

DYNAMICS OF SEXUAL CONSENT

Sex, Rape and the Grey Area In-Between

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Chapter 4

GIVING IN

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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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