

DYNAMICS OF SEXUAL CONSENT

Sex, Rape and the Grey Area In-Between

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Chapter 2

HOW DOES CONSENT WORK?

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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 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 cosyng 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 “grobe” 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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