn't want to be with me more.

How should Julia's account be interpreted? One interpretation is that the men she "persuaded" were people with whom she had a special bodily

relationship, where their sexual familiarity has relaxed the boundaries between their bodies. In such a relationship, it is not a big deal when one person puts their hand on the other's genitals, even though the latter has expressed a reluctance to have sex. The trust and their relaxed bodily boundaries create a space for a certain "carelessness" with each other, which may well be part of a positive form of intimacy. At the same time, there is something compromising in Julia's story, which explains her expression "if I'm being completely honest". Julia presents the dynamic as something mutual, which is not determined by her and her partner's gender. But it is interesting to reflect on how we would read Julia's story if she had been a man telling us about his behaviour towards female partners. How would we then, for example, interpret the statement "if [she] really doesn't want to, then [she] probably won't stay there and instead will get up and do what [she] wants to do"? We are used to viewing women as much more vulnerable to men's pressures than vice versa. To what extent is Julia's behaviour and reasoning influenced by dominant cultural notions of men as strong and autonomous and of women's sexual expressions as non-threatening to men? I try to raise the issue with Julia:

*Lena:* But you don't think it's ever been the case that some guy has agreed to it to make you happy or because he thinks it's expected of him?

*Julia:* Well, I don't know, it's really hard to know. I hope it's not like that [laughs]. But no, I can't imagine that.

*Lena:* Because you feel like you have a pretty good sense of where the other person is at? That you can tell if he is...

*Julia:* The situations I'm thinking of were with three guys where I knew what kind of relationship I had with them. I knew them well enough that I would notice, I think, if they didn't want to or if it wasn't good for them too.

Julia returns here to the importance of her having a stable relationship with the men she pressured. In line with the themes raised in the previous chapter, she refers, as a consequence of my leading question, to an ability to sense her partner's signals and needs. In the interview, she never reflects on the cultural assumptions that exist about men's sexual invulnerability and how they may have influenced her own approach to her partners' initial boundary-setting.

I will soon let Stina's story shed further light on the question of how this gender aspect can play a role when it comes to respecting the expressed boundaries of others. First, I just want to highlight the fact that when Julia talks about "persuading", she seems to be referring to a spectrum of different experiences that involve varying degrees of pressure. Towards the end of our conversation about this theme, it becomes clear that the type of dynamic that

she initially talked about under the heading of “persuading” might not actually be called “persuading” – as Julia herself realizes – but rather is about the processual character of sexual interactions.

*Julia:* Say I’m with someone and I’m in love with him and I might not be thinking that I want to have sex right now but then he comes along and sort of hugs me, kisses me...then it’s easy to just, then you go along, like – “Oh, here you are, how nice”. So I don’t know if I see it as persuading.

*Lena:* It’s more that it’s a process...

*Julia:* Mm.

*Lena:* ...in which you are influenced by the other person.

*Julia:* Yes, because it’s not a switch you flip like this, bang, now both of you are horny at the same time.

Julia’s last sentence – “it’s not a switch you flip like this, bang, now both of you are horny at the same time” – is key here. It points to the fact that sexual desire, which is typically the driving force behind a person’s willingness to have sex, is not something that necessarily exists *before* a sexual interaction takes place. Instead, that desire can be a product caused by the other person’s bodily proximity and sexual actions (Alcoff 2018; Cahill 2014). Based on such an understanding of sexual interactions, another possible interpretation of Julia’s account is that her partner’s or her own initial rejection is a signal that sexual desire is currently lacking, but that this is combined with signs suggesting an openness to having sex if the desire should arise.

### **Stina: “I thought he probably wanted to anyway”**

In the interview with Stina (30–35 years old, heterosexual), the same theme comes up. Most of the interview is about Stina’s experiences of assault and unwanted sex in a previous, long-term relationship, something I discuss in more detail in the next chapter. Towards the end of the interview, however, we talk about her sexual experiences after this destructive relationship and the question arises about how it has been for Stina when she has wanted to have sex but her partner was unwilling.

*Stina:* I had a shorter relationship and once he said “Stina, I can’t do it anymore” or something like that, like “I have chafing”. And I...well, I didn’t accept it, and I continued to caress him so that he then wanted to have sex. So in that case I have...and this was before I had processed all that with my ex, I think, and that was what I had kind of learned. So that time maybe you could say that *I* did that, really. Or at least that I was nagging.

*Lena:* He said “I can’t do it anymore” – so it sounds like you’d already had sex and wanted to have sex again?

*Stina:* Yes, exactly, we had had sex maybe three times and I wanted to have sex a fourth time [laughs]. I’ve never been as turned on by a person as this guy.

*Lena:* So then you caressed him.

*Stina:* Mm.

*Lena:* On his dick?

*Stina:* Yes, because it wasn’t like this “Oh, no, no”, but it was more that he laughed and said that he couldn’t do it and so I was just like, “Yeeesss, you can!” and he was “No, I have chafing, can’t we do it tomorrow instead?” So he wasn’t like this “No!” But he said no – or he said “I can’t do it anymore” or something like that.

*Lena:* But then it went pretty quick to get him singing from the same hymn sheet?

*Stina:* Yes. And then it was probably him who in some way, it wasn’t like I sat down on him.

*Lena:* He was active?

*Stina:* Yes.

Early on in her account, Stina kind of morally condemns her own action of continuing to caress a partner who had signalled that he did not want to. It emerges during our conversation that she had not previously thought of the incident as problematic and it is with some discomfort that she realizes that she was in a way doing the same thing to this partner as her previous partner did to her: pushing the person into having sex. The behaviour she describes is similar to Julia’s and it is an interesting difference that while Julia does not seem to think that she has done anything wrong, Stina is weighed down by a certain guilt. One explanation she gives is that she had “learned” from her long-term destructive relationship that you do not have to respect a partner’s no.

*Lena:* But in retrospect, what do you think...

*Stina:* It’s actually the first time I’ve thought about it, now that I’ve said it. I remember getting him to want it again, but I’ve never actually thought...I feel a little ashamed now that I think about it [laughs], in light of what I just said about my ex so now I feel a little bit like “Oh, God”. I probably thought that he probably wanted to anyway, well, I probably thought so then, I did. But now in retrospect, I think that I should have just stopped because he said no.

Stina says that she feels ashamed of the blind spot in herself that caused her to continue her sexual acts with a man who at least initially was unwilling. She interprets the blind spot as a product of the lack of boundaries that

prevailed in her previous relationship. Like Julia, however, she does not reflect on whether it mattered that she is a woman and the person whose initial no she disrespected was a man.

While Stina says in the interview excerpt above that she was somehow wrong to insist on having sex with a man who initially expressed reluctance, her position becomes more ambivalent further into our conversation. I emphasize that I think it is interesting that she shares a story that is based on “reversed gender roles”, in that she, as a woman, had the goading role in respect to a hesitant man. I also share a personal experience about a time when I did not respect a man’s expression of reluctance and I admit that I also had not reflected on that situation as potentially problematic, although I did have a hint of it.

*Lena:* Now that you’re talking about this, I’m thinking of a similar thing I did with a guy. He was a bit like this, “No, but I have to go to work now” [carefully, cautiously] and like that, a polite guy sort of.

*Stina:* Yes. And in and of itself, that has happened often, but I think that that is often sometimes part of the foreplay, that you might say it even though some part of you...yeah.

*Lena:* Yes, but how do you determine that difference then?

*Stina:* Yeah, it’s difficult. I also think that it gets very difficult for men if they have an erection, as then it becomes, “But you’ve got an erection, you definitely want to have sex with me”. It must be, I think, difficult for a guy then if he doesn’t want to.

Here Stina can be said to suddenly shift gears, when she emphasizes that a mild expression of reluctance can be “part of the foreplay”. She also highlights that a man’s *bodily* readiness to have sex is so visible, implying that if she succeeds in stimulating a man to erection, she usually takes it as a sign of his willingness. At the same time, she does not seem to see physical arousal as incompatible with reluctance, as she says it must be hard for a guy with an erection if he does not want to have sex. I will shortly return to the relationship between a person’s *sexual arousal* on the one hand and their *will/consent* on the other. First, however, I will dig deeper into Stina’s idea that a mild no can be part of foreplay and into her thoughts on where the boundary is drawn between legitimate and illegitimate pressure.

*Stina:* When I say no sometimes, I might say no because I don’t want to, but if the guy then continues, you can still get the urge [laughs] and want to. And my first no was actually a real no – like I’m not in the mood or whatever – but then you’ve been persuaded by the foreplay and you get the desire to anyway. And that’s a question, because my first no was actually a real no, but then it turned out that I wanted to do it myself.

Stina describes the same process as Julia and, like her, uses the word “persuade”. It is about not initially being in the same zone as a partner, but how this can change if their partner continues their seduction attempts. She describes it as something relatively unproblematic, although towards the end she raises the idea that there is a problematic aspect in that her “first no was actually a real no”. In the following excerpt, when she revisits the situation with the man who said he could not do it anymore, her ambivalence is still there, even though she emphasizes the problematic nature of her behaviour.

*Stina:* I’m thinking about this situation that I talked about where I was the one who kept going. Then it became quite obvious that he thought it was nice [laughs] after a while too, but I...I didn’t listen there. And then it was about how I...well, that’s so hard, I don’t know what else to say about it [laughs].

*Lena:* You say “It was about how...” – was there something you were going to say?

*Stina:* I think that the relationship I’m talking about, where I crossed the line, it was a very sexual relationship, we had sex practically all the time. So then I assumed that he wanted to, even though he said, “I can’t do it anymore”. Well, he’s just a bit tired, it’ll pass, stuff like that...But that’s not really an excuse. I can hear how it sounds now in retrospect [laughs].

*Lena:* When you say “That’s no excuse”, do you mean that it’s problematic to try to excite a person who said no?

*Stina:* Yes, since I myself have experienced not being listened to, I am sensitive to such things. So now if I were to meet someone, I’d be really upset if he kept going after I said no, because I’ve been through these things.

To my direct question, Stina answers unequivocally that it is wrong to continue sexually caressing someone who has said that they do not want to have sex – even if the caresses result in the latter becoming sexually excited and thinking it is “nice”. Still, Stina’s attitude continues to be ambivalent. In an email conversation I had with her after the interview, I asked her to elaborate on what she means by her idea that saying no can be part of the foreplay. She replied: “What I mean by it being part of the foreplay is the ‘teasing’ or ‘pretending’ thing. But that’s usually when you know each other well. And sometimes it’s what we said during the interview: that maybe you weren’t ‘on’ from the start but got that way as it went on”.

Here, Stina highlights two different processes: firstly, the phenomenon of *token resistance* (Muehlenhard & Peterson 2005; Muehlenhard et al. 2016), addressed in the introductory chapter, and secondly, when a genuine no can

be transformed into a yes through the partner's continued efforts. However, these different processes mixed together for Stina in the short follow-up telephone interview I conducted with her after our email exchange to get a better picture of how she thinks.

*Lena:* I take it that you don't think it's really okay to try to seduce someone who has said no. Is that right?

*Stina:* Well, yes... [hesitation]. But it is this thing about how it can sometimes be part of the foreplay, that you say "I have to go to work" or something. Not that you say "No!" [determined] but more [talks "weakly"] "Well, I have an appointment with the dentist". Obviously it could be part of the...or I think it could be part of the foreplay as well.

*Lena:* In what way can it be part of the foreplay? That you're teasing?

*Stina:* Yes, exactly. Or partly that you're teasing, but I also think it could be that I am not really in the mood and therefore say no because I *want* to get in the mood. Like, I want the guy to *get* me in the mood. I'm thinking it's nice to have sex, but right now I don't feel like it, but if I say something like that, the guy can make me want to have sex.

*Lena:* So that "Well, I have to go to work" becomes like an invitation to him to try a little harder?

*Stina:* Yes. Exactly that. And that is very difficult, that is, from a moral view or where do you draw the line? You can feel it a little bit. With my [former boyfriend who didn't respect the boundaries], it was pretty obvious that I didn't want to, but with other guys, there was never any discussion about it. If I've said no, it's been no, but if I've said no in that way, a little more beseeching, it's been obvious that it's not a real no, so to speak. But it's hard to...there aren't any... My ex-boyfriend could of course claim that my nos were part of the foreplay "because we always had sex afterwards so she must have wanted it".

*Lena:* But would you say that it is simply about some kind of feeling, that you can read the other person?

*Stina:* Yes, I would say so. I can't find any other answer and it's not a good answer, really.

As I touched on in the opening chapter, the idea of (women's) "token resistance" is a sensitive subject from a consent perspective (Beres 2010), as it can contribute to legitimizing a lack of respect for signals of unwillingness. However, Stina's story makes it clear that this idea of token or feigned resistance cannot be dismissed as a patriarchal myth – it is a dynamic that actually exists. Stina reflects on the problem that there are no clear, formal

criteria that can be applied to distinguish a feigned no from a “real no”. At the same time, in line with the theme of the previous chapter, she is aware that it is still easy to make the distinction in practice, by reading the other person in a subtle way. Stina says that an initial no can sometimes be an expression of the fact that “I am not really in the mood and therefore say no because I *want* to get in the mood. Like, I want the guy to *get* me in the mood”. I see this as a core sentence, which I also think can serve as a description of the mechanism that is operative in the “persuading” dynamic Julia describes. The formulation points to the complexity of desire itself, where a person can sometimes “want to want” – which in psychology is called *second-order desire* (Cahill 2014: 314) – and can want help from another person to transform their bodily state and state of mind. This duality can then be expressed by a mild no accompanied by certain signals that point in a different direction. Given this complexity, the concept of “token resistance” is potentially obtuse, as it is based on a dichotomy between wanting and wanting that does not match reality (Muehlenhard & Peterson 2005).

In traditional chastity cultures in which women’s sexual desires are taboo, women’s feigned resistance is almost a necessary component of the heterosexual game. Stina’s sexual experiences have taken place far away from such notions, but she nevertheless points out that the dynamics surrounding this feigned resistance have a certain patriarchal foundation.

*Lena:* You said that you can say “Nooo...”, and that it becomes like an invitation to him to help you get in the mood. Is there anything else you think about it?

*Stina:* Yes, one thing is that I think there are many people who got that thing from porn, I mean guys mostly, I think. They get horny doing that thing because in the world of porn – I mean, I don’t watch porn at all myself, but I’ve gotten the sense when I’ve met men who watch porn that it’s like some kind of...rape romance is maybe too much to say but you know this thing where you have to sort of *just take* the girl like this and so maybe they get hot from trying to persuade someone a little bit.

Stina herself raises the connections here that exist between the dynamics surrounding women’s feigned resistance and a violence-inducing culture that is based on overcoming women’s resistance. It can be added that women’s transference of responsibility for their own desire and arousal onto men further contributes to the blurring of the boundary between seduction and assault, as it signals that the man is the one who is to control the sexual interaction. When Stina brings up the patterns she sees as being conditioned by men’s consumption of pornography, I ask if she herself can get turned on by

this dynamic, whereupon it turns out that for Stina the dynamics surrounding feigned resistance are clearly gendered.

*Lena:* But can you get turned on by it too? And by that I mean that you are in the classic female role.

*Stina:* So...yes...I don't get turned on by *me* nagging for sex. But like I said, I can be turned on by someone trying to persuade me. Not in such a way that they force themselves on me of course, but more that they... kiss me extra, like that, you know. When I like the idea of sex but am not in the mood, and he makes me want it. I can probably get turned on by that.

*Lena:* Can you find the words to say what it is in that that can be arousing?

*Stina:* Well, that the guy can *get* me turned on, simply put. Even though you're not, that he somehow succeeds. And maybe that he goes to the trouble somehow [laughs].

Stina manages here to put into words the allure in what could be described as a very mild form of dominance or power play. The component she first identifies is that the man's ability to turn her on despite her initial lack of desire is exciting in and of itself. I interpret this as showing her a kind of erotic power and competence in the man, which she finds attractive. But Stina also mentions another factor – “that he goes to the trouble”. Here, I would suggest that the fact that he persists in his attempts despite her saying no works as a form of validation, as proof of Stina's *irresistible* attractiveness. This is a mechanism discussed in detail by one of my other interview participants, Elias, which I analyse in [Chapter 8](#).

On the one hand, Stina problematizes the “rape romance” that might lie behind this type of dynamic, but, on the other hand, she talks about the positive aspects of being seduced in this way. It may seem alarming that the line between the violent and the desirable here becomes so unclear – at least on a *discursive* level (cf. [Muehlenhard et al. 2016](#)). At the same time, Stina seems to think that *in practice* it is easy for her partner to differentiate between a non-negotiable no, which should be immediately respected, and signals of reluctance that are actually an invitation to continued seduction. When talking about the ex-partner who repeatedly overstepped her boundaries over the course of many years, she says he certainly could have used the same words as she does, claiming that he saw her no as an invitation to further attempts. At the same time, she seems convinced that his violations were not really based on him misunderstanding her signals, but rather on a lack of respect for what she wanted. In line with what previous research ([Kitzinger & Frith 1999](#); [Muehlenhard et al. 2016](#)) has put forth, it seems that Stina's ex-partner, rather than having really misunderstood Stina, could conceivably defend his behaviour by falsely referring to misunderstandings.

Meanwhile, Stina's ambivalence does not seem to be exclusively related to the difficulty of discursively demarcating right from wrong. Regarding the situation when she ignored a partner's initial signals of reluctance, she condemns her own behaviour during the interview, but at the same time she says that it was "quite obvious that he thought it was nice" and describes in positive terms similar situations where she herself was the one who was "converted".

A theme that arises in Stina's account and to some extent in Julia's, is how to conceive of the relationship between consent and sexual arousal/lust. An underlying assumption in much of what Julia and Stina say seems to be that if you "succeed" in getting someone sexually aroused, then that person has more or less consented to having sex. As Julia says, sexual desire is not something that just happens by someone flipping a switch, so the process of one person making an effort to get the other person to feel sexual desire can be an important part of a sexual interaction. Stina suggests that there are subtle ways to communicate to a partner that it is precisely this kind of effort that is desired. But both Julia and Stina also seem to think that it can be legitimate to try to convert a genuine no into a yes through further seduction attempts.

Ann Cahill (2014), who has explored in philosophical terms where the line should be drawn between ethical and unethical sex, emphasizes that to the extent that sex is a process of interaction, it cannot be an ethical requirement that sexual desire *precede* a sexual interaction. She also stresses that such an understanding of sex could be accused of having a masculinist bias, given that it is more common for women than men to need more stimulation to become aroused (Basson 2000; Tiefer 2001). At the same time, Cahill claims: "That desire can be incited by a sexual interaction does not guarantee that desire is always desired" (2014: 314). Without arriving at an unambiguous answer, she asks which ethical boundaries should be drawn regarding cases where one partner is "consciously attempting, through sexual interaction, to instigate desire with a partner not currently experiencing it" (*ibid.*).

There is an ambiguity regarding the status of sexual pleasure and arousal in relation to consent. Given the central place of bodily communication in regard to dynamics of consent, on the one hand it is common – and in many cases reasonable – to interpret signs of pleasure and arousal as expressions of consent (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). On the other hand, sexual pleasure and arousal are not the same thing as willingness. Even victims of rape can experience sexual arousal and pleasure *against their will*, often making the experience even more traumatizing (Alcoff 2018; Cahill 2014). One of this study's participants, Elias (30–35 years old, bisexual), for example, tells of an assault in which he experienced physical pleasure and an orgasm against his will.

A final excerpt from the interview with Stina also highlights the problem of elevating bodily pleasure and desire to a value that can trump the principle

of respecting someone's will. When she was younger, Stina often found it difficult to orgasm and says that when men became too fixated on her having an orgasm, it felt too pressurized. She explores such an example with a former boyfriend.

*Stina:* He was going to make me come and he was really going at it and I finally said, "That's enough now". And then he said, "Stina, lie still! Relax!" [upset, determined]. It was obvious that I didn't want to, it was enough, I, like, soon had no feeling left.

I find this example interesting, because even though Stina tells us that this man had some flaws generally when it came to respecting her integrity, I'm convinced that it was the very fact that he wanted to give Stina pleasure that for him warranted his quite violent verbal communication in the situation recounted. To angrily and firmly tell a person to lie still when they express a desire to end a sexual act would probably be perceived as much more unacceptable if the act had not been focused on giving her an orgasm.

### **Nils: "Even if your head doesn't want to, your body gets going"**

In the previous chapter, we met Nils (30–35 years old, heterosexual), who rarely feels the desire to have sex, and who developed an intricate signalling system with an ex-girlfriend that allowed him to reject her sexual advances almost imperceptibly. During the interview, we also got into the question highlighted above of whether it is legitimate for one party to try to convert another person's initial no into a yes through various forms of erotic stimulation. We got onto this theme when talking about the sliding scale that Nils raised in the previous chapter, where "want to" and "don't want to" may appear with varying levels of strength and clarity. In the interview, I returned to Nils's "wanting scale" to raise the question of how the degree and type of wanting can vary during a sexual interaction.

*Lena:* It was interesting, that scale you talked about.

*Nils:* Things are not black or white.

*Lena:* No. I've talked to other people about this, that maybe you don't want sex at first, but you agree to it, and then after they've been doing it for a while, they want it.

*Nils:* Exactly. I think that's just what a lot of these discussions are about. If you are right at that line of "I don't want to, I'm tired" and then your partner insists and turns you on, you slip into "Yes, now I want to have sex, now we're on" and then you have sex. I think it's a really interesting discussion about where the line is when that's not okay.

*Lena:* So what do you think? Do you think it's okay in a situation where someone says "No, I don't want to" for the partner to continue to try to turn on the person who said no?

*Nils:* I don't think it's okay for the partner to keep trying to turn the person on, *but:* if you say no first, you can change your mind, right?

*Lena:* But that's the question, trying to get someone horny.

*Nils:* It's such a huge grey area with so many ifs and buts. I don't think it's okay for one partner to try to turn the other one on, but if the other one gets horny and they have sex, then that's okay. So it's a little bit... it's a little bit like shoving or pushing someone over that line, okay then let's go.

*Lena:* Has it ever happened to you that your partner wanted it and you didn't and then she managed to get you going?

*Nils:* Yes, that happens. I'm usually somewhere between indifferent and don't want to, but when someone you like starts to press against you, touch you...Even if your head doesn't want to, your body gets going.

Nils is somewhat unclear in his opinions here, which probably reflects the grey-area nature of the subject itself. On the one hand, he clearly says that he thinks it is wrong to try to turn on someone who says they do not want to. On the other hand, he talks in non-judgemental terms about "shoving or pushing someone over that line", that is, the line between the absence versus the presence of the sexual desire that makes you want to do it. Nils's statement that "even if your head doesn't want to, your body gets going" sums up our earlier discussion about the relationship between one's will and one's bodily desire. For him, judging by his wording, there may be a clear gap between his mental will and his bodily desire, something that can also shed light on Stina and Julia's stories about turned-on boyfriends. When Stina takes her partner's erection as evidence that he wants to have sex, it may, as she herself suggests, very well be an incorrect assumption. In the next chapter, I will go into more detail about Nils's experiences of agreeing to have sex with women because he assumed that it was expected of him as a man, something that can offer additional insight into Julia and Stina's stories about seducing unwilling men.

### **Oskar: "I manipulated her into sex by exciting her"**

Oskar (35–40 years old, heterosexual), who we also met in the previous chapter, touches on the issue of getting a person to change their mind from no to yes by actively trying to make them sexually excited. When I ask him if he has ever crossed another person's sexual boundaries, he tells me, among other things, about a one-night stand he had with a woman many years ago.

The woman wanted to be kissed and caressed but indicated that she did not want penetrative intercourse.

*Oskar:* In that case, I manipulated her into having sex. She said she didn't want intercourse, but I turned her on so much that she wanted it. And that's a bit like...I knew I could do it and I did it and it was only for my own pleasure, because she was completely uninteresting to me. I thought she was pretty but it was like totally...it was purely for my own pleasure to conquer and have sex with this girl. So there, somehow, I manipulated her into having sex with me by exciting her.

*Lena:* She didn't want [penetrative] intercourse but did she want to be caressed, petted and stuff like that?

*Oskar:* Yes, we were lying in bed making out and messing with each other.

*Lena:* And you turned her on by caressing her and stuff like that?

*Oskar:* Yes, that's how I remember it.

*Lena:* And she was totally on board with that?

*Oscar:* Yes.

It is worth noting that Oskar brings up the example when I ask him if he crossed a woman's boundaries sexually. Like Oskar, Stina is self-critical regarding her sexual "manipulation" of her former partner's consent. But for her, the critical reflection is something that arises while we are talking about the incident, while Oskar is already aware that he did something wrong in the situation he describes. With the knowledge that, as we have seen above, it is far from evident to morally condemn the type of behaviour Oskar is describing, I approach his self-criticism from a different perspective.

*Lena:* But if she got horny then?

*Oskar:* Yes, she did, obviously.

*Lena:* Why do you feel bad about it then?

*Oskar:* I don't know, maybe I shouldn't. Maybe because I have a tendency to beat myself up, say that I'm a bad person. Maybe I don't need to feel bad. I don't know. But I sort of manipulated...The guilt lies in me manipulating. I feel that I did. I knew what I was doing.

*Lena:* You wanted to get her where you wanted to have her.

*Oskar:* Exactly. My sense or my feelings were like "I want to have this". And I have a pretty good sense of how to do it and I was in that feeling and that desire.

*Lena:* So it's not that you turned her on against her will, but rather that it was precisely your manipulative approach that was the problem?

*Oskar:* Yes.

When I question Oskar's self-condemnation, I focus on the sexual pleasure that the woman, as it appears, got to experience thanks to him. After a re-evaluative reflection, Oskar still feels that he did something wrong and that the key word is "manipulation". The manipulative element lies in the fact that he approached the woman with a clear intention of what he wanted to do with her, which he could make happen by performing actions that he knew would make her want what he wanted. He did not care about her as a whole person, but only as a sexual object, who was there to satisfy his desires. Later in the interview, I return to this story, to get a clearer picture of the incident and Oskar's reasoning about his responsibility, especially given the ambivalence he expressed when I challenged his reasoning that he had done something wrong.

*Lena:* You were a bit ambivalent before about whether you had done something wrong or not.

*Oskar:* Yes, that's right. No, I don't know if I feel like I did something wrong, it's more, it feels like it's somewhat rotten behaviour. Because it was only for selfish reasons, because if it hadn't been selfish, I would have just gone along with her wishes.

*Lena:* But would you be able to think that she felt good and had a nice time thanks to you too?

*Oskar:* Hm.

*Lena:* Because you think it was good for her, don't you?

*Oskar:* Yes, it sounded that way.

*Lena:* But you have the feeling that it was a little rotten, so is there something about respecting her integrity, that that's where you went wrong?

*Oskar:* Mm, exactly.

Here, Oskar uses the words "selfish" to further explain what he considered to be, if not wrong, then at least "rotten" in his behaviour. He says earlier that he was not interested in the woman as a person, and clarifies here that his attempts to make her feel good were not driven by concern for her, but rather stemmed from his own selfish desires. Certainly the *consequence* seems to have been that it was good for her, but Oskar's underlying *intention* was selfish and her pleasure was rather a means for his pleasure than something of value in its own right (cf. [Held 1976](#)).

Oskar's rejection of all forms of manipulative behaviour stands in stark contrast to the kind of male, heterosexual culture perhaps most clearly expressed in Neil Strauss's best-selling book *The Game* ([Strauss 2005](#)). In the book, Strauss treats women as objects that men, through various manipulative techniques, such as intentionally seeking to lower a woman's self-esteem, can win over. This instrumentalizing approach can be

understood in terms of Michael Schwalbe's (1992) concept of *analytical role-taking*, which he argues characterizes *the masculinist self* (also see Gunnarsson 2014b). Role-taking is a concept from symbolic interactionism that, simply put, means trying to see things from another person's perspective. Schwalbe contends that analytical role-taking in a heterosexual context involves men relating to women as technical rather than moral problems, where the goal is to "overcome women's resistance as objects" (1992: 42). Just as in so-called *receptive role-taking*, analytical role-taking requires an ability to step into the other person's situation and adapt to their feelings and needs. However, while receptive role-taking is based on *feeling with* the other person, analytical role-taking means relating to the other's inner world as a resource that can be used or an obstacle that must be overcome in order to get the person where one wants them. Even if the manipulation Oskar talks about can be said to be very mild compared to the techniques described in *The Game* – where, among other things, active efforts to lower women's self-confidence are advocated as a way of getting them interested – the basic principle is the same: relating to the woman is not done out of respect for her as a human being but out of a selfish desire to steer her in a certain direction. Here we are clearly moving beyond a discussion of consent in its conventional, legally informed sense, towards more profound ethical questions about how we should relate to our fellow human beings.

What Oskar's reasoning also highlights is that a behaviour that involves getting another person to willingly agree to have sex comes in different versions with different moral statuses. For him, it was mainly his calculating, instrumentalizing approach that felt "rotten". If the process of getting the woman to change her mind had instead been guided by his regard for her as a human being and by a well-founded assessment that it would do her good to be "pushed over the edge", to borrow Nils's words, one can imagine that his self-criticism would not have been as strong.

### **Pernilla: "I let her take the step instead of me suggesting sex"**

Julia emphasized that there is a difference between trying to persuade a slightly reluctant steady partner into having sex and doing the same thing with a person you do not know very well. However, this contextual factor cannot be translated into a simple question of a steady relationship versus a casual/new partner, but is in fact more complex than that. Pernilla and Gunnar, for example, talk about having steady relationships where they would never think of continuing their seduction attempts if their partner shows signs of not wanting to. Pernilla (30–35 years old, lesbian, previously bisexual) presents herself as a person with a strong sexual libido and says that she often ends up in relationships where she wants more sex than the other person. She

is currently with a woman who has much less sexual desire than her and who also sometimes is unsure about whether she wants to have sex or not.

*Pernilla:* My current partner has said a number of times that she's unsure if she wants to or not. And I don't know how that feels because I'm usually very sure of what I want. But if she says that right now I'm very unsure, yes, then we stop.

*Lena:* So if the other person doesn't know, then you take it as if it's best that we don't.

*Pernilla:* Yes, then we'll take it as a no, until she knows.

Pernilla's principle of caution – taking ambivalence as a no – can be compared to the stance we saw represented earlier in this chapter, where a somewhat ambivalent no is instead taken as a springboard to try to “push” the partner to a yes. Pernilla wants, so to speak, to leave her partner in peace from her influence, so that she can figure out what she wants herself. That principle has been put into a system in which Pernilla largely avoids making sexual advances at all, so that her partner can feel completely free to choose when she wants to have sex.

*Pernilla:* Nowadays I let her take the initiative because then we both know for sure that she actually wants to. I might try sometimes, but I think it's best for both of us if she takes the initiative, so that we're on the same page. As I said, I can have sex at any time and if she wants to have sex at two o'clock in the afternoon, we'll do it. But it's probably more important to me that she really wants to, so I let her take that step instead of me suggesting sex.

Pernilla's principle of caution contrasts strongly with Julia and Stina's more “careless” approach. Her cautious approach seems to be at least partly connected to her experience of her partner as being relatively vulnerable in relation to Pernilla.

*Pernilla:* She has a certain amount of inexperience when it comes to same-sex sex and I want her to have the time she needs to...well, they are completely unfounded fears that she has because I think the sex is really great, but she feels inexperienced and she has said that and she finds it a bit difficult.

Here, Pernilla's more extensive experiences of lesbian sex emerge as a factor that makes her partner vulnerable. One could interpret her partner's experience of not always knowing what she wants as part of a process of finding her place within lesbian sexuality. In such a situation, a person other than Pernilla might have chosen to take a more active position, to show the

inexperienced person the way, so to speak. But Pernilla seems to be aware of the influence she can have on her partner if she is too clear about her own sexual desires, and she sees such an influence as being something that curtails her partner's ability to sense what she herself *really* wants. It is not far-fetched to assume that the fact that her partner is a woman plays a certain role in Pernilla's assessment of her partner as being susceptible to the influence of others. Julia and Stina's stories are about male partners and, as previously addressed, in the dominant discourse on gender and sexuality, being a man fits uneasily with the identity as sexually vulnerable.

**Gunnar: "I'm very restrained about what signals I send"**

Gunnar (50–55 years old, bisexual) lives with a woman who has a mental health problem that both contributes to her rarely wanting to have sex and makes her sensitive to pressure. Here, then, there are special circumstances that make it unthinkable for Gunnar to apply the type of insistent seduction behaviour that we saw examples of above – not only out of consideration for his partner's boundaries, but also because it is simply not a seduction strategy that works with this specific partner, with whom he would be happy to have sex more often than actually happens.

*Gunnar:* A lot happens on her terms, based on how she feels, what she has energy for and if she feels like it. And I can't push her, because she's too fragile. So I'm incredibly careful, often you can't even joke about it, because then she'll experience it as a demand. So I have to be very, very restrained with what signals I send and how I express myself. I have to be very careful.

*Lena:* So with her you feel that you have to be extra...She's very sensitive to pressure, so you have to back off a lot more with her than with anyone else?

*Gunnar:* Yes, that's right. If she senses somehow that it's a demand from me, then she feels really bad.

*Lena:* Can you give an example of when she's felt like that?

*Gunnar:* How much is required from my side for her to feel that it becomes a demand? It can be enough to tell what I think of as quite innocent jokes, little allusions, stuff like that, in the evening, and I don't experience it as anything other than a little fun, much like you can joke about anything.

*Lena:* But in some way you signal that you are interested in something sexual?

*Gunnar:* Yes, well, of course I do.

*Lena:* Could one say that just showing you're interested puts pressure on her?

*Gunnar:* Some days. If she feels bad and feels like I want to have her, then she can't really handle it. But when she feels well, it works in a slightly different way.

Just like Pernilla, Gunnar has a relatively strong sex drive and his partner can feel assured that whenever she wants to have sex, Gunnar will want to. This means that, like Pernilla, Gunnar can hand over the initiative to his partner, so that she can feel completely free in either choosing or not choosing sex. Although Gunnar's partner is unusually sensitive to pressure, the dynamic between Gunnar and her can shed light on more "normal" levels of sensitivity to the needs and desires of others. As I will discuss in-depth in the next chapter, we are deeply dependent and caring creatures, so in that sense, the desires of others are rarely something we can easily ignore. To the extent that the *raison d'être* of a relationship lies largely in the ability of the parties to meet each other's needs, the impulse to accommodate the other person's wishes can be strong. This basic dynamic is also gendered, as feminine identity is to a much greater extent than masculine identity associated with taking care of others' needs (Gunnarsson 2014a, 2014b). At the same time, there are important individual variations, where some people, like Gunnar's partner – and, it seems, Pernilla's too – find it more difficult than others to remain secure in themselves under the influence of other people. If Gunnar even just shows that he is interested in having sex, his partner can experience this as a suffocating "demand" that stands in the way of her being able to get attuned to her own sexual needs.

It is an intriguing question how much integrity and autonomy one can expect a person to have when faced with the desires of other people, and this is a question that is also relevant outside the sexual sphere. People vary quite widely in how clear they allow themselves to be about their own wishes, and such varieties relate to different cultural assumptions about what a clearly stated wish *means* – does it entail a demand or not? In the interview with Cecilia (30–35 years old, bisexual), we briefly touched on this topic.

*Cecilia:* I was thinking about this thing about saying yes and no. Someone once said that we don't live in a culture of consent, that you kind of don't accept other people's no. For example, if someone asks a friend "Do you want to go to the cinema tonight?" and your friend says no, then you nag your friend. If there's someone who doesn't want a cookie, you try to encourage them to take one. There is a lot of that, where you don't really respect people's boundaries, in terms of small things like that. And that... [long pause]. I don't know if I agree that it's not a culture of consent. I think that in the best of all possible worlds, everyone would know what they want and don't want, and that kind of "Please, can't you come along to

the cinema tonight?” would be seen as an expression of “I really want you to come”.

*Lena:* And then it wouldn't be a problem...

*Cecilia:* Nah.

*Lena:* ...because you could trust that the person can set boundaries.

*Cecilia:* Yes.

The phrase “Please, can't you come along to the cinema tonight?” can be seen as parallel to a person's nagging about sex. However, for most people it is probably easier to condemn sexual nagging than nagging to get someone to accompany you to the cinema, which says something about the particularly sensitive status of sexual boundaries. An interesting aspect to what Cecilia says is that the attempts at persuasion can be interpreted just as much as an expression of the insisting party's valuing of the other's company as an expression of lacking respect. Here we find a parallel to the validation that Stina can experience when her partner “takes the trouble” to keep trying to seduce her although she has said no: it becomes an emphatic sign of how much he appreciates having sex with her. As uncomfortable as such reasoning may seem, we can thus imagine that a man who is too quick to respect Stina's signals of reluctance is on one level doing her a disservice.

Cecilia's reasoning is based on the idea that no matter how much one person nags at another, it is still the latter who decides in the end. A person can certainly be influenced by the other's nagging, but not in a way that can make them do something against their will – at least “in the best of all possible worlds”. These are relevant questions that Cecilia brings up here: How assertive versus careful should we be with each other? What capacity to sense and stand up for their own needs can we expect from our fellow humans? There are cultural differences that probably have a bearing on these questions, but even at the individual level there are significant variations in terms of people's comfort levels when it comes to conflicting with what others want. Femininity and masculinity are also constructed in ways that create a tendency for women to be more adaptable than men, a tendency that is also rooted in power asymmetries (Gunnarsson 2014a, 2014b). In the next chapter, which analyses accounts of acquiescing to have sex you do not want to engage in, it becomes very clear that today we are far from living “in the best of all possible worlds”.

### **Human affectability, for good and bad**

The central question raised in this chapter is to which degree it is legitimate to consciously seek to get another person where you want them, even after their initial expressions of reluctance. What it is about here is not getting the other person to agree to something they do not really want, but rather about

getting them to want to – or at least to get them sexually aroused enough to participate in the sex. I problematized the conflation of sexual desire and willingness/consent, which was often the basis of the participants' assumptions that their partner was genuinely persuaded. Indeed, it may well be that a person knows that they will have difficulty resisting a person if that person continues in their attempts to make them sexually excited, and does *not* want this to happen (Cahill 2014). At the same time, we also saw that a lack of desire can be accompanied by a willingness to be further seduced and that there seems to be subtle ways of communicating this complexity. The interviews make clear the importance of contextual factors when boundaries are drawn. In a stable relationship, you can in many cases be more “careless” with the other person than with a more unknown partner because of the familiarity and security that exists. Meanwhile, in a stable relationship the partners may also take each other's sexual availability for granted in a way that hinders them from taking in the other's signals of unavailability. Another contextual factor affecting the level of carefulness with the other has to do with the individual particularities of the latter, for example how vulnerable they are perceived to be. Here, that person's gender identity is likely to play a major role in whether they are judged to be potentially vulnerable in relation to the sexuality of others.

A tricky question raised by the participants' accounts is how to assess the importance of gender in terms of the (il)legitimacy of continuing to try to seduce a person who has expressed that they do not want to have sex. In the introductory chapter, I referred to research showing that women often take men's willingness for granted (Gunnarsson 2018; Humphreys 2000) and that it is very common for men to have had sex even though they did not want to (Byers & O'Sullivan 1998; Muehlenhard & Cook 1988). That, before the interview, Stina did not reflect on the possible moral issue in her behaviour towards the man who said that he “couldn't do it anymore”, should probably be understood in the light of this data. We do not know how this man experienced the interaction that Stina describes. Did he feel pressured to go through with the sex so as not to disappoint her? Or so as to live up to expectations of male sexuality? Did he experience sexual pleasure but without actually wanting the sex? Or did Stina's continued seduction mean that the ensuing sex became something he soon fully welcomed?

Another question is: In the event that the man did not want to participate in the sex, *how did that affect him?* Was he harmed by this or not? As I discussed in the introduction, previous research shows that one and the same act can be experienced differently depending on the gender identity of the person who carries it out or experiences it. In survey studies, for example, many men report that their experiences of unwanted sex have not been negative (Byers & O'Sullivan 1998; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson 1998). How should such results be interpreted? Are they a reflection of men's actual

experiences? Or of men's difficulties in identifying themselves with the identity as sexually vulnerable? I will explore these issues further in [Chapter 10](#).

An implicit theme permeating this chapter is the *affectability* of people. A central positive element in sex is precisely the mutual influence the parties have on each other. In most – if not all – forms of sexual interaction, we want to be *affected* by what the other person is, does and feels. The other person starts processes in us that we cannot ourselves control and that is a big part of the allure of sex. But where to draw the line between this sort of positive sexual influence and other forms that appear to violate someone's integrity? As Oskar's story shows, it can be quite easy to get another person where you want them, by manipulating them purely sexually so that they can no longer resist the sexual advances that they initially rejected. In her book *Rape and resistance*, Linda Alcoff distances herself from physical desire as a marker of consent, since, among other things, the manipulation of another person's sexual desires is a technique that can be used deliberately to gain control over them: “desires and pleasures can themselves be manipulated, as many perpetrators well know” (2018: 138).

This chapter offers more questions than answers. These questions respond to a need for intensified reflection on and discussion about situations located in the grey area between consent and non-consent. Such discussions are highly unlikely to lead to unambiguous, universal criteria for how to distinguish morally dubious from unproblematic behaviour, since these boundaries are always dependent on the specific context in which the actions are performed. However, a collective exchange of experiences and an analytical and moral twisting and turning of the questions give people increased resources to fine-tune their judgements in sexual interactions with others. Such a reflexive process can be illustrated by an imagined scenario for how Stina's conversation with me could conceivably affect her behaviour in the future. We can imagine that, after having devoted focused reflection in the interview on her behaviour towards the man who said he could not have any more sex, she will carry with her an increased awareness in respect to similar situations in the future. That awareness will not necessarily lead to her principled avoidance of behaving in the same way again, but it will likely increase her attentiveness to other people's signals and her ability to make refined assessments of where the boundary between okay and not okay is located. Perhaps her increased awareness will also lead her, similarly to the process Stella described in the previous chapter, to explicitly communicate with a future partner about these things, to reduce the risk of overstepping their boundaries.

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# 4

## GIVING IN

In the previous chapter, I explored the process by which one person succeeds in making another person turned on after the latter initially expressed reluctance. In this chapter, I instead look more closely at experiences of agreeing, or giving in to, sex despite the person not feeling like it. The main focus is on the relational mechanisms that make the interview participants unwillingly accommodate the needs of a partner. Such experiences are referred to by some scholars as “consensual unwanted sex” (Foster 2011; Impett & Peplau 2002, 2003; Wilkinson 2008), but, as addressed in the introductory chapter, it is indeed worth problematizing whether this type of sex is “consensual” in the qualified sense of the term, given that it is not really wanted.

### **Stina: “I thought that then he’d love me”**

We met Stina (30–35 years old, heterosexual) in the previous chapter, where she reflected on a situation in which she pressured a man to have sex. Stina interprets her own lack of respect for the man’s boundary-setting as a consequence of her having “kind of learned” to behave like that. She is referring here to the pattern of the relationship that the main part of the interview came to be about, a several-year-long relationship that began when Stina was in her 20s and that was characterized by her boyfriend’s consistent lack of respect for her sexual boundaries. Stina believes that the incident in which she herself can be said to have crossed someone else’s boundary might be a reflection of the normalization of boundary-crossing behaviour that prevailed in her previous relationship.

In the dysfunctional relationship, the destructive consequences of which Stina processed thoroughly after it ended, it was Stina’s own boundaries that

were consistently violated – by the boyfriend, but, as we shall see, to some extent by herself as well. Unwanted sex and sexual abuse – and the grey area in between them – was a central part of the relationship. Stina describes her boyfriend as a sex addict and says that it was taken for granted that they would always have sex at bedtime. An important aspect of her story is that during the relationship itself, she did not categorize her boyfriend's behaviour as violent – although she could be critical of it and strongly felt that something was wrong – but it was only after the relationship ended that she started trying out using words like “rape” to describe what happened. This *normalization process* (Enander & Holmberg 2008; Lundgren 2004), whereby people who are exposed to violence in intimate relationships do not *see* the abnormality in their partner's behaviour, is a well-researched and very common dynamic that contributes to the challenge of victims breaking free from violent relationships.

Although the boyfriend often pushed to have his desire to have sex fulfilled – even after a clear rejection on Stina's part – Stina says that the unwanted sex was still something she *chose* to give in to. This sometimes concerned having sex in general, while sometimes it was about specific actions that her boyfriend wanted her to perform during a sexual interaction. This is how she summarizes the basic mechanism:

*Stina:* I didn't want sex; I wanted love. But it was my way of getting love so that's why I did it anyway.

There is research that shows that it is more common for women than men to be motivated to have sex not by sexual desire but rather as a way of achieving intimacy (Impett & Peplau 2003). In Stina's case, however, it was not a question of a well-functioning exchange of sex for love. No matter how much she conformed to her boyfriend's wishes, he continued to treat her unlovingly, although he could momentarily act appreciative when he got his way. According to the picture that Stina paints, the dynamics of the relationship seem to have been built on a toxic combination of a lack of respect and pressure on the part of her boyfriend and, for her part, a strong hunger for love combined with low self-esteem. Here she talks about a typical situation in the relationship, where, when she had her period, she felt forced to give him oral sex.

*Stina:* With the oral sex, I remember that he wanted me to swallow when he came, because he thought it was very sexy. And I thought it was very disgusting but he talked me into it too even though I didn't really want to. I even remember him saying – because I was a vegetarian – that it was a good source of protein [laughs].

*Lena:* How else might he persuade you?

*Stina:* It could be purely physical, that he pushed me down. Maybe we were lying there, making out, and he was quite obviously pushing me

down. And many times I just came back up and he did it again, and you could tell he was getting irritated and frustrated. And I so badly wanted him to be happy with me, so I did it. Because I really wanted something back, so it was my way of trying to get something from him. I absolutely didn't want to do it, but I did it because I thought then he would...well, kind of love me. But what happened most often was that he would come and get sleepy and fall asleep, which resulted in me just being left there by myself.

At one point in the interview, Stina describes the relationship with the words "I [was] probably unhappily in love with my own boyfriend". The whole relationship was characterized by her longing for more tenderness and love from him, and she says that she sometimes raised these needs in conversation as a way of trying to negotiate the terms of their sexual interaction.

*Stina:* I guess he had an image of sex...the classic male, when he came, the sex was over and that was also the goal of it, that he would come. The whole relationship was also quite loveless and I always wanted love and tenderness from him, but I didn't get it. I tried to say that when we were having sex too, that I get turned on if you're affectionate with me, but he was more, like...maybe the sex was a little harder, or not that way.

While Stina's expression of her needs did not generate any substantial changes in her boyfriend's way of relating to her, he was able, according to Stina, to manipulatively use his knowledge of her needs.

*Stina:* He could lie on top of me and then all of a sudden he was inside me. And then he played this little "Whoops!" [playfully], and would be kind of cute-sweet-unassuming. And then I couldn't really defend myself against it. It would happen quite often too. I said I wasn't in the mood and I often said I wanted us to cuddle without it leading to sex, but it kind of never happened because as soon as we did it, it was like that anyway...And maybe that's why we had sex so often because it wasn't that he was always nagging his way into it, but more that he was trying to be a little sweet and cute and then just "Oh, look what happened now, huh!" And then I felt that I couldn't just say "No!", because he was kind of cute and that's exactly what I wanted to have.

*Lena:* He knew which buttons to push.

*Stina:* Yes. Because that particular thing when he was like that "Whoops!", that wasn't really his personality otherwise. He probably used that one more than anything else actually, now that I think about it.

We can interpret her boyfriend's behaviour in terms of Schwalbe's (1992) concept of *analytical role-taking*, which I discussed in the previous chapter in relation to Oskar's manipulative approach to his one-night stand. Stina's boyfriend had no problem understanding her needs and desires, but they were not important to him in their own right; they were only important in regard to the fact that he needed to relate to them in order to get his own way. What Schwalbe calls *receptive role-taking* is, on the other hand, about feeling with the other person so that their perspective cannot be ignored and instead becomes part of one's own reality. It was the latter – which we may also refer to as love – that Stina longed for, but what she got was a low-quality copy of this love that always quickly showed its true face again. In an intricate, and very common, pattern, Stina nevertheless stayed and continued her attempts, and her low self-esteem, which added fuel to the destructive dynamic, was likely reinforced by her boyfriend's long-term lack of respect for her self-worth.

