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**Consent is a grey area? A comparison of understandings of consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and on the BDSM blogosphere**

Meg Barker

# Consent is a grey area? A comparison of understandings of consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and on the BDSM blogosphere

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## Abstract Page

Whilst the *Fifty Shades* trilogy has increased public awareness of BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism), the understandings of consent depicted in the novels remain reflective of those prevalent in wider heteronormative culture. Responsibility for consenting is located within the individual (woman) and consent relates to sex rather than to the relationship as a whole. This contrasts with understandings of consent currently emerging on the BDSM blogosphere where the locus of responsibility is shifting from individuals to communities, and the concept is opening up to encompass awareness of intersecting social power dynamics and interactions beyond the sexual arena.

**Keywords:** abuse, BDSM, consent, *Fifty Shades*, gender, kink, power.

## **Consent is a grey area? A comparison of understandings of consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and on the BDSM blogosphere**

Meg Barker

Since the foundation of any form of organised BDSM communities, consent has occupied a place of central importance. This is reflected in the common mantra, since the early 1980s, that BDSM play should be 'safe, sane and consensual' (SSC), and the more recent revised phrase 'risk aware consensual kink' (RACK). The latter critically interrogates the possibility of both entirely safe behaviours and completely sane subjectivities, but retains the sense that consent can be clearly and simply negotiated when it comes to BDSM (Veaux, 2012a).

The *Fifty Shades* series (James 2012a, b & c) has recently brought BDSM to a far larger audience than any previous media product (see editorial, this issue). The books include explicit references to BDSM contracts, safewords, and checklists of activities, drawing on common understandings and practices from BDSM communities. Several conversations between the lead characters centre on sexual consent, reflecting this sense that it can be relatively easily negotiated between autonomous individuals. At the same time, BDSM communities themselves have undergone an interrogation of such previously accepted understandings of consent. A number of prominent BDSM bloggers (such as Kitty Stryker, 2011a-c; Clarisse Thorn, 2011; and Pepper Mint, 2007a) have written openly about non-consensual behaviour within BDSM communities, questioning the previously accepted line that 'BDSM is not (ever) abuse'. Much of this discussion has challenged simplistic neoliberal notions of consent which were previously prevalent in BDSM communities and are central to the *Fifty Shades* series due to their culturally taken-for-granted status.

The first section of this paper briefly overviews the ways in which consent is understood within the *Fifty Shades* novels, and how they reflect wider cultural understandings. This section focuses upon the locus of responsibility for consent, the ways in which consent operates, and the activities it relates to, drawing mostly upon the first novel in the trilogy where consent practices are introduced. The second section of the paper returns to each of these themes in turn, highlighting how simplistic heteronormative understandings of consent have been both reproduced and resisted within recent BDSM community discussions. Contrasting these portrayals will hopefully challenge and expand understandings in ways that are useful to wider conversations about consent and communication.

### **Consent in *Fifty Shades***

#### *Locus of responsibility for consent*

Reflective of neoliberal approaches, the responsibility for consent in the *Fifty Shades* novels is located within individuals. Specifically it is up to Anastasia Steele (who is both the woman in the relationship, and the potential submissive) to provide her consent (or not) for the various practices which Christian (the man, and the dominant) wants to engage in. For example, after their first spanking scene, Ana says 'I didn't like it. I'd rather you didn't do it again' (James, 2012a, p.286) and then emails Christian saying 'if I listened to my body I'd be in Alaska by now' (James, 2012a, p.294). Christian makes Ana's individual responsibility clear in his reply:

For the record, you stood beside me knowing what I was going to do.  
You didn't at any time ask me to stop – you didn't use either safeword<sup>i</sup>.  
You are an adult – you have choices. (James, 2012a, p.293)

Christian also insists that the BDSM elements of their relationship remain private, having Ana sign a non-disclosure agreement prior to telling her about his dominant identity. Despite wanting to, Ana does not speak to her close friends or family about her concerns over whether to sign the contract and to consent to submitting to Christian. Despite the rather schoolgirl fantasy nature of their friendships<sup>ii</sup>, the relationship between Christian and Ana remains very self-contained, with boundaries policed by secrecy around BDSM and by jealousy: both Ana and Christian are desired by pretty much everybody of the 'opposite sex' that they meet, and both become possessive when this occurs. Thus consent remains located internally, within the individuals concerned, without the potential for any collective element to consent decisions.