It is important to note that Stina was never afraid of her boyfriend and that he never hurt her physically. It strikes me as interesting that while on one level there was a consistent pattern of docility in Stina's attitude towards her boyfriend, she appears at the same time to have been anything but docile based on how she describes the relationship. She and her boyfriend argued constantly and she says that she was not hesitant to "tell [...] him how terrible he was". Towards the end of the relationship, during arguments, she was able to bring up the fact that he was forcing her to have sex and to tell him to respect that she did not want to. She could also "negotiate" with him about *how* they would have sex, such as by telling him that she got more turned on if he was more affectionate with her. But fundamentally, there was always her seemingly uncompromising desire to preserve the relationship, which meant that, with few exceptions, she always complied with his will in the end. When the relationship finally broke up, it was on his initiative.

Although Stina could get upset about her boyfriend's treatment of her, she also always had thoughts about how maybe it was her fault, thoughts that her boyfriend liked to actively encourage. How a victim internalizes the perspective of the violent party is also a classic dynamic in violent relationships (Lundgren 2004). Stina talks about the inverted logic that could prevail in the relationship.

*Stina:* He said a few times that "You make me feel like a rapist". And it was like he wanted to say something like "Don't you understand that it's abnormal that your girlfriend doesn't want to have sex with you, that you make *me* feel like a rapist because I want to have sex with you". So that it was me who was abnormal. You might think that maybe he should have thought a little about what it might mean [that he felt like a rapist] [laughs]. But it's typical that he blamed me for that too, because he felt uncomfortable. But this was throughout many years,

and I began to think that I was abnormal too, that I should want to and that it was somehow my fault.

Stina's experience can be compared to Joy Sanchez's story in the #prataomdet [talkaboutit] "campaign" (see the Introduction). She recounts how her then-boyfriend forced himself on her when she was too drunk to resist, and when she uttered the words "You raped me" the next morning, he began acting as if he was the victim.

At first he objects, says that I wanted to, that I helped to take off my clothes, but I remember what happened and that I was completely helpless. Then he throws a tantrum, screams, cries, tears his hair, punches through the bedroom wall and begs me to take it back, to say it wasn't rape, to never tell anyone else, to say it's not true. [...] I comfort him in my arms and feel nothing.

(Sanchez 2012: 29; also see Gunnarsson 2018)

Stina never went so far as to accuse her then-boyfriend of rape, but in both her and Sanchez's cases, there is a similar inversion of the idea of who is responsible for the conflict that stems from the men's transgressions. As they lack empathy with the women's perspective – Schwalbe's receptive role-taking – the only real thing for the men in Stina's and Sanchez's accounts is their own pain at being positioned as rapists.

Stina's relationship can be said to have been characterized by her boyfriend *using* Stina for his own purposes rather than caring for her in her own right. This was Stina's pain, because she wanted to be loved. Towards the end of the interview, however, it appears that there was a duality in her position as a sexual object for her boyfriend's pleasure. She says that once an initially unwanted sex act had begun, she could often experience pleasure through her boyfriend being so turned on by her.

*Stina:* I got really turned on by seeing how much he was turned on by me and so I still got *some* kind of validation from it. And I guess that's why I had sex with him so often, because it was the only way for me to get some kind of...

*Lena:* Some kind of pay-off.

*Stina:* Yes, exactly.

As Tian Sørhaug puts it, "[women can be] something for themselves by being something for others" (1995: 25). Perhaps this pattern is most articulated in sexuality. Our entire culture is permeated with images of the female body as an object intended to arouse men's desire and pleasure, and many women learn through this culture to channel their own desires through the

object position – in which male arousal is the ultimate proof of one’s sexual worth. It is not really clear to me – and maybe not to Stina either – to what degree she was aware when she was in that relationship that the kind of validation she was getting from her boyfriend was not what she actually needed. Regardless, people have a need to be validated as valuable, and being valued as an object for someone else’s needs is better than not being valued at all.

**Anas: “I don’t want to make anyone unhappy”**

The interview with Anas (20–25 years old, gay) was largely about the many times he has agreed to have sex against his will, after being pressured by a partner. Similar to Stina, I get the impression that Anas’s experiences of having sex against his will are an important reason why he was interested in being interviewed. While Stina has processed her experiences over many years, Anas’s experiences of being pressured into sex are more recent and unprocessed. Unlike Stina, Anas also has had negative experiences with several different partners. In our email exchange before the interview, he tells me that he had sex “both with and without consent” and I get onto the topic a bit into the interview.

*Lena:* You said in your email that you had sex both with and without consent.

*Anas:* Mm.

*Lena:* When you talk about it being without consent, are you talking about obvious assaults or is it more of a grey area...

*Anas:* Nah. It’s more...In my last relationship it was that he...Sometimes you don’t feel like having sex and sometimes you’ve lost your feelings for the person. And in a relationship, feelings go up and down, sometimes you can long for a person and sometimes you don’t, or you might be tired of the person and sometimes you don’t want to have sex. And then when we might have been out or something, my partner wanted to have sex and I didn’t. And I could say several times “No, not today” and like “I don’t want that”. Maybe I was angry with him or had lost my feelings for him. But when...when he was sort of nagging and all that, and even if I didn’t want it and could feel disgusted about having sex because I didn’t want to have sex, I still had sex with him. In order not to destroy the relationship and contribute to conflict and arguments or something like that, I think that’s what it was. There was no passion, there was no intimacy during the act.

Anas says that this happened repeatedly with this particular partner. I ask if this happened only in this relationship.

*Anas:* It has happened with other partners as well. In a relationship that I had a few years ago, it was at the end when I had no feelings left for

him and I wanted us to be friends, but he still had feelings for me... And you didn't really know how to get out of the relationship without hurting him. When we had sex...I felt disgusted, even though the person was very, very good-looking and all that, you still got disgusted. It was because he wanted to have sex and I didn't. Before you have sex, it's not like you say "Oh, I want to have sex!" but more that you give each other hints, you stroke each other or touch each other or look at one other in some way. And even if I tried to avoid these looks and all the touching and whatever and show that "No, I don't want this" and even said it, I have still agreed to it even though I haven't agreed to it – to have sex. So that the person will not be sad.

*Lena:* So that's the point, not to make the other person disappointed?

*Anas:* Disappointed and unhappy and...you want to get along with someone and not the opposite, that's what it's about. I don't want to ruin anything.

*Lena:* Why do you want to do that? You said it now, because you don't want to ruin...?

*Anas:* To not ruin the relationship and you don't want to be alone; you would like to keep the relationship, but maybe in a completely different format, maybe as a friendship for example. Like it was with my last ex, I had no feelings for him but I still wanted to keep a friendship with him, that is, to have someone you can be with.

*Lena:* You said you didn't know how to get out of the relationship without hurting him. And then I thought: that is what happens if you break up with someone, the person will usually feel hurt [laughs].

*Anas:* Yes.

*Lena:* But you think it's very hard to make someone else...

*Anas:* Yes, I don't want to make anyone sad and I feel *terrible* [with emphasis], as a person, if that person gets sad. It...I feel like, I just feel terrible.

Anas himself focuses here on his own motivations to always end up, after clear initial rejections followed by nagging from his partner, acquiescing to sex. As in Stina's case, there is no fear of aggression or violence from the partner behind Anas's acquiescence. There are instead two, partly linked, mechanisms behind his compliance. First, he talks about not wanting to "ruin the relationship", where an unspoken underlying assumption seems to be that relationships are destroyed by conflict: if a partner becomes unhappy as a consequence of Anas denying him sex, he perceives it as a threat to the relationship. It is interesting to note here that Anas, unlike Stina, is not at a "love disadvantage" in these situations, with an unsatisfied hunger for love pushing him to conform. In the situation just described, it was even the case that he had lost his feelings for his partner and is about to end the relationship in its

romantic form. However, the relative upper hand that Anas could potentially have because of this is not something he takes advantage of; it is still his partner's desires and feelings that set the terms for their interactions.

That brings us to the second mechanism behind Anas's agreement: he states emphatically that he feels "*terrible* [...] as a person" if he makes someone sad. This experience likely has to do with deeply ingrained attachment patterns, making his ability to influence another person's feelings in a negative way closely associated with feelings of guilt. Feeling "terrible" is not a pleasant feeling, which makes it easy to understand why the adaptations Anas makes to keep others in a good mood are experienced as a more attractive choice than insisting on his no. There is a parallel to how Anas thinks about the fact that he is still not open about his homosexuality with his parents. He says he thinks his mother would take it hard – "she's quite a dramatic person" – and that he is afraid to risk his relationship with her.

In the excerpt below, it becomes clear that at least one of his partners has used manipulative strategies to get his way, something that Anas only becomes aware of during the interview. I ask him to go into more detail about what happened when a partner pressured him despite his rejections.

*Lena:* How long was that process? How many times would you reject and he continue?

*Anas:* I remember one time, I think we were sitting on the sofa...I might have done it [rejected] a couple of times and then maybe an hour passed and then he did it again. And then "Nah, but not now" and then he got...he got mad, I remember [as if he's realizing it now], and sad...and then he continued and I agreed even though I didn't agree, or I agreed even though I didn't want to.

*Lena:* But this about him becoming mad and sad – how did he express it? Did he say things or did he just look mad and sad?

*Anas:* So he just went blank. I could see that he got mad, or sad. He wasn't himself. He became more formal. Then you understood that he was mad or not satisfied with something.

*Lena:* How did it feel for you then?

*Anas:* That's a stressful moment in itself because then you have to try to make him happy, in some way.

*Lena:* Why then?

*Anas:* Because you don't want the relationship to...break down or get bad and we'd have to end things or break up or something like that. It felt like you had done something bad to him and that it was my job to ensure that...yeah, like I had broken his mobile phone or something and had to pay him back. A bit of that feeling that I'd done something bad and now it's my job...

*Lena:* It was your fault that he was sad and mad?

*Anas:* Yes, it felt a bit like that [laughs]. But now that I'm talking about it, it feels completely...crazy.

*Lena:* I understand what you mean, but can you put into words why it feels crazy?

*Anas:* Because...I go against my own will and do things that others want me to do even though I don't want to. It feels like you devalue yourself, that you have no value. You lose your pride and your dignity, that's what's so crazy, why should someone decide over me? [laughs]. Now that I look back on it...it's a way to manipulate it so you get what you want, to show that you're mad in that way. So you feel taken advantage of – *now* I feel taken advantage of, that maybe I was taken advantage of sexually [laughs].

*Lena:* You mean now that we're sitting here talking?

*Anas:* That I'm realizing it now, that this was a way for him to get what he wanted from me. He wanted to satisfy himself and in order to do that he manipulated me by pretending to be mad so that I would feel guilty and then go along with it. Instead of waiting and seeing and showing me respect and acceptance, he tries to get something by manipulating me. And it doesn't feel good now in retrospect [laughs]. No.

In the above exchange, the line between research and therapy – or “feminist consciousness-raising” – becomes somewhat blurred. During our conversation, Anas becomes aware that his then-partner has wronged him, something he had not realized before. Perhaps he would have gained this insight regardless of the questions I asked, just by the way the conversation went. However, I believe that my somewhat questioning attitude helped this process along and would like to say a few words about how *questioning the victim* can, perhaps against our intuitions, in some cases be an important means of making them see the perpetrator's guilt. When I ask Anas how he felt when his partner became mad and sad, he replies that it was a stressful moment, “because then you have to try to make him happy”. It becomes clear to me here that Anas has difficulty seeing that there are alternative ways of looking at the world, where it is not Anas's responsibility to make sure that others are happy. I could have sympathized with Anas and validated that I understood his feeling of discomfort in the face of his partner's disappointment and distancing of himself, but I found it more important to question his assumptions about his own responsibility for others' feelings. When I ask why he has to make his partner happy, he again brings up his fear of ruining the relationship and develops an economic reasoning about his experience of guilt – “like I had broken his mobile phone or something and I had to pay him back”. I put Anas's description in other words – “It was your fault that he was sad and mad?” – and then he realizes the absurdity of this way of thinking, which I assume had long been a bodily lived experience whose underlying principles he puts into words for the first time in the interview.

Saying this, I want to make the point that when you question the behaviour and thought patterns of a person who has been subjected to assault or any other form of sexual manipulation, doing so is not necessarily in conflict with placing blame on and demanding responsibility from the perpetrator (Lamb 1999). In Anas's case, on the contrary, it is the questioning of his own patterns that finally allows him to see the wrong his former partner committed against him. When I began my analysis of Anas's story by focussing on his own behaviour and motivations, I was well aware that it could be sensitive. It could be seen as shifting the responsibility for what happened from the perpetrator to the victim. This is a theme that I refer to again and again in this book. In contrast to the widespread – and understandable – tendencies among anti-violence activists and violence researchers to avoid any form of focus on the actions of the victim (Gunnarsson 2023; Haaken 2002; Lamb 1999), I show the necessity to reveal and analyse not only the behaviour of the transgressing party and the victim's experience of it, but also the victim's own behaviour and beliefs to the extent that they are relevant to what happened. In terms of Anas, it becomes clear that on some level he had certain options that he himself did not *see*. He *could* have remained firm in saying no – even if this would have unpleasant emotional consequences in the short term. Not seeing this option has prevented him from protecting his sexual integrity from manipulative partners.

Sharon Lamb (1999) notes that in many situations of assault, where the victim is not turned into a completely passive “thing” without the slightest agency (cf. Haaken 2002), it is appropriate to place a certain measure of responsibility on the victim, emphasizing that this is in no way inconsistent with placing adequate blame on the perpetrator. It is understandable that the anti-violence movement is sceptical of highlighting victims' responsibility, given the wider patriarchal context that tends to place undue blame on victims. But given that we attribute some degree of agency to the victimized party, some degree of responsibility logically follows. As Lamb points out, the tendency to see victims as completely “pure” and passive may be counterproductive in that it may make them locked into the victim position: “When we rush out to stop victim-blaming it is not useful or accurate to blame everyone *but* the victim; in so doing we thwart the very impulse of change, self-assertion, and courage that underlies recovery” (1999: 184, emphasis original).

Anas says that in his current nascent relationship, he is trying to be clearer about his own needs and boundaries and that he is succeeding quite well. Hopefully, the insights he gained during the interview will contribute to that process.

### **Kristina: “You don't have any reason to say no”**

As in Anas's case, my interview with Kristina (50–55 years old, bisexual) leads to a new awareness on her part of her experiences of unwanted sex. Kristina was encouraged by a person close to her to participate in the study,

as I was looking for bisexual participants. She did not have any particular experiences that she wanted to talk about, but thought it “could be interesting” to be interviewed. She was one of the less talkative participants and, unlike most other participants, seemed to have reflected rather little on her experiences of sex. However, early on in the interview, we got into what she expressed as her difficulties in saying no, after I opened up a general conversation about difficulties related to consent.

*Lena:* When [at the beginning of the interview] I talked about consent, you said that it must be difficult for a court to decide. But do *you* think these are difficult things?

*Kristina:* Saying no?

*Lena:* For example.

*Kristina:* Well, it could probably be. You think “Nooo, tonight I don’t want to have sex” but you agree anyway because you have no reason [laughs] or what can I say, you have no reason to say no, or... Well, I don’t know, you’re a little... Yes, well, but it can be difficult to say no, like, “No, I don’t want to”.

*Lena:* But can you do it in some other way, maybe not by *saying* no, but by trying to avoid the whole thing in some other way?

*Kristina:* Yes, you can do that, you can find something else to do instead [laughs] – I’ll watch that on TV or I’ll... Yes, you can avoid it somehow.

*Lena:* Do you do that sometimes?

*Kristina:* Nah, I don’t know if I do. No, I probably don’t.

*Lena:* But does it often happen that you don’t feel like it and then you feel that anyway...

*Kristina:* Yes, well, but yes. Yes, you probably do, you sort of go like “Okay” – or you don’t say anything, it just happens. Yes, I don’t know, you have no argument for why not.

*Lena:* That’s what you feel, that you need to have an argument?

*Kristina:* Yes, you can feel that way. You have to be like “Why then?”

Kristina’s current partner, with whom she says she has a very good relationship on the whole, is a man who likes to have a lot of sex, so given her difficulty saying no, she experiences quite a few occasions of unwanted sex. She does not experience any coercion on the part of her partner and she does not find the unwanted sex difficult on a deep level, but feels it is nice when the sex is over. She says that her partner is considerate about her having a good time when they have sex. However, he is not so considerate about making sure that Kristina really wants to have sex, but rather, according to her, takes her availability for granted. As we saw in the interview excerpt above, Kristina returns to the fact that she cannot say no

without having a “reason” or an “argument”. I encourage her to develop her thoughts on this.

*Lena:* You say you have to have an argument.

*Kristina:* I have a feeling that I have to have an argument. I have to have a reason to say no. That you don’t just say no – and then people might ask “But why?” and then you have nothing.

*Lena:* But if you think... “I don’t feel like it”?

*Kristina:* Yes...

*Lena:* That’s not a reason?

*Kristina:* It’s difficult. For me, that’s not a reason, “I don’t feel like it”.

*Lena:* What do you think a good reason would be then?

*Kristina:* Well...a cold can be a good reason [laughs], “I have a cold”.

*Lena:* Because then you don’t have the energy for it.

*Kristina:* Yes, then you don’t have the energy for it, that’s a good reason. Or that there is something else, that you have to do something.

I want to analyse Kristina’s reasoning about valid reasons for saying no in terms of a distinction between subjectivity and objectivity. Kristina’s subjective, inner life – her desire or lack of desire for something – seems to her to have little or no authority in regard to social interaction. It is something of a paradox because the central component of genuine social interaction is precisely what psychologists call *intersubjectivity*, the play between two or more people’s subjective lives – what they want, need, think, feel and so on. In regard to sexual interactions, this intersubjectivity is, at least ideally, perhaps particularly emphasized. But for Kristina, what she herself feels is apparently not a relevant factor for the social interactions she takes part in, something that during the interview turns out to be true even outside of the realm of sex. A cold, on the other hand, has more objective weight – it sets a boundary *independently* of her subjective state and thus cannot be neglected in the same way as her feelings can. A cold also means that it is not as easy to blame *her* for the lack of sex – the cold instead takes that blame.

Kristina says that she finds it extremely difficult to say no in all possible contexts. She has been on long-term sick leave for fatigue and it is hardly far-fetched to assume that her lack of respect for her own subjective limits has meant that her much more objective body had to set the boundaries instead.

Stina and Anas’s docility was strongly linked to an attempt to keep their partners in a good mood. What is it like for Kristina? I ask her if her challenge in saying no applies to all people.

*Lena:* Is it different with different people or is it always like that?

*Kristina:* It may be different with different people, but if it’s the people I’m closest to, I have a harder time saying no.

*Lena:* Why is that?

*Kristina:* Well...yes, I don't know why but it...

*Lena:* I mean it can be that if one person says no, the other person reacts in some way. Is it something like that?

*Kristina:* Yes, well, maybe it could be, or that you feel that you are disappointing them. Yes, it could probably be like that.

*Lena:* Might you be afraid that the person will get angry with you or is it more that you care about the other person?

*Kristina:* It's probably not that they will get angry, I don't think so. Nah, it probably isn't. Well, I don't know, it's probably more that they get disappointed or...things like that.

*Lena:* You sort of want the other person to be happy?

*Kristina:* [laughs] Yes, that things are good [makes a kind of gesture with her arms that I interpret as a symbol of *relationship/unity*]. I can't imagine, if we're talking about Bengt, that he would get angry or mad at me if I said that, I absolutely don't think so. But it still is there...somehow.

Just like for Stina and Anas, the fear of disappointing her partner is what compliance boils down to in Kristina's case, too. Stina is very clear in her description of her own motivations, probably because she actively processed the events for many years: she wanted to be loved and accepted by her boyfriend and therefore did not want to disappoint him. Anas instead wrestled with strong feelings of guilt associated with disappointing someone else, combined with a desire to preserve his relationships. Kristina is vaguer about her motivations, but she says that she wants "things [to be] good", and probably, like Anas, she associates any form of friction between her and others' expressed needs as a threat to the "good". Like Stina and Anas, her compliance is not about her fear of the other person's anger. However, she does not pick up on my question about whether it stems from care for the other person. I interpret it to mean that her tendency to acquiesce is not driven by clearly altruistic motives, where sex becomes a way of giving something to someone you care about ([Impett & Peplau 2003](#)).

Kristina was quite affected by the interview – she was one of the people I continued to talk to after the interview and then referred to a counsellor. However, it did not seem to be our conversation about the unwanted sex in her current relationship that upset her the most. Rather, what our conversation about this did was to lead her into further questions about what she really wants and why she does what she does. Kristina is bisexual. She has previously had sexual relations mainly with women, but is not open about her orientation. Besides the man she currently lives with, she has had a relationship with one other man. When we talk about taking the initiative sexually and about differences between same-sex and heterosexual sex, she says

that both men she has been with have been very “sexually active”, which means that they have most often taken the initiative for having sex. When speaking of one of her relationships with women, where she herself was the most active partner, I ask if it was often like that with women.

*Lena:* Are there many relationships with women in which you have been more active?

*Kristina:* Yes...maybe it's the case, maybe I've been more active with women, I probably have been. But if we're going to say that, I've always been more in love when I've been with women. It's a stupid thing to say now that I'm with Bengt [laughs], but...that's actually how it is, that I fall more in love with a woman, there's greater attraction. And then you might wonder why I'm...with Bengt then, but ah.

*Lena:* Yes.

*Kristina:* Yes [laughs], exactly.

*Lena:* But are you in love with men but not as much or is it more like you're not really...

*Kristina:* Nah, it's not really...it's not that real excitement and, no, it's not. Because I've started to think about it a little now that it's not really like that, even though we're doing *very* well. Bengt is probably the one I have had the best relationship with, we are very even in some way and everything works well, everyday life and...but I am probably, I am not as *in love* with him as I can be with a woman, I'm not.

*Lena:* And this thing you're talking about, being in love and you also said attracted – is it connected for you that if you are in love with someone, it also affects sexuality...

*Kristina:* It does.

*Lena:* That you become more sexually attracted.

*Kristina:* Yes, yes, it is connected.

Even before the interview, Kristina seems to have started to reflect on whether it is really right for her to be with her current partner. I consider it to be the case that Kristina probably would have lived a lesbian life if it were not for the societal norms.

*Kristina:* Sometimes I find myself like this: “But what am I doing?” You sometimes have doubts like that: “What the hell, why am I with Bengt then if it's not really one hundred percent?” You can think about that sometimes. Is it because it's good, it's convenient? *It is* easier to be with a man, in society, it is. You won't be questioned, no one looks sideways at you, that's the way it is. It's easier, somehow.

Again there is an adjustment to the external world, at the expense of her own needs. There is also a pattern in how Kristina's current relationship began, which can be compared to the sexual dynamics *within* the relationship. She and her partner were good friends initially and one day he asked if they should start having sex with each other, as friends. At first, Kristina rejected the proposal. A while later, however, they witnessed an event that left them both shaken and made them think about the finiteness of life. "And we started talking about that, and then all of a sudden, yes, we can try to have a relationship, because it's important to live when you're alive, you never know when you're going to die". Just like when it comes to the sex in the relationship with Bengt, he was the one who took the initiative for them to have a sexual relationship at all, something that Kristina was at first confused about but at a later, "weak" moment changed her attitude towards. "Then all of a sudden [laughs] we had a relationship – and we were baffled in the beginning that that's how it turned out". The wider context within which Kristina's unwanted sex takes place – a relationship that she might not have chosen if she had actively followed her own heart instead of responding to others' advances and conforming to society's norms – highlights that the question of sexual consent needs to be related to dynamics outside the direct sexual interaction.

**Nils: "As a guy, it's hard to say no"**

Another of the participants who has extensive experience of unwanted sex is Nils (30–35 years old, heterosexual). Unlike Stina, Anas and Kristina, Nils has not only agreed against his will to have sex after an advance from another person, but he has also initiated sex himself even though he did not feel like it. Nils's problem can be summed up as him being overall very uninterested in sex, while feeling forced to live up to the expectations of him as a man to be sexually active. He says that at the beginning of a relationship he may find sex fun – as a way to get to know the other person more than as an expression of pure sexual desire – but that after a time he experiences sex as "uninteresting" and does not "get out anything of it". Even so, for many years it did not occur to him that he could deny a partner sex or say to her how he felt.

*Nils:* It took a very long time before I began to understand that I, as a guy, could also say "No, I don't want to have sex". Because you're fed all the time with the idea that guys want to have sex all the time and if you say no, then people think that...well, either that I'm abnormal, that there's something wrong with me or that I'm not attracted to them or that something is wrong with the relationship, or...I have felt that it is very difficult as a guy to say "I don't feel like having sex", because then my partner usually thinks that there is something wrong with the relationship or wrong with them...Whereas I have felt that there has been something wrong with me.

As I stated in the opening chapter, it is somewhat of a paradox that while it is usually the vulnerability of girls and women to men's sexual pressure that is highlighted, due to *the male sexual drive discourse* (Gavey 2005; Hollway 1984), on one level it is boys and men who have, if not the greatest, then at least a special kind of sexual pressure on them. It became clear from my interviews that the images of men as sexually driven are not a problem for the men who have a strong sex drive, but for those who, like Nils, lack this drive, it can cause serious problems.

The excerpt above, as well as other parts of the interview with Nils, firstly, illuminates how the male sexual drive discourse meant that for a long time Nils did not even see it as an option to say no to sex. It was not that he made a conscious choice to live up to the norm of the sexually willing man, but rather that he did not see that he had a choice. Secondly, it highlights how the conceptions about men's ever-present sexual readiness mean that a man's refusal of a woman's sexual invitations can often only be understood as a sign that something is "wrong". Within the framework of the male sexual drive discourse, it cannot be that the man *simply* does not have the desire, but his reluctance instead becomes a deviation that must be explained (Gunnarsson 2018). The fact that during a large part of his life Nils consistently agreed to have sex even though he did not want to therefore cannot only be seen as an attempt to fit in and avoid feeling abnormal. To the extent that the concept of men's unconditional willingness is shared, or is expected to be shared, by Nils's partner – whom he loves and cares for – there is also a more care-driven incentive to live up to the male sexual drive discourse. If he does not, there is the risk that his partner thinks that he does not love her or find her attractive.

Although during the first part of Nils's sexual life it was very unusual for him to say no to sex, he recounts two different occasions when he did say no, with consequences that strengthened his conviction that it is unthinkable for men not to accept women's sexual advances. The first time was when, in his twenties, he went home with a woman from the pub.

*Nils:* We had bought food and gone to her house and she wanted to have sex and I didn't want to, and she kicked me out so I had to go home, at four in the morning. I think it's a bit funny, because you always hear the opposite, that it's guys who get mad if the girl doesn't want sex.

*Lena:* Can you tell me about it in a little more detail?

*Nils:* We got to her house, we ate, somehow her box of sex toys came out and she started showing what she had and...then I actually don't remember much what happened, quite honestly, she really wanted to have sex and I didn't. She tried to kiss me and I turned my face away and...when she pressed herself against me I pushed her away and then she got, well, after a while she got mad and asked me to leave.

*Lena:* Do you remember if she said anything special, or do you just remember that she got mad?

*Nils:* She got mad and started shouting something, like “Then leave!” Or something like that, “Go away”.

*Lena:* How did that feel for you?

*Nils:* It felt a bit funny somehow, precisely because it was this reversed situation. I’ve always heard that girls say no to sex and it’s the guy who wants it, so after I’d walked in the street for five minutes, I just started laughing at how absurd the whole situation had been.

The other situation Nils talks about, where he clearly and explicitly said no, was with a long-term partner.

*Nils:* She was almost...well, like shocked. And I tried like “There’s nothing wrong, I’m tired”; I blamed it on “I don’t have the energy”. And a few days later we talked about it, because she was worried that there was something wrong with our relationship, that I didn’t like her or something like that and then I couldn’t really admit that I just wasn’t in the mood. But I said “No, no, everything is great” – because everything was great in the relationship. I just didn’t want to have sex.

*Lena:* You said she was shocked?

*Nils:* Mm, or she was like “Ah, okay...”, almost a little tense atmosphere – what’s happening now? She probably hadn’t expected me to say no either. Because she had the same belief that I do, that a guy should always want to have sex. If the girl in a relationship wants to have sex, she can always have it, that’s the idea I think a lot of people have today.

That his girlfriend became concerned that something was “wrong” does not necessarily have to be explained only in terms of specific expectations of men’s sexual readiness. My interview material shows that sexual rejections *are* sometimes an expression of deeper problems in the relationship, which is why a woman’s sexual rejection of a man can also arouse relational anxiety in the man. At the same time, it is a normalized part of our culture that women reject men’s sexual advances, which is why it can often be a rather undramatic event that does not challenge to the same extent the rejected person’s trust in the relationship, their partner’s love or their own attractiveness.

Nils himself reflects on the gender asymmetry that means that women do not learn to take the sexual boundaries of others into account in the same way as men do.

*Nils:* [Women] have been taught that they should be strong women and take what they want and at the same time we still have the older idea that men always want sex. The last 15 years – it was *Sex and the City* very much that started the female sexual...for women to take what they wanted more. For me, it’s gone a little wrong, but I think it’s been

very good for most people, that women have been able to live out their sexuality more, I think it's really, really great. But I think guys need to learn that it's okay not to want to have sex. You've never been taught that it's okay to say no [laughs] as a guy. As a guy, you are taught that if girls don't want to have sex, then you shouldn't force yourself on her, but no one has ever said to me "Yes, but if you don't want to have sex, you just have to say no". Instead, I'm constantly bombarded by the media and society around me: "You should want to have sex, you should be happy if you get to have sex". If you look at these reports of teachers having sex with their students – if it's a man exploiting female students then he's a disgusting paedophile; if it's a female exploiting male students then it's "So great for them, they got to have sex when they were fifteen, why didn't I have such a cool teacher!?" All the time, this, even when a person in a position of power takes advantage of a guy, the guy should be happy that he got laid, because that's what all guys want all the time.

Nils talks about a progressive process of change in terms of gendered norms around sexuality, but where a piece of the puzzle is missing, or at least is lagging behind. As long as heterosexual women are prevented by gendered norms from showing too much sexual boldness, men who are not that sexually interested can be relatively safe in not having to deny women sex. It is the men's own initiative that drives sex, and it is easier to refrain from taking the initiative than to actively reject a woman's sexual advances. As the role of actively initiating sex is increasingly opened up to women (Jackson & Scott 2004), however, men like Nils can find themselves caught between "the new" and "the old", something we may have seen in Stina's account in the previous chapter. For there to be a balance, women's relative emancipation must be complemented by an increased respect for men's boundaries.

Nils's pattern of agreeing to and sometimes initiating sex against his will in stable relationships persisted for many years of his sexual life, until he met a partner who made him feel accepted in his weak sexual drive. What, then, was it like for Nils all those times when he participated in sex against his will?

*Lena:* Can you tell me a little more about what it did to you that you had sex that way, even though you didn't want to?

*Nils:* Sigh. It's so bizarre. When I noticed that my partner wanted sex, started to be clear about it and pressed against me, started caressing and making out...it's like something crawling up my spine, like *no-I-don't-want-to-no-I-don't-want-to-no-I-don't-want-to-no-I-don't-want-to-no-I-don't-want-to*. And then it becomes like if I don't respond to this, then she'll think that something is wrong, that something is wrong with our relationship, that something is wrong with

me, so I...responded and then we started having sex. I'm such a clichéd housewife: I could make shopping lists in my head in the meantime, I could do maths in my head while my body was just working.

*Lena:* You wanted to get away from it, was that it?

*Nils:* Sigh. [Pause.] Yeah, I didn't want to be there right then. There were many times when it was like that.

*Lena:* But what did that do to your feelings for this girl you were with? Because if I think about having sex with someone I really don't want to have sex with...

*Nils:* But I loved her. After all, she was my partner and everything else is absolutely fantastic and you're supposed to have sex in relationships. So you have to accept that little thing to get everything else.

Having sex against his will was, so to speak, a price Nils imagined he had to pay to get all the other parts of the relationship. The logic is comparable to what we have seen in the other accounts in the chapter, although there are considerable nuances in how this basic logic plays out: if I say no to my partner's sexual advances, then the relationship is put at risk.

### **Oskar: "Saying no has always been connected to me feeling bad"**

I will now return to my interview with Oskar (35–40 years old, heterosexual), to try to shed further light on the relational and psychological mechanisms that can make it difficult to deny a partner sex. Here, Oskar talks about the times when he actually said no, but where this was far from easy to do. It is above all in his current marriage that he has often felt pressured to have sex when he did not want to – and the more pressured he has felt, the less he has wanted to.

*Lena:* Have you felt pressured to have sex with a woman?

*Oskar:* Yes, earlier in my relationship with my wife I felt like that. And that it was very difficult to say no.

*Lena:* Why was it difficult?

*Oskar:* Because she could get very angry, and it was like there was something wrong with me for saying no.

*Lena:* What do you think about that?

*Oskar:* I think that maybe she had some issues that she had to deal with.

*Lena:* What did you do in these situations?

*Oskar:* I kept trying to say no. And then we'd get into an argument as well, get into a scuffle and start yelling and shouting.

*Lena:* In what way was it difficult to say no?

*Oskar:* Because...for me, saying no has always been connected to me feeling bad, feeling like I'm doing something wrong. In my family, people

were supposed to be happy and to say yes. If you say no, you cause discomfort for other people and you shouldn't do that, which means that you have to suppress a lot of emotions and your own true will. So even though I *feel* that it's right to say no, saying no is associated with discomfort about saying no, setting boundaries, disappointing other people.

*Lena:* Is it the fear of anger that lies at the root of it?

*Oscar:* Yes. Or maybe the fear of the guilt that the other person is trying to put on me.

Oskar's account of his wife's angry response to his no provides a parallel to Nils's experiences. Oskar says that with his wife, who is a feminist, he was able to address the bizarre issue that she got angry at him because he did not want to have sex on her terms. He could point out that if the gender roles were reversed, she would probably find it unacceptable. However, it seems that Oskar's conflicts with his wife about sex reflected further relational difficulties, with his wife experiencing Oskar's sexual rejections as a kind of lovelessness, and the more upset and demanding she became as a consequence of this, the more disinterested he became in having sex with her and the firmer he became in his rejections. Oskar's view of the problem is that his wife had emotional issues from earlier in her life, which made it painful for her to be rejected. This pain, which his wife expressed through anger, in turn brought to the fore his own wounds from childhood, wounds that had made him take responsibility throughout his life for other people's feelings – a pattern that he was increasingly able to break free from, however, through therapy and other “work on himself”. Today, Oskar and his wife have a good relationship and it is rare that he rejects her sexual advances. According to him, it is largely because his wife has processed her emotional wound and no longer approaches him in the same forceful and demanding way.

I want to understand Oskar's fear of his wife's – and others' – anger a little better.

*Lena:* You talk about your fear of your wife's anger. Is there anything else you want to say about it?

*Oskar:* Just to point out that it is on a very deep level. It's a *pattern* rather than some kind of idea of “Oh, now there's going to be a world war” or something like that. It is a pattern that arises in different situations.

*Lena:* A pattern of behaviour?

*Oskar:* Yes, exactly. Which just arises. And in other contexts as well that have nothing to do with sex, when people get angry at the fact that reality is sort of difficult. Then I want to be the reality that adapts to the person who is finding it difficult so that it won't be difficult anymore.

Oskar's description of the mechanisms behind his impulse to adapt may also shed light on some of the other participants' experiences. For example, if we look at Anas and Kristina's stories, they both talk about feeling like they have some kind of responsibility for their partner to be satisfied. Anas mentions feeling "terrible" if he "makes" the other person disappointed, as a parallel to the feelings of guilt that Oskar struggles not to accept when his wife more or less explicitly communicates that he is doing something wrong towards her when he rejects her sexual advances. Kristina mentions no feelings of guilt but it is not far-fetched to assume that such feelings unconsciously add fuel to her reluctance to disappoint others. What Oskar puts his finger on is that the impulse to adapt to the desires and moods of other people can be a deeply ingrained and unconscious pattern of behaviour that has a life of its own and "just arises", rather than a consequence of conscious beliefs and motives.

Anastasia Powell (2008) draws, with the help of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of *habitus*, attention to the preconscious aspects of dynamics of consent. Bourdieu's famous concept of *habitus* refers to the ways in which historically developed power-laden practices are internalized by people so that they are experienced as their natural way of being (Bourdieu 2001). Powell's point is that gendered expectations about how to behave in a sexual interaction seldom operate on a conscious level that people consciously relate to. Cultural expectations are instead borne by preconscious, bodily patterns, and thereby also become more difficult to reflect on and challenge. The bodily patterns involve emotions, which are a strong unconscious motivator for certain patterns of behaviour. Bourdieu (2001) discusses, for example, how subjugated people's feelings of shame and guilt undergird their silent acceptance of boundaries that contribute to their own subordination. Bourdieu's focus is on how bodily *habitus* patterns cause people to willingly reproduce power structures even if they are to their own detriment. Although Powell mentions the pressure men have on them to be sexually active, her focus, in line with Bourdieu's analysis of power, is the gendered power structures that cause women to conform to the will of men. She highlights the experience of *inescapability* that one of the women she interviewed describes regarding her own unwilling consent to a sexual situation: "this young woman believes, feels and experiences herself to be less capable of acting differently than perhaps she is" (Powell 2008: 175).

Oskar's account highlights that there are more basic psychological mechanisms that the *habitus*-mediated power structures can be said to be founded upon, meaning that people in a socially privileged position can also be stuck in self-denying patterns. As a study on sexual compliance showed, women with attachment anxiety had a stronger propensity to "consent" to sex they did not have a desire to engage in (Brewer & Forrest-Redfern 2022). Oskar himself explains his increasingly waning pattern of conforming to the wishes

of other people in terms of the dominance structures in his family during his childhood, in which his father's violence was always a threat. Bourdieu's *habitus* theory has been criticized for leaving too little room for individual agency and for challenging power relations. In light of this, it is interesting to note that Oskar has actually been able to break free from his own ingrained patterns, through individual and group-based therapeutic work that has enabled him to bring unconscious feelings and driving forces to the surface and thereby being able to challenge them.

**Gunnar: “She agreed so I’d be satisfied”**

I will end this chapter with an analysis of compliant or one-sided sex from the perspective of the partner doing the pressuring. Gunnar (50–55 years old, bisexual), who in the previous chapter spoke about his cautious approach to his current partner, says that he has always had a very strong sex drive – “I’ve probably been rather oversexual” – which has caused problems in both of his long-term relationships, where he wanted/wants to have far more sex than his female partners. Gunnar describes his previous marriage, which I will focus on here, as dysfunctional and says it was a time in his life when he himself suffered from significant psychological pain, which he later processed in therapy. He talks about his “immoderate need for validation” and how this could express itself sexually.

*Gunnar:* My ex-wife didn’t have this physical need at all, to be hugged, to be caressed, to have sex; her love life was more practical – to organize a trip, to make things nice at home. And I had an immoderate need for validation, and it manifested itself above all in the sexual and the physical. So having a sex life was almost like the air you breathe for me, it was that important.

*Lena:* You mean that it was above all through the sexual side that you wanted validation?

*Gunnar:* Yes, it was like the ultimate sign of validation in some way. So I could easily have had sex three, four, five times a day [laughs]. And she couldn’t, you can safely say [laughs].

He links his overwhelming need for validation to a childhood where he was not seen in his own right in the way that a child needs to be.

*Gunnar:* And that makes you very adaptable and you almost erase yourself, to fit in. You develop a very strong ability to sense the needs of others and I developed an unbelievably strong need to be validated as good enough. You are prepared to do almost anything to be good enough, to be accepted, and you need enormous amounts of

validation. It left its mark on the whole of my first relationship. I think that such things can lie behind the need for sex, that it provides such validation. It is an underlying need that drives you.

Gunnar does not bring up these childhood issues when he talks about his previous marriage, but when he talks about his sexual encounters with unknown men. Although he has had mostly positive and uncomplicated experiences with such encounters, there have been situations where he has had sex with men he did not really want to have sex with.

*Gunnar:* But it wasn't that I did it reluctantly, that I felt forced by someone, it wasn't like that. It was more my own horniness, to put it simply. And there are surely emotional things that make you get that drive or that need too.

Gunnar here makes a connection between his strong desire for sex and his desperate need for validation, stemming from the neglect he experienced as a child. His case is interesting because his description of himself is similar in many ways to the accounts from earlier in this chapter, in which his low self-esteem makes him too prone to adapt to the needs of others. Meanwhile, it turns out that his desperate need for validation has also caused him to cross the sexual boundaries of other people, because the need for validation has been so sexualized for him.

*Lena:* In practical terms, did you and your wife compromise or did you have sex, say once a week, and then you went around, frustrated?

*Gunnar:* It wasn't that she never had the desire, but sex was only on her terms. I couldn't control it, I felt, but it was when she felt like it that we could have sex. And it could shift from once a week to once a month and the less validation I gave her, the less interest she had. But it became very strong, I almost got...I won't say anguish, but it was incredibly strong feelings, like a desperation: "But I have to have this". And she sensed that, and I was perhaps clear about it as well that I thought we had far too little sex. And it wasn't that uncommon that...well, that she acquiesced so that I would be satisfied [laughs]. And it was physically wonderful and nice, but it left an aftertaste that wasn't good at all. Because it really is something that you should have mutually, and when it becomes one-sided like that and above all when it is so clear that one partner is doing it just to make the other satisfied, it doesn't feel good. And you feel afterwards that this is not good for our sex life, this is not good for our relationship. So it's more of an empty feeling afterwards. It was never the case that I forced her

to do anything, but she agreed because...because she experienced it as a requirement. And somewhere, it wasn't the physical sexual part that I needed, but what I really needed deep down was the expression of a feeling. And when it wasn't there, I was physically satisfied, but the black hole in me didn't get any smaller. Rather the opposite actually.

*Lena:* Why the opposite?

*Gunnar:* [Pause]. Because it was basically about wanting to feel that I was loved. It was the love I needed, and in my case that was mainly through sex, and when I then had some kind of sex but felt that there was no tangible love in the act itself...If you think about how you eat sweets to get sugar and then you get a whole bag of sugar-free sweets – yes, it's sweets, but you don't get what you needed deep inside. And then somehow it becomes even clearer that I'm missing this.

Gunnar here talks about how his wife felt pressured to please him. However, the focus of the story is on his experience rather than hers. He says that she “experienced it as a requirement” and, on another occasion, that “she forced herself in some way to satisfy me”, but he does not linger on the question of her experience. The emphasis of his story is on his own pain and dissatisfaction. In a way, you can say that Gunnar's strong experience of lack also characterizes his account in the interview, in which his own vulnerability and “victimhood” are constantly in the foreground. This is expressed, among other things, by the fact that both here and in the account of his current partner, which was analysed in the previous chapter, he begins by stating that sex takes place “on her terms”. I bring our discussion to the question of his partner's experience and Gunnar's responsibility.

*Lena:* When you describe [your ex-wife], she doesn't sound like a very amenable person.

*Gunnar:* No, oh no.

*Lena:* So when you say she forced herself to satisfy you – what was it that made her do that?

*Gunnar:* Mm, that's a good question that's difficult to answer. I don't know if I really know. She wasn't very open, so it wasn't always so easy to know what she was feeling.

*Lena:* But you felt it was her choice to do it?

*Gunnar:* Well, yes, I must say that it was. But exactly why and how big a part I had in this why, that is almost impossible for me to know.

*Lena:* But can you feel that you *should* not have let her do that?

*Gunnar:* Yes, I could feel that way.

*Lena:* But did you always let it happen?

*Gunnar:* Yes, I think so.

*Lena:* Because you had this desperation?

*Gunnar:* Mm, like this hunger.

*Lena:* Could you feel already while in the situation itself that maybe you really shouldn't have done it?

*Gunnar:* Yes.

*Lena:* So there was sort of an inner split there.

*Gunnar:* Yes, there was. Absolutely.

It here becomes clear that Gunnar feels that he did wrong to his then-wife. It is notable, though, that while in other parts of the interview he speaks spontaneously in long, uninterrupted chunks of verbiage, he here answers very briefly to my direct questions. It is difficult to know how exactly this should be interpreted, but in some way it represents a distancing from the issue of his own guilt and his ex-partner's experience of his behaviour.

An important point I want to make regarding the analysis of Gunnar's account is that an acute need for validation can not only be a driving force behind adapting to the sexual demands of others, as we saw, for example, in Stina's story, but it can also make a person insensitive to others' boundaries. Gunnar talks about having a need fuelled by a painful compulsion, a feeling that "*I have to have this*". It is this experience of compulsion that makes him go against his sense that he really should not have let his then-partner "force herself" to satisfy him. His desperation wins over his moral judgement. Like Michael's experience, which I will analyse in [Chapter 7](#), Gunnar's experience points very clearly to an important aspect of sex: our sexual needs cannot be reduced to a matter of physical pleasure but are deeply connected to our basic existential needs of validation and connection. Understanding the existential breadth of sex and the therefore potentially very strong psychological forces that can be involved in sex is thus something we must bring with us when we discuss sexual violations.

### **The agency of the victimized**

Feminist researchers in the field of consent have criticized anti-violence projects that focus on teaching girls and women to become better at saying no to sex. They have shown that such a focus reflects a mistaken assumption that men have difficulties picking up on women's more subtle signals of disinclination and in an all too familiar a way places the responsibility for stopping men's sexual violence on women (Beres 2010; [Kitzinger & Frith 1999](#)). I agree with these researchers that the primary emphasis of campaigns and training about sexual consent should be on the willing party's responsibility to make sure the other person really wants to have sex. At the same time, I believe that it would be unfortunate to limit preventive work to that focus. It

must, in order to be all-encompassing and thus effective, also start from the fact that all people will not take the responsibility we demand that they take, but will consciously or unconsciously seek out people who are prepared to allow themselves to be taken advantage of. My wording *allow themselves* to be taken advantage of refers to the degree of agency that victims in many – *though not all* – cases actually have when it comes to protecting their sexual integrity from being overstepped by other people (Haaken 2002; Lamb 1999). As we have seen in this chapter, the issue of freedom of choice is extremely complex. When Stina, Anas and Kristina agree to have sex even though they do not want to, there are strong motivations behind their choices, which they cannot easily go against without unpleasant emotional consequences. We should not underestimate the fear of, for example, being abandoned by a partner. However, consent researchers, educators and debaters should not stop at understanding and sympathizing with these types of fear-driven mechanisms, but should also show what opportunities are available for not being controlled by them in a way that is harmful to oneself.

Similar to previous research, my interview material shows that people who acquiesce to sex often do not see that they have any other choice. The experience of necessity/non-choice should be respected and carefully explored. However, it should not be taken to mean that the person actually has no choice. As Powell (2008) is aware of in her reflection on the female participant who did not see the opportunities she might actually have had to set a boundary, to an extent power works by making us accept boundaries that could actually be crossed. Lamb (1999) emphasizes that it is a widespread and serious problem that victims of sexual abuse often take too much responsibility for what happened, but simultaneously believes that the answer to this problem is not a black-and-white logic that makes us write off the victim's own actions as irrelevant. Carefully finding out if there was actually anything a person could have done differently to protect themselves is a way of communicating to them that we believe in their ability to “assume the assertiveness that will protect [their] rights” (Lamb 1999: 54). Lamb points out that this does not contradict a demand that the perpetrator take their rightful responsibility.

Both Powell and Lamb write about sexual violence and unwanted sex in classic gendered terms, with women occupying the victim position and men the perpetrator position. However, the experience of submitting to unwanted sex is something that men seem to share with women to a large extent, as we saw in the Introduction. How, then, should we conceive of the influence of gender on the tendency to agree to unwanted sex? I suggest we develop a multidimensional understanding of the mechanisms that make people sexually comply, even while it would have been possible not to. I argue that at the most basic level of this problem we find gender-neutral relational mechanisms connected to people's profound dependence on each other. However,

although human mutual interdependence is a universal fact, there are variations between people in terms of the acuteness of their experience of dependence and thus between their willingness to compromise their own needs in order to preserve a relationship or gain another person's validation. These variations likely stem to a large extent from formative childhood experiences that contribute to different attachment patterns (Brewer & Forrest-Redfern 2022; Cassidy & Shaver 2018). Although gender structures to some extent affect even our earliest experiences (Benjamin 1988; Chodorow 1978), in this chapter we have seen that men and women can adopt very similar adaptation strategies as a way of avoiding conflict.

Meanwhile, there are further social conditions that create a tendency for women to put their own needs aside for the sake of others to a greater degree than men. The very construction of femininity and masculinity can even be said to revolve around the question of the importance of one's own versus others' needs: women are expected to be care-oriented, while men are expected to be assertive (Gunnarsson 2014a, 2014b). These constructions are not something people can just shake off, partly because they shape our identities from the beginning of our lives, and partly because other people often react negatively if we work against them. This gendered pattern is clearly reflected on the sexual level, in which women in our culture are more or less subtly positioned as sexual objects for men's sexual desires. This can mean that both men and women experience it as "natural" that women should meet men's sexual needs even if they themselves have no desire (Powell 2008). As we saw in Stina's case, women can also experience a particular form of validation in the position of being desirable, which is fed by dominant cultural imagery that value women based on their heterosexual attractiveness.

Paradoxically enough, the dominant conceptions of sexually driven men and responsive women also place pressure on men to agree to women's sexual advances, as Nils's story so clearly illustrates. In Chapter 10, I will delve further into the question of men's experiences of unwanted sex and how they possibly differ from women's.

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# 5

## GIVING IN – BECAUSE YOU WANT TO

While the previous chapter addressed experiences of having sex despite not wanting to, this chapter shifts focus to experiences of desire-less sex characterized by a greater degree of mutual willingness. Indeed, sex where one person lacks sexual desire but still accepts or agrees to the sex includes a broad spectrum of experiences characterized by different degrees of un/willingness and dis/comfort. At the most positive and unproblematic end of that spectrum, we find experiences of happily and willingly agreeing to have sex with someone else as a gift, despite getting nothing out of it physically. Popular language has seen the rise of the term “maintenance sex”, referring to sex that a person engages in “to keep a relationship going, even if they aren’t in the mood” (Petter 2021). In the scholarly literature, the term “compliant sex” has been used to label practices of “putting the other partner’s sexual desires ahead of [one’s] own and *willingly* engaging in *unwanted* sex” (Impett & Peplau 2003: 87, emphasis added). In this chapter I explore the nuances of this type of sex, as experienced both by the person lacking sexual desire and the person engaging in a sexual interaction with a person known to be motivated by other reasons than desire.

### **Gunnar: “She wanted to do it for my sake”**

I will begin by revisiting Gunnar (50–55 years old, bisexual), who in the previous chapter talked about how his ex-wife felt pressured to satisfy him sexually. Earlier in the book, he also shared his experiences of sexually approaching his current female partner, who for various reasons rarely feels like having sex. Both Gunnar’s former wife and his current partner have regularly agreed to have sex with Gunnar, although they themselves did not feel sexual

desire. As Gunnar describes it, there is still a vast difference between these two types of one-sided or compliant sex. In fact, it was the case that even at the beginning of their marriage, his then-wife sometimes obliged “with warmth and generosity”, as Gunnar puts it, and this is what leads him to discussing how things are with his current partner.

*Gunnar:* With my ex-wife, I think there was a development there. In the beginning, she had more desire, so then it was more often...And when she didn't feel any sexual desire, she probably did it with warmth and generosity because she felt she wanted to anyway.

*Lena:* You can do it with love and warmth, for the other person's sake. That difference is interesting.

*Gunnar:* Oh yes, they are two very different things. And it works similarly in my current relationship. But here it is so very clear that she is not doing it with reluctance and distaste, but because she really... she wants to do it for my sake. I can still miss the mutuality because it is so fundamental to me that I am not really satisfied if I have not been able to make it at least as nice for the other person. But it's a completely different experience when someone does it for me like that, with that feeling behind it.

*Lena:* Do you mean that there is this thing that she *wants* you to have a good time?

*Gunnar:* Mm.

*Lena:* That she cares about you, is that what you mean?

*Gunnar:* Yes, exactly.

As I touched on earlier, there are motivations other than sexual desire that drive people to have sex (Foster 2011; Impett & Peplau 2002, 2003; Muehlenhard & Peterson 2005). These motivations range from fear to love, and where the line should be drawn between “good” and “bad” reasons is far from a simple question. Nor is it a simple matter to define where the line is to be drawn between an experience of free choice and a feeling of pressure or coercion.

In the previous chapter, I raised relational mechanisms as being decisive for people agreeing to have sex that they do not really want to participate in. There, the focus was on the destructive vulnerability that our dependence can create. But, fundamentally, our relational being is a positive and nurturing force, where an important component is care for others. When we love and care about someone, giving is ideally not a zero-sum game that *costs* us something, but rather the other person's satisfaction becomes our own satisfaction (Gunnarsson 2011, 2014a). This is why Gunnar's partner's choice to have sex *for his sake* can take place with joy and genuine willingness.

I will soon complicate this picture somewhat, focusing on the gendered mechanisms that tend to make caring about the needs of others a differently

charged issue depending on the gender of the giver. But first, we will see what Mariam has to say about her experiences of having sex with her husband even though she does not feel like it.

**Mariam: “You have to say yes sometimes”**

Mariam (55–60 years old, heterosexual) has been in a marriage for a long time to a man, which she describes as loving. She describes herself as quite uninterested in sex and says there is a big difference between her and her husband’s needs. I get the impression that she would have no problem living a life completely without sex. Although Mariam usually goes with her own feelings and says no to her husband’s sexual invitations, she talks about how she sometimes obliges. I try to get some clarity about how she has experienced the sex on these occasions.

*Lena:* How has it felt for you in such situations? Has it felt okay or has it been difficult?

*Mariam:* I think it’s been okay anyway, because he hasn’t forced me or it hasn’t been like he *has* to have it. But still he’s asked and may have been nagging a bit. But it’s not that I have to, he has never forced me in that way, now you have to do it. But the feeling is that I am not...

*Lena:* But no major damage actually happened?

*Mariam:* No, no, not like that. And I’ve still been part of it and kind of... gone along with it, even though I might not have wanted to at the time.

*Lena:* Could you say that you didn’t really feel like having sex, but that you still, you *wanted* to do it for him?

*Mariam:* Yes, you could say that. And I am someone who has perhaps agreed more for his sake, not for my own.

Even if we hold up human freedom as an ideal and see sex as something that can never be *expected* from another person, it is probably impossible to let go of all such expectations. The clearest example of the inevitability of expectations around access to another person’s body is found in the idea that two people in a relationship should have sex. How, when and how often they should have sex is negotiable, but *that* they should have sex is typically not negotiable in the same way. Hence, when a person is very uninterested in sex, an expectation easily arises that they should compromise and do it anyway. As Nils put it in the previous chapter: “After all, she was my partner and everything else is absolutely fantastic and you’re supposed to have sex in relationships. So you have to accept that little thing to get everything else”.

Several of the interviews are about what happens when one person does not feel like having sex at all, and it is interesting that while most people do not see it as legitimate to nag an unwilling partner *in that moment* for sex, it is considered more legitimate to express dissatisfaction with a more systematic pattern of a partner never or rarely wanting sex. For most people, it seems obvious that not having sex is a problem that needs to be rectified, while theoretically one could just as well imagine that the “sex-demanding” partner’s behaviour could be seen as the problem. The normative place of sex in a couple’s relationship has of course to do with the fact that sex is, so to speak, its *raison d’être*. It is a relatively new and culturally bounded phenomenon that marriage and marriage-like relationships are based on sexual attraction, but marriage as an institution has always been a matter of regulating sexual ties. For a long time, marriage also guaranteed a *right* to sex.

Mariam grew up in the Middle East in a context where the right of husbands to have sex is strongly emphasized and is closely linked to a very strong *male sexual drive discourse* (Gavey 2005; Hollway 1984): men *must* have sex, so therefore their wives must give it to them or else they will be forced to be unfaithful. Although Mariam is politically progressive, the presence of this mindset can be discerned in the interview with her in a different way than in the other interviews. She talks about a time at the beginning of her marriage when she and her husband lived in a way that meant that they rarely had a moment alone with each other and so she would agree to sex “so that I don’t have a guilty conscience if maybe it would be a month before we get the chance to be alone together again”. Later in the interview I come back to Mariam’s mention of her “guilty conscience”.

*Lena:* You told me that you could have a guilty conscience and you said that you were usually good at saying no.

*Mariam:* Mm.

*Lena:* Have you sometimes felt guilty when you said no?

*Mariam:* It could happen if I said no several times in a row. Then you thought that maybe you should agree...I wouldn’t accept if he went to another woman when I’m married to him. And then maybe I thought “Yes, but okay”. I’m a person who’s actually a bit [laughs], I’m not very into sex, you could say, and prefer to have very long periods in between before I might find it fun and want to do it. And especially when we were young and he had asked maybe five or six times and I’d said no, then I could feel a little guilty. After all, I’m married to him and it’s the only way for him to have sex and yet I keep saying no, no, no – where would he go?

*Lena:* So you can say he has a greater need for sex than you do and so you want to compromise a little?

*Mariam:* Yes, that is how I have sometimes thought about it.

*Lena:* Does it mean that you are simply the kind of person who is not very interested in sex?

*Mariam:* Yes, I never have been.

*Lena:* It's not that there's something wrong with your relationship?

*Mariam:* No, no. I still like him *very much* and I know that he loves me very, very much, takes good care of me and cares a lot about me. It's not that.

*Lena:* Because sometimes it can be that way, but not always.

*Mariam:* No, not in our case. Because he takes into account and accepts my nos, and he is aware that I don't have a great need for sex. And it may be that it also makes me feel worse, that he takes me into consideration so often and accepts that I'm a person who doesn't want much sex. It makes you sometimes think that maybe you have to say yes sometimes anyway.

*Lena:* Do you mean that since he shows you so much consideration, maybe you can give back?

*Mariam:* Yes, that's what I mean.

From the interview with Mariam, it becomes clear that she is anything but a docile and normative woman. I also do not feel that she has a real fear that her husband would cheat if he never got to have sex with her, but rather that she makes a choice from her own free will to have sex with him sometimes, simply out of her concern for his needs. The caring dynamic is not an expression of "selfless giving" but is instead based on some kind of "economic" logic, a give-and-take. Her repeated no implies a certain suffering for her husband, which he bears meekly. This creates a genuine willingness on her part to give back to him by compromising a little on her own immediate desires.

### **Thomas: "It was a little unfair that I did it for him while he refused"**

One person who knows a lot about sexual compromise is Thomas (50–55 years old, gay). He lived for a long time in a loving marriage that was satisfying on every level, apart from the fact that he and his husband's sexual preferences were in unyielding conflict. The problem was that both enjoyed taking on the penetrating role and neither enjoyed being penetrated. While Thomas's husband was adamant that he did not want to be penetrated, Thomas himself was able to compromise on that point. That Thomas agreed to be penetrated by his husband was entirely conditioned by his love for him.

*Thomas:* Being the bottom, I can only let someone do that if I like him very much. It sounds a little weird, but I can top anyone but would never let someone top me during a one-night-stand or at a sex club.

*Lena:* Why?

*Thomas:* It's very intimate for me. There aren't many people who have done it – my husband and maybe one or two others. When I love someone and like him a lot and he loves me, then I can put up with sexual things, for the sake of the other person. Just because that person enjoys it and wants it. I never do anything I don't want to do, but being topped is not my favourite. But you can do it in a nice and very intimate way and then it can be wonderful.

Thomas's experience of being penetrated is that it hurts at first, but that after a while, "if everything is right", it can turn into something more pleasurable – sometimes even very pleasurable. Thomas makes it very clear that it was never this type of sex that was the problem in his marriage – his big problem was his frustration at never being able to penetrate his husband. The tragic incompatibility between Thomas and his spouse eventually resulted in them ceasing to have sex and Thomas, despite his preference for monogamy, seeking sex outside of their marriage.

Thomas expresses that he knows his own limits well and I get the impression that his experience of letting his husband penetrate him was in itself completely unproblematic. Before he explains that his husband never let Thomas penetrate him, I take it for granted that the kind of compromise Thomas made with his immediate sexual desires was something that was mutual. Thomas says early on in the interview that he has full respect for his husband's no, but I ask him how he feels about the fact that he, but not his spouse, was ready to compromise to some extent for the sake of the other person.

*Lena:* How did it feel that your husband didn't do it for you?

*Thomas:* It didn't feel good. But I'm still an incredibly considerate person; I would never do anything sexual with someone if they don't want it.

*Lena:* You did it for him, you could say, but he didn't do it back and that didn't feel so good.

*Thomas:* No.

*Lena:* Can you tell me a little more? Were there conflicts due to it?

*Thomas:* It could make me sad. No conflict, there were discussions, and I could also be sad because I felt it was a bit unfair that I agreed but he didn't. But on the other hand, if someone doesn't want to, there's nothing in me that would make me force anyone to do anything. And logically, if someone doesn't like it, well, what am I supposed to do? Then you have to accept it just like you have to accept many other things in a relationship that you have to compromise about. But it's so strong here. I have this option: I can top other guys. I remember very well that I said to him once: "So there are only two options for me, either with you or with someone else, but not doing it is out of the question".

Although Thomas experienced disappointment in regard to his husband, my overall impression is that this did not affect his experience of agreeing to be penetrated. It is highly conceivable that his husband's reluctance to, so to speak, share the burden of being penetrated could lead to an ill will standing in the way of his own willingness to be topped. However, I do not interpret the fact that Thomas and his spouse's sex life eventually ceased as being due to such ill will, but rather a result of them beginning to have sex with others, making their marital sex life more superfluous. My interpretation of Thomas's lack of resentment towards his own compromising is that he felt completely confident in wanting to do it.

**Stella: "I really worry that she wanted it because I wanted it"**

In [Chapter 2](#), Stella (25–30 years old, lesbian) talked about what consensual communication could be like between her and her partner and she shared her thoughts about where the limit is for touching a partner without first confirming that it is okay. Stella is currently married to a woman who, like Mariam and Gunnar's partners, has a low level of interest in sex, something that has created some frustration for Stella, who wants to have sex much more often than her wife. For Gunnar and Mariam, "obliging" or "compliant" ([Impett & Peplau 2003](#)) sex with a regular partner appears to be relatively unproblematic, as long as it is done as an act of care and is experienced as a free choice (cf. [Gavey 2005](#); [Impett & Peplau 2003](#)). Stella finds it difficult to accept this as a legitimate form of sexual exchange, though. We get into the subject when I ask her if she believes that she has ever had sex with someone who did not really want to.

*Stella:* I'm afraid that my wife and I had sex even though she didn't really want to. I'm really worried about that. And that has probably happened. We talk about stuff like that and we try to process it.

Stella says that she and her wife spend a lot of time talking about their relationship in the wake of a crisis in their relationship, where sex is one factor that is discussed. But there is a gap in their communication that has to do with what is meant by "wanting" to have sex.

*Lena:* You say that it probably happened, but that you don't know. You haven't talked about it?

*Stella:* No, she's said she never had sex with me when she didn't want to. But what does *want* mean? Has it been that she wanted to so as to make me happy? What is it really to want to? Is it because she wants to or because she knows I want to and she wants me to be happy? We haven't talked about that so I really worry about that, that she wanted it because I wanted it so that it would be good for me.

Despite Stella's wife assuring her that she did not have sex with her against her will, Stella cannot feel secure that this is really the case. Unlike Gunnar, who has accepted it as part of his sex life that his partner has sex for his sake rather than based on her own sexual desire, it does not feel okay for Stella that her partner agrees to do it out of concern for her needs. Stella talks about another situation where she is also unsure if her sexual partner really wanted to and I try to drill deeper into what it means for Stella to *really want to*.

*Stella:* I had sex with a straight girl once, I mean we semi-dated for a while. And then it came out that she just wanted the lesbian experience, sort of. I think maybe she slept with me because she wanted to test it out. And I'm a little unsure if she actually *wanted* it, that's what I ponder.

*Lena:* That maybe she wasn't really turned on?

*Stella:* Yeah, something like that.

*Lena:* Is that what you mean about your wife too, that maybe she wasn't really turned on?

*Stella:* Yes, exactly.

*Lena:* That's what you're afraid of? That she didn't want it that way?

*Stella:* Exactly.

*Lena:* Because you can want to on different levels.

*Stella:* Mm.

*Lena:* But does it feel important to you that the other person is turned on?

*Stella:* Mm.

*Lena:* That that's what it is to really want to.

*Stella:* Yes, I believe that I think it's very important, because otherwise it feels like...Like with my wife, that she does want to have sex with me, but she wants it to make me happy. And it doesn't feel good to me that it should...because I can be happy anyway.

It is clear that Stella has high demands on reciprocity in sex. Her partner should want to do it for *her own sake* and not for Stella's sake. While Gunnar also has a preference for sex where his partner is sexually aroused, he presents it as a matter of having better sex then. For Stella, on the other hand, it is a moral question, a question of her violating someone else's boundary if the other person does not *really* want to, that is, if the person does not feel sexual desire. I return to the second situation that Stella mentions, with the heterosexual woman, to further demonstrate the difference in the moral standards that Stella and Gunnar apply to their responsibilities in relation to their sexual partners. Stella's experience with the heterosexual woman was hardly a form of compliant sex, but Stella's thoughts about it shed light on the importance she places on her sexual partner's motives for having sex with her being lust-based. When Stella first recounts the encounter with the heterosexual "adventurer, I imagine" that Stella may

have felt tricked or taken advantage of by the woman not actually enjoying the sexual connection with Stella. But even in that situation, where Stella's heterosexual partner appears to be anything but a victim but, on the contrary, is actively seeking a new, desired experience, Stella turns the situation into a question of her responsibility not to overstep the other person's boundaries.

*Lena:* It sounds like it doesn't feel good for you if it was the case that she wasn't really into you.

*Stella:* No.

*Lena:* What is it about that that doesn't feel good?

*Stella:* Well, like...I don't feel like I forced her, but if she just wanted to have that experience without being so into it, then it doesn't feel good to me, because then I kind of...I feel like I've crossed a line in some way, even if she wanted to. I don't know, it's hard to explain.

*Lena:* It's interesting because I can also imagine that, if I had been you, I could have felt a little like it was *me* who was being exploited. If she only wants to do it with me to get "the lesbian experience". But you haven't felt that way?

*Stella:* Yes, I have. I mean, I was pretty annoyed with her for a long time after it ended, that she just wanted to experiment...Because she went back to the guy she dated before she met me and they're still together. But I probably never felt taken advantage of in that way. I probably felt more "Come on, grow up".

*Lena:* So it was more this feeling of "did I cross a line"?

*Stella:* Mm.

### **Rikard: "Sex was a way of overcoming our problems"**

Rikard (40–45 years old, bisexual) tells me about an occasion when he agreed to have sex with a female partner, and this situation could fit into the previous chapter, where I addressed compliant sex that was more unambiguously unwanted and that negatively affected the unwilling party. The difficulty of making a clear division between negative and positive experiences of adapting to a partner's wishes shows how "wanting" versus "not wanting" is not a simple dichotomy. I still choose to include Rikard's experience in this chapter because the sex he reluctantly agreed to was something he still fundamentally wanted to take part in and – perhaps more importantly – in retrospect is glad that he did take part in.

Rikard has a very active and what many would perceive as extravagant sex life, with many elements of BDSM practice. He has steady relationships with women, but meets men only for sex. While with men he exclusively occupies a submissive sexual position, his sexuality with women is more

flexible. However, his entire sexuality is governed by a desire to focus on the needs of his sexual partner, something that with men he realizes through total submission, while with women he can accomplish it in other ways as well, such as by taking on a dominant role. A difference between his experiences with men versus with women is also that his own physical pleasure is overshadowed with men in favour of the mental pleasure he experiences by being the object of men's pleasure, while his focus on women's pleasure is something that gives him self physical sexual pleasure.

Since Rikard is almost always in the mood for sex, he rarely finds himself in situations where “obliging” is an option. However, one such situation comes up during the interview, when we talk about his tendency to adapt to the needs of his sexual partners.

*Lena:* When it comes to women, is it unproblematic for you to fully support their needs? There is no conflict there that “Oh, now I'm doing this for her sake even though I really would have wanted to do something else”?

*Rikard:* Nah. But in relation to this woman I have a clear emotional bond with, there have probably been times when we had sex because she wanted to while I didn't feel like it. And it may have been like “well”. It has felt like now we had sex just because you wanted it. And there have been periods when there was broken trust between us.

Rikard tells us that his partner had betrayed him in a matter, which caused their relationship to crack at the joints and his trust in her to decrease. He is used to always wanting sex, but in the periods when his trust in his partner has been challenged, his desire has sometimes been absent.

*Rikard:* On the one hand, there have been times when it hasn't worked sexually, where my erection hasn't worked, but there have also been a few times where I've *obliged* to have sex even though I didn't *really* want it that much. Usually I really want to have sex, but in these situations, it's been like “Yes, okay, we'll have sex then”.

*Lena:* How has it been for you then?

*Rikard:* *That* has been a bit difficult emotionally. But it hasn't been connected so much to the sex itself as to doing something pleasurable for someone who recently hurt me by breaking a trust and showing disrespect. So more an emotional like...

*Lena:* How did it go on those occasions when you had sex even though you didn't want to? How did you get there?

*Rikard:* We got there by her taking me by the hand, pulling me to the bed and saying “Take me”.

*Lena:* And then you did it.

*Rikard:* And then I did it.

*Lena:* Was it self-evident that you would do it then?

*Rikard:* Yes...it probably was, like. There was a voice in my head that said “don’t want to”, but I kind of did it anyway.

*Lena:* Can you elaborate more on that? I know it’s not always that easy, but you could have...

*Rikard:* Said no.

*Lena:* ...said no.

*Rikard:* Hmm.

*Lena:* Did you think it was an option to do that?

*Rikard:* [long pause] With her, no.

*Lena:* Because?

*Rikard:* Because my emotional connection to her is so strong that somewhere, I probably wanted to. I didn’t really want to have sex, but I still wanted to have sex as a way of overcoming the issues we had, as part of the reunion after the betrayal.

*Lena:* And did you feel that it contributed to that?

*Rikard:* Yes, returning to each other sexually has on those occasions when there has been some kind of betrayal or when for other reasons we have separated – because we have separated a few times – then the sexual reunification has come first, before a more social or relational reunification.

*Lena:* So was it worth it?

*Richard:* Yes.

*Lena:* But how did you feel? During the act itself and afterwards?

*Rikard:* During the act, I could get into how she was enjoying herself, but afterwards I felt a bit...I felt used, taken advantage of, but not in a good way [laughs] but a bit like this “Well, I’m a fucking dildo”.

*Lena:* But that feeling didn’t destroy anything else between you?

*Rikard:* No, it didn’t.

When Rikard says that he felt used “but not in a good way”, he means that his role as the submissive is precisely to be used by the dominant party, something he finds pleasure in. It is interesting to explore the difference between the various types of experience of being used by someone else, something that can shed light on the difference between real exploitation and being made use of as a mutually pleasurable game. However, to understand Rikard’s experience here, his sense of disappointment in his partner is the decisive factor. Somehow, in sex, he was able to enter the more purely sexual sphere where it is wonderful and exciting to be the source of his partner’s pleasure. At the same time, the sense of resentment he felt towards his partner stood in the way of such generosity, so his giving came at a cost. This clearly shows

how the willingness to take a giving position is conditioned by a feeling of benevolence towards the recipient.

### **Anders: The gender asymmetries of give-and-take sex**

At the end of my interview with Anders (40–45 years old, bisexual), we get into the topic of doing something sexual that you do not find particularly enjoyable yourself for the sake of another person. During the interview, Anders often engages in general reflections, sometimes, as in this case, resulting in a discussion between us. He slips into the theme of doing it for the other person's sake when reasoning about how to best introduce suggestions for more “kinky” forms of sex to his new female partner. Anders has a previous experience, which I discuss in [Chapter 8](#), of a partner who, after they had broken up, said that she did not really want to participate in the type of dominance sex she and Anders practiced. Therefore, I raise the issue of potential worries about whether his new partner might oblige and put up with something she does not really want.

*Anders:* If we were to try something sexual where we would have to discuss it, I think I could say straight out don't do this now because I want it and you're in love with me and want me to think it's nice to be in bed with you, but do this because you want to do it. And maybe you do it for my sake, because that can happen, because sex, it's about a give-and-take too. You can do things you didn't think of yourself – I wouldn't have licked you like this or done this as you want me to do, but I'm doing it for you and I want to do it. There is consent, but it is someone else's idea and yes, you do it for each other a little. But it's still not about doing something against your will, because that's a big difference. Like, “Can you do this with me?” “Yes, I suppose I can do that. It's not very exciting to me and I'd rather do it some other way, but you think it's absolutely wonderful and I enjoy your enjoyment, so I do it” – it's a different thing than doing it against one's will. And there I could probably imagine doing almost anything for my partner, actually, so that she can enjoy herself. And I don't expect it to be the other way around, for her to feel the same way.

As in the case with Thomas, Anders is not here talking about obliging sex where one person has no desire to have sex at all, but rather about what kind of sexual acts you agree to perform for another person. Anders describes sex as naturally based on a mutual give-and-take, which includes doing things for the other person's pleasure. Just as in Rikard's case, the dualism between give-and-take here dissolves to a certain extent, because his giving to

a partner is also rewarding for himself: “I enjoy your enjoyment”, as he puts it. However, the pleasure he is talking about here is something other than the more direct, bodily pleasure that he gives his partner in the situation of giving:

*Anders:* If I’m going to go down on a woman, it’s not exactly very nice for me. It’s hard on my jaws and tongue, especially if it takes a long time before she comes; it can take an eternity. But I still get really excited by it and I’m happy to do it, because she can enjoy it. It’s about giving. And of course I want to get it back too – I don’t expect it, although it’s clear that it’s nice if she agrees to do it, if you can put it like that, and does something for me that might not be very nice for her, but which she still does of her own free will because she wants me to have a good time, because now I have made it nice for her. A little bit like that, where you give and take.

Anders repeats that he does not expect his (female) partner to comply with his wishes. At the same time, in the interview there is a trace of resentment towards different female partners whose own needs have diverged from Anders’s. Even though he says that he does not expect “her to feel the same way” or think that it is wonderful to give him pleasure on his terms and to put her own preferences aside, I still feel that in several places in the interview he expresses a bitterness at the absence of such an attitude on the part of women. For example, he talks in a glorifying way about the male gay world and how unproblematic it is with sex among men – “you agree to do it” – while he rants about women’s tendency to “have a headache” when it comes to sex.

Partly because of these aspects of the interview, partly because I feel there is a lack a reflection from Anders about possible differences between women’s and men’s experiences of meeting a partner’s needs, I raise the gender perspective with him. This is based on my analysis that the different positioning of women and men in a heterosexual context means that for a woman to accommodate a man’s sexual desires tends to have a different meaning than when the roles are reversed.

*Lena:* You say that you don’t expect the same, that your partner should want to do everything that you like. Do you think there is a difference there between being a man and a woman, on a general level?

*Anders:* I was actually talking to a female friend about this recently. I don’t think the difference between men and women is as big as it is made out to be. And I think it’s unfortunate that women still have this victim label in sexual contexts. I don’t know female sexuality in that way, but when I do something for someone else it’s because

I like sex a lot and I'm often horny and then anything is exciting. Even if I'm doing it for my partner and it's not really nice for me, I can still be turned on by my partner's arousal.

The question of giving, and of adapting to someone else's needs, is undoubtedly strongly gendered. Women's role in patriarchy can in many ways be boiled down to the principle of putting one's own needs aside for the sake of others (Gunnarsson 2014b). Giving, and adapting to other people's needs, therefore often has completely different implications for women than for men, perhaps especially in heterosexual constellations. The woman's giving is associated with subordination, while the man can give without it threatening his position – on the contrary, giving is here often an expression of authority and strength. As the rapturous women in pornography testify, the man's ability to give women pleasure is a central aspect of his heterosexual power and potency. I make an effort to raise this issue with Anders.

*Lena:* What I thought about was that a man can adapt to what a woman wants and make it nice for her and just find it really exciting. And a woman can absolutely do that for a man as well, but at the same time it can also be more problematic, that well, now I'm going to make it nice for the man.

*Anders:* Hmm.

*Lena:* Because it fits so well with...

*Anders:* With everything else.

*Lena:* ...subordination.

*Anders:* Yes, exactly.

*Lena:* While the man doesn't have that. He does not end up in a vulnerable position by giving his woman...

*Anders:* No. You have so many advantages in society so now you can take it and lick here as well. Yes, I hadn't thought about that aspect, but it is very relevant with the way society is structured, that this is something that the woman has with her also in the bedroom. That you do something for the one who is normally bigger and stronger and perhaps more dominant, and then it becomes a different kind of give-and-take, that it becomes a barrier instead. I don't know.

Anders longs for reciprocity – and maybe even some kind of justice. But it is only first through my reflections that he becomes aware that a reciprocity on the surface may not always translate into real reciprocity. Virginia Braun, Nicola Gavey and Kathryn McPhillips (2003) show that the principle of reciprocity has to some extent permeated Western sex manuals and other normative discourses since the early 20th century. They also point to research in, above all, anthropology, which highlights the principle of reciprocity as a

universal principle that is the very glue in social relations (Gouldner 1996). The norm of reciprocity can mean different things but can be understood in an overarching way as a duty – or at least an expectation – to give back to the same degree that one has received.

The ideals of reciprocity and equality are closely linked. At the same time, it is risky to mix them up too easily, because even if an exchange can be mutual on a superficial level, the wider context within which the exchange is made can be characterized by unequal power relations, which means that the reciprocity has different consequences for the parties involved and is charged with varying degrees of freedom and pressure. Braun et al. (2003) investigate how the principle of reciprocity in heterosexual sex can in fact create a lack of freedom mainly for women, for example when it comes to ending a sexual act before both partners have reached orgasm. If the woman had an orgasm but the man did not, she may feel it as her duty to continue having sex until the man comes, and based on existing conventions about how heterosexual sex “works”, this often involves the penetration of the penis into the vagina until the man orgasms. Conversely, the heterosexual men interviewed in Braun and colleagues’ study expressed that they see the woman’s orgasm as important, partly because it is a sign of reciprocity, which is seen as an expression of “good”, equal sex, partly because it confirms that the man is a good sex partner.

Anders’s tacitly conveyed wish that women would be happy to “give back” a little more is probably not just about him wanting to have his sexual needs met. Judging from the entire interview, it seems as much an expression of a longing for care, affirmation and love, for women to care about his needs. He recounts that he sometimes would cry in his marital bed after being sexually rejected again by his then-wife. As mentioned in the previous chapter, people’s sexual needs are often intertwined with basic needs for recognition. A pattern I discern in the interview with Anders is that the personal wounds he carries with him from his tangled relationships with women seem to fuel his abstract and principle-based reasoning about doing something for someone else’s sake, as well as his glorifying way of contrasting simple male same-sex sexuality against complicated female (hetero)sexuality.

### **The larger context of “maintenance sex”**

This chapter and the previous one have shown that sex based on accommodating the other person’s wants rather than acting on one’s own desires includes a wide range of experiences, ranging from abuse and experiences of coercion to voluntary and unproblematic acts of care performed for “altruistic reasons” (Impett & Peplau 2003: 93). In regard to the more voluntary and positive forms of obliging sex analysed in this chapter, there are considerable differences in the attitudes among the participants. This becomes clearest in

the contrast between Gunnar and Stella, both of whom have experiences – or, in Stella’s case, likely although not confirmed experiences – of their partners agreeing to sex despite their lack of desire. For Gunnar, it is a routine part of his current relationship, with which he seems to have no moral concerns, although he may feel some dissatisfaction with the lack of reciprocity. Stella, on the other hand, is “really worried” that her partner has had sex with her just for Stella’s sake. Despite the partner’s assurances that she never had sex with Stella against her will, Stella does not perceive her partner’s will as being valid if it is not based on her own sexual desire. If the desire is missing, then Stella feels that she has transgressed her partner’s boundary.

Nicola Gavey discusses the problems with sex that is not based on sexual desire and, unlike Stella, is not ready to morally condemn all such forms of compliance sex.

In the struggle against normative sexual coercion, I don’t think it is necessary to propose instead an ethic that holds that all sex has to be entered into because both people feel like having sex. It seems possible to imagine legitimate instances where people choose to have sex with someone as an act of giving – as a gesture of love or care for another person – even though they don’t feel like the physical experience themselves. This is a complex arena in which there is the potential for all sorts of judgment calls about the ethics of such giving in relation to dynamics of power [...] However, even at the most simple level, there is an obvious distinction between acts of giving that at least feel “free” and “chosen” and those that feel necessary; between those that are experienced as pleasurable or reasonable and those that are experienced as aversive or oppressive.

(2005: 151)

Exactly where the line should be drawn between negative and positive forms of sex guided by the sexual desires of only one person is not always clear, but, as Gavey writes, the line is often obvious. This does not, however, eliminate the issue to which Gavey briefly refers, namely that the giving gesture that may be involved in other-centred sex can never be entirely disentangled from the fact that the giving and accommodating stance is more commonly taken by persons at a power disadvantage. Indeed, engaging in sex for the sake of the other person is more common among women than men (Brewer & Forrest-Redfern 2022). It is thus no surprise that, from a feminist consent perspective, this type of sex is often viewed with disdain. For example, when in 2016 the Swedish sexologist and midwife Helena Cewer’s encouraged newly postpartum women to agree to have sex for the sake of the man and their relationship, this led to a series of critical interventions in progressive Swedish media. The critics’ main message was that Cewer’s advice was at odds with the principle of consent in its deeper sense (Elings 2016; Hellquist 2016). It

is reported that these writings gave rise to emails from women who testified how their participation in sex despite a lack of desire affected them negatively and, in the long term, undermined their sexual desire. A similar controversy arose in the UK, when the model Caprice Bourret advised women to have sex with their partners even if they were not in the mood, something that was countered with statements about such sex being premised on heterosexist prejudices about women's and men's sexuality (Petter 2021).

Even if it is, strictly put, compatible with the concept of consent to *choose* to have sex solely for the sake of another person, it is reasonable to assume that such interactions, at least if they are routine, may contribute to undermining the deeper ethical dimensions of the principle of consent. Given that people's sexuality is continuously shaped by their experiences, it is likely that a person who routinely has sex guided by the sexual needs of their partner will become increasingly alienated from their own sexual impulses and develop an externally directed sexuality. For example, it is significant that Stina (30–35 years old, heterosexual), who in the previous chapter talked about destructive forms of obliging sex and abuse in a previous relationship, had a poor sense of her own sexual desire during that period of her life. She herself believes that this made it more natural for her to adapt her sexual practices to external factors, such as her partner's needs and beliefs, but also to general cultural beliefs about how sex “should” be done. Freja (20–25 years old, lesbian, formerly heterosexual) testifies to a similar pattern (see Chapter 8). This pattern – of being a body that exists for others and is controlled by forces outside of oneself – already exists on an overarching level for women in the prevailing patriarchal culture and is a fundamental source of the widespread occurrence, even normalization, of sexual violence against women. It is also against the backdrop of these general patterns that Anders's reasoning about an ideal *symmetry* between women's and men's willingness to agree to have sex is difficult to translate into real symmetry.

At the same time, it would be too simplistic to see all forms of other-centred sex as morally and politically reprehensible, not least in a neoliberal era where selfless giving is something that is generally in short supply. As I discussed in Chapter 3, sexual desire is also something that can be awakened some time into a particular sexual interaction, which is why an ideal that sex must always be based on an initial, mutual sexual desire seems unrealistic. As Ann Cahill (2014) points out, such a view of sex can even be seen as masculinist because it is more consistent with men's than women's general arousal patterns. We cannot escape this complexity, which undermines the possibility of creating simple models of right and wrong. While only people themselves can draw the line between right and wrong in the sexual situations they find themselves in, encouraging a collective, continuous, critical reflection on the (gendered) grounds for and consequences of our sexual choices can, however, make our ability to draw such lines more finely calibrated.

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# 6

## SEXUAL TEMPLATES

As already addressed in part, dynamics of consent, like other social interactions, never take place in a social vacuum. They are always based in a social context, which specifies templates for how sexual interactions should go, by allocating roles and generating expectations about how the different parties should act. In previous research, this theme has often been analysed in terms of *sexual scripts* (Beres 2014; Frith & Kitzinger 2001; Gagnon & Simon 1973; Healy Cullen et al. 2023; Jackson 1978; Rodgers et al. 2023; Wiederman 2005; Williamson et al. 2023), with a focus on how the heterosexual dynamic takes place according to a pattern in which the woman and the man are expected to assume different, complementary roles. The central principle in these scripts is that the man drives things forward and the woman responds, both when sex is initiated and during the act of sex itself. However, it would be simplistic to reduce the conventions that regulate the dynamics of consent to this gendered pattern based on activity/passivity. Above all, in recent decades we have seen an increased openness to women's sexual agency (Bay-Cheng 2015; Brown-Bowers et al. 2015; Gill 2008; Harris 2005), which Nils brought up in [Chapter 4](#).

This chapter takes a broad view of the complex network of conventions and norms surrounding both heterosexual and same-sex sex. The focus is on the participants' experiences of being limited in their freedom by different types of sexual templates, but the interview material shows that the lack of a clear template can also paralyze action.

### Men's burden of taking the initiative

Elias (30–35 years old, bisexual) reflected in [Chapter 2](#) about how the “reading” of consent works in the type of dominance sex he often participates in, with him in the dominant role. As for the sex itself, one might say that Elias

– with women, men and non-binary people alike – plays out a conventional heterosexual script in an accentuated form. As he himself puts it: “It’s like a very traditional heteronorm that is somehow magnified or exaggerated”. Although we will see in [Chapter 8](#) that he feels there are some problems associated with this sexual pattern, it is fundamentally a positive source of sexual pleasure for him and his partners. When it comes to *taking the initiative* to have sex, however, Elias experiences some frustration at the role he feels forced into, where he is the one who is expected to take the initiative. Here he feels that the pattern is stronger in his interactions with women. For example, he tells about an encounter he had with a woman, whom he describes as generally breaking with societal conventions – “she lives very much outside the box” – but who nevertheless assumed a traditionally feminine, passive role in the flirting and seduction stage.

*Elias:* We ended up on my sofa making out and from there until we had sex, it was like a drawn-out period where I tried to be a bit wait-and-see to see if she would take the initiative [laughs]. And maybe tried to be a little encouraging in a way but still kind of...

*Lena:* Why?

*Elias:* That is a very good question. I think I don’t want to be pushy, or assume too much. Precisely because I myself find it difficult when people assume things, it is very important to me that you don’t push things on people, so I wanted to see if she took the initiative. But she didn’t really, so in the end I just asked if we should move to the bed instead [laughs] and she wanted to and the rest was non-verbal, I think, with clothes being taken off and stuff, pretty mutual. But it took a while before I asked because I somehow wanted it to be...not necessarily that she took the whole initiative but something more mutual than that it would be entirely on me, because it’s something that I perceive as a little difficult.

*Lena:* It’s interesting, because she was breaking with conventions on many levels.

*Elias:* Yes.

*Lena:* But did you feel that she was stuck in some norm in that situation?

*Elias:* Yes, when it comes to this thing about signalling attraction and desire, she wanted me to take the initiative in order to perceive me as interested enough for her to be interested enough. Definitely.

*Lena:* She wanted you to signal interest, so that she would be interested enough?

*Elias:* I took it to mean that then she would be interested in response. If I wasn’t that interested, it had to be a bit like that. It’s hard to explain, but it’s some kind of interaction dynamic back and forth, where attraction and desire are signalled – or maybe even created.

What Elias says here gets to the complexity of the heteronormative interaction. A superficial understanding of the *initiative-taking man/responsive woman* schema could be that the woman's sexual desire is already present before the man takes the initiative, but that it is only with the man's approach that the desire gains legitimacy and can, thereby, be expressed. But Elias goes a step further and suggests that the woman's sexual interest may even be *created* only because he himself expressed his interest. He understood it as "she wanted me to take the initiative in order to perceive me as interested enough for her to be interested enough". If he had not taken the initiative, in other words, the woman would, if Elias is right, have interpreted it as meaning that he was not enough interested in having sex with her so as to spark her own interest.

I think Elias is getting to the heart of the traditional heteronormative dynamic here. As women do not have the same culturally sanctioned access to autonomous sexual desire as men, it is likely that women's sexual desire often arises as an *effect* of a man's desire. The further patriarchal problematic in this is that the constitution of female desire makes women's sexuality dependent – and ultimately directed – by men's sexuality.

While it can be assumed that many men do not mind taking the controlling role, Elias would have liked their interaction during the seduction phase to be more symmetrical. A reason he offers is that he does not like being too "pushy" and to "impose" his own will on others. This can be interpreted as an expression of an ethical approach where, as far as possible, he wants to avoid others feeling pressured to do something for his sake, and wants to feel certain that the other person *really* wants to. But I try to probe deeper into the question of why the skewed distribution of roles is a problem for Elias.

*Lena:* You would have preferred it to be a bit more mutual.

*Elias:* Yes.

*Lena:* But when you talk about her behaviour, it sounds a bit like a kind of minimization of risk, that if you are the one who pushes things forward and takes the initiative, you can also...

*Elias:* Get rejected.

*Lena:* ...get rejected.

*Elias:* That's true. It's probably something that I find difficult too, that somewhere in the back of my mind I'm conscious of it.

*Lena:* That you risk being rejected?

*Elias:* Yes.

*Lena:* That that's a hard thing about being the one who takes the initiative.

*Elias:* Exactly. It would have been nice either if you could encounter each other more mutually in some way or for the other person to take the initiative sometimes and sometimes it would be me. But it's a bit difficult because you're always a bit pushy when you take the initiative for something that involves someone else. I'm very aware of that. And if someone doesn't like it, then it gets extra difficult.

Here, it becomes clear that Elias's discomfort with bearing the responsibility for initiating sex is not only based on an ethical impulse. There is also a risk in being the first to clearly signal interest, as the proposal may be rejected. However, that risk is neutralized to some extent by the gendered notions that normalize women's rejection of men's sexual initiatives, while women can be said to run a greater risk if they make an approach that is not reciprocated, since a man's rejection of a woman is more of a cultural abnormality.

Oskar (35–40 years old, heterosexual) also raises the question of taking the initiative, when I ask him how he understands the connections between consent and gender. He says that in his stable relationships it has been more mutual, but that with new sexual partners it has almost always been his lot to initiate sex. Like Elias, he does not like that arrangement. For him, the reason is that he believes it gets in the way both of women's freedom and of more genuine encounters.

*Oskar:* If you look at it from the outside, these gender roles, it's really sad – if it's the case that people I've been with haven't expressed what they want because they're afraid of not living up to the female norm. It creates a lot of unfreedom to live according to such ideas, to not be who you really are. It really prevents more real encounters.

Oskar here expresses a more essentialist view than Elias. For him, there is a real will and a real self in the women that are prevented from being expressed due to norms about female sexuality. It is quite clear that norms and expectations often act in this way – as an *external* phenomenon that can be in conflict with one's inner self. But as Elias suggests, our very selves – including what we want and what we desire – can also be shaped by norms and expectations so that they become part of our inner self. Expectations for women not to express a sexuality that is not first based on a man's desire can mean that women's desires are shaped in line with this. Perhaps Oskar is right in that he met women who longed to have sex with him but did not dare to express it until he made an approach. But perhaps it has also been the case that their desire only was awoken when he took the initiative, simply because that way of channelling their sexuality was experienced as most safe and natural, considering the stigmatization of an “overly” autonomous female sexuality.

### Sexual liberation as imperative

Elias and Oskar's dissatisfaction with women's passivity is a sign that the heteronormative template does not have a total grip on our culture. For a few decades now, there has been a clearly opposing cultural current where women's right to active sexual expression has been emphasized (Bay-Cheng 2015; Brown-Bowers et al. 2015; Gill 2008; Harris 2005). As mentioned in Chapter 1 and as we saw in Nils's reflections in Chapter 4, this cultural trend

is often connected with the series *Sex and the City*, in which the female protagonists very actively and sometimes predatorily pursue male sexual partners. However, that trend can be traced back further in time, to the 1960s and 1970s' wave of sexual liberation.

Several researchers have noted that the increased emphasis and even glorification of women's active sexuality has not in any unambiguous way *replaced* the traditional heterosexual template centred on female passivity and responsiveness. Instead, both of these cultural tendencies exist in parallel, creating a series of contradictions and tensions in the sexual sphere, especially for women. As Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott write, "Ideals of sexual self-expression have reshaped the old slag/drag dichotomy but have also narrowed the margins between excess and deficiency, between being too sexual and not sexual enough, thus producing an even more slippery tightrope for women to walk" (2004: 240). Similarly, Kate Milnes (2004) highlights the problems with women still being at risk of being stigmatized if they express their sexuality too actively – at the same time that this sexual expression is also in demand. Milnes points out that the idea of women's *freedom* to realize their sexuality can turn into a pressure on women to live up to such ideals, which can hardly be seen as liberatory.

We have previously heard Stina's (30–35 years old, heterosexual) account about being pressured into sex in a long-term relationship she had when she was younger. The factor that Stina repeatedly highlights as decisive for her boyfriend's power over her in these situations was her strong need to be accepted and loved by him. At the same time, there is another theme in the interview, which relates to the cultural images of female sexual expression that I mention above, but also to a more general cultural tendency to glorify sex (Jackson & Scott 2004). A strong feeling Stina had during the relationship was that she *should* have wanted to have sex with her boyfriend to a greater extent than she actually did: "I started to think that I was abnormal [...], that I ought to want to". The shame she could experience in connection with the abuse was partly to do with her feeling that she did not live up to the role of the "sexual" woman.

*Stina:* I think that shame was also a shame that I wasn't a woman who...I didn't want to be abnormal, so I performed a lot, these norms in society about how you have to be so sexually liberated and want to have sex. He was, in quotation marks, "forced" to rape me – it shouldn't have happened when we were together because I should have wanted to have sex with him. I also wished that I *was* more...I mean, I wanted to want. I never thought that he could have less sex, but that it was me who had to become more sexual. And that was perhaps partly why I continued to have sex even though I didn't feel like it, I thought it would work out with time, that I would become more sexual. And sometimes I tried to turn myself on too, tried to kind of get into that.

*Lena:* But you wanted to want.

*Stina:* Yes.

*Lena:* To be that wonderful sexual woman...

*Stina:* Yes. Yes, a lot was...

*Lena:* ...or to be able to satisfy him?

*Stina:* Satisfying him, wanting to enjoy it more myself, as it was going to happen anyway. And I guess I also wanted to be the one who...so. And also this thing about coming, that I wanted to come, because I also wanted to experience it. There was probably a lot of stuff there, I think.

I do not want to overinterpret what Stina says here and read it as a simple effect of a cultural climate that places a very high value on sexual expression. During that relationship, Stina had poor contact with her own sexual desire and had difficulty achieving orgasm, something that came to change dramatically later in her sexual life. Her *wanting to want* can be seen in part as an expression of a longing for sexual pleasures that she knows are possible but had not yet experienced. However, that desire finds its special expression in Stina's perception that the sex "was going to happen anyway", regardless of how she experienced it. Based on that logic, it becomes natural to try to improve one's situation by improving one's experience of sex rather than investing effort in avoiding the unpleasant sex.

However, without the specific cultural context that surrounded Stina's relationship, much would probably have looked different. As Gavey points out, there is a contemporary norm that "sex *should* be pleasurable" (2005: 142, emphasis original), which stigmatizes those who do not enjoy sex. Sexuality researchers Emily Impett and Letitia Peplau (2003) refer to a study of American, Russian and Japanese college students' experiences of agreeing to unwanted sex, which showed that American women were significantly more likely than all categories of men and more likely than the Japanese and Russian women to agree to have sex though they had no desire for it (Sprecher et al. 1994). The results are interesting because they seem to run counter to the fact that the United States is in many respects a more gender-equal country than Russia and Japan. Impett and Peplau suggest that "American women may no longer possess the traditional 'excuses' for avoiding sex outside of marriage that may be available to women in other cultures" (2003: 89). While this study is dated, the cultural tendency towards a liberation of women's sexuality was already established in the 1990s. The paradoxical aspect of cultures that emphasize female chastity and are suspicious of female sexual desire is that they can provide protection for women who do not want to have sex, because it is considered expected and legitimate that a woman does not want to. With the "sexual revolution" in the Global North, this protective mechanism has largely been removed, and Kate Milnes (2004)

notes, in line with Impett and Peplau's reasoning, that it seems to have made it more difficult for many women to say no to sex.