#### *How consent operates*

The ways in which consent operates within *Fifty Shades* reflect wider gendered sexual assumptions. Generally Christian initiates something and, if Ana doesn't explicitly say 'no' or use her safeword to stop play, they end up doing it. Thus the heteronormative dynamic of the active man and passive woman is reproduced, as is the 'no means no' version of sex whereby anything other than saying no - or safewording - is assumed to be consent (see Kitzinger & Frith, 1999).

For example, in negotiations over the contract which Christian wants Ana to sign to agree to be his submissive and to set out what she consents to, Ana is constructed as agentic: able to freely choose regardless of how this contract is presented to her. There is little acknowledgement of the potential impact of knowing how much Christian wants it and being told, early on, that the only way that they will have any relationship is if she signs the contract.

“Say yes,” he whispers fervently.

I frown, not understanding.

“To what?”

“Yes to our arrangement. To being mine. Please Ana,” (James, 2012a, p.138)

Additionally all of the suggestions on the contract are initiated by Christian (who is the only one with any experience of them). Ana rarely communicates any desires of her own, but rather Christian orchestrates their scenes completely. This reproduces common myths around men's natural sexual needs and women's lack of them (Gavey, 2005). The fact that Ana reaches orgasm easily - often multiply - every time despite lack of communication about what she enjoys problematically reproduces both the centrality of orgasms to sex and ideals of telepathic male sexual prowess (Barker, 2011a). The sexual double standard is also present, whereby women are expected to police the unclear boundaries between 'good' and 'bad' sex so as not to be stigmatised as 'slut' or 'tight' (Barker, 2012a). It seems to be Ana's resistance to becoming a submissive, and her insistence of remaining in 'kinky fuckery' rather than 'real' BDSM (James 2012b p.34), that enables her to have the romantic relationship with Christian that he denied to his previous submissives. Consent is

inevitably complicated under such conditions wherein one person does not know their desires and is restricted from articulating some possibilities, whilst the other automatically knows what both they - and the other person - wants.

In some ways Ana's actions reveal such complexities. She could be read as resisting simplistic understandings of sexual consent throughout the books, for example, in her opposition to the contract (James, 2012a, p.187) and her insistence that Christian acknowledges her dislike of pain when she asks him to 'show me how much it can hurt' (James, 2012a, p.504). Ana's reactions also challenge Christian's perception that people have a simple direct insight into themselves. After the spanking scene described above she appears content but is later seen to be troubled by it and visibly upset. This calls into question neoliberal understandings of consent whereby autonomous subjects have easy access to transparent responses and the capacity to live according to these (Bauer, forthcoming 2013).

### *The coverage of consent*

Whilst Christian insists on negotiation of consent in the sexual side of the relationship, his behaviour within the rest of the relationship is often far from consensual (see Tsaros, this volume). He frequently violates their arrangements and does things that Ana has explicitly asked him not to do. For example, he buys her expensive gifts; he turns up on the holiday that she has taken explicitly because she wants some space; and he takes over the company that she works for in the second novel in order to control her working life. Ana jokingly refers to Christian as a stalker (James, 2012a, p.295) and, indeed, the books follow the romantic comedy trope that construes behaviours such as following people, becoming jealous, and possessively trying to limit their friendships with others as romantic.

Lack of consent operates in both directions in the wider relationship between Christian and Ana. Both are possessive and jealous of the other, and just as Christian tries to get Ana to submit to him despite signs that this is not what she wants, so she attempts to get him to enter the kind of 'hearts and flowers' relationship with her in which he says he has no interest (James, 2012a, p.299). This is reflective of the popular view that (heterosexual) relationships are between people from different planets who are required to figure out and then play one another (Barker, 2012a). There are echoes throughout the book of films like *Pretty Woman* (the piano scene), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (the emails), and – of course – *Secretary* (the BDSM, the name Grey), which all reproduce the Beauty and the Beast narrative of the innocent woman changing the - dangerous and wounded - man into what she wants him to be through the power of her love (Downing, 2013).

More nuanced readings of the relationship are possible. Ana does resist many of Christian's attempts to control her life: trying to give back his presents, and becoming angry at his interference in her job. However, she usually capitulates eventually. Ana also recognises that sex is not easily separable from the rest of the relationship, and that it is hard for her to determine her own desires knowing how much Christian wants sexual dominance, and how much she wants him (James, 2012a, p.394, p.503). Although she doesn't consider these difficulties as gendered, they clearly reflect common dilemmas of femininity relating to the requirement of a relationship, the desire to be desired and pleasure in pleasing another, and the yearning to

remain childlike and not agentic/responsible (de Beauvoir, 1949; Barker, 2011b). Her 'inner goddess' tells Ana that she needs to sign the contract 'otherwise we'll end up alone with lots of cats and your classic novels to keep you company' (James, 2012a, p.176) and Christian promises Ana that if she submits she won't have to make any more wearying decisions because he will do this for her (James, 2012a, p.224).