### Women who are too much

I will now look closer at two other women's accounts, to examine the discourse on women's sexual expression from a different point of view, which demonstrates the limited dissemination and realization of this discourse. Mui (20–25 years old, bisexual) was cited in [Chapter 2](#) about the annoyed response she received from a male partner when she woke him up with oral sex. A prominent theme in the interview with Mui is her strong sex drive. She wants sex very often and has learned that the idea that men always want sex is false, as she is almost always the one who wants it the most. At the time of the interview, Mui has found well-functioning ways to channel her sexuality that are liberating for her and appreciated by her various partners, but her strong sex drive has also created some friction in her relationships. Here, she talks about a previous relationship with a man, who during a period of their relationship rarely wanted to have sex.

*Mui:* We had sex very often in the first year we were together and then...I tried to learn that in a normal relationship you don't have sex every time you see each other and sometimes it doesn't work out, he can't get it up or he is simply not horny. I tried to learn this but I felt very trapped. I mean, my parents forbade sex when I started to get my period, to protect me because I got it when I was very young. So that no one could get me pregnant or hurt me. And that confinement made me...they made sex sound like it was horrible and if you're a girl who is horny, it's sick [laughs]. That's how I felt when I wasn't allowed to have sex with my boyfriend. He said, "I mean, now you're a little too into it", and then I backed off. I felt a bit like a monster, like I wasn't normal, and I didn't know how to deal with it.

*Lena:* Were you ashamed in any way?

*Mui:* Yes.

*Lena:* So it was first that your parents had given you the idea that a horny girl, it's terrible, but did you get that feeling from your boyfriend too?

*Mui:* Mm. It was often like he put a kind of label on me: "Mui is a very sexual person, she wants to have sex all the time". And I didn't really know how to interpret it and I asked him: "Is that good or not?" But he didn't really answer that.

Mui's parents, who are immigrants from an Asian country, conveyed an unusually conservative view of sexuality in a Swedish context, which means that she still cannot be open with them about being sexually active at all. Her

boyfriend's value system was more progressive, but it is clear that his sense that Mui was "too into it" was sustained by the gendered discourses that make a woman who is more sexually interested than her male partner seem incomprehensible and potentially repulsive. It is important to point out that this man's need to stigmatize Mui's sexuality probably stemmed in large part from the threat it posed to his own sexual identity as a man. Her intense and active sexuality revealed the fact that he himself was not always up for sex, which, according to the discourse of the male sex drive, he is expected to be.

In [Chapter 2](#), I briefly mentioned Anette (60–65 years old, heterosexual) when raising the question of how the influence of alcohol and drugs affects the dynamics of consent. During a large part of her life, Anette abused drugs and hung out with other addicts, and a significant part of my interview with her is about sexual encounters she had in connection with drug abuse and which, in retrospect, she wished she had not had. She says that she was driven by a need for affirmation but that the sex with the male addicts never resulted in the affirmation she longed for. On the contrary, she often left the situations feeling disrespected and sometimes violated. Towards the end of our conversation about these events, it however becomes clear that it was far from just a need for affirmation that was behind Anette's participation in these sexual encounters – her sexual desire was also a strong driving force. It also turns out that it was her active expression of her sexual desire that gave rise to some of the problems in the sexual encounters.

*Anette:* Sometimes I was much stronger than them in terms of sexuality. I tried to take space and to have my needs met. But it didn't work. They were embarrassed or did not have the courage to express their desire. They were kings of the hill as long as they decided or felt they were in charge, but when I took over they got really scared and pulled away [laughs]. Some guys have a hard time with strong women. If they are not strong in themselves.

*Lena:* In these situations, was it like they were no longer turned on?

*Anette:* No, they became insecure. Very insecure, and then it wasn't fun anymore and it went horribly wrong. Then they couldn't cope with the situation and instead of feeling sad, they became angry or aggressive – you know anger and sadness go hand in hand.

*Lena:* Can you tell me a little more what you mean when you say you took space, or took over, you even said. Was it that you enjoyed it very much and took a lot of pleasure...

*Anette:* Mm.

*Lena:* ...or was it that you wanted to decide?

*Anette:* Well, that I took pleasure in it and wanted to explore and maybe push the boundaries and play a little. I wanted it to be fun.

*Lena:* You took some initiative.

*Anette:* Yes.

*Lena:* But then they became insecure.

*Anette:* Mm.

*Lena:* Why do you think they did?

*Anette:* Maybe they were caught off-guard. Maybe they thought it wouldn't be like that, as they had their own idea of sexuality...Oh, I don't know. They wanted to decide, I guess.

*Lena:* Do you think they weren't used to the woman taking space like that?

*Anette:* Yes, I think so.

*Lena:* That they were used to the man being in charge and the woman adapting.

*Anette:* Mm, I think so.

The insecurity that Anette says that her sexuality created in the men meant that they often became aggressive, something that was obviously enhanced by the influence of drugs. Anette is vague when I ask her what kind of reactions she might get from the men after sex and I take it as being too offensive for her to share.

*Anette:* I know that there was nothing wrong in how I took space with my desire. But they twisted it and made me feel that I was a little too sexual, that I was...kind of dirty.

*Lena:* A little shame in some way?

*Anette:* Yes.

Anette's painful experiences highlight the patriarchal order in which men want access to women's sexuality, but on their own terms, placing women in the role of sexual objects rather than subjects. Women are expected on the one hand to be (appropriately) sexually available, but on the other hand not to be sexually "too much". If they fail to balance on this fine line (Jackson & Scott 2004), according to this patriarchal logic, a man's appreciation of a woman's sexuality can quickly turn to contempt and shaming – indeed, this duality can sometimes even coexist in some intricate combination. On a broader cultural level, it is the prostituted woman who embodies masculinity's deeply conflicted relationship to female sexuality (Westerstrand 2012). On the one hand, (many) men want what a prostitute can give; on the other hand, the prostituted woman is the figure who is perhaps treated with the least amount of respect in our culture, which is why "whore" works so effectively as a swear word with regulatory effects on women's sexuality.

Anette tells of a man who said things to her after they had sex that made her feel "raped". She never discloses the man's words – perhaps they are too

painful to invoke – but it is likely that they somehow derived their offensive force from the discourse of *the whore*.

### When there is no template

Anette's story shows what can happen when a person breaks the "script" that distributes roles in different ways and prescribes certain ways of behaving. It was as if the ground began to sway beneath the men as she "took space" and pushed the sexual encounter forward, because their own sexual behaviour was shaped in relation to another type of female behaviour. Although it should be obvious by now that there are many problems associated with sexual scripts and templates, Anette's story clearly shows that sex can also often depend on such templates in order to flow frictionlessly (at least superficially frictionlessly). We will now turn to another participant's experience, which also highlights the problems of not having a sexual template to follow, when the scripts offered by the dominant culture are experienced as unsatisfactory. Freja (20–25 years old, lesbian) lived heterosexually for a long time but is now "what you could call a political lesbian". This means that, based on a feminist point of view, she has chosen to focus her sexual energies on women as she experiences sex with men to be problematic due to the systematic power relations between women and men (Douglas 1990; Kolm 2003). Freja has a far-reaching feminist awareness and sees her previous destructive relationships with men as in many ways an expression of the power structures that make women shape their sexuality according to men's needs. Here, she talks about a situation with a woman who was more or less inexperienced in terms of same-sex sex. Her account makes it evident that her personal rejection of heterosexuality is about more than the gender of her sexual partner.

*Freja:* I was at a party a while ago and there was a girl; we slept in the same bed afterwards, and she was like, "Why don't you take the initiative?" And I'm basically an out lesbian in all the social contexts I'm in, and so it was like she was asking me to initiate sex, but it didn't strike her that she could also initiate sex with me. And I don't know what the reason for that was, if she had sexual experiences with women before or whatever, but I think it can be something you sometimes come across as a dyke, that women who may not be as out expect you to take some kind of male role because you have more experience. And it's a very strange position to be in, because the whole thing about me wanting to have sex with women is that I want there to be reciprocity.

In accordance with the theories about heterosexual scripts and feminist theories of heterosexuality as being structured by power asymmetry, Freja

associates heterosexual sex with an absence of reciprocity. She has a well thought-out and strong desire to build sexual relationships where the mutual interplay of activity and initiative forms the core, but she says that this is associated with certain difficulties.

*Lena:* Can you give an example of how it can be difficult?

*Freja:* It's difficult because you don't necessarily have a template for how to behave. I think it can be difficult to take the initiative, sexually for example or in relationships [...]. There is no certainty as to who should be the party asking for it.

*Lena:* But why can it be difficult to take the initiative?

*Freja:* Why? Because it is not obvious who will do it.

*Lena:* Nah.

*Freja:* And partly because it's not obvious who should do it and also because as a woman you're not used to – even if you've been a lesbian all your life – you're not used to asking...That's not what you are taught as a woman, that you should say “I” and all that. And that's good, because that's where the whole reciprocity comes from, from the very beginning. But then it can be difficult in sexual situations, because you don't have that way of thinking, or you haven't been taught it. [...]

*Lena:* This woman who asked if you wouldn't take the initiative – did you then have sex?

*Freja:* No.

*Lena:* And you didn't want to?

*Freja:* Yes, I could definitely imagine doing it. What happened then was that I touched her a little bit and like that and she kind of didn't respond...She responded, kind of moved in a way and made a sound in a way that was like this “I appreciate this”, but she gave, like, no response to me that showed that she herself was taking the initiative to do something active or something. And then I wasn't so excited [laughs]. It ends up as being a fucking weird situation; I don't want to act like some fucking dude and just be “on”.

I interpret it to mean that Freja felt that the woman she shared a bed with was, so to speak, trained into a heterosexual template and so expected Freja to take the “masculine”, active role to complement her own passivity. A person other than Freja might not have had a problem with this, but Freja feels a strong desire to move away from these templates in order to achieve what she perceives to be something more equal and intimate, where not only the power over but also the responsibility for sex is shared.

Research on same-sex sex notes that since non-heterosexuals “do not have a clear sexual script that they follow to negotiate consent in sexual situations [...]

individuals may be left to develop their understandings and practices of consent on their own” (Dietzel 2024: 482; cf. Marcantonio & Willis 2023; McKie et al. 2020). Although Freja says that the lack of a “template for how to behave” can create certain difficulties, she also feels that it creates more room for action. She reports that she often finds it difficult to know what she really wants when it comes to sex, something she associates with her position as a woman in a patriarchy that makes women’s sexuality subordinate to men’s needs. The lack of a clear template places greater *demands* on her to recognize her own will and even if this can be difficult, it is compensated by the greater *space* that she believes also exists for recognizing what she herself wants sexually.

*Freja:* When I have sex with women, I don’t necessarily know what I want, but in the sexual interaction there is a completely different space to actually think about what you want during the time. It’s not just “Now I’m *allowing* you to have sex with me”, as it often is in the consent discussion – that doesn’t turn into a relationship. But when I’ve had sex with women, I feel that in a completely different way it simply requires reciprocity. It is required both on her part and on my part.

The lack of a heterosexual script where the man takes an active subject position and the woman a more passive and objectified position means that both parties *have to* activate their *own* sexual subjectivity. If that habit is not there, which it is not for Freja, there is still, by virtue of the indeterminacy that exists in terms of role distribution and the expected sequence of events, a space where they can put effort into trying to recognize what they really want.

Freja’s experiences can be reflected in Cecilia’s (30–35 years old, bisexual) account of her experiences of having sex with women, after having lived heterosexually for most of her sexual life. She says that in her relationships with men she has always assumed what can be classified as the traditional female role, where she responded to the man’s initiative rather than taking the initiative herself. This habit caused some problems in the relationship she had a while ago with a woman. At the start of the relationship, her partner did not want to have sex at all due to emotional reasons that had nothing to do with Cecilia. Once they started having sex, Cecilia felt that it was still too infrequent for her taste.

*Cecilia:* There was a woman I had a relationship with where I was the one who wanted more. We had very different needs. I wanted us to have more sex than she wanted to and I found it very difficult. It’s the only relationship where I wanted more sex than the other person. I found it very difficult to relate to. And the fact that it was a woman also made it so interesting...I kind of didn’t have a template for that [laughs] – what do you do now? I just felt terrible and like I was nagging, like

a real...bloke [laughs]. “Can’t we have sex a little more?” Ugh, it was really hard actually. Since I haven’t had an awful lot of sex and haven’t been in that many relationships, it was also that thing: How do you initiate? I’ve mostly been with men who have been quite “on” and I haven’t had to take much responsibility because...It’s been quite clear that now we’re doing it [laughs] and that they’ve wanted to. But here it got very difficult because we both were lying on our edge of the bed [laughs] and so...who? For me, it was really very difficult.

*Lena:* When you did have sex, was it on your initiative?

*Cecilia:* No, not always. She would initiate sometimes and I did sometimes, but I still felt dissatisfied that we weren’t having sex often enough. And I brought it up in a way that in retrospect I think was very whiny and bad, like I was really complaining about it. And then she said “But you don’t take the initiative either, you can do it more often then, if you want us to have sex more often”. And she was right about that. But I wasn’t used to it. I was used to these men and haven’t had to take the initiative that much so I didn’t really know how to do it. When she said that I could take the initiative more often, I really wished I knew how. I wished I could have just done it and trusted that she...I guess she can just say if she doesn’t feel like it this time. That’s when I realized that I’ve mostly been with men who have been very clear about what they want and I’ve kind of gone along. And I felt it was a shame that I hadn’t practiced being the one who takes the initiative and the one who gets to read the other person’s perhaps slightly more subtle signals.

Although active and passive sexual roles can of course be taken by people of all genders (this is not least evident in the gay world, which can be clearly structured according to such role divisions, as we will see below), their heterosexualized character nevertheless becomes extremely clear here. For both Freja and Cecilia, being “into it” is associated with being a “fucking dude” or “a real...bloke”. While Freja has difficulty with the active/passive dynamic in general and seems to see it as inextricably linked to power asymmetry, I perceive Cecilia as being more neutral towards this dynamic and, as we will see in [Chapter 8](#), she also has positive experiences with BDSM sex, where the active/passive dynamic is at its apex.

For her, however, the problem is that her sexual “schooling” in the passive role has not made her equipped to handle a sexual interaction with another passive party. Rather, she associates being “a real...bloke” with being the one who wants it when the other one does not want it and then expressing some sort of displeasure about it. When her partner requests that Cecilia take more of the initiative for sex, however, it indicates that her partner might actually *have* wanted to have sex – if only Cecilia had expressed her interest

more clearly. We can compare this to what Elias said about the woman who he found too passive and how he felt that her interest was conditional on him clearly showing his interest. While in the traditional heterosexual script, it is “natural” for the man to take the initiative even if the woman has not actively expressed her interest in having sex, for Cecilia this was instead associated with a fear of overstepping the other person’s boundaries – what if she did not actually want it but *went along* with it?

*Cecilia:* I really don’t want to be...a bloke [laughs]. Regardless of whether these are qualities that men actually have, this thing about being the one who takes what they want first without checking if the other person actually wants to and putting their own needs first, no, I don’t want to be like that.

Being the party who takes the initiative *without becoming a “bloke”* requires, according to Cecilia, that one is able to read the “perhaps slightly more subtle signals” of sexual interest that a passive partner might send. However, it is something she never learned in her sexual interactions with men, as the sex was always based on the men’s clear initiative.

### The tyranny of reciprocity?

Freja’s dissatisfaction with heterosexuality is based on a classic radical feminist critique of it as more or less inextricably linked with a lack of reciprocity (Atkinson 1974; Douglas 1990; Kolm 2003). It is the man’s needs and desires that rule, and the woman meets them. Freja clearly articulates a desire to go beyond the heterosexual pattern in depth in her sexual interactions with women, by cultivating genuinely mutual sexual interactions based on the active participation and desire of both. However, it is a simplification to unequivocally paint normative heterosexuality as being built on non-reciprocity – the picture is somewhat more complex than that. In the previous chapter, I mentioned Braun, Gavey and McPhillips’ (2003) research showing that conventional heterosexual sex is often governed by a principle of reciprocity, which consists of “give and take”, as Anders puts it. The problem is that even the principle of reciprocity can become a *requirement* that stands in the way of genuine reciprocity. The ideal that both the woman and the man should have an orgasm can, for example, be seen as an expression of concern for the sexual needs of both and a challenge to patriarchal patterns that emphasize the man’s desire. At the same time, however, Braun et al’s (2003) research shows that many women experience it as a sometimes tiring *demand* from men that they come. They also show that the men’s pursuit of the female orgasm is not only guided by concern for the woman, but as much by a sense that the lack of female orgasm means a failure for *themselves*.

In [Chapter 3](#), I explored Stina's (30–35 years old, heterosexual) experience that her own orgasm often became a demand to fulfil for the sake of her male partner and how one of her partners even barked “Lie still!” at her so he could continue his attempts to make her come. She reflects on the gender dynamics behind it.

*Stina:* It's interesting because I get that it's such a male/female thing when he would make me come when I really didn't want to. And he somehow... didn't force me, but he was just like, “Lie down now, come on” and almost got annoyed too. It's such a classic thing that the man decides and has to make the woman come and that it's her that's wrong even if it's her own sexuality.

*Lena:* Yes, it's a very interesting situation. Often you enjoy yourself if your partner enjoys themselves, but then it can also be that he feels “Oh, I made her come”, where the woman's pleasure somehow becomes...

*Stina:* The man's.

*Lena:* Yes. And then you deprive him...

*Stina:* Yes, exactly. I've also experienced that several times with one-night-stands who think...you know the thing where he comes and “Now I'm going to make you come” and I'm just “No, it's fine” and he's just “No no, I can always make women come”. I can sometimes experience it as men thinking that it is somehow important to them that the woman should come – for their sake. It's not “But God, poor thing”, because then I would only have been able to say “It's fine for me, it was great, it was great”. Then that should be enough. But that it's, as you say, it's like the men have taken that too, like everything else they take from us [laughs]. Actually. The female orgasm is so mystified in the media and I think it has become a *thing*. Men can make women come and it's kind of cool. It's like *they* succeeded.

Similar to other researchers, [Braun et al. \(2003\)](#) point out that both the man's and the woman's orgasm are often perceived as the man's performance. It links to the idea of an active male sexuality and a passive, receptive female sexuality, so it is the man who *gives* the woman her orgasm, and it is considered an important male *competence* to be able to master “the complex challenge of producing orgasm in the female body” ([Braun et al. 2003](#): 249). Here, then, we see that the principle of reciprocity in heterosexual sex is distorted in interesting ways, through the underlying gendered and anything but symmetrical framework that surrounds its enforcement.

As far as I can understand, Stina herself is not in the habit of pretending to orgasm. However, there is a lot of research on women “faking” their orgasm. This is often a strategy to end a sexual act that the partner does not consider finished until the woman comes, but it can also be motivated by a concern for

the partner's sexual self-confidence (Braun et al. 2003; Frith 2015; Kalman 2013). Kristina (50–55 years old, bisexual), who in Chapter 4 told me that with her current partner she has a lot of sex that she does not really feel like having, firmly dismisses my question about whether she pretends to have an orgasm, as if it were something she cannot imagine. However, it turns out that she still participates in other types of pretence when her desire is not as great as her partner expects, something she does not seem to have been aware of until the interview.

*Lena:* Are you good at *appearing* like you want to?

*Kristina:* [Laughs].

*Lena:* Are you pretending that you think it's nice or...so that the other person thinks you want to, or what?

*Kristina:* Yes [thoughtful pause]. Yes, you probably pretend a little, you probably do. To sort of affirm the other person in some way. It's hard because you don't think about it. So you haven't thought about why you behave like that.

The feminist philosopher Virginia Held, in an article from 1976 on heterosexual relationships in a patriarchal social order, makes a distinction that is relevant to the experiences Stina and Kristina share. She discusses the fact that a woman's pleasure is often a factor that is appreciated by men and that gives them increased pleasure themselves and that this factor has sometimes been highlighted as giving hope to the idea of reciprocity and equality in heterosexuality. But in line with Braun et al' analysis, Held makes a distinction between an egoistic interest versus a care-driven interest in the woman's pleasure. She argues that a man who values the woman's pleasure primarily because it enhances his own pleasure is still egoistically oriented towards the woman, regardless of whether the result is that he actively seeks the woman's pleasure (Held 1976). Another feminist philosopher, Ann Cahill (2011), similarly theorizes patriarchal heterosexuality not so much as a matter of the man relating to the woman as an *object* in the strict sense; rather, it is in the man's interest that the woman's sexual subjectivity – her desire and will – is included in the sexual exchange. The patriarchal principle lies, according to Cahill, in the fact that the woman's sexual subjectivity in the patriarchal dynamic does not constitute a value *in and of itself* but is for the man's pleasure. Women's feigned sexual pleasure is perhaps the most blatant expression of that mechanism.

Research literature on faked orgasms and men's investment in the female orgasm usually deals with a heterosexual context. However, the incentive to pretend can be strong even in same-sex interactions. Stella (25–30 years old, lesbian) says that she “probably faked an orgasm once or twice”, as a way to end a no-longer-pleasurable sex act without having to risk hurting her

partner's sexual confidence. We get into the subject when I ask Stella if she has ever agreed to have sex even though she did not feel like it.

*Stella:* I can't remember any situation in the relationships I've had where I didn't want to. However, I have several times – both in and out of relationships – wanted to have sex but then after a while wanted it to end. I want to be done, now I don't think it's so fun anymore, but there's still a long way to go before my partner is done. Kind of like I want to get it over with.

*Lena:* But in those situations, have you ever said something like, "Now I don't want to anymore"? Or done something to end it?

*Stella:* No, I never said anything. However, I have tried to speed it up. I've probably faked an orgasm once or twice too [laughs], just to make it end. It's happened quite a few times that I've felt like I want it to be done, and it's been when it's my turn or how should I describe it, when it's me who hasn't come yet. Because somehow, it's like the sex isn't over until both people come. And that's also between two women, I've experienced. And in these situations it's felt like she's been so far from the mark as well so it's just as well to fake. That way I don't have to lie here [laughs].

*Lena:* It just hasn't been that good?

*Stella:* No.

Here, Stella makes an implicit reference to the prescribed course of events in the heterosexual script, specifically its mutual version which prescribes that both people should orgasm. As is the case for many heterosexual women, for Stella the fundamentally liberating idea of mutual pleasure and orgasm is transformed into a burden that makes her feel the need to trick her partner. What is it that makes Stella choose to "fake it" and continue to participate in the sex instead of telling her partner how she feels? She tells of a single time when, during a sex act, she – in a joking manner – informed her long-term partner that she was "very far from where it feels good". That comment had far-reaching negative consequences for her partner's sexual self-confidence and for the relationship dynamic, reinforcing Stella's experience that the only alternative in such a situation is to pretend to enjoy and complete the sexual act. Communicating with a partner during the act of sex that she would need the partner to do something differently is something she has always found difficult, because she is afraid of hurting her partner's self-esteem. And stopping a sex act has felt even less like an option.

While a sex act is in full swing, giving a partner feedback on how you want the sex act to go or ending the sex act are two different things. However, they both deal with the possibility, so important from a consent perspective, of being able to express what one wants, even after a sexual interaction has

begun, and to let one's desire influence the sexual course of events. Stella herself has never participated in sex that she did not want to participate in *when it started*. The fact that she nonetheless has experiences of unwanted sex seems to be something she only becomes aware of during the interview, as she previously experienced it as self-evident that once a sexual act has begun, it must be "completed" – both people must be "finished". What it means to "complete" a lesbian sexual act can be said to be dictated by a same-sex sexual script that prescribes that both should take pleasure from the interaction and orgasm before the sex is finished. If this does not happen, it appears that something is "wrong" and the partner's sexual confidence and the relational security are at stake. This strong scripting of the lesbian sexual interaction, pivoting around principles of reciprocity and symmetry, contests the argument made in previous research that same-sex sex is not clearly scripted (Di-etzel 2024; Marcantonio & Willis 2023; McKie et al. 2020).

I want to emphasize that the sexual scripts that curtail people's sexual freedom gain their power over us only by virtue of the fact that they regulate relationships. In Chapter 4, we saw that Nils's difficulty in breaking the norm of male sexual willingness derived much of its power from his concern for the woman who made claims on his sexuality – breaking with the norm would hurt her or make her insecure. In the same way, Stella's tendency to submit to the "lesbian sexual script" is fundamentally underpinned by her reluctance to create discomfort in her partner. To understand the power of sexual scripts and conventions, we need to see how people's tendency to follow them is strengthened by relational needs – needs both to be accepted and to not create discomfort in others.

Although heterosexuality is essentially governed by a principle of reciprocity, because of bodily differences it cannot be realized in a completely symmetrical way in heterosexual sex. In same-sex sex, on the other hand, the bodily similarity means that reciprocity in a completely different way can take a form based on symmetry, where both partners do, if not the same thing, at least similar things with each other in order for both to experience pleasure – and ultimately to have an orgasm. In Chapter 4, Anas (20–25 years old, gay) talked about his experiences of being pressured into sex by different partners. His account also sheds light on the clear sexual scripts that are also present in same-sex sex and how they convey that once a sexual act has begun one is not expected to continue the communication of consent – it is already clear how it should be done. Here Anas and I talk about what could happen when, after repeated pressure, he agreed to have sex with a partner against his will:

*Lena:* You talked about giving him oral sex, that you were also active in these situations. Did he ask you to suck him off or did you initiate it yourself?

*Anas:* Yes, I kind of took... It was probably more about him doing it on me, then I'll do it on him.

*Lena:* Are there certain unwritten rules somehow?

*Anas:* Yes.

Here we see a powerful form of scripting, based on a principle of reciprocity which, with the bodily similarity of the participants in same-sex sex, can be translated into symmetry in the actions they perform. It contributes to the fact that a person like Anas, who agrees to have sex even though he does not want to, can still take a superficially active role in accordance with sexual scripts that are taken for granted.

Stella and Anas's experiences of same-sex sex contrast with Freja's. In Freja's experience, the principle of reciprocity is the opposite of scripted sex – here there are no ready-made roles to assume or scripts to follow, which makes people compelled to activate and act on the basis of their own sexual subjectivity. We are talking here about a different kind of principle of reciprocity than the one expressed in Stella and Anas's accounts. The latter are marked by what might be called a superficial reciprocity, which emphasizes symmetry in the outward expressions of sex, in what is done. Against the background of a dissonance between the participants in regard to how they *feel* about the sexual acts, however, the superficial reciprocity turns into its opposite: it is only one of the parties whose sexual needs are allowed to be expressed, while the other has to adapt. In Freja's description, reciprocity is instead precisely about both parties having the space to recognize what they want and about the inner experiences of both leaving their mark on the interaction to an equal degree (cf. [Cahill 2014](#)).

### The roles of the gay male scene

While Anas talks about sex governed by a principle of symmetry, the gay male world's often rigidly scripted sexual roles appear as a theme in many of the interviews with gay and bisexual men. The organization of sexual relations between men based on fixed, complementary roles such as dominant/active/top and submissive/passive/bottom is a tendency reinforced through dating and hookup apps, such as Grindr, encouraging users to sort themselves into ready-made categories, which are employed as a basis for partner matching.

Thomas (50–55 years old, gay) spoke in [Chapter 5](#) about his and his spouse's conflicting sexual needs, which meant that they could never have a fulfilling sex life together. In light of that experience, on the one hand, he thinks it is convenient that the dating apps make it so clear what their members' sexual preferences are.

*Thomas:* After that experience with my husband, where my love and infatuation stood in the way of my sexual fulfilment, I have been very clear that if a person is not interested in being bottomed, it is not interesting to me, purely sexually.

On the other hand, he finds it difficult how the firm typification reifies people and often replaces subtler forms of communication.

*Thomas:* It's so crazy, the first thing that happens is that you check "Are you active or passive?" You don't even have to take the initiative! It's so boring that way, it's "What do you like?", "How big are you?", "How big is your cock?", "Are you passive or active?"

*Lena:* And that's a bit boring, you think?

*Thomas:* It's really boring.

*Lena:* It's like a kind of...

*Thomas:* Market.

To the extent that a central component of dynamics of consent consists of the parties communicating with each other about what they want, we can see here that the typified communication that takes place via an app like Grindr can on one level contribute to simplifying the consent process (Sternin et al. 2022). At the same time, that form of communication is extremely reductive. When Thomas exclaims "You don't even have to take the initiative", I interpret it as the mechanized matching of user profiles somehow replacing the complex communication about consent between *people*. A person's sexual subjectivity is here reduced to a static identity or preference, or even to a commodity that can be consumed if, like researchers who have studied gay apps (Bonner-Thompson 2017), we take Thomas's market metaphor seriously. If two identities match each other and a meeting is arranged, it is not infrequently taken for granted that they will have sex (Dietzel 2024). As Michael (30–35 years old, gay) testifies, this is an arrangement that does not promote the possibility of setting limits based on what you feel in the moment: "Many times it has been decided that you should sleep together and so sometimes I have slept with people just to get it done and to leave". Michael is one of the participants who is very critical of the culture he believes characterizes the gay male dating environment. In Chapter 10, I return to the interview with him to go into more detail about the distinctive character of the gay male scene and its implications for the issue of consent.

### Five dicks as threat or treat?

At the beginning of the chapter, I analysed Elias's account of an encounter with an otherwise norm-breaking woman who he felt was unable to initiate sex so he himself had to take the first step. He suggests, in an exploratory fashion, that it may be that some women he has been with were dependent on him taking the initiative for their own sexual interest to even be activated, rather than it being a matter of them *holding back* their sexual desire until he took the first the step. If Elias is right, which we have reason to believe considering research about how women's and men's sexuality is shaped by

gendered expectations, one might say that the women's adaptation to the conventional template in these cases has become integral to the very patterning of their sexual desire. It is not simply that the gendered expectations act as a limiting *external* factor, but they are internalized so that the adaptation takes place unconsciously. With the help of reflections from two of the participants, I will now delve theoretically into how it is possible that ideas about gender and sexuality can have such power over people in shaping both what they want and how they experience things.

In the interview with Anders (40–45 years old, bisexual), he reflects in general terms on the differences and similarities between women and men when it comes to sex. In the previous chapter, he shared his thoughts on doing something sexually for another person that is not one's own immediate preference. When I ask him if he thinks that, on a general level, it might have a different meaning for women to do something sexual for a man compared to the other way around, he elaborates that women and men are not really as different "as people make it out to be".

*Anders:* I don't think the difference between men and women is as big as people make it out to be. And I think it's unfortunate that women still have this victim label on them in sexual contexts. I was talking to my [female] friend about this thing about women's sexuality often being undervalued, how the woman is not the one at the centre. We took a rather extreme example: imagine a gang bang scenario in a porn movie with five men and one woman. It is almost always the situation that the woman becomes a victim and it is the men who enjoy it. And then you turn it around and it's five women and one man – then it's still the man who is the focus, not these five women who are using this man – if you want to look at it that way – as a tool for their sexual pleasure. Why is it like that? She gets five, that's amazing! But it is always turned around like that, so that the woman is made a victim in these situations. So you undervalue the woman's sexuality instead of putting her in focus. She gets five dicks, like wow, not just one! If it's a man who gets five women, then he's the king.

Anders's reflection is theoretically interesting and points to a central tension in the feminist project, perhaps especially in feminist discussions about sexuality and sexual violence. This tension is based on the fact that, on the one hand, feminist politics and analysis are based on a motivation to make gender visible as a category with the power to create systematic differences between women's and men's experiences, where, due to their subordinate position, women's experiences are characterized to a greater extent by vulnerability. On the other hand, in the feminist project there is a motivation

to avoid an essentialization and reification of gender differences and to challenge notions of women's vulnerability and men's invulnerability. Not only does such a reification of gender differences lead to a simplistic and inaccurate view of reality, but the notions of differences between women and men are also important to problematize because they intervene in reality and shape women's and men's experiences. An overly strong emphasis, for example, on women's vulnerability can thus to some extent contribute to creating an experience of vulnerability for women.

Whether "five dicks" for a woman is perceived as a threat or a treat is largely determined by notions of gender and sexuality, and can determine whether an outwardly similar act constitutes pleasurable sex or a terrifying act of violence. Anders seems to be saying that if we would just let go of all these notions about women's and men's sexuality, the differences would disappear and women would no longer be so vulnerable but instead would take ownership of their sexuality and enjoy the sex that is offered to them. What Anders is trying to highlight is that there is a patriarchal dynamic behind the fact that a woman does not enjoy group sex with five men, and that women are not so inclined to welcome such an act is linked to the fact that it is not compatible with the dominant cultural schemas that devalue women's sexual desire. On one level, he is right about this. At the same time, it is rather clear to me that Anders's reasoning here is partly based on a personal frustration with women's lack of sexual availability, which indeed undermines the feminist impulse in his reasoning quite strongly.

One can also question the dualism Anders sets up between how women and men *really* are and what "people make it out to be". It reflects a widespread way of thinking about the relationship between reality and conceptions, but it is not actually possible to so sharply distinguish conceptions of gender and sexuality from what people actually feel and experience, because our experiences are inevitably shaped in dialogue with the ideas we have about reality. It is also important to underscore that the conceptions of women's sexual vulnerability are not just notions hanging loosely in the air without any anchoring in reality. They stem in part from a material reality where men's sexuality is *de facto* often a danger to women.

I will also discuss a line of reasoning espoused by Julia (25–30 years old, heterosexual), which sheds interesting light on the theoretical question of how exactly conceptions of gender shape people's experiences and behaviours. In [Chapter 3](#), Julia talked about how she was able to "persuade" male partners to have sex with her after their initial expressions of reluctance. Towards the end of the interview, I raise the question of what significance she thinks gender has on the issue of sex and consent.

*Lena:* You are a woman, heterosexual, you have sex with men. Do you have any thoughts on the role gender plays in sex and consent?

*Julia:* It's probably the classic thing that women might talk more about feelings and relationships, with each other, with friends, while guys might not do it as much. And that guys watch porn more.

*Lena:* That women talk more about feelings than boys, can you elaborate on the significance of this for the issue of consent?

*Julia:* It isn't a requirement exactly, but it is part of a male gender role that you should always want to have sex. So guys might not have to think so much about whether they want to or not, while for women it might be more about feelings, like "Do I like this guy? Do I *want* to sleep with him?" And it's different from person to person, but that is the most typical.

*Lena:* But is it the case for you too that the emotional is important?

*Julia:* It doesn't have to be, that I feel in love or anything, but I definitely have to feel some kind of attraction to a person and I don't do that with many. Whereas guys are more like this...well, it is expected that they think "Oh, what a pretty girl there and there and there, there are pretty girls everywhere" and then they should want to have sex.

*Lena:* But you say that "it is expected".

*Julia:* Mm.

*Lena:* And you said that maybe guys don't have to think too much about whether they want to or not. But do you think that sometimes they might not want to, even though they think they should? Or?

*Julia:* Well, I don't know. If you think that guys somehow get happy if they manage to have sex with someone...If a guy and a girl go out to the pub, I don't think it's particularly difficult for the girl to pick up a guy, while it's much harder for the guy to pick up a woman if you take just any old woman or guy. I don't know why, but maybe women are pickier, I don't know.

*Lena:* And then...What you mean is that guys generally want sex more?

*Julia:* I mean, I don't know if that's the case. But I think that for most guys, or for guys in general, it might not matter that much who they have sex with.

*Lena:* And if it's a little more difficult for guys to get laid, then it becomes "Oh, I'm getting laid!"

*Julia:* Yes.

*Lena:* And so they are happier than a girl is if she gets to have sex [laughs], just from being allowed to have sex at all. And then it becomes some kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

*Julia:* Mm.

I find Julia's musings theoretically very interesting and they lead me to my own reflections on the mechanisms behind people's general tendency to

fit relatively well into the gendered behavioural templates provided. At the beginning of the interview extract, I am unsure how Julia thinks about the relationship between the *expectations* for men and women to be different and how they *actually* are. “It is expected [...] they should want to have sex”, she says, and I wonder if she means that sometimes they might not want to but they still behave as if they do. But Julia is on a different track. She seems to think that guys actually want more, because there are these expectations that they should want to. One factor she highlights as causally central here is the relative *difficulty* for heterosexual men to get sex. That difficulty makes every opportunity to have sex more positively charged, based on a kind of economic logic where the scarcity or low availability of something – in this case the female body – gives it an extra value increasing its desirability. “You think that guys somehow get happy if they *manage* to have sex with someone” (my emphasis), says Julia, putting her finger on the idea that *achieving* something that is difficult is in itself emotionally rewarding, regardless of what is actually achieved. If what is achieved happens to be “having sex with a woman”, this positive charge colours the very concept – and potentially the experience of – having sex with a woman.

There are widespread beliefs – supported but also challenged by science – that men are more interested in sex than women for purely biological reasons. It is likely that such a biological pattern exists at the group level, but it is important not to jump to the conclusion, as is common to do, that just because men want to have more sex than women, this is biologically caused. An important point about the idea of gender being socially constructed is precisely that gendered ideas and norms intricately affect what women and men actually appreciate, long for and find pleasure in.

### Templates versus individuals

In this chapter, I have addressed the fact that dynamics of consent are always embedded in a social context, which provides templates for how sexual interactions should proceed. The templates specify and allocate roles and generate different expectations as to how to act. They are in most cases clearly gendered. In previous research, this theme has often been analysed in terms of *sexual scripts*, with a focus on how heterosexual interactions are expected to take place according to a pattern where the woman and the man take different, complementary roles and behave in different, complementary ways. In the chapter, I have shown how several of the participants experienced that that type of gendered division of roles was limiting and frustrating, showing how people’s freedom to participate in sex in the way they themselves wish to can be severely limited by norms and expectations.

Both Anette and Mui share stories about breaking the conventional heterosexual script by taking on a “too” active and demanding role and how such a breaking of norms sometimes contributed to undermining their sexual interactions with men. It gives an indication of the costs that may be associated with breaking with the conventional template, revealing the rationality behind adapting to it. The way that women are made passive by the conventional heterosexual template certainly creates frustration for men like Elias and Oskar, but at the same time it is also risky for women to break with the norm of passivity.

Theories about heterosexual scripts and the passive role assigned to women in them have lately had to be nuanced in the light of recent cultural processes that, in a Global North context, have made women’s sexual expression not only increasingly legitimate but also encouraged. The paradox is that although the normalization of female sexual expression is in many ways an expression of an increasingly gender-equal sexuality, it can also become just another demand to live up to – unless accompanied by the authority to decide over one’s own body. Similarly, we have seen that the norm of reciprocity and mutual pleasure can also take the form of a limiting obligation preventing people from expressing what they really desire.

A completely de-scripted sexuality is arguably an impossibility, as people are inevitably guided by previous experiences and ideas about how sex works and what you can expect in a sexual situation. However, the sexual templates our culture provides us with can be loosened and diversified to a large extent, and normative awareness created about how these templates are always subordinate to what individuals want in the moment. As we saw in Stella’s case, however, such an awareness first requires insight into which templates are taken for granted without being reflected upon. For Stella, for example, it was a given for her not to interrupt a sexual act before both she and her partner had orgasmed so that she does not seem to have become fully aware until the interview that she had participated in unwanted sex. In this context, I would again like to highlight [Powell’s \(2008\)](#) comment that one of the young women she interviewed probably perceived herself to be less capable of acting differently than she actually was. The gap here between perceived and actual opportunity is important to address in order to strengthen people’s ability to set limits.

There is a duality in the rigidly scripted sexuality. Following a predetermined template is on one level easy – you do not have to make a lot of decisions about how to act. As Freja discusses, the unscripted sexual interaction requires that you know what you want in a different way, something that for her is far from a simple matter. In the next chapter, I will focus specifically on sexual *wanting*, a phenomenon that is absolutely central to the idea of consent but at the same time far from stable and unequivocal.

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# 7

## KNOWING WHAT YOU WANT

The principle of consent reflects the ideal that people should have sex only if they want to. However, while much consent research – and, in particular, activism related to consent – does not problematize the distinction between wanted and unwanted sex, previous studies as well as my own analysis thus far have made it clear that wanting as such may be ambiguous. It is possible to want different things at the same time, based on different motivations. What people want is not always clear even to themselves. This chapter deepens the analysis of the complex ontology of wanting, based on interview accounts that in various ways problematize the idea of wanting as something unambiguous and self-evident.

### **Cecilia: “I’ve always been bad at knowing what I want”**

In [Chapter 6](#), I briefly touched on Freja’s experience of always having difficulty knowing what she wants when it comes to sex. She sees this as an effect of living in a patriarchal culture that does not teach women to recognize their own sexuality because it is constructed as being something for men. As we will see in the next chapter, this pattern caused Freja to enter what she sees as an over-feminized submissive role in BDSM sex that she actually felt bad about. Another of the participants who also talks about difficulties in being in touch with her own sexual needs is Cecilia (30–35 years old, bisexual), who, in the previous chapter, talked about her problems with initiating sex with a passive female partner. As mentioned, Cecilia lived heterosexually for several years before she started having sexual relationships with women, and in her relationships with men the sex always followed a classic heterosexual script: the man took the initiative and Cecilia, as she puts it, “would go

along”. In the interview, she touches on the connections between her adaptable sexual attitude and her weak sense of her own desires.

*Cecilia:* During a few years when I had just become an adult and I was dating and so on, I realized that maybe I didn’t have a solid grasp of the situation.

*Lena:* What do you mean by not having a solid grasp of the situation?

*Cecilia:* I realized that I’m quite inhibited. On the one hand, I rarely felt that I fell in love, I very rarely became interested in someone. I could meet people and have sex, but it was very much based on other people showing interest. Sure, I could take steps myself to make us have sex, but it was very much based on others showing that they wanted to. I didn’t have much contact with my own desires and I rarely felt...I didn’t feel that much like I wanted sex either.

Over time, Cecilia developed more and more of a genuine interest in sex, but in the relationships she had with men, it was always the men who drove sex.

*Cecilia:* Before my last relationship, I probably had a worse sense of what I wanted. So I was probably very passive and all that, so then it had to be when the other wanted.

At one point in the interview, she says that she sometimes went along even though she did not feel like it. However, a more prominent thread of thought in the interview is that her own sexual desires were so unclear to her that the men’s desires for her almost automatically implied that she wanted it herself.

*Lena:* When there was sex, was it on their initiative?

*Cecilia:* Yes, it was on their initiative.

*Lena:* And did you always agree...or want to...Did you always go along with what he wanted? Or did you sometimes say no or rule it out in some other way?

*Cecilia:* No, in that case I probably made sure we weren’t hanging out then. I have had a very hard time saying no when we are together and in a situation where we could have sex. So I can’t think of a single time I said no to it.

*Lena:* And why is it difficult?

*Cecilia:* [Long pause]. Yes, well [laughs]. Yes, why is it so hard to say no? For one thing, I think it’s a lot of fun to have sex, I, like, enjoy sex, so often I’ve probably thought that it’s just as well to take advantage [laughs]. I probably didn’t want to let an opportunity go to waste. But then also because I had such a poor grasp of what

I myself want and don't want and when, it's probably been the easiest way – it's great if someone else wants it and is clear about it. Then I can go along, and it will be fine. And most of the time it has turned out well. I kind of needed someone else to initiate, then I was able to go along. I probably also had an idea of how terrible it would be if you were in a situation where we are supposed to have sex and I suddenly say no and then the atmosphere just turns bad. There is also the fact that it would be...difficult, somehow. It's probably easier to go along.

*Lena:* You say “terrible”, that's quite a strong word. Why is it terrible?

*Cecilia:* To disappoint someone. I have these ideas and I may have slightly overestimated how disappointed they would be if they are not allowed to have sex [laughs]. But I must have really thought like that, that it would be so difficult for the other person.

Cecilia's fear of conflicting with a partner's desire to have sex is similar to many of the experiences I analysed in [Chapter 4](#). An important difference in Cecilia's story, however, is that she never experienced a sexual act as unwelcome – “most of the time it has turned out well”. Rather, it is as if her will was shaped by the will of her male partners. Or is it rather that her own will was not relevant, because it spoke in an almost inaudible voice? It is interesting to reflect Cecilia's experience in Elias's thoughts in the previous chapter, where he explained that he felt that women often need his initiative in order to awaken their sexual interest.

How is it then that Cecilia had – and to some extent still has – such difficulty sensing what she herself wants? For a long time, she herself associated it with the conservative sexual morals imparted by her parents during her upbringing: sex was something ugly. Those notions were internalized by Cecilia and made it difficult for her to relate to her own sexual desire. Then, however, she realized that her poor connection with her own sexual drive was part of a larger pattern.

*Cecilia:* For me, it's strange to think that how well you grasp what you want and don't want when you have sex would be separate from how you are in general. Because I've probably had quite a hard time knowing what I want at all.

She says that she grew up in a religious context characterized by a homogenized way of thinking, where it was important to think in a certain way.

*Cecilia:* I think that I haven't had much practice in recognizing what I want myself. What am I thinking myself? What is important to me? And this has affected my whole life, not just the arena of sex.

It's been clear to me that I've been very influenced by this when it comes to sex and I've worked a lot on it and it's been tantra and BDSM and all sorts. So now I have a pretty good grasp there. And my exploration of sex has fertilized my other relationships too, of course. That I started thinking about who is getting something out of this [laughs] and do I want this? Who is giving? Who is it that gets?

In the next chapter, I will revisit the interview with Cecilia to analyse her reflections on taking a submissive position in BDSM sex. Here, I want to go into one particular occasion when Cecilia had sex with her male BDSM partner, which raises difficult questions about what Cecilia *really* wanted in the situation in question. She brings up the incident herself when we talk about her difficulties in saying no.

*Cecilia:* On one occasion when we saw each other, I had such a terrible [vaginal] yeast infection and also had a bad cold so I was quite miserable. He completely understood that I was sick, and we hadn't seen each other for a while so we were very happy to see each other and we sat there, snuggling on the couch. Then he said, "Now we're going to bed and we're just going to lie there and snuggle and I'm going to take care of you". He tried to convey that here there is no expectation for us to have sex [laughs]. But I...we still ended up having a lot of sex that night and I was really so sick. I don't remember if I somehow initiated it or if he did and I went along. But I remember thinking that he couldn't mean that we weren't going to have sex. I guess I didn't really believe him when he said that.

*Lena:* And you felt that then there will be sex?

*Cecilia:* Mm. And we had sex and I was really sick but I remember it as me enjoying it anyway, it was good. I was really tired but...

*Lena:* But when you think *he wants to have sex*, does that mean *we will have sex*?

*Cecilia:* [Laughs.]

*Lena:* So, there isn't even the space to think that it could be that you don't have sex...

*Cecilia:* ...although he wants to...

*Lena:* ...although he wants to? I'm interested about whether it goes straight from *he wants to have sex* to *so we have sex*?

*Cecilia:* [Long pause.] Yes, that's a good question. Either the space wasn't there, and it became automatic in my brain: "Okay, he wants to have sex, then we'll have sex, even if he were to say something else". Or else I thought: "Okay, he probably really wants to have sex. He says we won't have it, but I don't want to disappoint him

and now he'll be lying there wishing we were having it [laughs] and we haven't seen each other for a long time and..." And I felt disappointed myself too, as I said, we hadn't seen each other in a long time. I had been looking forward to us seeing each other and having sex and then I got sick. So there was that too.

*Lena:* So somewhere you wanted to as well?

*Cecilia:* Yes, exactly.

*Lena:* But you don't really know what was going on in your brain there?

*Cecilia:* Nah. But I imagine someone else might have thought "Yeah, yeah, tonight I'm sick, tomorrow's a new day" [laughs]. But for me it's like so decisive every time.

*Lena:* And there is also something about sex standing for something positive, that you like sex?

*Cecilia:* Mm.

*Lena:* And then you have to take the opportunity – is that it, too?

*Cecilia:* Yes. I think that when I felt that I got close to someone, it was when we had sex. For me it's like that.

*Lena:* Sex is associated with closeness?

*Cecilia:* Mm, exactly.

Cecilia wonders how she should actually think about the incident. She is unsure of exactly what the relationship was like between (her guesses about) her partner's desires on the one hand and her own attitude towards sex on the other. It is not particularly surprising since the immediate, self-evident connection that seems to exist for Cecilia between "he wants it" and "so we'll have sex" does not encourage awareness-raising. Perhaps, Cecilia says, it was a completely automatic transition between "he wants it" and "so we'll have sex", or else a more complex inner negotiation took place inside her, where the basic motivation was to avoid disappointing her partner, combined with her own generally positive attitude towards sex. Indeed, if one finds it difficult to concretely feel what one wants in the moment, it is easy to lean towards more general and abstract guidelines for how to behave. Here, Cecilia's general experience that sex is something positive for her becomes a guideline that she can stick to when the ability to sense *what she feels like right now* fails her.

### **Stina: "I didn't even reflect on whether I wanted to"**

Stina (30–35 years old, heterosexual) spoke in [Chapter 4](#) about the countless times she agreed – often after significant pressure – to have sex with her then-boyfriend. Here, I will briefly return to the interview with Stina to shed light on the fact that a poor sense of one's own sexual needs and desires can make a person more vulnerable to external influences. Stina says that during

the relationship in which she repeatedly had sex against her will, she generally did not experience very strong sexual desire, which meant that it was easy for her to let her sexual actions be controlled by external factors. She reflects on how her upbringing and her use of birth control pills may have contributed to the fact that she had a poor sense of her sexuality as a young person, but she also mentions the dynamics of the destructive relationship as a cause.

*Stina:* It took a long time before I started masturbating. And my pleasure in sex in general, there was some sort of a block there with this relationship, because I got no pleasure and sex was something negative almost always...I never got any pleasure from him; he gave up all the time and didn't make much of an effort either. So in the end I thought that there are women who can't come and that I was probably one of them. Am I asexual? I wondered sometimes.

It turned out over time that Stina is absolutely not asexual. As she came off the pill and was able to explore her sexuality on her own terms after that destructive relationship ended, she came into contact with a strong sexual drive. Although her then-boyfriend's exercise of power and lack of interest in Stina's needs helped lock her into an externally controlled sexuality, it is significant that she entered that relationship without experiencing a firm anchoring in her own sexuality, which is not uncommon when you are young. During the latter part of the relationship, Stina began to experience an aversion to sex and it was clear to her that she did not want to. In the beginning of the relationship, however, having sex was more of a matter of course – regardless of what she felt.

*Lena:* In those situations when you agreed to have sex, were you then aware of what you felt and wanted? Were you aware that you didn't really want to but agreed because you wanted it to be good for him?

*Stina:* Yes. It might not have been like that in the beginning, but after a while it definitely was.

*Lena:* Because there it can be different, that you don't know what you want or that you don't even recognize your own desires.

*Stina:* Yes, and it was probably like that in the beginning, absolutely. Then I didn't feel...I didn't even think about whether I wanted to have sex, at first.

*Lena:* It was just like "He wants to have sex, so you have sex"?

*Stina:* Yes.

*Lena:* But then it grew, it started chafing, you started to become aware of what you wanted and didn't want?

*Stina:* Mm.

Stina herself points out that her lack of a clear sexual desire of her own made it natural for her to see sex as, as she puts it, “a chore”.

*Stina:* In the beginning, I didn’t reflect on it in the same way, but kind of thought that it was a chore that I had to do. During the time we were together, I was on the pill and since I stopped the pill I have a much stronger sexual desire and it’s also very easy for me to come, so in retrospect I have understood that that was it. But it’s clear that you get blocked when you don’t feel appreciated and loved as well, so it was probably psychological too.

*Lena:* You mean that you saw it as a chore, that it was also connected to the fact that you didn’t really feel that desire of your own?

*Stina:* Yes, absolutely.

*Lena:* And then it became more *something you do*.

*Stina:* Yes, there were two parts, I think, partly a chore because it’s something you do and I didn’t want to be abnormal. But also this other part that I wanted him to love me.

Stina talks about a situation that took place a period of time after that destructive relationship ended, which she believes shows how “damaged” she was by the pattern in the relationship.

*Stina:* I had a fuck buddy once and after a while I didn’t get turned on by him, I got tired. But I still wanted sex, because he was my fuck buddy. But he noticed that I didn’t get wet and wondered if I still thought it was nice. And I didn’t even connect it but was like “What, you mean because I’m not coming or what?” Obviously I was quite damaged for a long time; it was like there weren’t such clear boundaries between not having sex and having sex. And it was this thing that you should have sex so then you should want to have sex. It took me a long time to understand that if you’re not into him, maybe you shouldn’t have sex with him! It’s almost like I’m raping myself. Or it’s a very strange thing; it affected me for long afterwards.

Although Stina’s and Cecilia’s experiences differ considerably, there is a similarity here in how both put their own feeling in the here and now in parentheses in order instead to be guided by more general principles: “I want sex” + “He is my fuck buddy” = “Then I’ll have sex with him”. A reflection that Mariam (55–60 years old, heterosexual) makes can help shed further light on the connection that seems to exist between a weak sense of one’s own sexuality and a tendency to be guided by what others want or by general rules and norms. Mariam, who in [Chapter 5](#) talked about how she sometimes agreed to have sex with her husband as a way of compromising between their

different needs, grew up in the Middle East, where the shaming of female sexuality is more accentuated and pervasive than in Sweden.

*Mariam:* Usually it's the men who want sex. The woman, even if she wants to, should be shy and careful, and not talk about it openly. You don't see the same needs in men and women and you are brought up that way. As a woman, you don't take the initiative to have sex with a man, even if it's your own husband who you have lived with for 30 years.

Mariam links the way women's sexuality is inhibited with women's vulnerability to pressure from others. She places great importance here on the possibility for women to *talk* about sex and the sexual parts of their bodies as an important part of sexual self-determination, but she also refers to the Swedish tradition of being naked in front of others in changing rooms as a cultural pattern that she believes strengthens women's sexual integrity.

*Lena:* The fact that as a woman there is a greater opportunity to talk about sex and that you don't have to be ashamed of your body, do you think it's important for you to also get better at saying no if you don't want to do it?

*Mariam:* I think so.

*Lena:* How?

*Mariam:* When you have the courage to show your body openly, you also have the courage to protect your body more. Because when you are shy and cautious, you don't have the courage to show your body and you are a little unsure of what is right and wrong and you let someone else approach you. You gain a stronger sense of self-confidence, that's why you have the courage. What I'm doing, it's not wrong. I take off my bra and panties, someone else sees me and I don't have to be ashamed of it. It's my body, I decide. Then you also have the self-confidence to say to another person, "No, I don't want to have sex with you".

Although Mariam talks about a cultural opportunity for bodily self-esteem and self-awareness on a level that a person like Stina could always take for granted, her reflections do shed light on Stina's experiences: A good connection with one's own body – a "yes" to one's own body and sexuality – makes people better equipped to say no, when that is necessary. A culture that prevents women from affirming and getting in touch with their own body's signals, on the other hand, deprives them of the compass that can make them active sexual subjects – who can say either yes or no *depending on what they themselves feel*.

## Wanting to want

In [Chapter 6](#), Stina uses the expression “I wanted to want”, to describe her inner state in the destructive relationship where she routinely “agreed” to sex without having the desire for it. This attitude can be described as a form of *second-order desire* (Cahill 2014), a concept I discussed in [Chapter 3](#) to describe the internal state in which a person does not desire sex but would like to feel such a desire. There we saw that it seems possible to communicate such a complex inner state to a partner who can then help the other person’s desire develop through further attempts at seduction. Oskar (35–40 years old, heterosexual) also raises this issue when he says that he can sometimes “want to want”. He gets into this topic at the beginning of the interview, when I ask why he wants to participate in the study.

*Oskar:* Something I have wondered about myself quite a lot is this thing about wanting and not wanting. What is *my* desire? I mean, what is my true desire? And what do I do, like... Sometimes I can want to want. Yes, that’s interesting, I’ve been thinking about that.

*Lena:* When you say you could want to want something, do you mean even though you don’t really want to?

*Oskar:* Yes, exactly.

Oskar says that the situations where he has *wanted to want* have sometimes been purely sexual and resulted in him having sex even though deep down he did not want to. But when he describes the mechanism, he brings up an example of how he wanted to feel like he was in love with someone he was not really in love with, and thus he broadens the theme beyond strictly sexual desire.

*Lena:* Can you talk a little about what it was like?

*Oskar:* My true desire is located in my stomach area, my heart area somewhere, while my other desire is in my head and I have ideas and conceptions there about how I *want* it to be. And so I’ve gone into relationships with a notion that I *want* to be in love, I want to be in a relationship, because...I don’t know...you’re considered to be happy then...some deep longing for intimacy but where I’m not really succeeding in creating it, but rather it’s the opposite. And this desire in my head overrides my true desire. But my true desire is always there. I may not have always been fully aware of it, but I have felt that it’s wrong. Somewhere I have somehow been able to feel that it’s wrong, what I’m doing.

It is only in retrospect that Oskar has come to analyse these situations in this way. When he was in them he was not aware of the self-deception, but he says that even then and there, in some part of himself, he felt that

something was wrong. He connects this tendency with his life in a wider context, which was marked by psychological pain from which he tried to escape in various ways, including through sex.

*Oskar:* It is painful to live according to that desire, which comes from some kind of deep longing to be loved and a fear of not being loved. I have tried to create situations where I can feel loved but in those situations I have failed quite strongly to feel it. If there was someone who showed me the slightest interest, I felt, “Oh God, how wonderful!” and kind of fell in love. And in other situations I wanted to feel it and longed for some kind of uniting with the other person and to feel loved. It was one girl in particular that I had a relationship with but was never in love with. But I forced myself to try to be. And it was terribly painful.

Oskar tells how his self-deceptions created “some kind of self-hatred” and notes that “I probably felt disgusted with myself”. I ask him what role the specifically sexual part played in this.

*Lena:* How much was connected to the sex and how much was connected more to the fact that the whole thing was a deception?

*Oskar:* It was the whole thing, I think. I was untrue to myself, in all areas. But in sex, it somehow becomes even more clear, I think. When you sit and watch a movie together it is not so clearly noticeable, but in a sexual situation it is usually quite a good thing if both people are fairly present. And in a sexual situation I meet myself more easily.

Like Cecilia, Oskar sees his difficulties in recognizing what he really wants sexually as something that cannot be separated from his life as a whole. It is basically the same problem. However, the dissonance becomes more apparent when it comes to sex, as it requires more contact and presence than many other activities in life. Oskar talks about an occasion when he had a one-night stand with a woman and then sat in her bathtub all night, experiencing severe anxiety, because he had not really wanted to have sex with the woman. This was a situation that caused him to reach rock-bottom in his life, which then led him to begin a healing process.

### **Michael: “Horniness goes past fear and common sense”**

However painful Oskar’s experiences were, it is clear that in his case we are not dealing with a problem of consent in the strict sense. It is not that someone else pressured him into sex, but rather it was a choice he made himself on the basis of a self-deception fuelled by a desperate longing for closeness. In my interpretation, the basic problem for Oskar lay in his inability to put up with the psychological pain he suffered from for a long time, which made

him reach for the first body that could possibly fill this void. In this way, his story is similar to the one Gunnar shares in [Chapter 4](#), about how his urgent need for affirmation was channelled into a strong sexual desire. We find an echo of the same theme in Michael's account. The interview with Michael (30–35 years old, gay), who in the previous chapter expressed criticism of the male gay milieu, is largely about his strongly conflicted relationship to sex. He talks about a life that has been difficult and has left him with recurring depression and a desperate longing both for intimacy and affirmation and for sex. The overarching theme of the interview is how his desperate longing for closeness and sex made him have sex in ways he did not feel good about and which he, on one level, did not want to participate in.

*Michael:* When I lived in [a smaller town], I felt compelled to go to Stockholm at regular intervals just to sleep with someone, to feel some kind of...I noticed that my depression came more and more, as if chasing me if I didn't get closeness and contact. Because in [the smaller town] I wouldn't even see a gay person for a very long time and then I started thinking: "How can anyone ever like me? How am I supposed to meet someone?" – loneliness, hopelessness. Suddenly you start going to cities just to...and no one wants to meet up as friends in such a situation, instead you just meet and have sex and it becomes very... You haven't had sex for a long time and you have a sexuality that just drives you forward and then you do things that you are not really comfortable with and that go against your self-respect.

In the previous chapter, Michael expressed a strong frustration with the male gay milieu, which he perceives as being fuelled by a collective desperation and as one-sidedly focused on sexual, often impersonal, encounters. Nevertheless, his own desperation has caused him to actively seek sex with men through the forums available to him. Just as in Oskar's case, the problem involved in Michael's experiences of repeatedly participating in sex that did not feel good to him is not a matter of consent in the strict sense. He does have experiences of having felt forced to have sex in certain situations, but the main theme of his interview is the sex he actively seeks out, driven in part by "a sexuality that just drives you forward" but also by a need for closeness, contact and affirmation. The problem is the compulsion that makes him unable to set boundaries and to instead accept the sex that is offered – even if this sex ultimately violates rather than meets his deeper need to be seen and accepted as a human being.

*Michael:* I could suddenly find myself having sex in a basement room in Stockholm with a person I thought was disgusting, and then I would have anxiety about it. And then I ended up in another such situation and everything was sort of to get some kind of contact, touch, affirmation, sexual outlet.

The desperate longing for “contact, touch, affirmation, sexual outlet” merges here into a single compulsive, indiscriminate movement towards another person. Although the sexual need merges with the need for human contact, Michael explains that his sexual desire gets the upper hand and overrides his other needs. In order to better understand how he is pushed into sexual situations he does not really want to participate in, I ask him to specify what role his own sexual desire plays.

*Michael:* Often from the beginning I have a horniness that is just waiting to be stimulated, so therefore I meet someone and the horniness is already there and is triggered very easily. Just because a person comes and shows interest, comes to me or I come to him, that horniness is there. And somehow it’s at the top of some kind of ladder that says “It has to be satisfied or you’re not going to survive this” [laughs]. And then it sort of goes past fear, past common sense, past respect.

*Lena:* So then it’s sex where you’re horny and it’s nice but still it doesn’t feel good, on another level?

*Michael:* Yes. It’s more like a task that needs to be done.

*Lena:* To dampen or remove that.

*Michael:* Yes, to soften the desperation a little. Sometimes it gets worse, because so many meetings are so anxiety-inducing.

In the context of consent, coercion is a matter of external coercion, in that a person forces another person to do something that they do not want, or that they feel compelled to do or participate in due to various factors outside of themselves. Michael’s account, however, is about an inner compulsion, stemming from the acute nature of his own sexual and emotional needs. This inner compulsion has made Michael repeatedly go against his own self-respect. “It felt like it was raping my whole body”, he says of his own sexuality during the time in his life when, after being suppressed throughout his teenage years, it finally blossomed with incredible force. Although there are other traumatic experiences in Michael’s life tied to his upbringing, it is clear that his identity as a gay man in a homophobic environment helped fuel both his sexual desperation and his weak sense of self-esteem, which made him desperate for affirmation and connection.

*Michael:* It has caused me to harbour self-hatred. There was no sense of self. I was just disconnected from myself and that’s where the fear was, that I didn’t know, like...didn’t know what felt, didn’t know what was happening, didn’t know what I wanted. Homosexuality, that it was so unaccepted, meant that I had to disconnect myself from everything that felt, sort of, because it hurt too much. As a child, I just lay there crying and asking God to make me not gay,

to take away those thoughts and feelings. Everything that I saw out in the world...there was no place for that.

Michael's defensive suppression of his own feelings and needs blocked his ability to sense what he actually felt, wanted and needed. He talks about a fear he has often experienced during sexual encounters and, although on some occasions it was a fear of violence, he makes it clear that the fear was more associated with an uncertainty about where his own boundaries lie. This lack of "ontological security" (Giddens 1991) has in sexual situations sometimes given rise to a fear so strong that his body has gone into "a hypervigilance, like a trauma state". He says that, further back in time, it was as if in sexual situations he completely "transformed" himself and "just carried it out", because he had such a weak sense of connection with his own needs and boundaries.

*Michael:* Before, there wasn't even an awareness but it was more that I completely transformed myself in the situation and just carried out.

*Lena:* You just transformed yourself, to fit in, and weren't even aware at the time that you were doing it? Or that you could do in some other way?

*Michael:* Exactly.

*Lena:* Or maybe that you even had a desire of your own, or what?

*Michael:* Exactly.

*Lena:* Or your own needs?

*Michael:* No. Because there was so much that was closed off in me that just...probably only acted to make some contact.

It is interesting how Michael articulates himself at the end of the excerpt. It is not him who acts but all that which was closed off in him. Again, this highlights how people's free choices can be undermined by forces within themselves. Michael's descriptions can also be related to my discussion in [Chapter 4](#) about how the tendency to agree to unwanted sex is often not a consequence of a conscious choice, but more of a bodily pattern, as if automated. When Michael says that what "was closed off in me [...] probably acted only to make some contact", he also actualizes the theme that runs through his interview: even if his sexual drive takes precedence, at the same time, there seems to be a more fundamental *need for connection* that is motivating his bodily desires.

*Michael:* There was a site called QX that is very sexualized and objectifying. People write everything from sexual suggestions to "Hey, how are you?" and sort of pretend to want to get to know you. Then you start sending pictures back and forth quite quickly and many times, when I was so desperate for some kind of contact, it was mostly a question of who is closest and what is most easily

accessible, basically. And during sex, my body goes into a hyper-vigilance, like a trauma mode; my heart rate goes up and my whole self, or my whole body at any rate, becomes different. At the same time, I realize that I have to carry this out, for some reason.

*Lena:* Why do you have to do that?

*Michael:* It's been this sexual...or it's not really so much about sexual stimulation...since in my everyday life I don't have any way to meet other gay people, it naturally becomes everything, from the sexual to just feeling contact. This thing that if I meet someone for casual sex, maybe there is a chance that that person will like me. And someday he might want to be with me and affirm my existence [laughs]. It may look like you're just meeting someone to have sex, but there's something in the back of your mind. You plan that sex meeting, but really it's that you want to have contact with someone.

It is becoming increasingly common to conceptualize voluntary participation in sex that does not make you feel good as a form of self-harm or self-injury (Fredlund, Wadsby & Jonsson 2020). Much of Michael's behaviour could be understood in terms of sex as self-injury, defined as “[r]epeatedly sought sexual situations that have caused you physical and/or mental harm and have affected you in life” (p. 898). Self-harming sexual behaviour is often linked to depression and, like other types of self-harm, such as cutting oneself, it fulfils the function of temporarily suppressing or diverting anxiety and other unbearable feelings. In the next chapter, I will return to the theme of self-harm in connection with some of the participations' reflections on their participation in BDSM sex. As I will discuss there, the phenomenon of self-harming sexual behaviour poses a considerable challenge to naïve ideas about consent as something that by definition protects people's sexual integrity and psychological and physical well-being.

### Having no will

I am now going to look at one of the participants' experiences with BDSM and take on the problem of desire from a slightly different approach. In Chapter 5, Rikard (40–45 years old, bisexual) talked about having sex with a female partner even though he did not want to. I also briefly touched on the fact that Rikard has extensive experience with BDSM and that he exclusively takes on a “mentally submissive” role during sexual encounters with men. He describes this as follows:

*Rikard:* I don't control the sex act: I'm always the recipient of penetration, I'm the one who gives oral sex, and I become very compliant towards the person or people I have sex with.

*Lena:* Could you say that when you have sex with men, it's largely based on the fact that you are there for someone else's...that you are some sort of object?

*Rikard:* Yes, I'm there for someone else's pleasure.

*Lena:* But you also enjoy that?

*Richard:* Yes. But it's above all a mental pleasure. I sometimes have erections when I have sex with men but it depends a bit on the type of sex.

*Lena:* Can you describe the mental pleasure more?

*Rikard:* It has to do with being obliging, being compliant, feeling that you arouse desire and can make someone else enjoy things sexually. I actually have the same experience when I have sex with women, where I find it very rewarding that my partner enjoys it. But when I have sex with men, there's a clearly compliant, subordinate mental part. With women, it's more fluid – I can be submissive and compliant and I can be very controlling. But there is always a lot of focus on the other person enjoying themselves.

While in the next chapter I discuss accounts by other BDSM practitioners who problematize why they are drawn to a submissive sexual role, Rikard does not express any such reflections – “I have probably never reflected on why I'm like that...It's how my sexuality is”. However, his sexual practices with men are associated with certain risks, above all when he ends up in what in BDSM terminology is called *subspace*, a kind of transcendent state that a submissive can end up in if they completely let go of control in a sex act, or “session”. A description of subspace on *Darkside*, the largest BDSM internet forum in Sweden, is that “the submissive ‘floats away’ in their own beautiful world where, for example, whiplash can be perceived as caresses. Very nice state that requires full trust in the dominant. Implies a great deal of responsibility for the dominant because the submissive in that situation does not have complete judgment about what is happening” (*Darkside* 2007, translated from Swedish). BDSM scholar Charlotta Carlström emphasizes that subspace is experienced differently by different people. “Many describe the condition in strong terms and compare it to ecstasy, trance and feelings of ‘flow’” (2016: 151, note 62), while some may also experience it as unpleasant and frightening (2016: 197). When Rikard describes in his interview how his submissiveness is expressed in sessions with men, he soon gets into the subject of subspace.

*Rikard:* It depends somewhat on the type of man, but I can sometimes end up in a mental state, often called subspace, where I probably *can't* actually say no, if you know what I mean. Where I become so compliant or submissive that the desire to please and be obliging becomes more important than my own boundaries.

*Lena:* And is it a positive or negative experience?

*Rikard:* It can be both. And I usually don't know that until after. It pretty much depends on which boundaries are crossed, how they are crossed and how the man in question acts afterwards.

Rikard describes the subspace state as a “bubble” he enters. The way to get there is, as I understand it, based on him completely letting go, something that is only possible for Rikard if the man who dominates him conveys a certain kind of security.

*Lena:* When you get into that state, why is it that you *can't* say no?

*Rikard:* [long pause]. Hmm, I've thought about that many times. I know with what kind of men I'm at risk of ending up there, but what exactly it is that makes me unable to say no, I don't know. It just becomes so clear that I'm there for this person's pleasure, so saying no would be...wrong? [searching for the right word]. I've thought about it a lot, but it's hard to put my finger on it. But I know *in advance* whether I'm at risk of ending up there, based on what kind of person it is.

*Lena:* What characterizes such a man? Is it a dominant person?

*Rikard:* Yes...or definite, clear, where at least I get the sense that the person is not playing a dominant role but *is* dominant. That could never happen with someone who says “I'm an alpha male”. A determined, calm personality.

*Lena:* Some kind of authority?

*Rikard:* Yes, authority or security, someone who is grounded in himself and knows what he wants and can express it without hesitation, without raising his voice.

*Lena:* So it's not an unpleasant type.

*Richard:* No.

*Lena:* But a very grounded person.

*Richard:* Yes. Who also gives a sense of security...Yes, it is probably that, a person who can *instil* a sense of security. Then sometimes it has turned out to be unfounded – even a person like that can cross boundaries and be the kind of person who just puts on his trousers and leaves afterwards – but it's probably that they instil a feeling of security, that I feel that I can let this person fully take control.

Boundary violations are a core part of the roleplay and what determines whether these are experienced positively or negatively is not only what is actually done, but also what kind of “energy” Rikard's partner radiates.

*Rikard:* It depends a lot on that feeling of security, if they manage to maintain it all the time. Some people can instil that sense of security, but

when they become very sexually excited, they lose their self-control and that shatters the sense of security. I'm still there, in subspace, but the security is shattered. Then it becomes mentally uncomfortable because then I'm in a place where I'm mentally helpless and I should really only be there when I feel safe, but then that's taken away from me.

For Rikard, the experience of security is thus caused by a form of self-control that his sexual partner radiates, and sexual arousal that is too strong undermines that self-control. There is a paradox here in that what Rikard is seeking in these sexual encounters is precisely the feeling of being an instrument for the other's pleasure. The "mental pleasure" he experiences comes from "being obliging, being compliant, feeling that you arouse desire and can make someone else enjoy things sexually". But if he succeeds too well in arousing his partner's desire, so that it is experienced as uncontrolled, the positive turns into something negative, at least if Rikard is in subspace. In many ways, Rikard's "ideal man" is a kind of mix of two different impulses in *hegemonic masculinity* (Connell 2020), sexual aggression and self-control. The contradiction between these two masculine tendencies makes surrendering to that kind of masculinity fraught with risk.

Rikard says that in the subspace state, he *cannot* end a session even if it feels unpleasant, but he has a hard time explaining exactly why that is. He fumbles for words and says that "It just becomes so clear that I'm there for this person's pleasure, so saying no would be...wrong?" It is as if in these situations he goes so deep into the submissive role that it is no longer a role but completely takes over and makes any form of boundary-setting on his part an unacceptable breach of norms. His role as an object for the other person is simply not compatible with having a desire of his own. But how radical is Rikard's loss of the contours of his own self in these situations?

*Lena:* When you're in situations where you can't say no, do you know what you want? Or is it that you don't know what you want, that it doesn't exist?

*Rikard:* It can be both. Most of the time I know what I want and don't want, but it *can* happen – but it's with men and it's not that often – that I go so completely into that bubble that sometimes I don't actually know what I want. I *have* no desire.

Rikard's experience makes it clear that the usual categories and assumptions of the consent discussion are limited. The ideal of consent is closely interwoven with an assumption about individual boundaries and autonomy, but the kind of sex that Rikard has with men is precisely about blurring the boundaries of his own self. Certainly, in most cases, he and his partner

communicate in advance about the boundaries of what is okay and what is not okay, but it is not possible to predict exactly what will happen – or how Rikard will feel – in advance. The solution to this consensual dilemma is often the agreement of a stop word, which the submissive can use to signal that a boundary has been violated. The problem, at least in Rikard's case, is that when he ends up in subspace, the contours of his own self are so dissolved that he cannot use any stop words. One might say that at the moment when he consents to being dominated he has autonomy, but the actions he has consented to can sometimes in the moment undermine this autonomy so that his ability to protect his boundaries is no longer possible.

However, the situations where Rikard feels that he has *no* desire of his own are among the exceptions. When he finds himself in subspace and feels he is unable to express his limits, he is usually aware of what he wants and does not want.

*Rikard:* For example, if someone takes me without a condom, I know – even in the bubble – that I'm not okay with that, with this person, but I let it happen anyway. I don't speak up, because I'm in the bubble.

*Lena:* But is it a *choice* you're making, to let it happen?

*Rikard:* Hmm, I'm aware that I'm *letting* it happen, but I'm also in the bubble so that I wouldn't be able to...I don't feel like I can say no.

Rikard's last statement highlights the complex relationship between freedom and coercion. On the one hand, in these situations he feels that he *cannot* say no, which means that he feels that he has no choice or control over the situation. On the other hand, he feels that he *lets* it happen, which seems to imply that there is nevertheless a choosing subject there who could have refrained from letting it happen. However, the possibility of not letting it happen seems to be on a more theoretical level, which has no bearing on the concrete situation that Rikard finds himself in. In practice, he has no choice, but since the unfreedom is not based on any absolute, physical coercion, it is not possible to understand it in any way other than that he himself is in some way affecting the course of events. His account of how a certain type of man can put him in this state sheds interesting light on the complex psycho-relational mechanisms that can limit our freedom in very absolute ways even when there are no external obstacles.

### **The boundary between me and you**

As discussed in the introductory chapter, consent researchers worked for a long time based on the assumption that there is a simple dichotomy between wanting and not wanting to have sex. Charlene Muehlenhard and

Zoë Peterson challenged this assumption in a 2005 article, stating that it is completely possible to both want and not want to have sex at the same time, based on different motivations. Not knowing what one wants can probably in many cases be understood as an expression of an inability to choose which of one's conflicting impulses to follow. Some of the accounts analysed in this chapter show, however, that the uncertainty surrounding one's own desires is not so much about ambivalence as about difficulties in sensing one's own motivations at all, as something that can be distinguished from the wishes and expectations of others.

How people will, to varying degrees, acquire or fail to acquire an ability to clearly distinguish their own motivations from external influences is a question that requires complex answers informed by psychological research and theory, something this book does not offer. From a gender perspective, however, it is relevant to pay attention to the tradition of feminist psychology that revolves around the thesis that girls' selves, due to the gender order of the family, develop in a way that gives them looser and more permeable contours than boys' selves, which tend to be more clearly demarcated from their environment (Chodorow 1978). Regardless of their experiences from the critical years of childhood, women and men are shaped throughout their lives by gendered notions where a central principle is that women to a much greater extent than men are expected to look after the needs of other people (Gunnarsson 2014a, 2014b). In addition, women's and men's sexuality is shaped by a culture where the female body often takes the position of an object defined and valued by the desires and needs of others rather than of an internally controlled subject. In a British study on young people and heterosexuality, the researchers coined the term "the male in the head" to describe the mechanism by which young women's sexuality is shaped by their perceptions of how they look in the eyes of men (Holland et al. 2004). In such a culture, it is not surprising if women find it more difficult than men to get in touch with their own sexual desire, which does not require someone else's affirmation and reflection to be aroused. The experiences addressed in this chapter of not knowing what one wants point to the limitations of a discussion on consent that takes for granted that people's desire is self-evident and transparent. Efforts to promote sexual integrity also need to focus on providing tools for people to *find* their own desire and will. Likewise, awareness should be raised about how wanting and not wanting is not always an either/or issue, and that the communication of consent thus does not have to be a matter of saying yes or no, but can just as well be about expressing one's ambivalence and uncertainty. Freja's reflections in the previous chapter show that when there is room for uncertainty in a sexual interaction, greater opportunities are also created to get in touch with what one actually wants.

In discussions about sexual consent and sexual violence, the issue of *coercion* versus *freedom/voluntariness* is central. Consent, understood as

voluntary participation in sex, can only occur in the absence of coercive circumstances. However, while these discussions are limited to external forms of coercion, Michael's and Oskar's accounts show that people can also be driven by internal forms of coercion or compulsion to carry out actions that they fundamentally do not want to participate in. The concept of *sex as self-injury* is a major challenge to the idea of the consenting subject as someone who has the ability to and the interest in protecting their own integrity. Knowledge of how sex can be used as a form of self-harm is on the rise and it will be important to allow this to make its mark in discussions about consent – and vice versa.

I want to draw attention to the fact that sexual compulsiveness can express itself in boundary violations both against one's own self and against others. Michael's compulsive search for sexual fulfilment has many similarities to Gunnar's, which was discussed primarily in [Chapter 4](#). Gunnar, like Michael, talks about inner conflicts between what he thought was the right thing to do (to leave his then-wife alone when she did not feel like having sex) and what he could not help but do (let her satisfy him even though she did not want to). The difference is that Gunnar's compulsion caused him to cross another person's boundary – on one level, against his own will – while Michael's compulsion caused him to commit violence against himself. The common denominator is that a force, which indeed exists within the person themselves but which is nevertheless experienced as separate from the self, takes the upper hand and “overrides” other considerations.

The next chapter will to some extent follow up on the question that has formed the nub of this chapter: how does one really know what one wants? There, I will analyse some of the participants' reflections on participating in BDSM and other forms of dominance sex, reflections which, like the accounts in this chapter, in various ways problematize naïve understandings of consent as an expression of what a person *simply* wants.

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# 8

## DOMINANCE AND SUBMISSION

A central theoretical point of departure for this book is that people are shaped by the social relationships and the culture they are a part of. Although we are born with certain personality and temperament traits, who we are is largely shaped by our immediate interpersonal relationships as well as by the wider society we are a part of. I would argue that it is feminist questions that have generated the most radical, and perhaps most troublesome, insights into this social constitution of humans. It was the feminist movement that first pointed out that “the personal is political” (Hanisch 1970), because patriarchy is so closely connected with what we consider to be most personal and intimate. The trouble with that reformulation of the political lies in its implication that even our most personal preferences – what we want, what we are attracted to, what we enjoy – are shaped by social and cultural forces that are anything but power-neutral.

The principle of consent is linked to our volitions in the moment and does not take into account the social factors that shape them. While consent-based sexual crime legislations normally disqualify expressions of voluntariness induced by another individual by illicit means, it goes without saying that the wider social and cultural structures that shape our sexual desires and wishes in the first place cannot be addressed by such legislations. As the societal forces that shape our sexuality in gendered ways are connected to patriarchal power asymmetries, they are nevertheless vital to address if we are to achieve the gender equal and non-violating sexual culture on which a genuine culture of consent must rest (Alcoff 2018).

In the introductory chapter, I touched on the intense conflicts between different feminist phalanxes in the so-called sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s. Sadosomasochistic sex (SM), where one person dominates another sexually,

often with elements of physical violence and humiliation, was a burning issue that divided the movement. Radical feminists saw it as the ultimate expression of a patriarchal order of dominance based on an eroticization of (male) supremacy and (female) submission (Jeffreys 1996; MacKinnon 1997). As previously mentioned, today that view is marginalized in feminist discourse and instead a more sex-liberal, and sometimes queer, perspective that celebrates all forms of (consensual) sexual expression and sees SM and other forms of BDSM practice as a liberating subversion of conventional sexual norms has come to dominate.

Several of the interview participants had experiences of sex based on (play with) dominance and submission, something I broadly refer to as “dominance sex”. Consenting to have another person humiliate you or physically harm you is an experience that merits particular analytical attention, not least in those paradoxical cases where people can be said to consent to the other person’s right to neglect their will. Meanwhile, in light of the stigmatization and even pathologization of BDSM and related practices, it may be precarious to, as I do in this chapter, problematize people’s participation in them. In Sweden, sadomasochism was a psychiatric diagnosis until 2009, when the National Board of Health and Welfare removed it from its disease classification and decided that sadomasochistic practice should be seen as one form of sexual expression among others (Carlström 2016). As Charlotta Carlström points out, this hardly means that BDSM has been normalized among the wider population; it is rather regarded by many as “both pathological and perverse” (2016: 26). Despite the risks of problematizing BDSM and other types of dominance sex in light of this broader context of stigmatization, just like more normative forms of sex these practices do not take place in a sociological and psychological vacuum and need to be critically examined. While some of the participants with experiences of dominance sex did not problematize their grounds for participating in such practices, others engaged in complex reflections about why they are drawn or have been drawn to this form of sex and the possible problems associated with it. These participants’ own problematization of their participation in dominance sex, ranging from strong condemnation to ambivalence and sober reflection, not only sheds important light on the problem of consent in dominance sex, but also contributes perspectives that should have bearing on other forms of sex.

### **Taking patriarchal degradation to its limit**

Freja, Pernilla and Cecilia all have a more or less clear feminist orientation and consider relationships with men to be problematic to varying degrees. Both Freja and Pernilla, who have the strongest feminist profiles, have previous experiences of sex with men but now live as lesbians, a conscious choice that has to do with the fact that they find it difficult to have equal and

reciprocal relationships with men due to the patriarchal mechanisms that structure even the most intimate sphere. Freja, Pernilla and Cecilia all also have experiences of BDSM sex with men, where they themselves assumed a submissive role. The BDSM theme has a more peripheral role in my interview with Pernilla, so I will here focus on Freja and Cecilia's approach to their experiences of being dominated sexually by men. However, a statement from Pernilla (30–35 years old, lesbian, formerly bisexual) sets the tone for the analysis. Recounting a sexual encounter with a man in which he dominated her, an experience that I will return to in the next chapter, in an interesting statement she expresses an uncertainty regarding her motivations for participating in that type of sex.

*Pernilla:* I like it, but I don't know if I like it because I really like it or because there is some kind of expectation...So it's very difficult, it's a fine line: What is really what?

Pernilla says here that she likes to be dominated sexually – as one of many possible sexual practices – but problematizes, so to speak, the ontological status of this liking: Does she “really” like it or does she like it “because there is some kind of expectation”? Unlike Freja and Cecilia, however, she does not show much interest in going deeper into her reflection on that problem. One interpretation is that her choice not to have sex with men in general has meant that it is an issue she no longer needs to think about.

In [Chapter 6](#), Freja (20–25 years old, lesbian, formerly heterosexual) talked about her experiences of having sex with women, considering that the clear division of roles offered by the heterosexual script is missing. I also mentioned that before she became “what you could call a political lesbian” she had relationships with men that she experienced as destructive. BDSM sex, with Freja taking the submissive role, was a component of some of these relationships. In contrast to Pernilla's uncertainty, Freja articulates an unequivocal view of her past participation in BDSM sex as a destructive internalization of patriarchal mechanisms that made her “choose” her own subordination. She is well versed in feminist theory and quite clearly inspired by radical feminist perspectives that conceptualize how male power and female subordination are normalized and eroticized. A consistent theme in her account is that the intensity dominance sex offered became a substitute for the intimacy she actually longed for but did not experience as possible in the relationships she had.

*Freja:* I had rough and advanced sexual fantasies very early on and in my relationships with men I actively pushed for us to live them out. And I think it's about...Having a mutual sexual relationship with a man is certainly not impossible, but it is very difficult in the society we live

in and then it can become logical to do things that kind of degrade you even more. Now there's almost a bit of a Freudian feel here, but there is some kind of repetition compulsion in it, you have a desire for things like...Sexual self-harm, it's something that many women have problems with and it's almost only women who have it.

*Lena:* Would you say that it was a self-harming sexual behaviour you had?

*Freja:* Absolutely.

*Lena:* Do you want to tell me how the sex could go? Were you humiliated?

*Freja:* Yeah, exactly, kind of rough BDSM humiliation sex. For me, it also was very strange because these were situations I actively entered into but at the same time found repulsive. I felt bad about it, but when I thought about how it made me feel, I thought that what made me feel bad was that I had abnormal sexual desires, rather than it being the degrading aspect *itself* harming me. I thought that I have these desires and it's abnormal and unfeminine and therefore I feel bad about them. But today I look at it as kind of...I have a pretty extreme attitude in my life in general [laughs] and I think there was kind of a catharsis in it: I'm in this relationship that's not reciprocal and I don't feel good about the way he treats me and looks at me and so I might as well take it one step further. I might as well take an active part in it. In my last relationship, I remember very well that the harder it got to be intimate in a healthy and normal way, the more I wanted to have this roughness. He could become very emotionally withdrawn and I think that because we couldn't meet emotionally and on equal terms, degrading myself sexually – or letting him do it – became a substitute in some way.

*Lena:* Some kind of...to experience a kind of, an intensity perhaps?

*Freja:* Yes, exactly, you could say that. So then you still have some kind of emotional exchange.

One could say that Freja first tried out the BDSM discourse that the problem surrounding BDSM is not that people are turned on by these practices, but instead the problem is that that type of desire is stigmatized. She interpreted her discomfort in these terms until she instead came to an understanding of her BDSM practice as something that was itself damaging to her. She raises a series of interconnected factors that she believes steered her into that type of sex. She mentions a kind of internalization of the broader patriarchal logic that devalues women. In this context, she uses the psychological concept of *repetition compulsion*, which denotes the mechanism in which a person who has experienced something problematic has a tendency to unconsciously be drawn to the same experience again, as a way of acting out the unresolved conflict. As Sharon Lamb puts it: "One can call the acting out of aggression on one's self a repetition of the abuse, a back-handed mastery

phenomenon. In abusing the self the victim says, ‘I am master of my own defeat’” (1999: 28). Usually, the repetition compulsion is related to trauma early in life. Freja, who in the interview does not relate her problem to childhood experiences, can instead be said to be expanding the idea of trauma to include the lack of respect that women generally experience in what she sees as a thoroughly misogynistic society.

Freja also relates to the concept of sex as self-harm or self-injury (Fredlund, Wadsby & Jonsson 2020), which I brought up in Chapter 7 in connection with Michael’s account. Psychologists have conceptualized self-harm with the help of the theory of repetition compulsion (Gardner 2013) and, in line with that, Freja highlights the positive feeling that can come from you *yourself* taking control of the harming when the harm is seen as inevitable. It is unclear whether Freja’s longing for something else was something she was aware of already when she was in the relationships she describes or if she became conscious of this longing afterwards. In any case, her account is characterized by an experience of resignation regarding the possibility that the relationships could be different. When she talks about “tak[ing] it one step further” and “tak[ing] an active part in” the loveless dynamic, I interpret it both as a way of bringing the painful dynamic into the light more clearly and as a way of making a virtue out of necessity and telling yourself that it is something you have chosen yourself. She mentions the liberation found in giving up the search for reciprocity and intimacy and instead embracing the logic of humiliation.

*Freja:* I felt that it was difficult to get close to the guy I was with then, there was a barrier. And it was somehow liberating when we started having BDSM sex because it was like...When you strive for something you can’t have, it hurts, and when you stop striving for it, it can be a liberation. That’s probably how I think about that relationship, that I really wanted something else but that this was what was available – or like standard alienated heterosexual sex, which isn’t so fucking heartfelt or intimate.

In that case, it is better to enter the order of humiliation all the way. Compared to the type of “standard alienated heterosexual sex” that Freja saw as the only alternative to BDSM sex, the latter also gave her an experience of intensity, which could in some way meet her longing for emotional exchange, when intimacy was lacking. But did Freja experience sexual pleasure from taking the sexually submissive role?

*Lena:* When you participated in BDSM sex, did it give you sexual pleasure? Did you get turned on from it?

*Freja:* Yes, I would say so.

*Lena:* So on that level it was good?

*Freja:* Yes. Although “good”. I think it’s hard...what’s “good”? [laughs]

*Lena:* But you experienced sexual pleasure and that was an important motivation?

*Freja:* Yes, I absolutely experienced sexual pleasure, but that was probably not the motivation, but rather the emotional part was. I guess there is a kind of satisfaction in self-harm. I’ve done that too, cut my arms. It is part of the payoff, that it’s destructive. That’s what you want to get.

Freja’s reflections deepen the problem I touched on in [Chapter 3](#), namely that it is not obvious that someone’s sexual arousal can be used as proof that the person really wants to have sex – and even less so that it is something that they feel good about. Freja actively initiated and enjoyed the BDSM sex from a sexual perspective, but it still hurt her. Just like some of the stories in the previous chapter, her experience shows how the conflicts people can carry within themselves make the question of what they want extremely complex.

*Freja:* I got a massage as a birthday present once and the woman who massaged me said that my hands were twitching in a way that you often get when you have been subjected to violence. And I was like, “But I have not been subjected to violence”. But when we had sex, it was a thing that he hit my face, and in retrospect I’ve thought about when feminists say that you own your body, that yes but...That’s when it became so clear: I own my body and have done this against my body, but my body didn’t think it was okay.

“You own your body” is a motto closely connected with the principle of consent. It is meant to act as a form of protection from the abuse of others, but Freja’s alienation from her own body makes it appear pointless, as it offers no protection from self-abuse.

### Escaping the burden of wanting

It is interesting to juxtapose Freja’s story with Cecilia’s (30–35 years old, bisexual), as they have much in common while also being markedly different. If we recall the conflicts I addressed in the introductory chapter between radical feminist and “sex-positive” perspectives on BDSM, Freja can be quite unambiguously placed in the radical feminist camp, which sees these practices as a problematic reflection of patriarchal power dynamics that should be challenged rather than played out in an accentuated and ritualized form. The “sex-positive” mindset prevalent among those who embrace BDSM instead sees every sexual desire as positive and *neutral in and of itself*

regardless of what kind of desire it is, as long as there is mutual consent. Cecilia's position is something of a middle ground between these polar opposites as she views her experiences as a sexual submissive as positive, while also reflecting deeply on why her sexuality is the way it is. She does not see her attraction to BDSM as one innocent sexual desire among others, but neither does she create a simple dualism between a constructive sexuality and a destructive one where the latter can easily be abandoned in favour of the former. Generally, she has an approach that could be described as particularly undogmatic and non-judgemental, bordering on nihilistic. She gives an account of her experiences in a matter-of-fact and practically neutral way and presents thoughts and reflections in a way that makes me feel that she sees them as one possible point of view rather than as something she firmly believes in.

Cecilia's experiences with BDSM sex are limited to a relationship she had with a man relatively recently. The sex involved him dominating and humiliating her and included, among other things, him hitting her. While for her partner there was pleasure in the humiliation itself, for Cecilia it was not the humiliation but rather the intensity of the pain that she sought. Towards the end of the interview, Cecilia clearly expresses that she had a positive experience of this relationship and regrets that it ended. Before that, she reflects in depth on why she enjoys this type of sex and how it may be connected to what she sees as psychological damage from childhood. Like Freja, she raises the concept of self-harm.

*Cecilia:* There is a discussion in the BDSM world about people who have self-harming behaviour or who are bordering on self-harming behaviour. And how do you know that? If someone wants to be spanked because it's part of their self-harming behaviour or because it's part of their sexuality that they enjoy? When I met that man who I had BDSM sex with, I wondered about it myself, because right then I was talking in therapy about how my father was sometimes violent when I was a child. He never hit me but I saw him hit my siblings. The question then becomes: When are you capable of saying yes to being hit? I don't know...if someone is, for example, very suicidal and wants to have a lot of strangulation sex, is that right? Can that person consent to it?

*Lena:* But have you asked yourself if you are involved in self-harming behaviour?

*Cecilia:* Mm.

*Lena:* And you think...?

*Cecilia:* Yes, I think that...yes. What I came to was: no, I can't think of this as a self-harming behaviour because then...Not having sex can also be a way of punishing myself.

To understand what Cecilia is saying here, we need more context. In the interview, she talks about a childhood that was marked both by religiously sanctioned sexual conservatism and – perhaps more importantly – an environment where her own needs were not seen as important. She links her attraction to the submissive position to her difficulties in recognizing her own desire, both sexually and on a wider level. Here, BDSM sex became a perfect solution to her problem of recognizing her own sexual desire. To then opt out from that form of sex would seem to her to be at least as “self-harming” as participating in it.

*Cecilia:* It suited me so well, because it was so relaxing. He told me what we would do [laughs] and I just had to comply.

Cecilia also highlights how the passive position frees her from feelings of guilt over her own sexuality. At the beginning of the excerpt below, she refers to her first sexual experience as a teenager, where the significantly older man she had sex with controlled the sexual encounter. But this is a theme that she gets into as we talk about her attraction to the submissive position.

*Lena:* What is it then that makes you the sexually submissive one?

*Cecilia:* I think it’s about how I...For example, when I had sex for the first time with that much older man, I basically just said “Maybe we should have sex?” and then he took care of the rest, what we should do. And I think that was my way of solving it, with the upbringing I had. I have been very inhibited, have learned that sex is ugly and something you should preferably not have and if you have it, you have it secretly. And so I think that it was my way of solving it, having someone else take the responsibility. Someone else has to handle this, basically [laughs].

*Lena:* No one should be able to blame you and your sexuality.

*Cecilia:* Nah. But with this BDSM relationship, I felt that it was really so nice. I didn’t have to challenge myself anywhere. I have been able to have sex in other ways and it has worked well [laughs], but it was precisely that I could relax as a person. I didn’t have to worry about all this: Do I want to? Does he want to? Or she? Whose desire is now in control and who is getting something out of this and for whose sake are we doing this? It was so very nice.

Cecilia’s thoughts can be related to feminist analyses of female sexual passivity as a way of circumventing the stigma that can be associated with “overly” active sexual expressions on the part of women. In the interview, Cecilia herself makes no explicit connections between her submissiveness and the fact that she is a woman, however. Still, her sexuality and her thoughts

about it are strongly marked by a particular view of the relationship between women and men.

*Cecilia:* I think what I liked about BDSM sex was the clarity. I think I have some kind of assumption that men are like this [laughs], that somewhere in all men there is the desire to demean women and for women to submit. So I probably thought it was a bit nice that yeah, here we have it, now it's out in the open. And it was also limited to the bedroom, when we weren't having sex we hung out like normal people or whatever [laughs]. And I also think I was able to relax more when we then hung out, because I felt that if he needs to humiliate me, he can do it later, in the bedroom [laughs]. In a mature relationship where both people are very insightful, it's clear that you can solve it in other ways, you can have conflicts that you kind of don't have to beat each other up in the bedroom for [laughs]. But this is one way to solve it.

Cecilia is referring here to an underlying, extremely negative view of men and she reflects about how to relate to men's need for humiliation within the framework of what she seems to see as an inevitable gender order. Where Freja turned away from men on the basis of a similar analysis, Cecilia instead enters the destructive dynamic and, so to speak, rides its waves.