Christian denies that the power imbalances between himself and Ana have any impact on her ability to freely consent. In addition to his comment about her being an adult who makes choices, he is frustrated that she requires distance from him in order to communicate openly, and also says 'Yes, I'm rich. Get used to it' (James, 2012a, p.399) in response to her discomfort at his spending money on her which makes her feel as if she is being paid for sex. Ana, however, reveals some awareness of the complexities of the differences between them, in relation to status, wealth and experience, if not gender. Additionally she constantly questions how Christian's earlier BDSM relationship with an older woman, when he was fifteen, could have been consensual.

Generally speaking, the *Fifty Shades* books demonstrate some awareness that individual characteristics and psychological entanglements (such as being 'fifty shades of fucked up' by one's past, or being young or inexperienced sexually, James, 2012a, p.269) can have some impact on the possibility of knowing one's desires and consenting. However there is no consideration of the potential impact of social power dynamics: thus the characters are treated as if they live in a social vacuum (Bauer, forthcoming 2013).

One intriguing way of revealing the relevance of such social power dynamics is to rewrite sections of the text with them altered and to explore how readers make sense of these, for example when the characters' gender, status, experience, or other axes of power are switched (see Barker, 2012d). The spate of erotic books that have been published in the wake of *Fifty Shades* almost all retain the successful male dominant/inexperienced female submissive dynamic, something which I will return to towards the end of the paper.

### **Consent in BDSM blogs**

Prior to 2011 some BDSM community bloggers, notably Mint (2007a and b), Wiseman (2008) and Kinkylittlegirl (2009), had written critically about the ways in which consent, negotiation and safewords operated within BDSM and the potentials for abuse despite common consent practices<sup>iii</sup>. However most community literature reflected the kind of sexual consent negotiations presented in *Fifty Shades*.

McAulay (2012a) uses the analogy of a grenade to describe the impact then, in 2011, of a number of blog posts about experiences of abuse in BDSM communities (primarily the pansexual<sup>iv</sup> BDSM communities in the United States, United Kingdom, Republic of Ireland, and Australia). McAulay terms what followed a 'war' between those who wanted more open discussion of these issues and those who wanted to close discussion down. This war led to the setting up of the consent culture project<sup>v</sup>, and key contributors Kitty Stryker and Maggie Mayhem putting on 'safe/ward' workshops around the United States and hosting a blog carnival to encourage the sharing of experience.

For the current paper I collected together all of the main blog posts on this topic which were frequently cited in internet discussions of BDSM and abuse. I published a list of these on my own blog. Bloggers and other community members were then asked whether any important posts had been missed, and these were added in (Barker, 2012c)<sup>vi</sup>. As Barker & Langdridge (2010) point out, it is vital that academics are very cautious when reporting narratives which have the potential to exacerbate, rather than ameliorate, the precarious position of sexual communities in wider culture. Barker & Langdridge focused on emerging narratives around BDSM as 'healing' which had the potential to both resist and reinforce common pathologising discourses such as sadism and masochism being regarded as disorders by mainstream psychiatry. Narratives of non-consensual behaviour in BDSM have a - probably greater - risk of reinforcing stereotypes of all BDSM as abusive, particularly given the still-criminalised status of some BDSM practices (Weait, 2007) at a time when these have again received popular and legal attention (see Jackman, 2012).

Mindful of these cautions, I have explored blog postings on BDSM and abuse in this paper for three main reasons. (1) Due to the nature of the blogs, and the mainstream media reporting of them (Chang, 2012; Clark-Flory, 2012), they are already in the public domain<sup>vii</sup>; (2) As will be explored, the common claim that BDSM is not (ever) abusive, and the related secrecy and silence surrounding abuse, is regarded as part of the problem by most of these authors who call for more open dialogue; and (3) The understandings of consent emerging in these blogs have a great deal of value to offer beyond BDSM communities. Bauer (forthcoming 2013), addressing similar concerns, writes that 'an open discourse on abuse is necessary in the community to educate and empower people, especially novices, even if this risks reproducing the stigma of BDSM as violent in the general public'.