*Lena:* Am I right that you have a rather cynical view of sex? You like sex but it is connected to a lot of ugly, bad stuff, particularly when it is men and women who meet?

*Cecilia:* Mm [laughs].

*Lena:* And you just have to accept it and you can even take advantage of it for your own pleasure, sort of?

*Cecilia:* Mm. Yes, it has probably gotten like that [laughs].

It should be made clear that Cecilia is a person who is happy to take on the challenges that she sees as being associated with "ordinary sex". She does not only want to have BDSM sex, but also other forms of sex where she is "forced" to practice recognizing her own sexual impulses and to actively participate in a reciprocal exchange. She sees this as part of a larger project of becoming better at recognizing her own desires and needs. A somewhat paradoxical aspect of her experiences as a sexual submissive is that they helped her to some extent get in better touch with her own sexual impulses and needs.

*Cecilia:* Before I met the man who I had a BDSM relationship with, I had less control over what I wanted. Back then I was very passive, so it had to be sex when the other person wanted it. Since it was so clear with him that he decides – that it is based on his desire or how

should I put it – I somehow became more aware of my own desire. I can't really explain how that happened.

*Lena:* Interesting.

*Cecilia:* Maybe because I could relax in a different way.

*Lena:* In the other relationships, could you get tense because “Oh, now I have to know what I want”?

*Cecilia:* Mmm, I think so. Mmm.

*Lena:* And when you didn't need to do that, it got easier?

*Cecilia:* Exactly.

As the title of Carlström's thesis, *BDSM: The practices of paradoxes* (translated from Swedish *BDSM: Paradoxernas praktiker* (2016)) signals, BDSM is characterized by many interesting paradoxes and here Cecilia articulates one of them. When she completely lets go of her own sexual desires, a space suddenly opens up for her to spontaneously feel them. It is a *liberation* for her to not have to find her way to her own sexuality, and perhaps it is the case that when this mental demand is released, the body's own motivations can emerge more clearly. This type of experience is evidence of the problems that exist with an understanding of play with sexual dominance as a simple reflection and cementing of dominance mechanisms outside of sex. Sexual play can also create a space to explore and process such mechanisms in a way that allows them to be transcended.

Cecilia is unsure of how big a part the BDSM sex had in her process of getting in better touch with her own sexuality and what role the broader context of the relationship played. Outside of sex, her partner, like Cecilia herself, was very “cuddly” and for the first time she felt that her need for that type of intimacy was being recognized.

*Cecilia:* It was also an important experience for me that here I get as much as I want of that [cuddling]. Since I'm very physical myself and for me it has a lot to do with liking someone, it also allowed me to relax quite a bit, that there is no limit here, I don't have to feel clingy here. It probably also made it possible for me to start sensing what I felt. As soon as I wanted something, he responded to it [laughs], so then I could become more aware of what I wanted and didn't want. So I'm not going to give the BDSM thing all the credit.

*Lena:* You got the feeling that your desire got a response and then it became easier to feel it.

*Cecilia:* Yes.

What above all becomes clear here is the decisive difference between the relationships in which Freja and Cecilia's BDSM experiences took place. In Freja's experience, the sex was based on the same dynamics as the relationship in general, but taken to its apex. For Cecilia, the sex was framed by a

tender relationship that met her need for intimacy. From a *sex as self-harm* perspective, it is easy to immediately become suspicious if a person with previous traumatizing experiences chooses to assume a sexually submissive role that involves physical pain and staged humiliation. As several researchers have highlighted (Barker, Iantaffi & Gupta 2007; Beckman 2004; Ritchie 2008), however, the experiences of many BDSM practitioners indicate that such enactments can, on the contrary, have a therapeutic effect if they take place within the framework of secure relationships. Andrea Beckman, who interviewed people who have experienced sexual violence and who today assume the role of sexual submissives, implicitly relates this to the discourse of the *repetition compulsion*, but sees a potential for freeing oneself from traumas by staging them in a safe environment that does not aim to hurt.

“Play” with formerly painful and threatening situations which can be “relived” and re-experienced’ within the trusting and safe, because controlled, context of consensual “S/M” appears to have therapeutic effects for some practitioners. The experiential process of traumatic experiences allows for a process of re-memorising and my observations suggest that it increases self-confidence and assertiveness of many practitioners. Former abuse experiences can thus at times be transformed through erotic practice in combination with trust and emotional safety.

(Beckman 2004: 204)

Mental healing is largely about playing out past conflicts in a safe environment that enables the processing of the feelings, thoughts and behavioural patterns associated with these conflicts. Just like a regular therapy session or a non-sexual conflict resolution process with another person, BDSM, under the right conditions, can be a space for such healing. The problem is that we cannot assume that a person who has been subjected to abuse, for example, can always decide for themselves whether consensual sexual submission fulfils a re-traumatizing function or a healing one.

### **Dominance and submission as a dynamic of validation**

We met Elias (30–35 years old, bisexual) in [Chapter 2](#), where he reflected on what actually happens when he reads his partner’s consent in the type of sexual games that are based on the partner’s wishes being – or at least appearing to be – irrelevant. Elias does not classify his sexual practice as BDSM, but most of the sex he participates in is based on a power play in which he is dominant and his partner submissive.

*Elias:* Many of the partners I’ve had don’t even want me to consider what they want, but only to care about what I want, and that’s what turns

them on. It's not formalized roles or play or that you can call it anything, but it's just people who go after dominant, masculine guys a lot – and I'm usually attracted to those people. It's just like a very traditional heteronorm that's magnified or overstated.

Although Elias says that he is not dominant, but rather that he is drawn to these situations because he is attracted to people with a submissive orientation, he nevertheless likes the dominance sex very much: It is “generally very good, everyone is very satisfied [laughs]”. But while the purely sexual dynamic leaves Elias with a decidedly positive feeling, he has nonetheless devoted a great deal of reflection to the broader relationship problems he sees as associated with that dynamic.

*Lena:* This is really just a question and it's not like I'm implicitly assuming anything, but when you've been with people who wanted you to dominate them and maybe even hit them, have you had thoughts like “Does this person really want this?” or “Is this really good for the person?”

*Elias:* Not directly during the situations, I don't think. But I sometimes in the long run have thoughts about people's mental health and things like that: Where does this come from? If someone is very submissive and wants to experience different things, I ask myself both where it comes from and if it's something I really should or want to entertain. Is it a need you want to keep feeding? Because maybe it's like a negative spiral, or a cycle anyway. I think it is. Because both when it comes to people who are submissive and people who are dominant, I think it has to do with insecurity, different types of insecurity, and different types of validation. And that can make it super passionate and intense because you give each other exactly the kind of validation you need. At the same time, it can be very destructive if you're in a relationship and it's like...If you don't give each other the validation you need, it can become a spiral of various negative behaviours.

*Lena:* Can you elaborate a little on your thoughts about seeking validation in different ways, and how you think about the fact that some get that validation from being submissive and some from dominating?

*Elias:* I think there are different forms of desire that come into play there. The submissive party usually wants the dominant party to be very high in some kind of desire, and there's where the aggressiveness lies as well. It should be a slightly animalistic or very uncontrolled passionate desire, and the aggressiveness is in the unleashing of that desire. And in that comes the great validation that I'm so desirable to this person that this person cannot control themselves.

*Lena:* That's right.

*Elias:* Whereas the dominant party – in my own experience anyway, and when I watch others – gets some kind of self-esteem boost from someone being submissive, from someone giving themselves to me. It’s a kind of confirmation of status, “Oh, you’re so amazing that you can do whatever you want with me”. That’s how I would describe that dynamic. There are two different types of validation that you can give each other and it can create an interaction that is very passionate precisely because you get these things fulfilled, intensely.

Elias talks about a sexual dynamic that he describes as “like a very traditional heteronorm that’s magnified” and his description of the mechanisms of validation that he sees as being involved can shed light on what happens also in more normative heterosexual sex with less of a clear division of roles. In [Chapter 3](#), Stina described the allure of a male partner continuing to insist on sex even after she says no – “that he goes to the trouble somehow”. It is likely the same type of validation mechanism that operates in this much milder form of dominance situation – that the man does not respect Stina’s no is seen as a sign of the strength of his attraction, which in turn becomes a sign of her desirability.

But what, then, is the potential problem with this polarized and complementary dynamic of validation, given the satisfaction it provides, according to Elias? I ask him to tell me more about the negative spiral that he believes can arise from that dynamic.

*Lena:* You talked about how it can be destructive in the relationship to just go into those desires and push on.

*Elias:* In the long run, yes.

*Lena:* Because?

*Elias:* Because you entertain some kind of problem that a person has. In both cases, I perceive it as an insecurity, of different kinds. In the case of submissives, there is a lack of self-esteem or self-worth and it becomes almost like an addiction to have one’s worth validated in these ways. Although it will never be...it’s like a hole that can never be filled. And the question is whether those people would not need a more secure partner. You’ve probably heard of attachment theory...

*Lena:* Mmm.

*Elias:* ...There are very clear attachment patterns: dominant people tend to be *dismissive-avoidant* and submissives tend to be *anxious-preoccupied*, in that they are very needy and clingy, want validation, especially when they are insecure. While the dominant party – definitely in my case – withdraws and finds it very difficult if people are too needy. And then it’s very easy for destructive dynamics to arise from this. You get a situation of almost some kind of mutual

co-dependence; you feed the other person's needs but never really solve the problem. Because then there is a problem in the relationship and I find it difficult and pull away. And then the other person becomes even more insecure, even more "on", wants even more validation – and I think it gets even more difficult.

Elias makes his in-depth analysis of the dynamics inspired by attachment theory, a well-established psychological theory about how children develop different types of attachment behaviours, characteristic ways of relating to other people that are modelled on their dynamics with their first caregivers (Cassidy & Shaver 2018). What unites these insecure types of attachment patterns is that they were relatively effective in the short term in the childhood environment in which they were founded, but that they ultimately do not lead to the satisfaction of relational needs that they aim for. For Elias, the problem lies in the fact that while his attachment patterns and the people he is attracted to complement each other in the sexual dynamic – and, as far as I can understand, also on a wider relational level *at the beginning* of a relationship – they are ultimately not compatible. Elias's avoidant tendencies and his partners' "clingy" patterns mutually reinforce each other until the relationship breaks down. While Elias sees how the dynamics of his sexual life can thus be at odds with his need for functioning relationships, he also sees a strong value in this sexual dynamic.

*Elias:* At the same time, I don't want to problematize it too much either and say that everyone should be in a certain normative way because it is safe and stable and everyone feels best that way. If people enjoy being validated in this way, by being submissive or whatever it's...I mean it's a bit of a *pros and cons* thing. I can't determine if the disadvantages are so great that you would want to avoid it – and that's what I struggle with myself because I don't know. As I said, there are advantages to it too, very intense passion and intense sex that is very nice to have. But at the same time, there are disadvantages, how it becomes a shaky foundation for a relationship.

For Elias as well as for Cecilia, their participation in BDSM sex is in clear harmony with what they actually *want* and in a direct sense feel good about. In contrast to this, Freja says that even when the degrading sex took place, she experienced negative feelings about it, even if they coexisted with sexual desire. Their accounts thus differ significantly. However, unlike Nils and Rikard, who also talk about experiences with BDSM sex, what does unite Freja, Cecilia and Elias is that they problematize their willingness to participate in sex based on dominance. Freja's problematization is based on a fairly clear distinction between destructive and constructive sexuality and on a view of

*play* with dominance and humiliation as an extension of *real* relationship patterns that include dominance and humiliation in a more diluted form. Cecilia and Elias's approaches instead show that it is possible to simultaneously embrace and critically reflect on the motivations behind one's participation in dominance sex (cf. Carlström 2016: 158–9, 166). They can be said to be treading a complex middle path between, on the one hand, naïve, libertarian perspectives on BDSM as something that never needs to be problematized as long as the participants are “on board” with it and, on the other hand, certain medical as well as radical feminist perspectives that, in a reductionist way, see the staging of dominance and destructiveness as real dominance and destructiveness. It is precisely such a complex, non-black-and-white process of reflection that BDSM scholar Meg-John Barker, in the wake of feminist BDSM bloggers, raises as an important component in shaping a more profound culture of consent in the BDSM world (Barker 2013).

I am focusing in this chapter on sex based on play with dominance and submission, but the need to reflect on how our desires are shaped is of course just as great when it comes to other forms of sex. The fact that I am focusing here on dominance sex in particular could be perceived as me being in alliance with the forces that want to pathologize sex that deviates from the “vanilla sex” norm. That is not my intention, but nor do I want to deviate from what is my mission in this study, namely to *problematize* sexual consent and sexual desire. This is why I emphasize those narratives of dominance sex that include such problematization, rather than those that do not. When dominance sex goes wrong and a person, as in Freja's case, voluntarily allows herself to be beaten and humiliated when this is not really something they feel good about, we also have reason to assume that it can have particularly harmful consequences.

### **Where does the responsibility of the dominant start and end?**

Freja's story, which opened the chapter, is problematic from a consent perspective, as she willingly participated in sex based on her being submissive and only *afterwards* came to consider this sex to be harmful and unwanted. We do not know how responsive her male partner was to possible signals that the BDSM sex for Freja was an extension of her self-destructiveness. There are probably sexually dominant people who, thanks to well-developed psychological insight, sensitivity and concern for their partner's needs, would never end up in a similar situation. But it is also easy to see that it can be difficult for a dominant person who does not have such abilities to understand a submissive partner's motivations. To illustrate how a situation like this can appear from the perspective of the dominant party, I will close the chapter with an account by Anders (40–45 years old, bisexual) about an occasion when his former female partner explained to him that she did not really want

to be a part of the dominance sex that they regularly practiced during their relationship. The experience is clearly painful for Anders. He brings it up at the opening stage of the interview, after I have briefly talked about ambiguities in the concept of consent that I am interested in exploring in this research study.

*Lena:* In the governmental investigation about a new sex crime legislation, the word “consent” is not actually used, but rather it’s “voluntary participation” in a sexual act. But what is voluntary participation? It is not always completely obvious.

*Anders:* No, there are circumstances that come into play there. I have thought about that a bit before we were due to meet. After all, consent can be something that arises in the moment, due to alcohol intoxication, sexual excitement or other circumstances that led to a sexual act. And then and there it feels completely okay what you’re doing, which may not be something you usually do, but here and now, with being in love, with the influence from alcohol and sexual excitement, you consent and it’s voluntary and it feels great. *But* afterwards, you think that I didn’t want to be a part of that, why did I do that? That doesn’t feel okay, you almost feel dirty, maybe, or raped. And then the question is: Where are you then? It was consent from free will then and there, but then it doesn’t feel right. Which one should apply?

It becomes apparent to me that this is not a hypothetical case that Anders is raising. A little later in the interview, I ask him if this is something he has been through himself, whereupon he tells me about an experience with his former partner, who, after their relationship ended, told Anders that she had not really wanted to participate in the sex games that were a common element in their relationship. Anders is a bit vague about what these sex games were, but it is clear that it was about a harder, “kinky” type of sex, with elements of, for example, bondage and slapping.

*Anders:* We had a good sex life, I would say. And now in retrospect when we’ve been to a family therapist, she’s started talking about sex we had that wasn’t okay. And I was so surprised. At first, I was thinking, like, what the hell, she took the initiative for a lot of things herself and wanted it to be a certain way, bought toys that she wanted to have in bed. I thought it was very exciting and very arousing and very wonderful and then she says that she felt forced and whatever else, that she did things that she really – when she thinks about it in hindsight – would not want included in her life. And maybe it’s related – I don’t know – that when she was little she was abused by her father so she carries that with her and maybe it wasn’t fully

processed, you know. I don't know, but she says it has affected her in our sex life. And I still don't understand what she means, because we had really wonderful and nice sex. And we talked about sex all the time and were very clear that if there's anything I do that you don't like, tell me. But she didn't say anything about it, and it was like "This was nice" and then we did it again and then we tried something new and it was very fun and exciting and arousing. But she didn't think so in retrospect. She didn't mean that it was abuse or that I did something against her will, that's not how she wants to see it, but she feels that that's not how I want my sex life to be.

It is clear that this is an experience that is difficult for Anders to handle and he seems confused about how to deal with the conflict between his own – and possibly his partner's – experience of the sex then and there and her experience afterwards. He clarifies that there is no doubt that the woman in question enjoyed the sex when it took place, as she herself has also subsequently confirmed that this was the case.

*Anders:* We sat with the family therapist when we were talking about this and my first reaction was "You enjoyed it, you thought it was great, you asked for it". "Yes, I did and it felt good at the time, but I wasn't thinking clearly", she said.

Anders's account, like many others in this chapter and previous ones, illustrates the complexity of what it means to really want something. He says that his partner said she felt "forced" to participate in the sex, but this experience of coercion does not come from any active coercive actions on Anders's part. Anders has a hard time understanding her experience, but speculates about whether she felt forced to go along with the sexual games simply because she felt it was a very important part of sex for him. The accounts analysed in [Chapter 4](#), where a reluctance to go against a partner's wishes was a common thread, may shed light on this dynamic. If his partner was psychologically inclined to fulfil Anders's wishes, it may not matter so much that he was careful to repeatedly make sure that she really wanted to.

Just like Freja's experience, Anders's account also introduces a time dimension that further complicates the question of the ontology of desire: there and then his partner had the desire, but in retrospect she wished it had not happened. At the same time, it can be questioned whether such a simple dualism can really be assumed between then and now. Just as in Freja's case, it is not improbable that there was ambivalence within Anders's partner even when the sex took place, if only on an unconscious level. Anders seems to recognize that such an ambivalence may have existed, but it seems to be both an emotional and a cognitive challenge for him to absorb this fact. As he puts

it, at least part of him seems to want to interpret his partner's experience as something of an unnecessary, intellectual complication of something that was *really* lovely and simple:

*Anders:* Then maybe you think about it and connect it to things that have happened in childhood and in other relationships and maybe take on the role of a victim, I don't know. I have a female friend who is very open about sex and she thinks people analyse it too much. "Why do I like this? He hits me when we have sex and it's really arousing and I really enjoy it – why do I?" Why should you ask the question "why?" at all? Do you have to analyse it? And in this case, it has become a lot of analysing for her – why did we do this?

Here, Anders can be said to invoke a "sex-positive" discourse – legitimized by the authority of a female friend – that questions the problematizing approach to non-normative sexual desires. His way of reasoning is similar to Freja's previous thinking that what was really the problem with her BDSM practice was not the sex itself but rather the norms that portray BDSM sex as ugly and wrong. Perhaps Anders is right that his former partner was influenced by discourses about "respectable" female sexuality, in a way that contributed to her feeling uncomfortable participating in their domination games. Even if that were the case, it makes me uncomfortable when Anders assumes the right to question his ex-partner's experience and when he implies that she has "take[n] on the role of a victim", not least considering her experiences of sexual abuse. In the interview, he is very quick to focus on his own pain in the face of what happened, while his attempts to understand his partner's experience and his own responsibility for what happened end up into the background. I actively steer the interview towards his own feelings, partly to gain greater clarity about the balance between his disappointment in his partner and his possible feelings of guilt.

*Lena:* But what was it like when she told you this? Whatever it was like when it happened, she said afterward that it didn't feel good. What was it like for you to hear that?

*Anders:* I was sad. At first I couldn't really...I think my first reaction, which was maybe not entirely sound, was that she's lying. I know how excited she was, I know how nice she thought it was. And she talked about how nice it was and, damn, would she have faked that? Although I don't think she did that either, but more that it's some other insight into how she wants things to be around her, emotionally and sexually. But I got a little sad. It was really wonderful and there was an enormous energy in that, that it wouldn't have meant anything to her and was just something she did – I felt a little tricked.

“Right, you didn’t think it was okay, why didn’t you say anything then? Have I gone around doing things, or have we done things, that weren’t okay with you? And now you come and say it wasn’t okay” [indignant]. Not even when we talked about sex. Because I was really responsive to her – “Is this okay? Does it feel okay? How do you want it? Is it okay if I do this? No, not like that but...” I thought we had a good openness about that, but apparently not. So I felt a little tricked and a little sad. A bit disappointed.

It is easy to understand the existential pain in that something that was experienced as mutually pleasurable and satisfying was in fact unwanted, at least in retrospect – particularly as my understanding of Anders’s sexuality from the interview is that his partner’s pleasure is important for him. If the pleasure and willingness that Anders so clearly experienced on the part of his partner can no longer be trusted, it is understandable that he feels like the ground beneath him is unstable. At the same time, it strikes me as noteworthy that Anders does not automatically bring up any feelings of guilt, not least as he is obviously a person who reflects a lot.<sup>1</sup> I ask him straight out if he has not experienced such feelings.

*Lena:* You have felt sad and disappointed, is it that you feel a little cheated almost?

*Anders:* Yes, a little like that.

*Lena:* But have you also felt guilty?

*Anders:* Yes, I have as well actually. Given that she is referring to the trauma from her childhood, which of course I knew about. I probably thought she had processed it more than she apparently had and maybe she thought so herself. But she relates it to abuse she suffered and talks about things she *went along* with to, which I find very hard to believe because she initiated it herself. There was some kind of psychological twist there. So I can feel oh, maybe I should have thought about that, and been careful and maybe asked about that and so on. But at the same second that I think that, I can feel like how the hell should I know? That she would draw that parallel to me, when I take a stand against abuse [laughs] and am very egalitarian. Because what we did was a game, we lived out fantasies with each other. How am I supposed to know that it wasn’t like that for her when she didn’t reflect that at all when we talked about it afterwards? But...there is a sense of conscience there too, that maybe I should have thought about it, that she could have been manipulated by me in some way. At the same time, it wasn’t me who took the initiative to buy stuff; she was the one who ordered bondage tape that you could tape your hands with and so on. If I had bought it

and said “Hey, I want us to try this” and she was like, “Uhhh, okay we can do it then” [without enthusiasm], then maybe I would have felt like, oh, maybe I should have thought that she is...I don’t know.

*Lena:* Then maybe you should have been a little more careful, you mean?

*Anders:* If I was the one who bought a lot of stuff and she later says “I didn’t want to be boring and so I agreed, and I enjoyed it but it’s not really how I want it” – then I could have felt that oh, I did something. But I don’t feel like I have done that in this case.

Anders oscillates quickly here between taking responsibility and shrugging it off. Perhaps the oscillation can be seen as pointing to a more general tension regarding the degree of autonomy we can expect from other people: How far does our responsibility really extend when it comes to ensuring that a person’s consent is genuine? Anders’s account indicates that even when the sex took place, he was aware of the risk of his partner agreeing to something she did not really want. To avoid that, he offered a continuous dialogue about sex, trying to make sure that his partner really wanted to. This, combined with the fact that his partner herself took the initiative to many of the acts and that she enjoyed them, makes Anders wonder how he could reasonably take her participation in the sex as anything other than voluntary. He compares it to a hypothetical counter-scenario where he was pushier and his partner agreed to his suggestions without much enthusiasm. At the same time, he also highlights the fact that his partner has a history of sexual abuse, something that he realizes can justify a special caution when it comes to games that relate to violations and the exercise of power: “So I can feel oh, maybe I should have thought about that, and been careful and maybe asked about that”.

When do a person’s psychological wounds mean that we cannot expect them to take responsibility for setting the boundaries they need? Should Anders have realized the risk that his partner was not psychologically equipped for the domination games they played, given her experiences of sexual abuse? Should he, because of this risk, if not refrained from participating in the sex, then at least have raised the question with his partner about how her past experiences might affect her experience in the present of such sex?

At the time of the interview, Anders has just started seeing a new woman and he is considering the problem of bringing up his interest in sexual dominance games. In his characteristic way, he first raises aspects that revolve around the vulnerability he himself feels due to his infatuation with the woman – will she find him “disgusting”? When I ask, however, it becomes clear that he has also considered the risk of his new partner feeling pressured to accommodate his sexual desires.

*Lena:* But aren’t you worried that if you suggest that you have some slapping in your sex, she will agree to it because she is in love with *you*?

*Anders:* Yes, oh yes. But I think I'm pretty good at asking the question the right way. We have been very open and honest with each other about feelings. But if we were to try something sexual that we would have to discuss, I think I could say straight out that "Now don't do this because I want to and you're in love with me and want me to feel good in bed with you, but do this because you want to do it".

Despite his experiences with his former partner, Anders seems to have confidence in his ability to find out if the new partner's consent is well-founded. It is likely that his previous experiences have increased his caution in a way that strengthens the likelihood that nothing like this would happen again. The type of imagined communication with his new partner that Anders is trying out can be related to Vanessa Munro's (2005) philosophical reasoning about consent, which I reviewed in the introductory chapter. Munro believes that a person's consent, to be morally valid, should flow from their own preferences and values. To ensure that these preferences and values are truly the person's own, the person should be capable of making a critical reflection on the context in which the decision to consent is made. A core of Munro's formulation is that it is only the person themselves who can determine what their own preferences and values actually are. In light of the fact that we are relational beings, however, the *conditions* for our critical reflection about our preferences and values are something that we ourselves have no control over. What Anders does when he imagines saying "Now don't do this because I want to and you're in love with me and want me to feel good in bed with you, but do this because you want to do it" is to take the responsibility he can to strengthen his partner's ability to know what she actually wants. One might say that consent communication can take place on several levels, where the first level is represented by "Do you want to?" while the second level is represented by "Do you really want this given X?" The second level digs under the surface and looks at what kind of motivational reasons might lie behind a yes and opens up the space for an intensified reflection on them. Then the person whose consent is at stake must take it upon themselves to find out what they really want. We do not know what would have happened if Anders had raised the issue of his ex-partner's experiences of abuse in connection with their sexual domination games, but it would probably have created better conditions for his partner to become aware of her motivations and to recognize her own needs.

### **Norm-transgression versus self-harm**

In 2019 I participated in a discussion about sex as self-harm on a Swedish radio programme, in my role as a gender researcher. Also invited to the studio was, among others, Cecilia Fredlund, a Swedish medical scholar who

had just completed her dissertation on sex as self-injury and whose research I have referred to. Fredlund is a pioneer in the field and in her dissertation from 2019 she emphasizes that the idea that sex can be used as self-harming behaviour is not yet accepted within the international field of self-harm research (Fredlund 2019). When I listened to the programme afterwards, I was struck by the fact that some of the descriptions of how sex as self-harm can be expressed – for example, a person voluntarily allowing another person to physically harm them during sex – could just as well have described the behaviour of a submissive/masochistic BDSM practitioner. This observation is not intended to erase the distinction between self-harming sex and submissive/masochistic BDSM practices. However, as above all Freja's story highlights, there are cases where it is not easy to distinguish what is what, and this fact is something that needs to be paid attention to with both psychological finesse and rigorous analysis. This requires, first and foremost, that discussions about sex as self-harm and discussions about BDSM cross-fertilize each other to a greater degree. In the radio programme, sex as self-harm was discussed without any reference to or delineation from BDSM practices. Conversely, the concept of sex as self-harm or self-injury is conspicuously absent from Charlotta Carlström's otherwise solid thesis on BDSM in Sweden from 2016, despite the fact that the idea of using sex as a self-harming behaviour has been well established in Sweden for some time, for example in care and social services (Bjärehed & Bjureberg 2019).

That the dialogue between the discourses on BDSM and sex as self-harm is almost non-existent can partly be explained by the fact that the concept of sex as self-harm is relatively new. Above all, however, it probably has to do with the fact that these discourses arise from different spheres – a sex-liberal one and a medical-psychiatric one – which have historically been in considerable conflict with each other. Not least, it is understandable that the BDSM community, which is still fighting for its legitimacy and depathologization, avoids being associated at all with the idea that practicing BDSM can sometimes be destructive.

In an intensified dialogue between psychological discourses about self-harming behaviours and sex-liberal discourses about norm-transgressive sex, there is the potential for significant tensions but also for a nuanced and deep-going development of the conversation about consent. It is therefore welcome that the psychologists Jonas Bjärehed and Johan Bjureberg (2019), in a Swedish book on self-harm, make an attempt to discuss the idea of sex as a form of self-harm in relation to BDSM. Pending further research, they cautiously embrace the idea of sex as self-harm, while also highlighting the problems associated with “defining what constitutes problematic or harmful expressions of sexuality” and emphasizing that “[i]t is easy to moralize or claim interpretive precedence regarding how a person should, or should not, express their sexuality” (2019: 53, translated from Swedish). There is

research establishing that BDSM practitioners do not suffer from mental illness to a greater degree than others (Shindel & Moser 2011). At the same time, experiences like Freja's – and Anders's – must be taken seriously and nuanced discussions about the boundaries between destructive and constructive forms of sexual submission must be held, not least in order to counter the still-widespread notions of BDSM as being, *by definition*, a destructive expression of mental illness. In the interface between discussions about BDSM and discussions about sex as self-harm perhaps the most burning questions about sexual consent and sexual freedom – as well as deeper questions about human existence – can be formulated.

### Note

- 1 It is interesting to compare this tendency in Anders's interview with Stella's reasoning in Chapter 5. When Stella talks about the heterosexual woman who wanted to have *the lesbian experience* with her, I feel there are two approaches Stella could take: either a sense of being used and tricked, or a sense of responsibility and guilt. While Stella completely takes on the position of responsibility, Anders focuses on his own pain and vulnerability.

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# 9

## BEYOND CONSENT

Although people have different ideas about what constitutes a sexual violation, few, in a modern context, would question that sexual violations are wrong and thus should be combatted. And whether one supports sex crime legislation being based on consent or not, few would likely oppose the moral principle that sex is something that all participants should want to engage in. Ultimately, these pervasive normative principles derive their power from the ontological assumption that people have a need to decide over their own bodies and that when this need is violated, this inflicts some kind of *harm*.

Rape is often depicted as one of the worst things that can happen to a person. Meanwhile, there are voices in the movement against sexual violence, as well as in research, that make a point of dedramatizing sexual violence to some extent and detaching the issue from assumptions about the necessarily horrific effects of sexual violence (Marcus 1992; Svensson & Chamberland 2015). Sharon Marcus, for instance, is critical of the radical feminist approach to rape which, she contends, “in its efforts to convey the horror and iniquity of rape [...] often concurs with masculinist culture in its designation of rape as a fate worse than, or tantamount to, death” (1992: 387). While somewhat controversial, interventions of this kind appear to be important as a counter-force to tendencies in the legal system to base the assessment of rape victims’ credibility on their degree of traumatization, and more generally as a way of expanding the discursive space for different experiences of sexual violence (Gavey 1999). At the same time, we cannot get away from the fact that the harmful effects of violations of sexual boundaries are fundamentally what lie behind the fact that we both morally condemn and legally punish them.

A deeper discussion of consent needs not only to go beyond naively liberal conceptions of consent as a straightforward expression of a person's free will, but also to explore the principle of consent in its wider moral and existential context. This chapter expands the discussion of sexual violations<sup>1</sup> beyond the principle of consent in order to explore what other factors contribute to whether a sexual interaction is perceived as a violation or not. It is a way of reconnecting the discussion of consent to the fundamental existential and normative questions from which it originates.

### When consent is not what is most important

In several of the chapters, I have analysed the experiences that Stina (30–35 years old, heterosexual) had in a multi-year relationship when she was younger and in which pressurized sex was commonplace. An obvious theme in Stina's account is that the experiences she had with this partner were something she felt bad about. But what exactly was it about these experiences that harmed her? Was it the sex itself? Or was it rather the underlying dynamic of these experiences that was the main violation, where a major element was her partner's lack of respect and concern for her as a person? Or was it the fact that she herself took part in these patterns of behaviour?

Stina talks about some situations in this relationship in a way that challenges the idea that consent as such is the most central factor for whether a sexual act is perceived as a violation or not. In [Chapter 4](#), for example, she talked about a common type of situation in the relationship, where her boyfriend seemed to take advantage of her longing for more tenderness on his part in order to achieve his desire to have sex. Here, after she expressed that she did not want to have sex, he would suddenly lie on top of her and insert his penis into her, only to then humorously exclaim "Whoops!" and behave in a charming and gentle way that Stina liked. While many of the other situations that Stina talks about are difficult to fully and unequivocally classify as criminal, in this situation it is unequivocal that her boyfriend is neglecting her expression of non-consent. When I raise this with her, however, she insists that she did not experience it as an assault.

*Lena:* Just entering someone who says no, that feels like clear-cut assault.

*Stina:* But it probably didn't feel like that so much.

*Lena:* It didn't feel as difficult as some other situations?

*Stina:* No.

*Lena:* Because it was a bit cosy?

*Stina:* Yes, because we talked about this, negotiated about what we wanted. I used to say that if we can cuddle without it leading to sex and if you can hold me and cuddle with me after we have sex, that would make me feel better.

Although in that situation her boyfriend actually penetrated Stina against her expressed will, against the background of this “bargaining”, his soft way of acting after penetrating her became for Stina a kind of proof that he had understood her wishes and was prepared to accommodate them. Central to her account is her longing for intimacy, respect and love – her longing for being valued. His disrespect in penetrating her against her will could therefore be compensated for by the behaviour that followed this act, a “sweetness” that not only gave her the intimacy she longed for but also became a kind of sign of respect because she had asked for more of this exact thing. The fact that the principle of consent had a low status in this relationship – it was assumed by both of them that Stina would have sex regardless of what she wanted – also likely meant that her boyfriend’s penetration of her against her will did not appear to be particularly dramatic to Stina. The focus thus ended up instead on her boyfriend’s behaviour afterwards.

Another excerpt from the interview sheds further light on how the experience of violation is connected to other factors than consent. Stina believes that her then-boyfriend suffered from a sex addiction problem, which, for example, expressed itself in the fact that he needed to have an orgasm in order to be able to calm down and fall asleep. When I point out that if it was only about the bodily release, he could have masturbated instead of having sex with her, Stina says that this sometimes happened and that she experienced it as “almost worse”.

*Stina:* There were a few occasions when I was lying there, half-asleep, and I noticed he was lying there, jerking off. And it almost became even more humiliating for me to have him lying next to me, because it was like I was inadequate. He was, “Shh, sleep, it’s nothing”, like that. Now I don’t think like this, but at the time it was somehow even more humiliating that I couldn’t satisfy his needs so he had to jerk off.

Although in this case her boyfriend refrained from using Stina in the way he was used to, him masturbating in front of her becomes “somehow even more humiliating” in light of the fact that it was a central goal for Stina to be appreciated by her boyfriend. The objectifying valuing of her sexuality that he could give her was not what she really craved, as she wanted to feel loved rather than useful. At the same time, as I discussed in [Chapter 4](#), being “used” gave her a certain validation, which was perceived to be better than none. It is against the background of this longing to have her value affirmed, within the context of a relationship governed by her boyfriend’s preference for sex on his own terms, that his choice to satisfy himself while she was lying next to him is experienced as “almost worse” than when he forced her to have sex.

Needs for respect, care and appreciation appear to be completely central motivations in the younger Stina’s experience. It is the general lack of

these values on the part of her boyfriend that constitutes the basic violation for Stina, combined with the fact that she herself actively participates in the violation, something I will go into below. Non-consensual sex was only one component of this wider pattern. It is interesting to note that her boyfriend's neglect of Stina's sexual reluctance is the only aspect of the relationship that is legally punishable, while the harm Stina suffered from the relationship actually stemmed from the general pattern of lovelessness and lack of respect that the forced sex was just a natural extension of.

### Not being “sensed”

In [Chapter 3](#), Pernilla (30–35 years, lesbian, formerly bisexual) talked about the cautious approach she employs with her current partner, where she always takes her partner's ambivalence as a no. I also touched on the interview with Pernilla in the previous chapter, where she briefly reflected on whether she enjoys taking on the submissive role in BDSM sex “because I actually like it or because there is some kind of expectation”. Before Pernilla decided to have sexual relationships only with women, she lived bisexually. While Freja reports consistently having had negative experiences in regard to sexual relations with men, this is not the case for Pernilla, although she finds women to be more sexually responsive than men. As a teenager, she was also raped by a boyfriend, an experience I discuss later in this chapter. Here, however, I will address a sexual encounter Pernilla had with a man that sheds light on the question of what in a sexual interaction can cause a sense of violation. It was a sexual meeting that was consensual on a rudimentary level, but which Pernilla nonetheless found unpleasant. She brings it up when I ask her to develop her thoughts about her experience of women as being more responsive than men in sexual interactions.

*Lena:* This thing about responsiveness – you took yourself as an example, that even if you want to have sex, you stop yourself a little and think about what your partner wants. Is that what you have experienced with men, that if they are horny and want to have sex, what the other person wants disappears?

*Pernilla:* Yes, I think a bit like that.

*Lena:* Can you give an example of that?

*Pernilla:* There is a specific guy I'm thinking about. We had been talking for quite some time on Messenger and gotten each other turned on and then he came to my house one evening when I was home alone and we started having sex. I think we had sex twice that night and he didn't think about me once [laughs], he just ran his race and then he left. He didn't talk to me and he didn't ask how it felt or how I was doing. And we had pretty rough sex, because that was

when I was kind of into BDSM stuff. Not that we had whips and stuff but it was a little harder sex, which I was totally fine with and I always have been and probably always will be fine with it, but it was like...he could have talked to me a little bit or asked some questions or something like that. But not a single one, he just came over and we had sex and then he basically left.

Pernilla says that she generally feels sure of what she wants sexually and that she has such a strong sexual drive that it is unusual for her not to want to have sex. However, this situation comes up as an example of a sexual encounter that, in retrospect, she is not sure if she really wanted to participate in it.

*Lena:* But were you already aware during the sex act itself that you didn't really know if you wanted to?

*Pernilla:* No, it was probably in retrospect. I wanted to sleep with him, I wanted to have sex. But he could have been a little less rough maybe and a little more like this "What do *you* want?" And he wasn't. But I have thought about that a lot in retrospect, not right then.

Although I never ask her about it, it seems that Pernilla herself sees this sexual experience as consensual: she wanted to sleep with the man and never actively expressed the opposite. Based on a procedural understanding of consent as a continuous reading of the other person's signals (Beres 2010, 2014b; Humphreys 2004; Muehlenhard et al. 2016), however, one can question to what degree this sexual interaction was truly consensual. As I referred to in the introductory chapter, Katrine Bindsbøl Holm Johansen, Bodil Pedersen and Tina Tjørnhøj-Thomsen (2020) found that their participants expressed two different understandings of consent. In situations where the consent is mutual and the communication of consent works, they perceived consent as a continuous "sensing" of the other person, that is, a mutual process of paying attention and adapting to the other person's reactions to one's actions. When, on the other hand, they were to make sense of situations of unwanted sex, they shifted to a narrower understanding of consent as the absence of an explicit rejection. This gap between their positive and negative understandings of consent made it difficult for the young people to comprehend unpleasant experiences of unwanted sex as violations. At the same time, Bindsbøl Holm Johansen et al. show that these interactions were nevertheless *experienced* as violations, and that the gap between this experience and the discursive tools that existed to make the situations comprehensible resulted in an inner dissonance within the women who reported about these experiences (Bindsbøl Holm Johansen et al. 2020).

It seems to me that Pernilla's confusion regarding the situation she describes can be understood in similar terms. Clearly, the man did not engage

in the “sensing” that is a normalized part of functioning consensual communication. Nevertheless, Pernilla does not seem to see the lack of *consent* as the problem in the situation, but instead gropes for words that can explain the discomfort in some other way. It is conceivable that one reason for the gap that Bindesbøl Holm Johansen et al. identify between the understandings of consent that their informants applied in positive versus negative dynamics of consent is partly due to the fact that the continuous sensing process that is normalized in functioning consent communication is often invisible and unreflected-upon, due to its tacit, taken-for-granted and bodily character. It is only when the sensing process fails that there is an incentive to reflect – and then perhaps the procedural understanding of consent is perceived as being too vague to be able to bring order to what happened. As Bindesbøl Holm Johansen et al. stress, the consequence is that many people who have experiences of unwanted sex go around with a subjective experience of having been violated, but lack the discursive tools to understand the event as a violation. In line with the analysis of Bindesbøl Holm Johansen et al. (2020), Pernilla expresses that the *subjective* experience of being violated stems from the other party’s lack of effort at sensing what she wanted.

It is one thing to try to, after the fact, make sense of a situation like the one Pernilla tells about, and another to sort out what is happening while it is taking place. In light of other experiences that Pernilla talks about during the interview, it is my impression that she is a person who would have been able to set a boundary with the man – if only she had been clear about what it was in the situation that felt wrong. I believe that, in the moment, she had a hard time interpreting what was happening: She wanted sex and did not have anything against rough sex, so why did it not feel good? If Pernilla had had a clearer *conception* of sexual violations as being a matter of a lack of concern, she would have had a better opportunity for understanding her feelings and needs when the violation took place and, thus, greater opportunities to set a boundary.

### “Mentally raped”

In Chapter 6, Anette (60–65 years old, heterosexual) talked about her experiences of sexual partners becoming insecure and perceiving her as being “too much” when she took space with her own desire. The broader theme in the interview with Anette is that she experienced the sex she had during her time as a drug addict as unsatisfactory almost all the time and in many cases as violations. Since she stopped taking drugs, she has not had sex, largely because of her negative experiences. As in Pernilla’s case, Anette’s negative experiences are about sex she herself participated in initiating, but where the sex ended up not feeling good. During the interview, it takes a while before I start to comprehend where the problem with the sex actually

lay, something I see as a reflection of the fact that this is not completely clear to Anette herself.

*Anette:* My experience, I can say that it's not very good. Sure, I've agreed to sex, even though I probably shouldn't have. But I've never been raped, it's more about the fact that it just happened that way.

*Lena:* And when you say "agreed to sex, even though you probably shouldn't have", why shouldn't you have? You really didn't want to or...?

*Anette:* Well, maybe I didn't want to, and I didn't get anything out of it. And then you feel rather empty afterwards. But this often happened when you were maybe at a party or something. When you do drugs, you often end up in such situations. Right then, it just happened and then I didn't think much about it, but afterwards I sometimes felt "What was it that happened? Why did I do this?" And I might have painted a picture of what it would be like and then it didn't turn out as I had imagined, and then I'm disappointed in myself afterwards. But then I sweep it under the carpet and then I'm there again.

In [Chapter 6](#), I discussed how the men that Anette had sex with could behave disrespectfully towards her as a reaction to them having difficulty dealing with her, as she puts it, "taking space" with her desire. But there is also another aspect to her story that is about her longing for closeness and affirmation, which contributed to her seeking sexual contact but which never resulted in the tenderness she sought.

*Lena:* What makes you have sex even though you might not want to? You say that you had an image that it should be in some other way.

*Anette:* Yes, well, it's probably how you want some sort of validation or a little tenderness and yes...to experience a nice moment. Like everyone, I think, when they want to have sex, they want to experience something nice and good that makes them feel good when they wake up in the morning.

*Lena:* So is it that you have often gone into it feeling like "this is going to be great", but then when you start having sex, it doesn't turn out the way you had imagined?

*Anette:* Yes.

*Lena:* And how does it turn out? Is it that you don't feel like you're getting that tenderness?

*Anette:* Yes, that's right. Those I was with were not in the same zone at all. I did not share my image of sex with the person I had sex with.

*Lena:* When you say they had sex in a way that wasn't really what you wanted, can you describe it? Was it that they were just going hard?

*Anette:* Yes. And they probably just wanted to satisfy themselves and then that was it. Then there was nothing more.

*Lena:* That's sort of the gist of it all?

*Anette:* Yes. And maybe they didn't know how to satisfy a woman either, I don't know. But many of them were pretty screwed up.

*Lena:* We talked about being an object, because it is in some ways being an object, how they used you for their own pleasure.

*Anette:* Yes.

*Lena:* But you felt that your pleasure was not important?

*Anette:* Yes. That's probably how it was.

We can compare Anette's account with Kristina's (50–55 years old, bisexual) testimony in [Chapter 4](#) about regularly agreeing to have unwanted sex with her male partner. When I ask Kristina if her partner usually listens to what she wants sexually, she interprets it as being a question of whether he cares about her pleasure, and this is something that he does to the greatest extent, according to her. It seems that this fact – that her partner does not behave like the men Anette describes but does actually care about her pleasure – makes it difficult for Kristina to see the compromising aspect in how he takes her sexual availability for granted. While Kristina's experience is characterized by a greater lack of consent than Anette's, it does not seem to be linked to a subjective experience of violation, because she feels that her partner wants to make the sexual situation good for her. It is this concern for her sexual needs that Anette, on the other hand, found missing in the men she had sex with.

I would say that Anette's discomfort boils down to an experience that the men did not treat her with respect, but as an object to be used for their own pleasure. As in Pernilla's case, the discomfort stems not primarily from the men doing something with her that she did not want to be a part of, but more from the men's general attitude towards her. As mentioned in regard to Pernilla's account, it is a problem that in this type of situation it can be difficult to understand in the moment what it is that does not feel good. Of course, such difficulties can exist even if a partner performs a physical act that is experienced as unpleasant, but it is likely more difficult to understand your feelings when the cause of the discomfort is a vague sense that your partner is not treating you in a respectful way.

The inability or unwillingness of Anette's sexual partners to make room for her sexuality and their lack of affirmation and tenderness can ultimately be boiled down to the same principle: her own, independent sexual subjectivity was not seen as something enriching for the sexual encounter, but rather as an obstacle to the men's sexual experience. It is this reduction of Anette to a tool for the men that, I believe, constitutes the violation. Probably in large part because of the emotional turmoil often associated with addiction, the experience of violation permeating the sexual encounters could sometimes, as touched upon in [Chapter 6](#), take more explicit forms, mostly after a sex act had ended. Anette is vague when she describes some of the men's actions towards her in the aftermath of her taking "too much" space with her desire.

It is interesting, though, that she unhesitatingly uses the word “rape” to describe her experience of one of the men’s behaviour.

*Lena:* Do you remember...Did he say things?

*Anette:* Yes, he said something that just...takes your breath away.

*Lena:* Do you remember what he said?

*Anette:* No. It was something humiliating. So you become empty.

*Lena:* How did it feel?

*Anette:* It felt like rape.

*Lena:* Hmm. Can you explain that, that it felt like rape?

*Anette:* I felt mentally raped. Absolutely unbelievable, you can’t imagine such a situation until you find yourself in it and you can’t believe in your wildest imagination that it happened. But there are very twisted people, who have a strange view of women and life and everything. That’s why so many weird things happen, shit.

Although Anette does not share what the man said, she said in [Chapter 6](#) that the sense of being violated or offended that she could experience after being too sexually active for the men’s taste stemmed from the men making her “feel that I was a little too sexual, that I was...kind of dirty”. Here we see how a consensual sexual act can be transformed into a violation, at least in the subjective sense, due to the partner’s behaviour *after* the sexual act. For Anette, the violation she experienced was of the same calibre as rape, something that is interesting to contrast with sex crime legislation that is limited to sexual acts as such – and reasonably so. At the same time, we have good reason to assume that the offensive power that the man’s words had for Anette was directly linked to the fact that they had just had sex with each other. Regardless of the level of intimacy, a sexual interaction is associated with a certain vulnerability and openness to the other person. If the sexual experience is accepted and appreciated, this openness can lead to pleasure and contact, but if it is suppressed and made into something “dirty”, as Anette describes it, this can be experienced as if something valuable within you is violated. Eirin [Cunniff Gilson \(2016\)](#) suggests that the essence of a sexual violation should be understood precisely in terms of an abuse of another person’s (bodily) vulnerability, an abuse that has such harmful effects precisely because this vulnerability is also the basis for positive experiences such as erotic pleasure and love.

### **Participating in one’s own violation**

Janice [Haaken \(2002\)](#) argues that sexual violence exists on a continuum that includes varying degrees of coercion versus freedom. There are rapes where the victim is completely paralyzed, such as when someone is held down or

has a gun pointed at them. What is far more common, however, are assaults where the victim has some degree of agency and the coercion works more through psychological mechanisms. What are the differences in how an assault is experienced depending on the degree of participation on the part of the victim? When one is physically restrained, virtually all one's agency is taken away, entailing a form of dehumanization that is often deeply traumatizing. But what about situations where the victim themselves is active in what is happening? A theme that comes up in the interview with Stina is that her experience of humiliation and denigration was exacerbated in proportion to how much she herself actively participated in an unwanted sexual act with her boyfriend. We get into the question in connection with her talking about how, under pressure from her boyfriend, she swallowed his sperm against her will.

*Lena:* But what was it like to swallow his sperm?

*Stina:* It was really humiliating. I thought it was so disgusting and had no desire to do it, so it felt like a violation. At the same time, it became shameful in itself that I didn't have to do it. A few times I pretended to swallow and half-hid it.

*Lena:* You say you didn't have to.

*Stina:* Nah.

*Lena:* You mean that just because you agreed to it...

*Stina:* I was disappointed in myself, that I did it anyway, because I could have spoken out more clearly.

*Lena:* Does that increase the shame?

*Stina:* Yes, I feel that way, yes. Because I was violated by him, but I also violated myself in some way.

The question of what degree of freedom of choice Stina can be said to have in this situation is both philosophically complex and politically and morally charged. There is research that highlights that victims' tendency to emphasize their own agency in an abusive situation is a way of defending themselves against the frightening reality of their own vulnerability to another person's harmful actions (for a review of different theorizations of this mechanism, see [Lamb 1999: 24–33](#)). Other scholars emphasize that contemporary neoliberal ideology's glorification of the hyper-agentive subject strengthens the incentive for victims of violence to hold on to an experience of having chosen to participate in or having otherwise influenced the course of events ([Bay-Cheng 2015](#)). In light of the fact that victims of sexual violence often mistakenly take responsibility for what happened ([Lamb 1999](#)), it can be a delicate matter to focus at all on the victim's options in a situation of abuse. Nevertheless, I agree with Sharon [Lamb \(1999\)](#) about the importance of listening to the experience of many victims when they feel that *they could have acted*

*differently*. Such experiences are not always an expression of a false consciousness and as researchers we must take these experiences seriously, not least to avoid locking victims of violence into a passivity with which they themselves cannot identify (cf. [Haaken 2002](#)).

Stina describes above how her sense of violation was doubled when she actively participated in the violation her boyfriend subjected her to. She felt that she could have refrained from swallowing the sperm and that she did it anyway, hoping to win her boyfriend's appreciation, added another layer of humiliation to the experience. The topic also comes up in connection with Stina telling me about what happened to her when, after that relationship ended, she heard one of her friends call her boyfriend's behaviour "rape". She says that it was partly a relief for her to start thinking about what had happened in terms of sexual violence, because it eased her own burden of guilt – "I had always felt that it was my fault and that I was the strange one". At the same time, she says that the word "rape" transformed her experience of what happened in a way that made "another part" of her feel "even more violated".

*Lena:* Wherein lay the sense of violation when you started thinking of it as rape?

*Stina:* Because then it was somehow taken a step further. I had heard about date rape and that sort of thing, there was something like that...in the back of my mind. But I still felt that we were a couple, so then it can't be rape. Like, I didn't know what are...where are these boundaries? I said no, but then I let it happen anyway, even though I had said no, and all that. I could have hit him or I could have...well, you know. So in that way maybe it got worse when I thought of it as rape and it was also shameful of course. I'm ashamed to say it now, but back then I despised women who didn't leave men who beat them. Or I didn't understand why they didn't leave. But I myself stayed in something like...then I became "such a woman".

A psychological problem associated with conceptualizing an experience as an assault is that it takes away the victim's experience of having had control over the situation. But here Stina points to another side of the matter: when she started to think about what happened as a wrongful and criminal act that her boyfriend subjected her to, the fact emerges that for several years she "chose" to live with this perpetrator. As Hanne Haavind points out in an article about the reproduction of power asymmetries in heterosexual love, women have a tendency to defend their male partner against the criticism of others, among other things because "[s]uch condemnation offends the dignity of the woman who has chosen him by making her sacrifices seem worthless and futile" (Haavind, 1984: 161; cf. [Dryden 1999](#): 48).

Stina's experiences resonate with Michael, Gunnar and, above all, Anas's stories. In terms of Michael and Gunnar, the experience of violating oneself is linked to sexual encounters that did not have the character of abuse, but where, due to desperation, they had sex in a way that did not feel good. Michael spoke in [Chapter 7](#) about "a sexuality that just drives you forward and then you do things that you are not really comfortable with and that go *against your self-respect*" (my emphasis) and adds: "It's me myself doing it". Gunnar speaks in a similar way about how he sometimes arranged to meet men and had sex even though it did not feel right and he says that "it feels a bit like *violating yourself*, why did I do this?" (my emphasis). This theme is raised also in the interview with Anas (20–25 years old, gay), who feels that he degraded himself when he agreed to have sex against his will with various ex-partners (see [Chapter 4](#)). When he describes how he experienced this unwanted sex, he repeatedly uses the word "prostitute".

*Anas:* You could feel like a...like a sex doll like [laughs], like you were being taken advantage of. You did it just because...I could actually feel like a prostitute [laughs]. I might be laughing now but...

*Lena:* Can you elaborate on feeling like a prostitute?

*Anas:* That I do things even though I don't want to do things, so as not to cause trouble or discord or to destroy a relationship.

*Lena:* To achieve something else that you wanted.

*Anas:* Yes, when you usually *want* to have sex and are very horny, you do things orally and in other ways with pleasure. And here it felt...when you had to do something orally, there was no pleasure, I didn't want to do it, it just felt disgusting, I felt like a prostitute [laughs], I really did.

How should we interpret Anas's experience of himself as a prostitute? Being a sex worker is in general a stigmatized and shameful identity in our society. I interpret Anas laughing every time he mentions that he felt like a prostitute as an expression of the identity's generally shameful charge, but also of its female connotations. It is of course possible to challenge Anas's implicit assumption that there is something negative in feeling like a prostitute. Many feminist researchers and debaters have indeed emphasized the need to question the widespread assumption that prostitution is an undignified activity ([Östergren 2006](#); [Rubin 1993](#)) and would perhaps have questioned Anas's account on these grounds. However, I see it as more fruitful to examine more closely wherein exactly the shame of feeling "like a prostitute" lies. What Anas seems to connote by the idea of prostitution is that he offered his body to someone else on the other person's terms, not – as for a real sex worker – in exchange for material goods but in order to maintain his partner's favour. He seems to identify an instrumentality in his own behaviour that he finds undignified, but above all it is his active

participation in something he really did not want to participate in that, for him, undermines his own dignity.

*Anas*: It feels like you degrade yourself, that you have no value. You lose your pride and your dignity [laughs]. Why should someone decide over me?

Andrew Sayer (2011) notes that despite the fact that dignity is central to all people and is a basic framework in, for example, the UN Declaration on Human Rights, the concept has been little explored by social scientists. He emphasizes that dignity is an elusive phenomenon, which people usually become aware of only when it is threatened. He further points to a central ambiguity in common conceptions of dignity: on the one hand, people are generally considered to have an inherent dignity regardless of external circumstances; on the other hand, a person's dignity depends on recognition in order to be realized and thereby it has an inherent fragility. What, then, does this dignity consist of? The Swedish word for dignity is *värdighet*, which has its parallel in the English *worthiness*. Both these terms are based on the word *worth* – or *värde* in Swedish. In the quote above, Anas links his experience of indignity or unworthiness precisely to losing his worth, pointing out how him adapting to another person's wishes means that he denies his own value. Sayer links the concept of human dignity to human autonomy – our uniqueness and our ability and right to decide over ourselves – and holds that it is our autonomy that engenders the respect we depend on to maintain our dignity: “[I]t is hard to respect someone who has no autonomy, no distinctiveness or individuality, who appears passively to follow everything that someone else's will dictates, and has no will of their own” (2011: 196).<sup>2</sup> As in the case of Stina, it is Anas's disregard of his own individuality and needs in favour of someone else's dictates that causes his experience of unworthiness.

Being able to express one's autonomy is an important aspect of dignity, but this does not mean that dignity is an individual matter. Sayer emphasizes that dignity is partly about the individual's ability to realize their autonomy, but that that ability is simultaneously also dependent on how we are treated by others, including what social position we have. The duality that stems from the fact that our individual autonomy is socially constituted – that is, dependent on how others behave towards us – is important to consider when discussing the question of how our sexual integrity can be damaged. We should not ignore the question of how the victimized party's own behaviour can contribute to their experience of violation, simply because this is an important aspect for victims themselves. Their experience of their own behaviour to some extent affecting what happened and their willingness to find out what they could have done differently must be taken seriously, not least to strengthen their ability to stand up for themselves in future situations (Lamb 1999). This is not in conflict with the perpetrator being held accountable

for their behaviour. But, as Lamb points out, the widespread – and certainly understandable – anxiety about even discussing how the victimized party may have contributed to the course of events leads to important parts of the victim’s experience being neglected, as well as to them being locked into a passive victim position.

### What happens afterwards

The damage caused by a sexual violation can thus be linked both to the perpetrator’s lack of respect for the victim’s autonomy and self-worth and – in those cases where the pressure exerted is more psychological than physically coercive (Haaken 2002) – to the victim’s experience of violating themselves when they agree with the message implicitly communicated by the abuser: “What you want is not important”. In this section, I want to look more closely at how the experience of violation can be transformed by what happens between the victim and the perpetrator after a violation has taken place. Anette spoke above about how a consensual sexual act could be transformed into a deeply violating experience due to what happened *afterwards*. The aspect of time is also evident in Stina’s account. Her boyfriend penetrated her against her expressed will – a clear violation – but due to his “cute” behaviour afterwards, Stina did not experience the act as particularly offensive. Conversely, with that boyfriend, she also had many experiences of reluctantly agreeing to sex in the hope of receiving love and appreciation. *If* her boyfriend in those cases had met Stina’s need for tenderness after he had had his sexual pleasure, it is likely that Stina would not have experienced the sex as a violation but rather as part of a mutual give-and-take according to the principle of “love for sex” (Burkett & Hamilton 2012; Fenner 2017). However, his habit was to fall asleep as soon as he had an orgasm, something that consolidated the violation and often left Stina crying in despair.

I will now turn my attention to Pernilla and Rikard’s experiences of rape, in order to further shed light on the question of how what happens afterwards affects the victim’s sense of having been violated. Pernilla, who spoke above about her experience of not being “sensed” by a sexual partner, tells me that as a teenager she was raped by a boyfriend who was the same age that she was. It was her first relationship and the incident comes up when she talks about men who “nag” their way to sex, something this boyfriend was in the habit of doing.

*Pernilla:* Since I was so young and it was my first sexual partner ever, I assumed it should be like that. I was so young. It is only recently that I realized that he actually raped me on one occasion as well. Because he kept nagging and nagging and I said no and no and he did it anyway.

*Lena:* So you said no all the time?

*Pernilla:* Yes. I said “No, I don’t want to. Stop”. And he did it anyway. And when he was done, I got out of bed and was very angry and he was like, “Why are you so angry?” But I didn’t realize it was rape then, because it was. It’s now I’ve realized in retrospect, oh, shit, okay, that’s how it was.

*Lena:* How did you feel when he raped you?

*Pernilla:* Hmm, it was so long ago. Of course...I remember the whole incident so well. Of course, it was difficult at the time, but it wasn’t that I was sad; I was mostly angry at him. And now it’s been so long that it’s over emotionally.

Pernilla’s description of her experience of the rape clearly does not give me access to a complete picture of what she actually felt and exactly what emotional traces the incident left. What I want to focus on is the effect that her immediate reaction to her boyfriend’s assault – anger – may have had. The common image that exists of rapists and rape victims is not particularly compatible with a reaction of the type Pernilla talks about, as the rapist is often portrayed as a kind of “psychopath monster who pulls out so ruthlessly that all that is left is a sobbing wreck” (Magnusson 2012: 18; translated from Swedish). Getting angry at one’s rapist, rather than being ashamed, resigned, sad or terrified, is naturally not a reaction available to all victims of rape, not least as it presupposes a lack of fear of the perpetrator. Pernilla’s experience is nevertheless important because it challenges the common rape mythology, according to which “real” rape victims are characterized by total passivation and traumatization (Svensson & Chamberland 2015). She serves as evidence of the fact that most rapes are embedded in an everyday normality, and that a rape, even if it causes damage, can be manageable for the victim.

In his discussion of dignity, Sayer (2011) emphasizes that the person whose dignity is violated not infrequently responds with a feeling of *indignation*, which is defined by the Oxford English dictionary as “[a]nger at what is regarded as unworthy or wrongful; wrath excited by a sense of wrong to oneself or, especially, to others, or by meanness, injustice, wickedness, or misconduct; righteous or dignified anger”. Getting angry at one’s rapist, rather than feeling ashamed, resigned, sad or terrified, can be seen both as an expression of a realization of one’s dignity and as a way of defending that dignity against an attack. The consequences of the violation Pernilla was subjected to were probably mitigated by her immediately resisting it and thereby reestablishing her dignity. In one sense, of course, the violation is irreversible and something that she has no control over – “it happened”, as she says. But if one thinks that the core of the violation her boyfriend subjected her to was not so much the act as such but rather the

lack of respect for her as a person that the act expressed, it was possible for Pernilla, by strongly reacting against his behaviour, to regain her human dignity to some extent.

Rikard (40–45 years old, bisexual) also shares an experience that “legally [...] probably [was] rape”, where his way of relating to the perpetrator in retrospect seems to have played a decisive role for how the rape affected him. As previously mentioned, Rikard has extensive experience with BDSM sex and in his interactions with men he always assumes a submissive role. He says that he has several times experienced how during a session, male sex partners have ignored agreements, with a typical example being that they neglected to use a condom. On one occasion when this happened, Rikard protested, but without being listened to by the sex partner.

*Lena:* Has it ever happened that during the act you feel “no, I don’t want this”?

*Rikard:* Mmm, it has happened. And it has happened that I’ve said stop and then the person has – for the most part anyway – stopped. But it has also happened that the person didn’t stop and when we talked afterwards he said “but we didn’t have an agreed safe word and I thought it was part of a role play”.

*Lena:* And was that the case, that you had not agreed on a safe word?

*Richard:* Yes. There is an occasion that really stands out. We hadn’t agreed on a safe word, because we hadn’t really talked more than about meeting so I could give him oral sex. And then I ended up in this state where I have a little difficulty saying no – not all the way because I said no and stop – and then we went to penetrative sex without a condom.

*Lena:* How was it for you?

*Rikard:* It was a downright unpleasant experience, both physically and mentally and yeah...legally, it would probably have been rape if I had taken it further.

*Lena:* But it wasn’t anything you wanted to do?

*Rikard:* Nah.

*Lena:* Because?

*Rikard:* Because when we talked about it afterwards, the person was remorseful, and we talked for a long time, even a few days after.

*Lena:* So then you brought it up with him and told him how you felt about it?

*Richard:* Yes. And I used the term; I said that I felt raped. We talked through it well and then we stopped our contact. But the decision not to take it further legally was probably above all because he understood, I felt, that he hadn’t just stepped a little carefully over a line, but really properly stomped over it.

Rikard's experience differs from Pernilla's, but the common denominator is that both confronted their perpetrator. Like Pernilla's, Rikard's story challenges the rape mythology that portrays rape as a radical crime against normality and is based on a clear polarization between an all-powerful and terrifying perpetrator and a passive victim (Gunnarsson 2018). When Rikard contacts his rapist to confront him, it is like he is bringing "The Rapist" down to earth and making him be a part of the normalcy he actually is a part of. Rikard's communication with his perpetrator leads to him receiving restitution that compensates for the violation he was subjected to. Without advocating that all rape victims should behave like Rikard – often, of course, that is not appropriate at all – I want to highlight his experience as an illustration both of the potentially reparative power of communication and of the fact that one can *simultaneously* be a victim and everything other than a victim in one's way of relating to what one was subjected to.

Rikard's way of contacting his abuser for a conversation about what happened must also be understood within the framework of the special context of the BDSM community, where conversation and communication about sexual boundaries is a necessary component in order for BDSM practices to work. In this case, it is clear that the way Rikard and his perpetrator are embedded in such a communicative culture, aimed at managing the risks of overstepping, takes on a protective function. In contrast to the mainstream context, one might say that boundary violations are accepted as an ever-present risk in the BDSM community, which, at least in Rikard's case, seems to lead to a certain de-dramatization of sexual overstepping that makes them easier to acknowledge and handle.

It is probably not a coincidence that this active and effective way of handling a rape is recounted by a man. Holding your perpetrator accountable without fear and with confidence in your ability to assert yourself is likely more accessible to a man than a woman, at least when the perpetrator is a man. In the next chapter, I will examine the question of what role a person's gender plays in how they experience sexual violations and in their experience of sexual vulnerability in general.

### **Our need for respect and care**

In an article in the journal *Sexualities*, the consent researcher Melanie Beres highlights the need to go beyond the consent-based model that in the Anglo-Saxon context has long characterized the work to prevent sexual violence. She is critical of the basic assumption that she argues guides many sex education efforts: that the incidence of harmful sexual experiences will be reduced if we only teach people to obtain consent. Her point is that even consensual sex can do harm in a number of different ways. She believes that if we are interested in fighting all forms of sex that harm people, we therefore need to

go beyond the model of consent, such as by challenging hegemonic constructions of femininity and masculinity that create pressure on women to accommodate men's needs (Beres 2018).

Beres's call to broaden our view beyond the principle of consent and to focus more generally on what kind of sex can do harm is urgent (indeed, in conjunction with a focus on positive experiences of sex). The reason that the principle of consent is morally and legally elevated is that people get hurt by having sex against their will. But as I have shown in this chapter, there are many more factors that determine whether a sexual interaction causes harm or not.

So can we say something in principle about what kind of sexual interactions cause harm? The central theme that emerges from the interview material is *the need for respect and care*. Just as in non-sexual interactions, we get hurt when another person fails to respect and care for us as people who are valuable in our own right. I would contend that what makes us particularly vulnerable as sexual beings is that sex has the potential to be a channel for deep, empowering reciprocity, while also being easily instrumentalized so that one person's sexuality is used by another for their own selfish purposes.

Basically, the principle of consent can be said to stem from the moral principle that we should treat each other with respect and care – as ends rather than means. In prevention work, clarifying the connection of the principle of consent to these basic values could be a way to broaden the discussion beyond consent, but also to deepen the discussion about what consent is or should be. In Pernilla's account, for example, we saw how the lack of respect and concern from her short-term partner caused discomfort, but that at the same time she seemed to have difficulty understanding – and thereby *justifying* – this discomfort. A violence prevention discussion that acknowledges our legitimate need to be seen and heard in sex could give people better tools for navigating sexual situations that do not feel good, thereby promoting their ability to express their boundaries and needs. Not least, the question “What are my needs when it comes to sexual interactions?” could be a fruitful hub in violence prevention and sex education, by promoting discussion and reflection both about sexual boundaries and about sex in a positive sense.

In this chapter, I have also highlighted the particular psychological consequences that can be associated with assault and unwanted sex in which the victimized party actively participates even though they feel that they could have refrained. As I mentioned earlier, it can be risky to focus at all on the victim's behaviour and choices, as this can shift the focus away from the perpetrator's guilt as well as from the coercive context that limits the victim's agency. However, the particular subjective consequences connected to experiences of actively participating in sex one does not want to participate in is, I believe, another reason to pay attention to the differences between various

forms of violating sexual experiences, in terms of the degree of coercion versus agency characterizing them. If we deny that the victim can have any part in what happened, we also deny them the opportunity to better understand what happened and the feelings this gives rise to.

## Notes

- 1 I use the word *violation* to designate a wide spectrum of abusive actions, from harassment to rape (cf. [Alcoff 2018](#)).
- 2 In his book about people's moral constitution, Christian Smith writes the following about human dignity and its implications: "By 'dignity' in this context I mean an inherent worth of immeasurable value that is deserving of certain morally appropriate responses. Dignity makes persons innately precious and inviolable. Because of this dignity, human persons are naturally worthy of certain kinds of moral treatment *by themselves* and in their mutual relations – in particular, of respect, justice, and love" (2010: 435, my emphasis).

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# 10

## SEXUALLY INVULNERABLE MEN?

A common thread in the book has been how the participants' experiences and understandings of these experiences take shape in dialogue with ideas about gender and sexuality. A core of such ideas can be said to be the notion that women are sexually vulnerable and men sexually invulnerable. The notion of men's sexual invulnerability is linked to what researchers call *the male sexual drive discourse* (Gavey 2005; Hollway 1984): if men always want sex, it is hard to see how sex could be anything other than a positive – rather than a potentially threatening and harmful – phenomenon for them. The fact that men occupy the position of perpetrators of sexual violence to an astronomically higher extent than women also contributes to cultural preconceptions that circumscribe our ability to “see” men's potential vulnerability to the sexual actions of others.

In Chapter 3, Stina talked about how she insisted on having sex with a male partner who said he could not take it. We do not know what this man really wanted and felt when he ended up having sex with Stina. Did he fully want to, after Stina's further efforts to arouse him? Or did he do it reluctantly or half-heartedly to avoid conflict or to live up to masculine ideals? Even if we knew that the man did not really want to have sex with Stina, the question of how it affected him still remains. Was he harmed by the incident? What role does it play that he is a man and Stina a woman?

I touched on the latter of these issues in the opening chapter, referring to Nicola Gavey's (2005) discussion about the experience of being woken by someone of the opposite sex performing oral sex. Gavey contends that the experience is likely to differ markedly depending on the gender of the person receiving versus giving the oral stimulation, given the deep-seated cultural notions of male sexuality as potentially dangerous that have no counterpart in

female sexuality. As Mui's account in [Chapter 2](#) made clear, a “surprise blow-job” performed by a woman on a man is not necessarily perceived as something positive, in contrast to the impression Mui had received from men discussing the issue on an online forum. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to assume that the experience of vulnerability, at least in most cases, is weaker for a man who receives unsolicited oral sex from a woman than if the gender roles are reversed.

In this book thus far, we have seen some examples of how dominant ideas about women's and men's sexuality can be in conflict with what people actually experience and want. Perhaps this was most clear in the case of Nils, the man who during a large part of his sexual life, at a high emotional cost, tried to force himself into a template of masculinity by always agreeing to, and even initiating, sex. Mui, with her strong sexual drive, similarly testified that the notion communicated to her that men always want sex is simply not true. When the men she met were confronted with her strong sexual needs, they often found it difficult to live up to the image of what men should be like. This type of experience shows the gap that can exist between people's actual sexuality and strongly gendered discourses about sexuality ([Gunnarsson 2018](#)).

At the same time, as discussed in [Chapter 6](#), it is not as simple as people's actual selves being completely separate from the ideas that surround them, as the gap metaphor suggests. The idea of social construction, which is so central to the field of gender studies, is precisely that the ideas that exist *about* women and men also contribute to shaping women and men. This shaping takes place in a series of interwoven ways. One key mechanism is that people tend to be anxious to live up to norms and expectations in order to win the affirmation of others and avoid stigmatization – regardless of what they themselves want deep down. But what makes the process of social construction so complex is that the discourses, norms and ideas in which our lives are couched also affect the kinds of people we become – what we want, what we value, what we feel. For example, most women want to feel feminine and most men masculine, which means that they more or less (un)consciously mould their selves based on common conceptions of femininity and masculinity. Ideas about men's and women's sexuality are therefore not just something that exist outside of ourselves to which we can relate and more or less adapt to. That men and women generally live up quite well to the ideas that exist about them is not only an instrumental adaptation strategy but also a spontaneous effect of the fact that the preferences and aspirations of actual women and men are continuously shaped by such ideas, and by the more or less subtle sanction-and-reward systems that are structurally linked to them ([Elder-Vass 2012](#); [Gunnarsson 2011](#)).

A motivation for me when I conducted my interviews was to try to create a picture of possible gender differences in how the participants experienced and were affected by different types of boundary violations. In the interviews with several of the men who spoke about experiences of assault or unwanted sex,

I was struck by how the men described these experiences in a way that signalled a relative invulnerability, despite their actual vulnerability in these situations. How this pattern should be interpreted is not self-evident. The way women and men talk about and make their experiences comprehensible is not a simple reflection of what they actually experienced. Their statements are inevitably influenced by their preconceptions about how it is appropriate to make sense of women's and men's experiences – for example, of unwanted sex – and it is difficult to determine to what degree these cultural preconceptions also colour how they *actually* experienced an occasion of unwanted sex. Gavey touches on this problem when she discusses how to interpret research that has shown that it is common for men to describe unwanted sex in neutral or even positive terms. She asks: “Are men constrained from telling the ‘truth’ of harm and victimization by the discourses of hegemonic masculinity, or do these discourses seamlessly constitute men as invulnerable to that kind of harm?” (Gavey 2005: 204). Based on my participants’ reflections, this chapter will explore this question and, by extension, the intricate relationship between people’s subjective experiences and the interpretive frameworks that surround them.

#### **Nils: “Like doing the dishes when you don’t want to”**

In Chapter 4, Nils (30–35 years old, heterosexual) spoke about the countless times he had sex with female partners even though he did not want to. He spoke vividly about how it affected him, how deep inside, he was filled with a *no-I-don't-want-to*, and how he made shopping lists in his head while the sex was going on. At the same time, he says that it did not affect his feelings for the woman in question, because he loved her and everything else in the relationship was good. From the way Nils talks about these experiences, it does not seem as though for him they involved an experience of being violated or invaded by the unwanted sex, an experience that tends to lead to feelings of uneasiness around the other person. I try to delve deeper into his feelings about repeatedly having sex with a former girlfriend even though he did not want to:

*Lena:* It didn’t create any bitterness or anything?

*Nils:* Not that I’m aware of anyway. No, I do not think so.

*Lena:* Could you feel disgusted?

*Nils:* No.

*Lena:* It wasn’t at that level.

*Nils:* No. The best comparison I can think of is that it was like doing the dishes. You have to do it but you really don’t want to.

*Lena:* It was like a job.

*Nils:* Yes, it was yet another chore that needed to be done, to make everyday life and the relationship work.

*Lena:* Yes, I see. So it wasn't like it went really deep, it wasn't, like, traumatizing for you?

*Nils:* No.

*Lena:* It wasn't at that level.

*Nils:* No. It was a person I loved, always. So I don't think so. I don't know...how do we know?

When Nils compares having sex against his will to doing the dishes against his will, this breaks with widespread notions that unwanted sex is something radically different from reluctantly doing a boring chore. This says something about the special position that the sexual sphere has in our general consciousness, a special position that, for example, means that in Sweden it is illegal to buy sex but not dishwashing services. I try to understand Nils's experience in more depth.

*Lena:* This is a very leading question and of course you can say no, but you didn't feel that your body was being taken advantage of, or some such feeling?

*Nils:* No, I didn't feel like that. *But:* depression, self-harming behaviour...I've met a lot of young girls who weren't feeling well and had sex as a self-harming behaviour and in some ways I can relate to that. I can almost define myself as a slut: if someone wants to have sex with me, I always agree, whether I want to or not. And it's considered self-harming behaviour, which it very well may be, but I haven't thought of it as such.

Nils, who suffers from depression, here implicitly reflects on whether the damage of his unwanted participation in sex is perhaps greater than he experiences or acknowledges. This uncertainty about his own experience is also expressed in the earlier extract where, when I asked if he has been harmed by the unwanted sex, he responds: "How do we know?" One interpretation could be that Nils's tendency to adapt to the needs of others is so normalized for him that he cannot see the harm the behaviour causes, and instead of developing antagonistic feelings towards the partners to whose will he submitted, the feelings are channelled as a depressive state. But when Nils brings up the topic of self-harm, there is also another factor that stands out – it is "young girls" who are harming themselves through sex. I ask him if he thinks his reluctance to classify his own behaviour as self-harm might have something to do with him being male.

*Nils:* Very, very possible.

*Lena:* How?

*Nils:* Because in theory I'm always physically...not in theory: I'm always physically stronger. It's hard to see that I'm being taken advantage of

because I always, always, always have the option to say no and walk away. In any case, I always have the *physical* possibility to do so, but whether I have been mentally capable, that's another matter. So in that way there is a certain difference.

*Lena:* So if you had been a very small man, short, weak and skinny, do you think it would have been different?

*Nils:* No, I think I still would have seen it as guys being physically stronger than girls, so guys always have the ability to get out of situations we don't want to be in.

What Nils says raises the theme of the interplay between reality and our ideas about it. In a general sense, it is a fact that men are physically stronger than women, which at a group level creates a relatively greater physical vulnerability for women than men. Meanwhile, the *conceptions* of men as stronger and potentially threatening and women as weaker and vulnerable also live a life of their own, so that – if Nils is right – a physically weak man may have difficulty identifying himself as vulnerable even in relation to a physically stronger woman. As Gavey states: “Men (as a category, even if it's not true of individual men) are imbued with power and physical strength, which is likely to render woman as the subject of fear, in a situation that is culturally marked as having the potential of danger” (2005: 203). Here we come to the core of social construction: The ideas we have about reality partly also create reality. This happens in part because people let their actions be guided by their own and other people's ideas, and in part because they interpret – and experience – what happens based on these ideas.

When Nils focuses on the physical power relationship between men and women, he connects to a traditional discourse on sexual violence as a matter of physical coercion. In reality, however, it is relatively rare that sexual violence is inflicted through physical coercion; it is more common for non-consensual sex to be manipulated through psychological processes. At the same time, it is likely that the experience of physical vulnerability or strength is an important background for people's overall experience of themselves as sexual beings and for the extent to which they see their bodies as sexually vulnerable. Also, as Gavey (2005) briefly suggests, the different bodily constitutions of women and men, sexually speaking, with the penetrating function of the penis and the more open and receptive constitution of the vagina, are likely to play a role here too.

### **Rikard: “Like when my favourite comedian isn't funny”**

In a slightly different way from Nils, Rikard (40–45 years old, bisexual) expresses what I want to call a de-dramatizing approach to his own sexual vulnerability. In the previous chapter, I discussed Rikard's experience with and

handling of a rape he was subjected to, and I highlighted how he confronted his perpetrator in a way that gave him vindication. Even though Rikard was *de facto* a victim in the rape situation and experienced it as unpleasant, his behaviour after the rape and the way he talks about it is still permeated with a kind of invulnerability and a lack of fear that I find striking. In the interview, he talks in a matter-of-fact way about the risks involved in many of his sexual practices, and although he can describe events as unpleasant, they still do not seem to have affected him emotionally in a profound way, something he confirms when I ask him straight out. We also saw in [Chapter 5](#) that even though Rikard felt like “a fucking dildo” when he agreed to have sex with his female partner, it was still not something he regretted and thought he was feeling bad about, but rather something he considered to be the most adequate choice in the situation.

I will now examine how Rikard relates to another type of unpleasant sexual situation that he has repeatedly found himself in. While not amounting to assaults, these are instances where a meeting with a man plays out in a way that does not feel good for him. As already addressed, Rikard’s role in sex with men is to let the men use him as an object solely for their own needs. This is something Rikard enjoys and actively seeks, but in order for it to feel good it is important for him that after the sex, his partner “gives back [my] human dignity”, as he puts it. This can be done very easily, just by the sexual partner asking him if he is okay or in some other way relating to him as a *person* rather than an object. One might say that it is this affirmation after the BDSM session that provides evidence that the session was just a game, and that the man who behaved as if Rikard were an object does not really see him as an object.

Rikard says, though, that it sometimes happens that the men he has sex with do not provide this resurrection of his dignity afterwards, and I ask what that does to him.

*Rikard:* Then there’s a slightly unpleasant, unhappy feeling. Not like I get depressed or anything like that, but a bit like “Yeah...uh-huh...” [dejected]. Getting that return – “are you okay?”, that feedback – gives me a feeling of having been good and somewhat valuable. But when I don’t get it, I don’t get that feeling and then I don’t walk away feeling “Wow!”

*Lena:* But are you harmed by it, would you say?

*Richard:* No.

*Lena:* So it doesn’t go that deep?

*Rikard:* No, it’s more...yeah, what could you compare it to that is an everyday reference? I can watch a YouTube clip with my favourite comedian and think haha, this was funny. Then I can watch a YouTube clip of him where he’s not funny, and in the one case I

feel happy afterwards and in the other I'm like "oh...[dejected], this was one of my favourite comedians and he wasn't funny this time". It's not like I'm unhappy or getting down and having a depressive episode from it, but I didn't really quite get what I expected. He's supposed to be quite funny and he wasn't.

Just like Nils's comparison to the burden of doing the dishes when you do not feel like it, this parallel to the disappointment of a comedic performance is somewhat surprising to me. I had imagined that the experience Rikard talks about would do more damage and be experienced as more of a violation. The interview with Rikard is special in that while he talks about the many situations of vulnerability his sex life entails and can speak about the discomfort they have at times contributed to, he does not radiate an ounce of vulnerability.

*Lena:* Based on everything you say, it doesn't feel like you are that vulnerable in your...

*Rikard:* Nah.

*Lena:* It doesn't hurt you that hard when something happens.

*Rikard:* Nah, it doesn't go very deep.

The idiom *to be on top of it* is the closest I can find for describing his approach. We do not know to what extent it is a strategy to shut out a vulnerability that is actually there or an expression of real invulnerability, but it clearly resonates with masculinity's demands for control and invulnerability.

When I ask if Rikard is afraid or worried about the vulnerability that his sex life entails, especially considering the times men have committed assaults, he answers in the negative. He reflects a lot on the risk-taking that his sexual practices inevitably entail and explains that his biggest concern is about the risk of becoming infected with HIV. Otherwise, risk-taking is, so to speak, part of "the game" and any mistakes can always be repaired. As he puts it: "Sometimes it goes wrong and all that...no harm, no foul". I relate this to his general sexual and relational lifestyle, which is characterized by stretching and exploring boundaries and the "darker" sides of sex and human interaction. One might perhaps say that Rikard does not see the boundaries of his body as particularly sacred and thus they are not a central regulator of his sense of dignity and well-being.

### **Elias: "As if someone had been in my home against my will"**

In the interview with Elias (30–35 years old, bisexual), he talks about an assault that his male partner at the time subjected him to. He describes it as a "micro-traumatic" experience. At the same time, there are patterns in his

way of describing his feelings about the incident that break with common conceptions about the sexual domain being a particularly vulnerable one. In the situation he discusses, his partner gave him oral sex despite Elias clearly objecting to this.

*Elias:* There was a situation in a previous relationship where I was quite explicit that I didn't want to and the person continued anyway. It was quite difficult in that I felt like my will was not respected. It was a blowjob but...

*Lena:* Where you got blown?

*Elias:* Yes, but I expressed quite clearly that I didn't want to have it or wasn't in the mood and the person pretty firmly ignored it. So I zoned out and waited it out a bit. And it was a little hard in a kind of micro-traumatic way, because it affected my relationship with this person, which changed in some way after that. Like, okay, I know this person can completely ignore what I want. I don't remember the details but he approached me and I tried in various ways to express that I wasn't interested – and it was ignored. And then I was a little clearer and that was also ignored. And then...I let it happen and waited it out.

*Lena:* And why did you let it happen there?

*Elias:* Because I would have had to get quite physical if I wanted it not to happen [laughs]. He was very forward, one might say.

*Lena:* And you didn't feel it was...

*Elias:* Not worth it.

*Lena:* Because it would be too strong a conflict then?

*Elias:* Mm, definitely. It was a balancing act of...This was a person I saw quite regularly and it had become too strong a conflict. It wouldn't have been worth it. It's not so terrible to wait out a blowjob, but the problem – the long-term problem – was knowing that this person can completely disrespect what I want.

*Lena:* So it wasn't so much the incident itself, waiting out a blowjob you didn't feel like having, but more of a relational thing?

*Elias:* Yes, emotional, relational. The thoughts I had when I zoned out and waited it out, it was kind of like a little shock, that okay, this person can act like that. It was not what I expected and how do I relate to this now, going forward? It was quite difficult, it changed quite a lot in that relationship, that is, in my feeling for the person. There was a permanent disinterest on my part after that [laughs], I wasn't that interested in having sex anymore.

It is clear that the experience Elias recounts was unpleasant for him, with profound emotional consequences. What I find interesting is his way of separating the sexual act itself from the relational dynamics, where the bodily

violation is not experienced as particularly problematic *in itself*, while the partner's lack of respect for Elias's will, on the other hand, starts a process that ultimately leads to the end of the relationship. A little further into our conversation, Elias's separation of the physical act as such from the violation of having his boundary transgressed becomes even clearer.

*Lena:* You say you would have had to get physical; you mean push him away?

*Elias:* Mm.

*Lena:* What was the consequence there that you didn't want? That he would get...?

*Elias:* When it had gone that far, it was more that it didn't matter. Because by then some limit had already been crossed. The person had already made it clear to me that he wasn't interested in listening to and showing respect for what I wanted, so that loss had already happened and there was nothing I could do about it. So the physical act of finishing the blowjob, I let it happen because it didn't matter that much. I had communicated quite clearly and the person had ignored it and that was the traumatic part. And so then okay, if that's the way you want it to be.

To gain a better understanding of Elias's experience of the violation, I ask him what role the sexual nature of the act played for him.

*Lena:* Does it matter to you that he didn't respect your will when it came to *sex* in particular? Or could it have been about anything?

*Elias:* If it's something that is very clearly my area, where the other person really doesn't have anything to do with it if I don't want to, then it would have been the same thing. It's not sex itself, it's more...It's one thing if it's something where both people have opinions and then you negotiate about it. It's another matter if...say a person wanted to be at my house when I didn't want the person at my house. If the person somehow still forced themselves on me, I would have perceived it in a similar way as with this sexual situation, in any case if I had been very clear that I was not interested and the person still forced themselves on me, then I would have perceived it as very disrespectful in a similar way. So it's more the ignoring of boundaries that I find very hard to tolerate.

Here Elias makes a distinction between different areas that can be characterized by conflicts of will and where sexuality is one area among others where one party has the total right of veto. It is his body and thus he has the uncompromising right to decide what should happen with it. In the same way, his home is *his*, so an unwanted intrusion there has the same violating

sense as the bodily intrusion. How does Elias look at his own vulnerability in the situation?

*Lena:* I interpret you as saying that you didn't so much experience that kind of physical vulnerability...

*Elias:* No, I could have done something about it. If I wanted to.

*Lena:* Did you feel strongly that it was a choice?

*Elias:* To allow it? Yes, at some point. What had been forced had already been forced. What mattered, that line, had already been crossed.

Elias here connects bodily vulnerability with an experience of coercion, of having no chance to influence what is happening to one's body. He felt that he *chose* to "let it happen", which means that he did not feel physically vulnerable. I interpret it to mean that it is on the basis of that experience that the physical act itself did not become so decisive for him. What instead matters to Elias is his boyfriend's betrayal of him as a person, his lack of respect for his will in an area where, according to common conventions, it should be respected. Elias's experience of bodily invulnerability can be related to the invulnerability Nils experiences through his conception that he as a man "always [has] the opportunity to say no". Another male participant, Thomas (50–55 years old, gay), expresses a similar experience of sexual invulnerability when stating "I cannot imagine any situation where I have to do things that I absolutely do not want".

It is difficult to know how exactly to interpret Nils, Rikard and Elias's use of metaphors when they describe their experiences of sexual violations. To what extent do they reflect what they actually experienced and to what extent are they a way of discursively arranging their experiences in a way that is consistent with notions of sexuality and masculinity? Another problem in regard to my analysis of their way of expressing themselves is that it is based on certain assumptions that can perhaps be questioned. When I mark out their stories as somehow surprising or deviant, I may be simplistically reproducing beliefs that it is "normal" to experience unwanted sex as traumatizing in a more profound way than involuntarily washing dishes or an unwelcome visit to one's home. Perhaps it is also common among women to describe experiences of unwanted sex and assault in a way that does not ascribe a particularly traumatizing status to the bodily intrusion as such? In this study, the men stand out with their de-dramatizing descriptions, but this might in part have to do with a methodological bias where I was more detailed in my questions to the men about their subjective experiences of assaults, as I was interested in understanding the men's experiences of sexual victimization given a cultural context that downplays men's sexual vulnerability. Based on my personal experiences as a woman, it is in any case foreign to me to compare unwanted sex with unwanted washing-up or to separate, as Elias does, the bodily experience from the interpersonal one.

### Turning away from one's own vulnerability

I will now take a look at an interview with yet another man, which sheds light on the tendency of the masculine position to relativize and direct the gaze away from its own vulnerability. We met Lennart (65–70 years old, heterosexual) in [Chapter 2](#), where he talked about, among other things, how he reads and reacts to a woman's signals of sexual interest or lack thereof. I ask Lennart if he has ever had sex even though he did not want to and he tells me about a single such occasion in his life – a clearly negative experience.

*Lennart:* Once I slept with a woman just to be nice and it felt like...oh fuck, I felt bad for several days. Not like I threw up or thought about killing myself but I thought how...When I walked around, thinking about how awkward and silly it was, how then do the women who maybe have to do this often feel? For the man to have his marital right to it, or even worse women who are subjected to assault.

*Lena:* But was it self-evident to you to say yes?

*Lennart:* No, I could just as easily have said no. But in some damn way to be nice to her. For me, I was kind of ambivalent, either way.

*Lena:* Okay, you thought it didn't matter to you, so then you could do it for her?

*Lennart:* Yes.

*Lena:* How was it then? Did you get anything out of it?

*Lennart:* I had an orgasm, but it was...I could just as easily have wanked. So what I got out of it was *nada*.

*Lena:* You said you thought you might as well do it, because it didn't matter to you. But then you said you felt bad for several days afterwards.

*Lennart:* Yes, it kind of came back. I thought what the hell did I do that for, it was fucking unnecessary. And what will she think? Is she waiting for there to be a continuation of this? We didn't talk about it, but my thoughts went around like that. Yeah, it felt like I shouldn't have bothered.

*Lena:* But when you agreed to it, you didn't understand that you would feel that way?

*Lennart:* No.

*Lena:* Can you describe a little more, what it was that was difficult?

*Lennart:* I don't know. I don't actually know, but it was just a bad feeling.

Lennart's account shows that he was not prepared for what it would mean for him emotionally to have sex with a woman he did not really want to have sex with. When he made the decision, he did it on the basis that he did not

think it would matter to him – so why not “be nice”? It may well be that this is an experience he shares with many women, but the fact that he is a man probably made it more difficult for him to see sex as something that could be a source of discomfort for him.

There are a few more interesting things happening in the interview excerpt above that, in my view, can only be understood from a gender perspective. Lennart certainly turns out to be vulnerable in a way that he himself was not prepared for, something that made him never again agree to unwanted sex after this incident. At the same time, there is a tendency for him to turn his gaze away from his own vulnerability to that of women. Firstly, he quickly takes his own experience as a starting-point for a reflection on what it might be like for women who give in to men’s sexual desires on a regular basis or are subjected to assault. Secondly, he also angles his own experience of unwanted sex into a question about the *woman’s* possible vulnerability to his actions: “And what will she think? Is she waiting for there to be a continuation of this?” Despite the fact that it was the woman who achieved her desire to have sex with him while he had sex against his will, in his thoughts she is still the one who becomes a potential victim while he ascribes to himself the power to hurt her (cf. Gunnarsson 2018: 4–5). It is difficult to see that the same framing of the situation would have been used if the gender roles had been reversed.

### The gay scene’s hypermasculine ideals

In the interviews with Anas and Michael, the theme of masculinity and (in)vulnerability comes up when they talk about their generally negative experiences of navigating the male gay dating setting. In my interviews with gay and bisexual men, the particular nature of the male gay scene repeatedly came up as a central theme. It is clear that men seeking sex with men are acting within a distinctive context, characterized by strong sexualization, a detachment of sex from other types of involvement and, as discussed in Chapter 6, a hard typification of sexual roles.

Anas (20–25 years old, gay) spoke in Chapter 4 about his repeated experiences of consenting to sex against his will. During the interview, he becomes aware that the culture that prevails within the male gay setting has contributed to his difficulties in standing up for his own needs. He highlights the strong masculinity ideal that is part of gay culture and what he sees as a sharp hierarchy where masculine expressions are prized while femininity is looked down upon: “You should have a beard and be hairy and you should be aggressive and angry”. In research, these tendencies are often referred to as *gay hypermasculinity*, an amplified dominant masculinity modelled on heterosexual ideals of masculinity (Bersani 1988; Kendall 2006).<sup>1</sup> During the

interview, Anas becomes aware of how these norms have stood in the way of his own boundary-setting.

*Lena:* This typical male role – aggressive, not showing emotions, hard – how would you say it affects the issue of consent? Or how has it affected you when it comes to sex, do you think?

*Anas:* I think it's affected me a lot actually, now that you say it. By not speaking up...If I speak up and show that it doesn't feel good, I show a vulnerability that people can use...that you show emotions, that you make a drama out of it. In the gay world, there is a lot of talk about not dramatizing things. Girls are drama, boys are not, you know. And to make a drama about something that is so natural...

*Lena:* Having sex?

*Anas:* Yes, feeling pleasure and it's so nice and, like, "and then he makes a drama out of it". There you might be taken as feminine, I think. And that's kind of what I worry about when I'm in a relationship. I'm *scared* of being associated with femininity, I think. And then I avoid talking about things with my partner, for example things that make me sad, and it affects our relationship. Because I don't want to seem feminine. Now that I'm talking about it, I'm realizing it. I get so mad at myself [laughs], that I do that even though I try to go against those gender roles.

*Lena:* But why are you scared of being perceived as feminine? I think I understand, but I'd like you to put it into words.

*Anas:* I get a completely different status; I get a lower value. I'm like nothing.

*Lena:* If we go back to the situation where the other person wants to have sex but you don't. If you then really say "no, I don't want to, it doesn't feel good", then it becomes like...

*Anas:* That you're dramatizing things. I dramatize quite a lot, I say when I'm feeling bad and sometimes it can feel like if I say too much it can lead to drama. I've sort of heard "Oh, you're as difficult as a girl, just going on with the drama".

*Lena:* Have you heard it in these sexual situations as well?

*Anas:* I think it plays a fundamental role for that you don't speak up, that you don't want to dramatize it, you become difficult. You can destroy the relationship and you'll be seen as feminine. That there are too many emotions.

*Lena:* And it's complicated – is that it?

*Anas:* It's complicated and it's feminine. It's girls who have feelings, it's girls who keep arguing about one thing and another.

*Lena:* It's also, I ponder, girls who don't feel like having sex – that is, according to the norm.

*Anas:* Mm.

*Lena:* “Guys always want to”.

*Anas:* Exactly, exactly.

*Lena:* Does that also play a role, do you think? That if you don’t feel like it, you somehow become...

*Anas:* Yes, exactly. It’s this thing that for guys sex is something given, maybe. And not having sex can perhaps be associated with femininity.

The theme that I raise with Anas at the end of this interview excerpt is perhaps the most obvious: not wanting to have sex in itself violates masculinity norms. That is indeed what made it so hard for Nils to even realize that it was possible for him to say no to sex. This mechanism also exists in a same-sex male context and, according to Anas, is fuelled by the rather explicit valuing of masculinity complemented by a stigmatization of feminine-coded expressions.

However, what Anas first arrives at is something other than the expectations of men to always want sex. He returns to the expression of making a “drama” out of it, which in his experience is often used in the gay world to describe people who are “too” emotional and complicated in their interpersonal interactions. During the interview, Anas becomes aware of how his fear of being “too much” has contributed to his difficulties in setting boundaries and expressing needs that somehow “complicate” an interaction.<sup>2</sup> The problem is that this is what consent communication is partly about: having the opportunity to “complicate” a sexual course of events by expressing not only positive desires but also discomfort or reluctance. One might say that Anas cannot live up to the ideal of invulnerability that permeates the masculinity constructions in the male gay context of which he is a part. Paradoxically, the “prohibition” on vulnerability makes Anas more vulnerable, because when there is no room for his feelings and needs, they are overstepped in a way that hurts him.

### “Just fuck”

Michael (30–35 years, gay), who in [Chapter 7](#) talked about how his desperation has driven him into sexual situations he felt bad about, has, like Anas, a relatively negative relationship with the gay setting he is a part of. Also like Anas, he feels that it is difficult to show emotions and vulnerability when meeting other men in the gay dating environment, pivoting around the app Grindr.

*Michael:* As soon as I respond to someone on Grindr with something that implies that I’m more human, that I have feelings, that I’m a person, that I’m not just phrases to be used in the gay world to easily categorize each other and understand “What are you? Can I sleep

with you? Are you easy or difficult? Can I easily put you in a category?”, as soon as you say something on a personal, human, vulnerable level, you are dissed.