In addition, it is important to note that lines between 'academia' and 'the blogosphere' are increasingly blurred. Many of the bloggers cited here draw on academic theories, have academic qualifications, and are invited to speak in academic contexts, and many of the academics writing on this area also blog (e.g. Barker 2012c; Downing, 2012; Newmahr, 2012; Weiss 2012). There is academic value to using sex blogs as both a source of data and as a means of dissemination (Barker, 2012b). Like the BDSM blogger Bitchy Jones, these bloggers - embedded as they are in the communities they write about - frequently resist polarisation into simplistic celebratory or critical stances towards BDSM practices and communities, and in so doing, enable more sophisticated understandings to emerge (see Barker, Downing & Attwood, 2012).

#### *Shifting the locus of responsibility for consent*

Through the blog postings on abuse within BDSM we see a shift in the locus of responsibility from isolated individuals - as in *Fifty Shades* and the earlier BDSM community understandings of consent that this draws on - to a sense of collective social responsibility for sexual consent<sup>viii</sup>.

Most blog posts begin by challenging the idea that experiences of abuse are rare. For example, Kitty Stryker's (2011a) post, 'I never called it rape', describes several experiences when saying 'no' or safewording were not respected, when dominants used toys or engaged in practices which she had not consented to and/or had explicitly stated that she did not want, and where dominants had continued with play after a scene had ended. Several bloggers also cite this post from one of the main BDSM community writers, Jay Wiseman, about a non-sexual scene he engaged in with a submissive woman.

So the scene is finished and she's getting dressed when I hear her quietly say, almost more to herself than me, "You actually kept the agreement to not be sexual. That was interesting."

Huh?

I turn to look at her, my jaw hanging open.

"What do you mean?" I ask her.

"You're the first one who ever did that," she replies.

HUH???

"Yeah," she continues, "All of the other men have just gone ahead and had sex with me anyway."

I cannot believe what I'm hearing.

"What do they say afterwards?"

"Usually something like, Oh, it just happened." (Wiseman, 2008)

Such postings begin to point towards the idea that these are not isolated incidents between individuals but something more systemic. The wider community is also implicated in the structure of the reports, as MacAulay Millar (2012) summarises, 'there's no shortage of stories that start "I was abused" and end "when I tried to say something the community closed ranks around the abuser and I was frozen out'. Thorn (2011) reflects on her own defensiveness when first hearing accounts of abuse and explains that it came from a fear of giving fuel to the common accusation that 'BDSM is always abuse'. Ironically such accusations seem to have resulted in communities where abuse may be more, rather than less, likely to occur due to the now dominant counter-discourse that 'kink is not abuse'<sup>ix</sup> which means that potential perpetrators know that abuse will rarely be acknowledged (Pervocracy, 2012c). MacAulay Millar (2012) also writes about the ways in which discussions have been silenced or marginalised in online forums, both explicitly by moderators and in the structural ways in which such forums operate.

The most commonly reported 'pushback' against postings about abusive experiences (Pervocracy, 2012b) took the form of dismissing them as a form of drama (a popular mantra in the overlapping sex and geek communities being 'I don't do drama'<sup>x</sup>). Also common were discussions of what the victim should have done differently to avoid abuse (what Veaux, 2012b calls 'the shoulda game'), and arguments that if they did not go to the police then it could not have been abuse, despite the well-recognised problems with the ways that both BDSM and sexual assault are treated in criminal justice systems (MacAulay Millar, 2012). Pervocracy (2012b) addresses these issues directly in their post 'why didn't I just call the cops?' explaining how the common focus on the responsibility of the victim left them assuming all blame themselves when a dominant fisted them without negotiation and continued to do so after they had safeworded several times. As Williams (2012) puts it: 'I thought "Well, I didn't say "No." forcefully enough. I didn't insist. I didn't hit him, push him away. It must be my fault.'"

Bloggers challenge victim blame and also resist pressure to follow a culturally standard rape narrative (Cadwallader, in press) by critically engaging with the assumption that anything that does not follow this narrative does not count (for example if they weren't immediately traumatised, if the abusive act was non-

penetrative, or if they had consented to other activities).

Creatrixtiara (2012) explicitly shifts the locus of relationships from individuals to community in their opening statement that:

We can't just rely on "tell rapists not to rape". Not when we don't recognise our own actions as abusive, not when we excuse the actions of others as "well they didn't mean it that way" because we know them. Not when we only notice big-scale attacks and don't recognise smaller acts of consent-breaking.