Michael also thinks that when the men meet up, there is often a lack of responsiveness to what the other person wants. He sees this as being linked to what he experiences as a devaluation of feelings, vulnerability and communication in the gay setting, something he explicitly associates with masculinity – with “a male deficit” – but also with the pain and desperation he feels many gay men, himself including, suffer from. Research shows that gay men’s mental illness is at a record high (Aggarwal & Gerrets 2014; Björkenstam et al. 2016; Hobbes 2017). This is linked to the stigma and fear associated with living with a sexuality that deviates and in many cases is condemned, but studies have also connected it to the hypermasculine gay culture (Hobbes 2017). Michael himself believes that the harsh typification of sexual roles based on power asymmetry has a connection to the collective psychological pain that he believes characterizes the male gay world.

*Michael:* It’s so crazy because many gay people think that the best thing is to be with someone who is straight, and you’re like “Huh?!” And also that you want someone who is dominant – you want someone who doesn’t really want you. It’s part of a power-and-role play and I think it has to do with emotional unavailability, that it becomes a pure sex act then, either if the other person is just dominant and doesn’t care about your feelings or else if he’s heterosexual and *cannot* have feelings for you. It’s much easier to never have to be held accountable for your fears, insecurities and vulnerabilities. In many of these cases, like in my sex encounters, there is, I think, so much pain behind it and to avoid that pain you do things where emotion is not involved. And then you have to live up to that image of a total man, the dominant man who can’t show much emotion. That prophecy is being fulfilled by us carrying so many wounds and not being able to talk about them, I think. And that’s where the sex comes in, that the best way then is to just fuck [laughs].

Michael’s expression “just fuck” can be seen as a marker for a kind of unmitigated sexuality that does not take personality and emotions into account. In this expression there is also a connotation of *just doing* something without thinking or feeling, as opposed to the type of sexual interaction that Freja strives for, where there is plenty of room to continuously sense and express what one wants and feels in the moment. For several of the other bi and gay men I interviewed, the “just fuck” culture is generally something positive and

liberating. For example, Anders, who is bisexual and has painful experiences of being sexually – and emotionally – rejected by female partners, exclaims during the interview:

*Anders:* Oh, oh, oh, if all women were like gay men, oh shit, what a life you could have! It's so unproblematic, it's so simple. It's a completely different attitude to sex, it's not so remarkable – “go ahead, it's your turn”.

For Anders, this culture is liberating and something he slightly jokingly contrasts with the archetypal image of the heterosexual woman who “has a headache” when there is a chance of sex. In [Chapter 6](#), I highlighted how for Stina, the increasingly strong emphasis on women's right to sexual pleasure became a *requirement* to enjoy sex. In the male gay context (McKie et al. 2020) and other marginalized sexual cultures – such as the BDSM sphere ([Barker 2013](#)) – this sex positivism is even stronger and, as some commentators have pointed out, an accentuated sex positivism, which only focuses on the positive sides of sex, risks turning into a “sexual imperative” ([Barker 2013](#): 905) that gets in the way of boundary-setting.

### **The paradox of (in)vulnerability**

The first part of this chapter explored Nils, Rikard and Elias's way of describing their experiences of unwanted sexual situations or assaults. In these situations, they were *de facto* sexually vulnerable in the sense that they did not have the power over the course of events that they needed to protect their integrity. At the same time, they describe their experience of the situations in ways that downplay their own vulnerability in the face of the other person's actions and depict the sexual nature of the unwanted situation as relatively insignificant to the experience of discomfort and vulnerability. They thereby challenge notions that the sexual use of a person's body tends to do more harm than other forms of “use”. It is impossible to determine to what degree Nils, Elias and Rikard's way of describing their experiences reflects how they actually experienced the situations versus to what extent they are covering up an actual experience of vulnerability that does not correspond to common expectations of men. Ideas about women's and men's sexual (in)vulnerability is a powerful factor that structures society's approach to sex and sexual violence, so research that qualitatively compares women's and men's experiences of unwanted sexual acts would be welcome. Such research could move the discussion of violence beyond the issue of how gender affects who does what to whom to address questions about how gendered discourses and power relations as well as bodily differences affect the subjective experience of sexual vulnerability versus invulnerability.

The deeply rooted beliefs that associate sexual vulnerability with women probably contributed to Lennart being unprepared for the discomfort he experienced when he had sex with a woman to “be nice”. In that case, one might say that notions of men’s sexual invulnerability contributed to Lennart ending up in a situation of actual vulnerability. This points to the paradoxical fact that the social construction of men as invulnerable can contribute to placing men in vulnerable situations, because they are not considered to be in need of protection in the same way that women are. Meanwhile, the notions of male invulnerability also shape how men actually experience unwanted sexual situations. Although Lennart describes his discomfort with the unwanted sex as powerful, it is interesting to see how in the interview he turns the attention away from his own vulnerability to the woman’s potential sensitivity to his actions. This reflects an experience of power and points to the fact that his experience of discomfort did not have to do with an experience of vulnerability in relation to the woman’s actions, but with his own decision to go against his own feelings.

Anas and Michael’s reports about the vulnerability they experience in the male gay context also testify to a “vulnerability paradox”, through which the environment’s lack of acceptance of (sexual) vulnerability reinforces their actual vulnerability. In different ways, Anas and Michael make connections between the strong masculinity norm that prevails in the male gay context and the vulnerability they themselves experience. The masculinity norm they refer to is strongly tied to ideals of not being emotional and of having an “uncomplicated” and entirely yes-oriented sexuality. As Michael sees it, the widespread strategy to “just fuck”, without regard for personality and feelings, is a way to shut down a sensitivity and vulnerability that in reality is often there. Both he and Anas are people who neither want nor are able to live up to the uncomplicated sexual ideal – their vulnerability and sensitivity are central themes in their interviews – but with the norms that prevail, they find it difficult to gain authority for the boundaries they would have to set in order to protect themselves. Research is beginning to identify the specific problems around consent that exist for men who have sex with men, pointing out hypersexual ideals (McKie et al. 2020) and assumptions about men’s sexual availability as key obstacles to consensual practices (Dietzel 2024; Gaspar et al. 2021; McKie et al. 2020; Sternin et al. 2022). It is always a delicate matter to identify problems in an already stigmatized subculture (Gaspar et al. 2021), but it still needs to be done in order to protect and represent the experiences of its very members.

I should clarify that when I speak of sexual vulnerability in this chapter, what I have in mind is a vulnerability to unwelcome sexual acts directed at oneself. It is this type of vulnerability that is most often relevant to discussions about consent and sexual violence. In the interviews with many of the men, however, other forms of vulnerability linked to sexuality arise. For

example, in connection with my questions about how Rikard experienced the unwanted sex he had with his female partner, he brings up his experience of vulnerability in the face of his partner's betrayal of an agreement they made about which other people they could have sex with. In the interviews with Gunnar, Anders and Lennart, a theme of vulnerability connected to women's sexual – and emotional – rejections emerges. In the interviews with Anders and Lennart, this vulnerability was sometimes expressed in bitter and even slightly mocking comments about their former partners. It is important to highlight these male experiences as a matter of vulnerability, need and dependence. Channelling one's feelings of vulnerability in the face of another person's actions as hostility is, in a sense, a general human tendency. Meanwhile, the taboo against male dependence (Cover 2014) means that feelings of vulnerability can be particularly difficult for men to handle, creating stronger incentives for aggressiveness and for seeking to control the person whose actions arouse the feelings of vulnerability (Gunnarsson 2014). Culturally emphasizing and discussing men's vulnerability in a way that creates more space for men to accept and manage their vulnerability is therefore extremely important *both* to protect men themselves and to prevent men's aggression towards others.

## Notes

- 1 It is in a way natural that masculinity is highly valued among men who have sex with men, given that what characterizes them is their attraction to men. However, the hypermasculine ideal can also be seen as a sort of compensation for the feminization that heteronormative culture ascribes to men who do not live up to the heterosexual masculinity ideal. Researchers have varying ideas about how gay hypermasculinity should be understood. Some, primarily queer-theoretically oriented researchers, argue that it can be seen as a sort of subversive parodying of traditional gender norms (Halperin 1995), while others (Bersani 1988; Kendall 2006) focus on the real exercise of power that they argue is linked with the hypermasculine order.
- 2 Here, we can draw a parallel to Anders's contrasting of male homosexuality and female heterosexuality in the previous chapter – it is women who “get a headache” and thereby put a stop to something that “really” is simple, self-evident and wonderful.

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# 11

## WE MUST – STILL – TALK MORE ABOUT SEX

Anyone who expected this book to offer firm guidelines on how to determine whether a person is engaging in sex voluntarily or involuntarily is likely to be disappointed. The purpose of this study was to investigate experiences that in some way problematize the boundary between consent and non-consent. My investigation has been thorough and multifaceted, but it can hardly be said to have resulted in conclusions that can immediately be applied to concrete situations in order to distinguish right from wrong, voluntary from involuntary. Instead, even in this final chapter, I conclude that there are certain inevitably ambiguous aspects to the dynamics of consent. In many situations – perhaps most – the question of where to draw the line between voluntariness and involuntariness is simple and unproblematic. But there are also grey-area experiences, the existence of which has to do with fundamental ambiguities in humans’ experience as social beings. The book’s most important contribution to the discussion on consent revolves around its identification of a need to relate to rather than to overlook the grey areas and ambiguities that exist.

What kind of sexual situations in the interview material appear as typical grey-area situations that cannot be unequivocally classified as either voluntary or involuntary? I here list what I see as the most typical situations.

- *When someone agrees to sex that they have no desire to participate in.* This type of situation actually encompasses a wide range of different situations. At one end of the spectrum, there is the completely voluntary and perhaps joyful act of care, where the lack of sexual desire is offset by other pleasurable motivations. At the other end of the spectrum, we find sex that someone “goes along with” as a result of the other person knowingly exploiting their vulnerability and dependence. These situations on

the outer edges of the spectrum can hardly be said to belong to the grey area, but in the middle we find different nuances of choice and coercion in various combinations. What creates the ambiguity is precisely the *mixture* of choice and non-choice. In the situations I am referring to, the unwilling party makes some kind of choice to participate in the sexual interaction, but their choice is not experienced as completely free and is not positively charged, but rather is often a way to avoid negative consequences of some kind, such as frightening relationship scenarios. The basic existential problem behind these situations is in all cases in this study the unwilling party's emotional attachment to the sexual partner in question, mediated by cultural conceptions of sex, gender and relationships.

- *When it is not clear what one wants.* Situations where a person does not feel sure about what they themselves want sexually can also be said to be in a grey area. This study shows that when a person has difficulties sensing what they themselves want, they are liable to go along both with other people's desires and with broader cultural scripts for how one "should" behave. In this category, we can also place situations where a person appeared to want to participate in a sexual act at the time it occurred but later realizes that they did not want to.
- *When someone is "persuaded" to have sex (when no becomes yes).* My analysis shows that a certain degree of "aggressive" seduction – after an initial no – is not always experienced as problematic but can even be an appreciated part of the sexual interaction. It is difficult to provide universal guidelines for when the continued seduction of an initially unwilling person is a violation of the principle of voluntariness, as it depends on the context. I have shown that the concept of "token resistance" – when someone signals unwillingness even though they really want to have sex – is based on a simplified dualism between willingness and unwillingness. Things are more complex than this, in that it is possible for a person to both feel reluctance and be open to further attempts at seduction, a duality that also seems to be possible communicate in subtle ways. At the same time, from a consent perspective, which takes into account how one person's pressure can limit another person's freedom to say no, it is indeed risky to embrace practices of seduction that involve "breaking down" the other person's resistance. Moreover, just because one person succeeds in making another person physically excited does not, strictly speaking, mean that the latter has consented to sex.
- *When it is unclear which actions the consent applies to (when yes becomes no).* Even when there is a clear consent to have sex, that does not mean that it is always obvious what kind of sex is included in that consent or that the consent will remain in place throughout the entire interaction. There are strong conventions about how sex "happens", which means that an initial consent to sex is not infrequently taken as evidence that the

person has consented to a number of different sexual acts that are considered to be a natural part of sex. Previous research has mainly highlighted the strong scripting of heterosexual interactions, but my study shows that same-sex sex is also governed by powerful conventions regarding how sex should go. It is not possible to obtain consent *before* each little step in a sexual interaction, but that problem is largely overcome by viewing consent as a continuous reading of and adaptation to how the other person responds to one's actions. However, if there are strong assumptions about what can be expected in a sexual encounter, this can get in the way of such attentiveness. In addition, it can make a person who feels uncomfortable with a sexual act unable to even perceive that they have the option to express their reluctance.

What characterizes these types of situations, all of which problematize the line between voluntariness and involuntariness, is that they challenge the *dualism between willingness and unwillingness* that structures many discussions of consent. Willingness and unwillingness can coexist in a person at one and the same time, and it can be unclear to a person themselves where exactly the line between “wanting” and “not wanting” is to be drawn. Furthermore, the procedural nature of sexual interactions means that in every second someone's willingness or unwillingness has the potential to turn into its opposite. This is a reality that discussions and education about consent need to take note of, so that not only “yes” and “no” but also ambivalence, ambiguity and change become things that people are asked to both express and decipher.

While debates as well as research on consent often focus on how consent is *communicated*, my emphasis here is rather on the ambiguity inherent in what [Hickman and Muehlenhard \(1999\)](#) see as the internal component of consent, that is how people come to *decide* that they do or do not want to participate in a sexual act. Of course, even the communication of what one wants and does not want can be characterized by ambiguity, but previous research states that the risk of misunderstanding is relatively small ([Muehlenhard et al. 2016](#)). This study suggests that *the fundamental factor behind grey-area situations lies instead in the fact that human volition itself is complex, multifaceted and changeable*.

### **In favour of a collective reflection on the grey area**

As discussed in the introductory chapter, the notion of a grey area between consent and non-consent has a somewhat delicate status in the anti-violence context, as it can be used to relativize the seriousness of acts that should be classified as abuse ([Gunnarsson 2018a](#); [Hansen 2023](#)). An important part of the feminist struggle against sexual violence has been to relabel many

sexual acts that are normalized in a patriarchal context as violence, and from that perspective any effort to complicate the boundaries surrounding the category of sexual violence can be perceived as problematic (Gunnarsson 2023). The grey-area discourse can, for example, be used by perpetrators who claim that they did not understand that they committed an assault. These risks must be considered. But the fact remains that there is indeed a grey area. And to understand this grey area, and how it is connected to unequivocal sexual violence, we need to look at it in the eye.

How, then, should we relate to the grey area in the public conversation about sex and sexual violence and in educational initiatives that address the issue of consent? My position here is that a more unconditional and exploratory collective reflection on the grey area is needed, as one of several components in an effective struggle against violence. The starting-point for such a collective reflection project should be that many sexual situations are characterized by an ambiguity that cannot be resolved by setting out universal guidelines about where the boundary between voluntariness and involuntariness lies. What characterizes grey-area situations is precisely that they cannot be fully figured out on a rule-based level. Instead, the drawing of the line between right and wrong must be made in each situation by those who participate in it – *supported and sanctioned by a wider collective context addressing these questions*.

Several times in this book I have returned to the legal philosopher Vanessa Munro's (2005) definition of "morally permissible" sex as sex arising from choices based on the participants' own preferences and values. In order for a person's preferences and values to really qualify as their own, they need, Munro argues, to be able to critically reflect on the context in which the decision to have sex is made. Munro's formulation can be seen as a way of distinguishing voluntariness from involuntariness in a more qualified way than the more rudimentary parameters to which jurists are referred. It brings a deeper level into the picture, so that a person's spontaneous impulse to participate in a sexual act is not given an unshakeable and unequivocal ontological and moral status, but is instead opened up to scrutiny: What is it that makes me do this? Or: What makes the other person do this with me?

When Munro points out the importance of reflection on the context in which a decision to have sex is made, she does not highlight the collective element that is present in all reflection, even when carried out by an individual alone. All personal reflection draws on conceptual resources that are generated collectively. A central condition for supporting the type of reflexivity that can strengthen people's ability to discern the line between right and wrong is thus that the collective conversation about sexual boundaries is intensified and refined. Not in order to end up with universal guidelines about how consent concretely expresses itself, but rather to offer a space where different experiences and perspectives can be addressed in dialogue

with research and other expertise that can create an increased understanding of the contextual factors that affect sexual situations.

The experiences shared in this book and the reflections that both the interview participants and I made about them are a small piece of the puzzle in expanding this type of collective reflection on the issue of consent in a broad sense extending beyond the legal domain. To illustrate what the dialectic between collective and individual consciousness might look like, we can, as an example, imagine that a person reading the accounts in this book about going along with sex that one has no desire to engage in might see similar patterns in their own experience that they had previously not reflected on. Becoming aware of these patterns and seeing them reflected in the experiences of others can be the first step to challenging them, and perhaps to sharing one's experiences with others who in turn can be a support. It can also be a catalyst for raising the issue with a sexual partner. Another reader might begin to reflect on whether their partner's participation in sex is always really voluntary or if they sometimes agree to sex to be accommodating. Similarly, reading my analysis of Pernilla's experience about not being "sensed" by her short-term sexual partner may help someone else put into words a similar experience that they had difficulty understanding. Finally, a heterosexual woman learning about Nils's difficulties in saying no to sex may start to think about her own assumptions about men's sexual availability. This book is indeed a research publication, which hardly reaches a broad public, but I want to illustrate with these examples how a process of *collective, public reflection* can influence people's *individual reflections and communications* about sexual boundaries.

An intensified collective reflection on the grey-area problem and on consent in general – which can be promoted by a number of different actors in society, from the media to schools – is of course not enough to end sexual violence. Knowledge and awareness have little meaning if someone finds pleasure in overstepping others' boundaries or simply does not care what others want. At the same time, we should not underestimate the norm-setting function of collective discussion; an intensified collective conversation about where the line is drawn between right and wrong creates a cultural environment that makes it more difficult to avoid responsibility for one's actions.

My conclusion about the importance of a more deep-going conversation about the issue of consent fits quite well with the development we are already seeing, and which this study can be seen as part of. There are indeed vital discussions, campaigns and educational efforts about consent, spurred both by legal developments and by #MeToo. However, my emphasis on *the grey-area problem* and on *reflection* adds important elements. Reflecting implies a certain measure of modesty and humility in the face of an acknowledged complexity, an acceptance that unequivocal and definite answers cannot always be found. In activist discourse it is, unsurprisingly, common to focus

on clear boundaries and to direct anger towards perpetrators and social institutions that do not take their due responsibility. While this has its rightful place, a key message of mine is that we also need to cultivate a discourse that can harbour ambiguity, uncertainty and ambivalence, and can account for the fact that there are situations that do not allow for simple and definitive answers. In what follows, I highlight some further themes that, based on this study, I see as fruitful to address in the collective reflection on consent.

### Consent can be emotionally difficult

While grey-area experiences have been the focus of this book, it has also dealt with experiences that can be more clearly classified as violations in a moral and sometimes legal sense. There are a number of different reasons why violations are committed, but what I want to highlight based on the analysis offered in this book are the emotional factors that can get in the way of consent. When consent is spoken of as potentially *difficult*, what is being referred to are often communication difficulties, as expressed in the so-called *miscommunication hypothesis* (Jozkowski et al. 2014; Muehlenhard et al. 2016), which assumes that violations often occur because it can be difficult to understand the unwillingness of the other person. However, in common with other studies (Beres 2010; Muehlenhard et al. 2016; O’Byrne, Rapley & Hansen 2006, 2008), this study has shown that this appears to be a limited problem. Instead, I would claim that it is primarily emotional factors, linked to the vulnerability that characterizes our human situation as dependent on others, which can make consent difficult.

Sex is often – perhaps always – a way to meet needs other than the purely sexual, if it even makes sense to talk about purely sexual needs. While this is fundamentally a positive aspect of sexuality, I have shown how it can also make people unfree. Above all, we have seen that an acute dependence on another person or a fear of endangering a relationship can make people agree to sex that they do not really want to participate in. But we have also seen how an emotional desperation for closeness can be channelled as a sexual compulsion, causing people to transgress both others’ and their own boundaries.

Reducing the problem of consent to a question of how best to understand what someone else wants – or even what one wants oneself – is therefore very limiting. Emotional factors are probably a far more important obstacle to a culture of consent. Even in cases where a person does have difficulties picking up on another person’s signals of reluctance, I would imagine that this often involves emotional barriers that protect them against the reality of rejection (cf. Bornäs 2022). It would also be unreasonable to assume that those who violate other people’s boundaries are simply driven by a lack of concern for others. When a person lacks respect for another person’s will, we need to scratch the surface to locate what pains and unmet needs are expressing

themselves in the impulse to exercise power over and use another person for one's own purposes.

### **Committed relationships do not protect people from assault and unwanted sex**

A large proportion of the accounts analysed in the book have been about interactions within committed relationships. This was not a focus I actively pursued, but it turned out that many of the participants' grey-area experiences or other complex experiences had taken place in established relationships. Why? The way I see it, it is because stable sexual relationships in and of themselves are extremely complex and are intertwined with an emotional dependence that can blur the line between one's own needs and those of the other person. In committed relationships, habits and assumptions can also arise regarding a partner's sexual availability that can get in the way of listening to what they want in the moment (Beres 2010; Willis & Jozkowski 2019).

When giving talks about this study I have received comments about how many of the experiences are about stable relationships. It seems that this remark stems from an expectation that the issue of consent would be primarily associated with new and/or temporary interactions. Although in popular imagery sexual violence is still associated with creepy men in dark alleys or parks, it is hardly news that sexual violence is most often committed by people who have a relationship to the victim. The fear of physical aggression that radical feminists highlight as an important constraining factor that makes women submit to men is nothing I have seen in my interview material. Of course, this does not mean that such fear is never a part of committed relationships, but I am prepared to argue that the fear of being abandoned or not being loved is a more decisive factor that allows power to be so often exercised in committed relationships. Fundamentally, such relational fears are gender-neutral, but as I have shown in my previous research on love and power, overall power structures mean that women more often end up in a position of dependence, while men more often enjoy an authority and self-esteem that make them less vulnerable (Gunnarsson 2011; 2014a, 2014b, 2016; Jónasdóttir 1994). Also, financial dependence is still a clearly gendered reality, which reduces the agency for the dependent party on all levels in a committed relationship. This being said, that question does not seem to have had any significance for the people who participated in this study, who instead pointed to the emotional factors as being decisive.

### **The need for respect and care**

I also want to emphasize the importance of broadening the consent discussion beyond consent as such and raising the larger question of what characterizes sexual acts that harm us. Similar to the reflection on how emotional factors

can get in the way of consent, such a reflection needs to focus on the basic human needs for respect and care that the principle of consent can be said to protect. Anchoring reflections about consent in a striving to protect these basic needs can help to create a more coherent understanding of the nature of sexual violations. The principle of consent is perhaps perceived as more tangible and concrete than the principle of showing others respect and care. But it is precisely for this reason, I argue, that these vaguer, but nonetheless fundamental, principles should be subject to an intensified collective reflection. What does it mean to show another person respect and care (in a sexual situation)? What is it that prevents us from showing other people respect and care? What characterizes a (sexual) situation where we do not feel respected and taken care of? What does it do to us? If we imagine that what unites abusive actions on the entire continuum from mild to severe is that they are a more or less violent expression of a lack of respect and care, we need to reflect on what these needs for respect and care consist of. This can both provide us with increased resources to understand why certain sexual situations feel uncomfortable and give us greater authority to set a limit.

### **People do not always know what they want**

Another important thing to take note of in our collective reflection on consent is that people do not always know what they want in sexual situations. This means that educational efforts about consent need to emphasize that ambivalence and uncertainty are just as legitimate a position as a “yes” or a “no” – and can also be communicated. It also means that work towards a culture of consent must involve creating tools for people to recognize their own sexuality in a positive sense. In line with the importance of highlighting contextual factors, this needs to involve a discussion of how cultural images of female and male sexuality can affect people’s ability to feel and express their own desire. It is important not to see people’s difficulty in understanding their own needs as a matter limited to the sexual sphere; rather, such difficulties need to be linked to psychological and cultural mechanisms that, in more general terms, make some people more inclined than others to shape their behaviour according to the wishes and needs of others.

### **The participation of the victimized party**

One reason why the notion of a grey area can be perceived as problematic is that the blurring of the line between sex and sexual violence means that the division of responsibility between perpetrator/willing and victim/unwilling also becomes less clear. Indeed, when there is uncertainty about whether a person’s participation in sex was voluntary or not, it is often due to an ambiguity in the attitude and behaviour of the person whose willingness is in

doubt. If we are to be able to conduct a fruitful collective reflection on grey-area situations, this means that we must have the courage to address the question of how – and why – people sometimes actively and *to some extent* willingly participate in sex they do not want to participate in. These situations can be said to exist in a borderland between voluntariness and involuntariness. Emotional needs, which the other party can exploit, often play a decisive, compelling role that should not be underestimated, and a similar force can be enacted by broader cultural norms and scripts. At the same time, there remains in these situations a certain measure of freedom to set a limit and to bear with the emotional after-effects of such a limit-setting and the reaction it can cause in the other person.

There are also forms of compliant or obliging sex that are not governed so much by emotional barriers but more by the unwilling party's inability to see the possibility they actually have of setting a limit (cf. Powell 2008). Pointing out that a victimized person *could* have set a limit but did not do so is perilous in a context where victim-blaming tendencies are often seen as best countered by denying that the victimized person could have done something to stop what happened. I contend, though, that it is only by carefully investigating and creating awareness of the mechanisms that make many people agree to things they do not want that we can work towards a culture of consent on all fronts. Reflecting on the unwilling party's actions, feelings and motivations, as part of strengthening people's ability to protect their boundaries, is fundamentally not at odds with emphasizing the willing party's responsibility (Lamb 1999).

When sex happens even though one party does not want it, the responsibility lies first and foremost with the willing person. Legally speaking, this responsibility does not extend very far, but in a moral sense we should place strong demands on the willing party's acceptance of responsibility. We should, for example, require them to try to get clarity about whether they are in a position of power that stops the other person from expressing their needs. We should also expect them to consider whether the other person has previous experiences that make them agree to things they do not actually feel good about. On a moral level, I am a strong proponent of having high expectations on the willing party, based on a strong belief in people's ability to take responsibility for others. Setting the bar high in the collective reflection on consent is a way to cultivate this ability to take responsibility.

At the same time, we cannot sit back and take it for granted that those who want sex will take their due responsibility, meaning it would be unwise not to also focus to some extent on what people can do to protect themselves. This is not about blaming the vulnerable party, but about taking the collective responsibility to strengthen people's resources to engage with and stand up for their own sexual "no" as well as "yes". While asking someone "Why did you agree to it even though you didn't want to?" can be framed as a form

of victim-blaming, the question is extremely important in that it broadens the spectrum of possibilities by implicitly communicating: “You don’t have to agree to sex if you don’t want to”. Moreover, we need to ask this question to be able to identify, understand and challenge those contextual factors that promote people’s “consent” to unwanted sex.

### Same-sex dynamics of consent

The contextual factors that we need to take into consideration in our collective reflection on the dynamics of consent have various aspects. In the study reported in this book, the male gay context appears to be a distinctive environment with potentially problematic consequences from a consent perspective. It is important that the issue of consent is raised beyond the heterosexual context that has been its home for so long and that increased attention is directed to the dynamics of consent and violence in same-sex interactions. Based on what we know about the close links between hegemonic masculinity and violence, it is hardly surprising if there are problems in a male gay context, especially if hypermasculine ideals are prized. The stigma that marginalized groups suffer from means that it can be sensitive to take a closer look at the problems that exist within such a group. However, not doing so comes at the cost of the integrity and well-being of people who are part of this group. From a scholarly perspective, directing more attention to the same-sex context also raises new, fruitful questions and perspectives on the relationship between gender and violence. Feminists have long seen heterosexuality as the central structure underpinning violence, but a focus on the dynamics of same-sex interactions can give us greater insights into mechanisms beyond heterosexuality as such.

### The ambiguous significance of gender

In this concluding chapter, I have highlighted the dialectic between the individual and the collective and argued that an intensified *collective* reflection on the dynamics of consent in the grey area is an important way forward to give *individuals* better conditions for reflecting on and, by extension, recognizing and respecting their own and others’ limits in the unique, concrete situations they find themselves in. My argument is inspired by [Munro’s \(2005\)](#) deliberations on the importance of people reflecting on the context surrounding their sexual actions and choices. It also draws inspiration from discussions taking place in the BDSM community, where the collective responsibility for creating awareness and norms around consent is emphasized ([Barker 2013](#)). An extremely central aspect of the context that surrounds every sexual interaction are the gendered notions and power relations that structure our society, and perhaps sexuality in particular. By engaging in dialogue with feminist

theory and previous research on sexuality and gender, this gendered context has been a theme throughout the book.

There is a fundamental tension regarding the significance of gender that can be formulated as follows. On the one hand, gender is a powerful structuring factor that creates systematic differences and power relations between people of different genders and means that virtually no human experience can be understood without reference to gender. On the other hand, however, the situations people find themselves in are not entirely determined by gender but also by gender-neutral mechanisms. There is a tendency for this tension to move into a polarization so that some debaters overemphasize the importance of the gender factor while others underemphasize it. Instead, I argue that this tension must be accommodated and harboured (cf. Benjamin 2013; Gunnarsson 2018b) in our collective reflection on consent, so that we can address the structures that tend to generate female vulnerability and male invulnerability in sexuality, while also examining how such patterns are challenged by women's experiences of power and invulnerability and men's experiences of vulnerability. Men's power over women in sexuality is, on the one hand, a structural tendency that must be taken into account; on the other hand, this structural tendency cannot be directly translated into individual experiences, which are infinitely complex and diverse. Matters are further complicated by the fact that claiming that women are subordinate to men in sexuality can contribute to consolidating women's experience of vulnerability in ways that reinforce men's power over women. We see here an ambiguity and complexity in the significance of gender, which matches the many other ambiguities and complexities highlighted in the book. While the anti-violence discourse characterized by the *politics of clear boundaries* (Gunnarsson 2023) often builds on a schematic determination of male power and female vulnerability, the more reflexive, searching and open-ended conversation that I call for is better suited to dealing with this complexity of gender.

### **Do we really need to talk more about sex in an overly sexualized world?**

In terms of representations of and information and conversations about sex, the last half century has seen enormous changes. The world that today's teenagers are growing up in, with an abundance of both pornography and factual information about all kinds of sexual practices and orientations only a click away, would certainly have been difficult to even imagine for a teenager in, say, Sweden in the 1950s. The term "sexualization" is often used to describe contemporary culture and usually has negative connotations. In that case, it refers to cultural tendencies towards sexual objectification and commercialization at the expense of deeper interpersonal values and purposes. If the "sexualization" of culture is decoupled from the objectification, alienation and commercialization with which it is partly associated, however, it also

harbours many positive and liberating elements. People today can talk about and reflect openly on sexual themes in a way that broadens knowledge and freedom in an area that is very important for the vast majority of people.

In this age of (over)sexualization, do we really need to talk *more* about sex? My answer is yes. Not least precisely because hardcore pornography is only a click away, something that needs to be counterbalanced by talking about sex as people actually experience it. But also, because, for most people, sex is important. And because sex is associated with vulnerability and sometimes violations and violence. It is telling that the interviews that form the basis of this book often came to be about domains of the human experience that usually remain unarticulated. Often, it was the first time that the participants put these experiences into words, which says something about the breadth of sexual experiences that exist without ever being named. The wordlessness and absence of reflection that often characterizes sex is indeed one its allures. At the same time, we know that underneath the wordlessness – in the unreflected doing – violence or milder forms of coercion and discomfort may be hidden. Making these experiences visible and available for collective reflection is the first important step in strengthening people’s ability to understand and handle them.

What perhaps primarily distinguishes the “sex talk” that I believe needs to be increased and intensified from the type of sexual discourse that pervades contemporary Western culture is that it does not take place in isolation from a wider interpersonal context. The usual “sexualization” of culture is characterized in many ways by separating the sexual from other considerations. This study has shown that this type of separation is hardly feasible. Regardless of how “purely sexual” a sex act is, sex is about so much more than sex. It is about our need for connection and closeness. It is about our value as people – about feeling wanted, appreciated, loved. It is, I would claim, precisely because of sexuality’s connections to such powerful needs that sex can be so beneficial and liberating and at the same time so strongly associated with violence and suffering.

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# APPENDIX

## Methodological approach

### The participants

The study reported in this book is based on interviews with 20 people from two different Swedish cities and their surrounding areas. When selecting participants, my basic idea was that I wanted to interview roughly equal numbers of women and men, possibly but not necessarily one or a couple of non-binary people, and equal numbers of heterosexual and gay/bisexual people. Although gender and sexual orientation are the basic analytical dimensions in the study, I was careful to also ensure that the participants would represent a certain spread in terms of class position, ethnic background and age.

I designed an ad, the headline for which read: “Would you like to be interviewed about wanting and not wanting to have sex?” Then the ad continued: “We are looking for participants aged 18 to 75 for a research project on sexual consent”, followed by a simple definition of consent. The design of the ad reflects the study’s focus on the broader theme of “wanting and not wanting to have sex”, which is intimately connected to the theme of consent but partly goes beyond it. I also opted out of focusing on the concept of consent in the ad’s title as it is a concept that not everyone is familiar with, and because I felt that its strong connection to discussions about sexual violence could make the study seem unappealing or irrelevant to people without experiences of violence. The following text was included in the ad, written in a way that clearly opens up a problematization of the concept of consent and that points out the type of questions I wanted to investigate in the project.

Sexual consent means that you agree with the other person to have sex and that this happens voluntarily. But it is not always obvious what this means.

That's why we want to talk to you about your experiences of wanting and not wanting to have sex and how you show – or don't show – it. Other questions on which we would like your opinion are: How do you know what the other person wants? What about when the other person says no? What is it like when you don't really know if you want to? Do you sometimes go along and have sex for the sake of the other person? Is it okay to nag for sex? How is all this affected by expectations of what sex "should" look like? And by ideas about what it means to be feminine or masculine?

I spread the ad primarily through social media, but also put it up in various physical locations and contacted some people and asked them to share the ad with particular categories of people according to the "snowball method". In order to ensure a spread among the participants, later on in the process I made minor adjustments to the ad to target specific groups. I sometimes added a text above the ad; for example, "Right now we are looking for: bisexual men, people over 50 and people from an immigrant background". This was also a way of excluding those categories of people who were already sufficiently represented among my participants, in order to minimize the number of rejections I had to make of people's offers to be interviewed.

I made no special efforts to recruit non-binary or trans people. In the ad, however, I wrote that I was looking for "people of different genders" rather than "women and men", in an attempt to open up to all types of gender identification. I considered other wordings because some people with a non-binary gender identity identify as not belonging to any gender, but in the end chose the wording "people of different genders", to simplify the ad text, which was already peppered with different aspects of categorization, and to avoid alienating groups of people who are not familiar or comfortable with such language about gender. I judged the latter aspect to be important in order to reach the majority of people who live in harmony with society's dominant norms. No non-binary or transgender people expressed interest in participating in the study. I also did not make any targeted efforts towards these groups, because even if their participation could have provided an interesting perspective, I did not find their participation decisive in order to be able to explore my questions, whereas the contrast between (cis-)women and (cis-)men was an important aspect of my project.

In terms of class and ethnicity, it was predominantly white, middle-class people who registered their interest. I never had any intention of reaching a spread in terms of class and ethnicity that represents the composition of the Swedish population, but I set out to achieve a certain – albeit humble – measure of diversity, by targeting the ad to specific forums and key people. Of the categories of people I absolutely wanted well represented, bisexual men were the most difficult to recruit, which is why I put extra work into actively seeking them out.

So what did the final group of participants look like? If the gender identity of the participants was quite unambiguous, the same cannot be said about their sexual orientation, especially in the case of the women. I interviewed ten women and ten men. Only three women identified as heterosexual, but one of the bisexually identified women had sexual experiences only with men. In addition to this woman, there were two more who identified as bisexual; however, two of the lesbian-identified women had extensive experiences of sex with men as well. Another lesbian-identified woman participated.

As for the men, three gay men participated – one of whom had extensive heterosexual experience – and three heterosexual men. Four of the men identified as bisexual, two of whom could be described as “heteroromantic” because they had romantic relationships only with women. Overall, among the participants there is a large presence of people who have experiences of sex with people of different genders (including non-binary and transgender people). This composition gradually became something I pursued, as I hypothesized that the experiences of “bisexually experienced” people might shed particular light on the question of how gender affects the dynamics of consent.

The age range was from 22 to 70 years, with a certain concentration of participants aged 25–35. Five of the participants had a non-Swedish background, of which three were non-European. All but three people were undergoing or had undergone higher education at the time of the interview. Five or six of the participants lived in the countryside or in a small urban area, while the rest lived in a medium- to large-sized city.

Regarding the participants’ experiences of sexual abuse, it is difficult to make definitive statements about this because the interviews often dealt with experiences in the borderland between consent and non-consent. Only a few of the participants had a clear experience of being subjected to sexual violence, but several came to the interview with a perception of having been part of something that was *possibly* rape. Many more told me about situations that involved pressure. An even larger proportion reported having sex against their will, but not necessarily because of pressure from others. Some of the participants talked about boundary-crossing acts that they themselves had committed, but none – unsurprisingly – shared experiences of having committed unequivocally criminal acts against another person.

What drove the participants to take part in the study? According to their own statements, the majority of them were motivated by the fact that they personally currently experienced or had experienced problems or tensions regarding the study’s theme. The interview became a way for them to process and share complicated experiences. For a few, it was more about the fact that they had time to spare and wanted to contribute to the research. An older man I interviewed, for example, said that he found it quite easy to talk openly about sex compared to others in his age category and that he therefore felt he

could contribute. In regard to my targeted advertising to specific categories, it was also often the case that a person's belonging to a minority or difficult-to-recruit category contributed to motivating the person to participate. Some of those who were not heterosexual stated that they felt motivated to participate because they appreciated the study's inclusion of homosexuals and bisexuals. Some of the participants were interested in sex in general and found it fun to talk about, while some were interested in the consent debate. A significant proportion of the participants, nine people, had more or less extensive experiences with BDSM or other forms of dominance sex. It can be assumed that this experience contributed to their interest in participating in the study since the issue of consent is central to the BDSM community.

The interviews were conducted in 2017, almost all of them before #MeToo swept the world starting in October of the same year, meaning that the intense public discussions about sexual violence, harassment and consent that emerged through #MeToo were not a part of the participants' consciousness. Here follows a list of all participants with pseudonyms and a few characteristics which, for reasons of anonymity, are kept very general.

## Women

- 1 Anette, 60–65 years old. Heterosexual. Single. On sick leave from working-class profession. Countryside/small town.
- 2 Cecilia, 30–35 years old. Bisexual. Single. Recent graduate to upper-middle-class occupation. Medium-sized city.
- 3 Freja, 20–25 years old. Lesbian-identified but previously lived heterosexually. Unqualified profession/university student. Medium-sized city.
- 4 Julia, 25–30 years old. Heterosexual. Single. University educated. Middle-class occupation. Medium-sized city.
- 5 Kristina, 50–55 years old. Bisexual. Steady relationship with a man. On sick leave from working-class profession. Countryside/small town.
- 6 Mariam, 55–60 years old. Heterosexual. Steady relationship. University educated. Middle-class occupation. Born in the Middle East. Countryside/small town.
- 7 Mui, 20–25 years old. Bisexually identified but has only had sex with men. Multiple ongoing sexual relationships. Studying at a university for a lower middle-class occupation. Parents born in Asia. Medium-sized city.
- 8 Pernilla, 30–35 years old. Lesbian-identified but has had sex with men to a significant extent. Steady relationship. University educated. Middle-class occupation. Medium-sized city.
- 9 Stella, 25–30 years old. Lesbian. Steady relationship. University educated. Middle-class occupation. Medium-sized city.
- 10 Stina, 30–35 years old. Heterosexual. Single. University educated. Middle-class occupation. Medium-sized city.

## Men

- 1 Anas, 20–25 years old. Gay. Beginning stages of a relationship. University student. Born in the Middle East, raised in Sweden. Medium-sized city.
- 2 Anders, 40–45 years old. Bisexual. Beginning stages of a relationship with a woman. Middle-class occupation. Medium-sized city.
- 3 Elias, 30–35 years old. Somewhat reluctantly bisexually identified (not relevant to him if his partner is male, female or non-binary). Single. Upper-middle-class occupation. Larger city.
- 4 Gunnar, 50–55 years old. Bisexual. Steady relationship with a woman. Middle-class occupation. Countryside/small town.
- 5 Lennart, 65–70 years old. Heterosexual. Steady relationship. Retired. No higher education. Medium-sized city.
- 6 Michael, 30–35 years old. Gay. Single. Creative profession/student. Medium-sized city.
- 7 Nils, 30–35 years old. Heterosexual. Single. Middle-class occupation. Medium-sized city.
- 8 Oskar, 35–40 years old. Heterosexual. Steady relationship. Middle-class occupation. Countryside/small town.
- 9 Rikard, 40–45 years old. Bisexual. Multiple relationships. Middle-class occupation. Larger city.
- 10 Thomas, 50–55 years old. Gay but with significant previous experience of sex with women. Middle-class occupation. Beginning stages of a relationship. Born in other European country. Countryside/small town.

## The interviews

The type of interviews I conducted are usually called semi-structured. This means that even if the interviewer of course actively controls the interview, this is not done by checking off predetermined questions; rather, the person being interviewed has a large measure of influence over which themes are discussed and the interviewer adapts their questions accordingly in the moment. This type of qualitative research contrasts strongly with quantitative methods and can be said to violate many of the methodological principles that govern the latter type of research. While a central ideal in quantitative research is that the researcher should influence the “object” of a study as little as possible, the researcher as a person in qualitative research is instead a central instrument for generating knowledge (Kvale 2007). This is because this type of research is about finding out the qualitative significance of phenomena, which requires that, throughout the research process, the researcher makes interpretations and assessments that cannot be replaced by systematized questionnaires or criteria for how a material should be categorized and analysed.

Steinar Kvale (2007) emphasizes that a qualitative interviewer must continuously make decisions in the moment about what to ask and how, which aspects of an answer they should follow up and which not, which answers should be commented on or interpreted, and so on. Karen Davies and Johanna Esseveld (1989) contend that what intuitively feels right to do in an interview is often the most fruitful. In line with this, the shape of the interviews that I conducted varied, both between the interviews and within one and the same interview. Sometimes it was most fruitful to ask very open or even vague questions in order to try to control the participant as little as possible while focusing on a broad theme – this was a strategy I consistently used in the initial stages of the interviews. Sometimes it was instead appropriate to comment on an answer by using my own words to restate what the participant said, partly to make sure I understood and partly as a way of helping the participant further in their attempt to put their experiences into words. This could sometimes include leading questions, something that in a positivist scientific tradition is considered to undermine objectivity, but which in qualitative research can be an effective way of checking the reliability of what someone said and to make sure that the interviewer has understood correctly (Kvale 2007). Sometimes I would engage in a theoretical discussion with a participant, sharing my perspectives so that the participant could respond to them. Sometimes I would share my personal experiences if I felt that doing so could fulfil an important function in the interview, such as if I believed that the participant felt ashamed of something they had said and I could share a similar experience. In some cases, I shared my experience in interviews with men, when I felt that their perspective might need to be met by my experiences as a woman. Sometimes I felt the need to quite clearly question or challenge what a person said, while in other cases I judged that an affirmative stance was more adequate, both ethically and in terms of my goal of gaining knowledge.

Many qualitative methodologies (Fog 2004; Kvale 2007) emphasize that one of the biggest dilemmas for a qualitative interviewer is the fact that ethical and intellectual considerations are sometimes in conflict with each other. We must respect the integrity of the participant, but our task as researchers is to generate new, interesting – and potentially useful – knowledge. So where are the limits around what we can ask people about, and how? Of course, the dilemma becomes even more acute when it comes to sensitive subjects (Corbin & Morse 2003), as in this study. In the interviews I conducted, this was a constant trade-off. To what degree should I explore topics in a way that gave the participant more freedom to choose what to talk about, versus asking direct questions about potentially sensitive topics? I consistently felt that asking “why?” was ethically sensitive in that it could be experienced as me questioning the participants’ experiences or reflections, while at the same time it was a key tool for delving deeper

into the themes addressed, something that may not only be beneficial from a researcher perspective but may also help the participant see things themselves from new perspectives. In conjunction with my analysis of Anas's experiences of being pressured to have sex in [Chapter 4](#), I reflect further on this dilemma.

The interviews took place in a secluded location based on the participant's wishes. Often they took place at the home of the participant, but sometimes we were in some other premises that either I or the participant had access to. The interviews lasted between just over an hour and two and a half hours. Before I started the recording, I told them a little about the Swedish law of consent, which at the time of the interviews was still being debated, and explained the Sexual Offenses Committee's definition of consent as *voluntary participation*. I then talked generally about the fact that it might not always be obvious what is meant by "voluntary" and that I wanted to learn more about people's experiences of this. In addition, I said that I was interested in what might happen if two people do not want the same thing. After this introduction, some of the participants immediately picked up the thread and started talking about some kind of problem related to this, which it was clear that the person had reflected on earlier and which probably motivated them to participate. In other cases, I started by asking the person why they wanted to be interviewed, which in most cases led the person to some problem that was relevant to the study. If this was not the situation, I instead started by asking very open-ended questions like "Can you tell me a little bit about what it's been like for you in your life with sex, wanting or not wanting to have sex, how to communicate it and so on?" Once the interview got into some relevant theme, it was just a matter of exploring it further by continuing to follow up on what I found to be interesting tracks – where by "interesting" I mean themes that, for example, touched on some kind of problem or tension, deviated from expected patterns, related to themes in previous research, or had the potential to shed light on central theoretical questions. I also had a series of predetermined questions and themes that I raised in the latter part of the interview if they had not already come up:

- How do you communicate that you want to have sex? Or do not want to?
- How do you relate to other people's expectations?
- Have you had sex even though you didn't want to?
- Can it be difficult to know what you want?
- Is it possible to want to have sex for different reasons? Giving in, out of care, etc.?
- Voluntariness versus feeling pressured?
- Can you participate voluntarily even though deep down you don't want to?
- What is it like when you yourself want it but the other person doesn't?

- How do you know what the other person wants to have sex?
- Have you ever had sex with someone who maybe didn't really want to or where you weren't sure the other person wanted to?

Towards the end of the interview, I asked outright what role the participant thought gender played in their experiences – not only their own gender but also their partner's. I asked people who had experiences of sex with people of different genders to tell me about any differences they noticed between same-sex and opposite-sex interactions.

When participants recounted experiences that were somehow problematic for them, I was careful to ask them how the experience felt to them, since exploring the complexity of the dynamics of consent should not only be about what people do or are exposed to and why, but also about how they experience it and what it means for them. There are widespread perceptions that rape is one of the worst things that can happen to you psychologically, and ultimately, it is the generally harmful effect of sexual abuse that makes it criminalized. But what happens when we move into more of a grey area? Where is the line between what feels comfortable and okay for different people? And how does gender play a role in the *meaning* of different types of experiences?

Although it can be assumed that those who volunteered to be interviewed found it easier than many others to talk about sex, in almost all the interviews it was clear that the participant was not used to talking at such a detailed level about their sexual experiences, including both how and why something happened and how they experienced it. Although contemporary Western culture is quite obsessed with sex, it is evident that many aspects of sex remain a consistently silent area, perhaps because sex is such a fundamentally bodily experience. A technique I used to dissolve some of the participants' inhibitions about the subject was to employ potentially sexually charged words and expressions myself, to show that explicit sexual language was "okay".

Given the intimate nature of the subject and my probing questions, the interviews became intense, trusting and sometimes overwhelming for the participants. In the vast majority of cases, in my judgement, this was enriching for the participant, rather than a problem (cf. [Corbin & Morse 2003](#)). I had a debriefing with the participants after the recorder was turned off and emphasized that they were welcome to contact me afterwards if there was anything they wondered about, and also if unpleasant feelings arose afterwards. Two of the people I interviewed were so affected by the interviews that I had a continued dialogue with them afterwards, which ended in me referring them to a free counsellor. In both cases, it was about people who for the first time put into words in front of another person experiences that were existentially central for them. The interviews thus brought to life feelings and thoughts that I believed a counsellor could best help them talk about further. Both responded positively to the suggestion that they visit the counsellor.

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