We can't just rely on telling people to watch their drinks or not walk out alone at nights. Not when they don't neatly correlate to safety numbers. Not when you can do everything perfect and still be attacked ...

We can't just focus on the victim and the perpetrator, not when there's all the rest of society that ... perpetuates behaviours and attitudes that allow these sorts of attacks to continue.

Many bloggers provide lists of what BDSM communities could usefully do and describe the kinds of cultures they would like to foster within such communities. Key elements, repeated across many blogs, include: acknowledging that abuse happens within BDSM communities, including in situations with people who are well-respected or leaders themselves (West, 2012), and in various different dynamics; listening to survivors, providing them with resources where possible, and respecting their choices; taking responsibility for calling people out - and potentially excluding them or listing their names - when they behave non-consensually; providing education – particularly to people new to communities and people who have engaged in non-consensual behaviour (see also Mint, 2007a & b; Stryker, 2011c; MacAulay Millar, 2012).

#### *Opening up how consent operates*

This conceptualisation of sexual consent as a collective and social phenomenon also relates to shifting understandings of how consent operates. This moves from the emphasis, as in the *Fifty Shades* trilogy, on the submissive or bottom saying 'no' or safewording, to calls to create cultures of enthusiastic consent and/or taking mutual responsibility for creating dynamics and situations in which consent is possible.

Some bloggers (e.g. Veaux, 2012a) point out that talk of negotiation and safewords in BDSM communities can operate as a veneer under which people actually assume that anything is fine so long as the other person enjoys it or doesn't complain. This is akin to what actually happens in many of the scenes in *Fifty Shades* and reflects a wider cultural tendency to evaluate sex on whether it is going well rather than on whether it is consensual (Bauer, forthcoming 2013). Such a position is strongly criticised in many blogs, for example Maxine (2012) says:

I think of this as Schrödinger-sex. You don't know until you open the box whether it contains an orgasm or a jail sentence. Why on earth would anyone find that attractive??! (E.L. James, I'm looking at you, here.)

Several bloggers call for more than just a return to taking negotiations and safewords seriously, shifting from a position of 'no means no' to 'yes means yes' (MacAulay Millar, 2011) or 'enthusiastic consent' (Pervocracy, 2011c), with the aim of strengthening - particularly women's - sexual subjectivities (Bauer, forthcoming 2013). Maxine (2012) writes: 'consent is established by saying "yes" before the fact, not by "not saying no" when something is already happening. Only YES means yes', and Veaux (2012c): 'I will not assume that simply because I haven't been forbidden to do something, that means it's OK to do it'. Here there is implicit criticism of the previous focus on establishing what people won't do (limits) and when they need to stop (safewords) and a shift towards finding out what people actively *want* to do through communication. There is also a sense that consent need to be an ongoing negotiation rather than a one-off moment after which it can be assumed.

This 'yes means yes' position shifts the focus of consent from the individual (usually submissive) giving their limits or safewords, to consent as a relational dialogue between the participants. Pervocracy (2012a) and others call for such dialogues to become more of a feature of BDSM erotica, pornography, and the stories that people tell about their scenes, to demonstrate that the conversations themselves can be erotic, and to create norms of having such dialogues, with available structures for how they might proceed.

However, the shift from 'no means no' to 'yes means yes' is not enough for most bloggers. The critique of the latter position relates to collective responsibility for consent because it involves acknowledging the ways in which all dialogues are situated within BDSM communities which, themselves, are located within wider culture. As boldlygo (2012) puts it 'none of us are able, even in spaces where we feel safe or where we know the rules are different, to fully separate ourselves from our social and environmental contexts': We cannot step outside of culture (Barker & Gill, 2012).

Several bloggers speak of wider 'rape culture' which is exemplified in the tendency to blame the victim and to deny abuse highlighted above. In her post 'I wish I could use a safeword on rape culture', Stryker (2011b) also speaks of slut shaming and the sexual double standard as creating the conditions in BDSM communities under which abuse is enabled. Pervocracy (2011b) writes about the cultural assumption that women owe men sex (the consent as contract model, which is perhaps what Ana resists in her discomfort over Christian's presents in *Fifty Shades*). Other common, and gendered, beliefs which both these authors highlight include the notions, perpetuated in *Fifty Shades* and by many in BDSM communities, that 'real' dominants/men should automatically know what submissives/women need, and that 'real' submissives should be able to take anything without safewording.

Such blogs echo a key issue which Weiss (2011) highlights in her ethnography of pansexual BDSM communities: the failure to recognise wider axes of power under which everyone operates. Authors such as Millbank (2012a, b & c), Valentine (2012) and Boldlygo (2012) explicitly address the common tendency of discussions to polarise into either an agency feminist position<sup>xi</sup> where everyone is regarded as free and autonomous, or a radical feminist position where freedom is considered impossible under conditions of patriarchy/kyriarchy<sup>xii</sup>. Like many of the academics writing on these topics, such bloggers search for a more 'sex critical' position (Downing, 2012) which rejects the neo-liberal choice rhetoric and acknowledges the multiple intersecting power dynamics within which agency operates (Deckha, 2011). For example, Millbank (2012c) critiques the 'sex-positive' position, present in many sexual communities, which risks becoming a

sexual imperative excluding those who do not want sex. Millbank (2012b) also points out that 'yes', or 'enthusiastic consent' is by no means straightforward given that women are encouraged to respond enthusiastically in all kinds of contexts when they might not really feel it.

Such authors employ a Foucauldian understanding of freedom in which people have options, albeit limited ones, to act within a field of power. Consent is possible, but liberal understandings of consent are called into question (Bauer, forthcoming 2013), and there is a focus upon what actions are feasible given the ways in which people are shaped by their contact with others and with the wider world (Ahmed, 2004). In her call for collective responsibility for abuse, Valentine (2012) asks:

Can we know that choosing to submit is both free and coerced, that this coercion isn't necessarily anyone's individual fault but that we still need to work, hard and constantly, against it?

### *Expanding out the coverage of consent*

BDSM practices challenge understandings of 'what counts' as sex and question common boundaries, for example, between sex, leisure, art, sport, and spiritual practice (Barker, 2012a). Thus blog posts about BDSM and abuse are not restricted to situations where penis-in-vagina intercourse happens without consent, but include many other forms of physical and psychological play (Newmahr, 2011). This begins to raise the question of the coverage of consent. Does it apply only to the sexual elements of play, to all play, to relationships in their entirety, and/or to other interactions between people? As we saw earlier, in *Fifty Shades*, consent is only understood as relevant to the sexual arena, meaning that many non-consensual aspects of the wider relationship go unchallenged.

Related to the shift towards collective responsibility and the recognition of the wider cultural context in which sexual consent conversations happen, bloggers point out the problems inherent in insisting on consent in a sexual context when it isn't present elsewhere. Given the 'consent toxicity' of wider culture (boldlygo, 2012), any form of pure consent in a sexual context is viewed as difficult if not impossible. Many bloggers point out the prevalence of forms of force, control, pressure, persuasion and manipulation in other aspects of life, for example Pervocracy (2012b) writes:

I think part of the reason we have trouble drawing the line "it's not okay to force someone into sexual activity" is that in many ways, forcing people to do things is part of our culture in general. Cut that shit out of your life. If someone doesn't want to go to a party, try a new food, get up and dance, make small talk at the lunchtable - that's their right. Stop the "aww c'mon" and "just this once" and the games where you playfully force someone to play along. Accept that no means no - all the time.

Pervocracy suggests that consent cultures can be built through making available narratives whereby communication and negotiation happen (in sexual and non-sexual contexts) and making a relational practice of tuning into one's feelings and communicating them honestly to others ("no, I don't want to sit with you." "No, you can't have my phone number." "I love hugs, but please ask me first.", 2012b). Many community

writers consider asking before touching to be a good micro-consent practice, raising awareness of the power and cultural entitlement involved in assuming the right to touch (children, women and people of colour, for example, Bauer, forthcoming 2013). However, it is also necessary to recognise classed and cultural dynamics whereby norms of always seeking consent to touch could be experienced as excluding or oppressive, for example when touch is a standard part of everyday interaction.

On a more macro level of social interaction, authors such as Chancer (1992) have highlighted the non-consensual cultures of dominance and submission which operate in the corporate world. Williams (2002) argues that hierarchical dynamics in academic culture also operate in ways which make mutual respect and recognition difficult and encourage non-consensual dominance/submission dynamics: equality is often assumed to be present rather than the impact of intersecting power dynamics being recognised (see also Gill, 2009). Cultures of consent toxicity are thus commonplace across romantic relationships, everyday social interaction, and the operation of corporate and public institutions. As Mint (2007c) acknowledges: 'we are in fact swimming in a soup of nonconsensual power dynamics, where our personal strategies are typically shaped by sets of options that can range from mildly undesirable to downright horrific'.

This returns us to whether sexual, or any other form, of consent can be simple - or even possible – under such conditions. As mentioned previously, the relationship dynamics in *Fifty Shades* whereby Christian and Ana try to change or manipulate one another is reminiscent of wider dynamics of romantic relationships whereby people are encouraged to figure out and play each other, particularly - but by no means exclusively - in heterosexual contexts (Barker, 2012a). In addition, the pressures, particularly on women, to create themselves as desirable objects and to be pleasing to others remain (Barker & Gill, 2012). Other writers specifically highlight the ways in which dangerous dominant men who non-consensually possess women are romanticised and eroticised in wider society (MacAulay Millar, 2012), suggesting that desire for such dynamics cannot easily be removed from that context. I might add to this the ways in which the infantilised woman who doesn't have agency or responsibility is widely romanticised and/or eroticised, as in *Fifty Shades* and in some parts of the BDSM communities (Barker, 2011b).

Moving us further away from the taken for granted liberal understanding of consent between free individuals which pervades wider culture, there is also an awareness in the blogs of intersections of power beyond gender. Prominent BDSM bloggers like Bitchy Jones (Barker, Downing & Atwood, 2012) and Maymay (cited in MacAulay Millar, 2011) raise awareness of the intersections between sexism and 'domism', which affect power hierarchies within BDSM impacting how people are treated and whose consent is more or less valued (dominant women still being subject to sexual subjectification, submissive men being low down the hierarchy). There are consent considerations, also, in relation to age, race, class, disability, status in the community, and body shape. For example, some communities set up TNG (The Next Generation) groups to address the issue of young people coming into communities and being overwhelmed by attention from much older, and more experienced, dominants (a dynamic which is exacerbated by many older submissives having left the community following non-consensual experiences, MacAulay Millar, 2012).

Millbank (2012d) argues that people 'have a responsibility equal to the social power they possess to care

about and bring about a state of consensuality in their sexual relations'. Such considerations lead to the suggestion that intersections of power and awareness of wider cultural conditions be explicitly included in negotiations and conversations about consent, and in community discussions, such that limitations and constraints on capacity to consent are recognised. This is very reminiscent of the suggestions made by the participants in Bauer's (forthcoming 2013) research on dyke+queer continental European scenes: both in terms of critical awareness of power dynamics and openness about the potential for abuse, so that it can be named.

Millbank (2012b) proposes, when it comes to sexual consent, that:

we must consider how much freedom a sex partner has to execute on the responsibilities we've assigned them, and to consider our *own* responsibilities to offset the pressure we are able to place on consent through the systems of domination in which we participate in a dominant position over our sex partner. If we want to create a situation where a "yes" is most likely to mean "yes", we must work, first to understand and then to defuse, the potential consequences of a "no" (2012b)

## **Conclusions**

Both the *Fifty Shades* series, and pansexual BDSM communities prior to 2011, helpfully raised the possibility that consent is something that requires establishing rather than being taken-for-granted. However, both generally accepted neoliberal understandings of consent whereby those consenting were equal and free to do so without constraint.

*Fifty Shades* reflects broader heteronormative understandings of consent whereby men initiate and women comply or resist, having the agency and self-understanding to easily do so. Consent is only regarded as relevant to the sexual context, and trying to shape and change one another is acceptable within wider relationships. Recent BDSM blogs about abuse have shifted the locus of responsibility from isolated individuals to communities who are seen as having collective responsibility for creating consensual cultures and engaging in open dialogue about abuse. Consent is regarded as an ongoing, relational, negotiation in which the conditions under which a 'no' is possible need to be created, by everyone involved, in order for a 'yes' to count. Thus it is possible for communities to operate in ways which either expand, or contract, the agency of people within them, the emphasis being on open dialogue and critical awareness rather than on protective and potentially infantilising rules. This involves a recognition of the intersecting social power dynamics under which we all operate as well as the consent toxicity of many everyday interactions at both an interpersonal and a structural level. Pervocracy (2012a) writes that 'a consent culture is one in which the prevailing narrative of sex – in fact of human interaction – is centred around mutual consent'. Both Mint (2007c) and Bauer (forthcoming 2013) point to the intriguing possibility of explicitly using BDSM play to interrogate social power dynamics, making them more accessible to criticism.

Such an approach is similar to the notion of Critically Informed Kink (CIK) (Barker & Gill, 2012), which also resembles the sex critical position which Downing (2012) puts forward. In addition to resisting polarisation into positions of *either* neoliberal choice *or* total lack of agency, a sex critical approach argues that *all forms*

of sexuality should be critically evaluated in terms of the ideologies they uphold. As Bauer (forthcoming 2013) makes clear, targeting BDSM alone is misguided given that all human interactions are infused with these power dynamics which limit consent and self-determination. Thorn (2011) quotes blogger violetwhite:

It's ironic that the most perverse manipulations of power in my life occurred in a past vanilla relationship where I tolerated tyranny because the normative structure of our relationship obscured the fact that that is what it was

Zanin (2012) and Downing (2013) both point out the juxtaposition between the way in which the BDSM contract and the marriage contract are, and are not, interrogated within the *Fifty Shades* books. Zanin argues that the trilogy 'is just plain old hetero-patriarchal power relationships [...that...] does nothing more than perpetuate an entire culture where "consent" takes a backseat to "normal"'.

Something that academics and bloggers can usefully do, moving forward, is to bring the kinds of critical considerations of consent within BDSM communities to bear on reports of abuse in other forms of relationships (including recent high profile cases), and on relationships and human interactions more widely. On this point, an interview between BDSM blogger, Franklin Veaux and a *Men's Health* magazine journalist, 'So your girlfriend has read 50 Shades; now how do you start with BDSM?', is fascinating (Veaux, 2012b). The journalist continually ask questions of the 'how do I get my girlfriend to...' variety, which Veaux persistently responds to by pointing out the problematic assumptions inherent in this very approach: the pressure to receive a 'yes', the need to play somebody in order to 'get them' to trust you, the assumption of a man initiating/woman complying/resisting dynamic, and the fact that open communication is not even considered. We need to explore ways of bringing the kinds of critical thinking present in both blogs and academic writing on these issues to a much wider audience.

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## Biography

Meg Barker is a senior lecturer in psychology at the Open University and a sex and relationship therapist. With Darren Langdridge, Meg published one of the key academic collections on BDSM, *Safe, Sane and Consensual* and co-edits the journal, *Psychology & Sexuality*. Meg co-organises Critical Sexology and founded BiUK. Meg's research on sexualities and relationships has been published in several journals and books and culminated recently in a general audience book *Rewriting the Rules* ([www.rewriting-the-rules.com](http://www.rewriting-the-rules.com)).

## Address:

Dr Meg Barker, Psychology in Social Sciences, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA  
01908 655378  
[meg.barker@open.ac.uk](mailto:meg.barker@open.ac.uk)

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- i Yellow to communicate being close to the limit and red to stop immediately.
  - ii Ana's best friend gets together with Christian's brother, Christian's sister gets together with Ana's best friend's brother.
  - iii Earlier than this Pat(rick) Califia had addressed such issues in lesbian BDSM communities in the 1990s.
  - iv The pansexual BDSM scene in this context refers to 'the community of BDSMers in major cities oriented around heterosexual men, and heterosexual, heteroflexible and bisexual women' (MacAulay Millar, 2011). MacAulay Millar reports that overlap between this scene and gay/lesbian/queer BDSM scenes is minimal. Issues of whether the understandings of consent within this scene generalise across other scenes is considered towards the end of the paper.
  - v [www.consentculture.com](http://www.consentculture.com)
  - vi I have used the real names of bloggers where these were readily publicly available on the home page on their blog, or where they explicitly asked me to do so. In all other cases I have used the title of the blog or internet handle.
  - vii I have not reported on any of the discussions taking place on BDSM websites and discussion forums which require a login for these reasons. Similarly I have not reported the comments on the blog posts given that authors of these may not always be aware that they are writing for a public audience. However, such discussions would be valuable material for future research, with author consent, given the potential to observe processes of opening up and closing down understandings in action.
  - viii It is noteworthy here that the majority of posts deal with submissive women victims/survivors and dominant men perpetrators, whilst recognising that these are not the only possible configurations. Dynamics of gender and other axes of power will be returned to towards the end of the paper.
  - ix And related ideas such as YKIOK, IJNMK (Your kink is OK, it's just not my kink).
  - x Common enough that there is an XKCD cartoon about how problematic this view is, see <http://xkcd.com/1124>.
  - xi Also called third wave, neoliberal, or sex-positive feminism.
  - xii This refers to the intersecting forms of social power (including gender, sexuality, disability, age, race, class, etc.) which result in a complex multiplicity of privileges and oppressions for each individual across relationships and contexts.