

Pleasure, Community, and Marginalization in Rope Bondage: A qualitative
investigation into a BDSM subculture

by

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Abstract¹

Rope bondage subculture is a social world positioned underneath the broader umbrella of pansexual BDSM subculture. It is characterized by its own norms, spaces, words, practices, art, career opportunities, events, identities, and more. The status of rope as a *sub*-subculture spread across and between locations renders it mostly invisible to outsiders. As such, although there are a few studies on rope bondage, its discrete social world has rarely been recognized in academic research, and never as the primary focus. Through my insider status I investigate the shape of the rope bondage world and the experiences of some of the people within it.

I draw on 23 qualitative interviews with people who practice rope bondage in Canada and the United States to investigate peoples' experiences of rope bondage practice and subculture. My analysis is supported by a theoretical foundation informed by symbolic interactionism, feminism, critical disability studies, and critical race theory. I explore the theoretical and methodological intricacies of conducting qualitative research on rope bondage from the inside, while prioritizing and theorizing ethical participant-centered methods informed by select kinky etiquette and practices.

My findings suggest that rope bondage subculture is characterized by almost indescribable experiences of pleasure, belonging, and joy, along with experiences of conflict and discrimination at personal and structural levels. It is both a vibrant social world and a subculture informed by (and reflective of) the racism, ableism, sexism,

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homo/transphobia, and classism that plague wider society. The accounts of disabled and racialized rope bondage practitioners are crucial to understanding both oppression and resistance in this world.

I build upon Weiss' (2006) concept of unintelligibility to argue that kinky pleasure that is not strictly, normatively sexual appears to be unintelligible to most BDSM researchers. Further, in some respects, kinky pleasure is unintelligible—or at least ineffable—to some of the practitioners themselves. My findings show that understanding the texture of rope bondage's pleasure requires listening to how rope bondage practitioners theorize their own desires, pleasures, and lives.

This work offers theoretical, conceptual, and practical tools to understand rope bondage practitioners, complex sexualities, BDSM, and participant-centered research on deviantized demographics.

To K, for surviving.

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Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Glossary</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Introduction: “Exactly what you think it is, and nothing like you think it is”</i>	<i>1</i>
Why Should We Care?	3
Positioning Myself	6
The Project	9
What <i>Is</i> Rope Bondage?	11
Rope Bondage Subculture	17
Dissertation Outline	19
<i>Chapter One: Kink, Desire, Race, and Rope in Sociology and Criminology</i>	<i>23</i>
What is BDSM?	24
Choosing Language: BDSM? SM? S/M?	25
A Short History of BDSM Research and Findings	27
Conceptualizing Kink Desire	36
Race and BDSM: Research Sampling and Racial Representation	42
Rope Bondage Practice and Subculture	45
Contributions	49
<i>Chapter Two: Theory and Methodology</i>	<i>51</i>
Brainstorming Theory	51
Critical Theoretical Influences: Feminism, Critical Race Theory, and BDSM Subculture	53
Feminism	54
Critical Disability Studies	55
Critical Race Theory and Representation	57
Micro-to-Macro Symbolic Interactionism: Meaning-Making, Stigma, Community, and Resistance	58
Power	61
Methodology	62
<i>Chapter Three: Methods and Kinking Research</i>	<i>66</i>
Methods Part 1: Project Design and Research Ethics	68
Data Sources, Research Structure, and Institutional Ethics	68
Interviews	70
Methods Part 2: Finding, Meeting, Speaking	71
Preparing to Enter the Field	71
Entering the Field: Gatekeepers, Recruitment, and Sampling	73
	<i>vii</i>

Recruitment	73
Sampling and Diversity	76
Interviews	79
Interviewing as a Scene	80
Methods Part 3: Analysis	82
Methods Part 4: Postscript	87
Limitations and Strengths: Insider Research	87
Messy Methods	91
Tensions in Interviewing Ethics	92
Interviewing on Race and Racism	100
Methods Part 5: Kinking Methods	102
<i>Chapter Four: Meet the Participants</i>	<i>109</i>
<i>Chapter Five: “Because It’s Community”: Unpacking Rope Bondage Subculture</i>	<i>121</i>
Community: Discovery, Construction, and Meaning	123
Finding Community	123
The Meaning of Community	127
“‘This is Where Community Happens’”: The Role of Events and Spaces in Rope Community and Subculture	139
Community, Consent, and Conflict	143
Belonging, Joy, and Pleasure: “The Rope Community is Love”	146
<i>Chapter Six: Marginalization, Stigma, and Disability in Rope Bondage Subculture</i>	<i>150</i>
Disability, Stigma, and Social Identity	152
Stigma, Social Identity, and Microaggressions	157
Clashing Social Identities	160
Benefits to Rope	164
Exceptions and Layered Marginalizations	169
<i>Chapter Seven: Kinksters of Colour in Rope Bondage Subculture: Race, Representation, and Resistance</i>	<i>172</i>
Responsibility and Visibility	176
Allyship and Whiteness	190
Discussion	191
<i>Chapter Eight: “Beautiful, Scary, and Really, Really Unsettling”: Unintelligibility and Theorizing Pleasure</i>	<i>193</i>
Unintelligible Desire	195
Mobilizing Unintelligible Pleasure	200
How do rope bondage practitioners theorize their own pleasure?	201
Reconciling Self-Theory and Unintelligibility	209
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>211</i>
Messages from the Other Side	213

Opportunities for the Future	216
<i>References</i>	<i>218</i>
<i>Appendices</i>	<i>248</i>
Appendix A: Interview Consent Form	248
Appendix B: Observation Consent Form	251
Appendix C: Safety Protocol for Observation Sessions	254
Appendix D: Certificate of REB Clearance	256
Appendix E: Interview Schedule (version 2)	258

Glossary

Drop: An emotional, physical, and/or psychological experience akin to situational depression that can follow a scene or other BDSM play. See Sprott and Randall (2016) for a discussion of different types of ‘drop’ and how communities understand them.

Headspace: An altered state of mind, a mood, or an emotion, depending on the person. May be referred to as “subspace”, “topspace”, and other more specific words that identify the position of the person experiencing it.

Kinbaku: “Literally tight binding in Japanese, and refers to erotic rope bondage in Japanese” (Rope 365, n.d., n.p.). Similar to “shibari”, but is more frequently associated with erotic/sexual rope bondage. Nawakiri (2017, p. 30) writes: “kinbaku should be an expression of sexual desire and love; it is a way for two people to communicate with each other, and to mutually enjoy the experience. Playing with rope may be done with almost no techniques or skills, but it cannot be done without this spirit.”

-mistic or -misia (suffix): Evolving language to replace -phobia as a suffix when speaking of bigotry, purportedly from the Ancient Greek “miseo”, to hate. Examples include “transmisia” instead of “transphobia” and “homomistic” instead of “homophobic”. Used by a participant in Chapter 5.

Munch: A social gathering of kinky people in a non-kinky location. Often involves food and takes place at a restaurant, café, or other similar space (hence the name “munch”). These are often more accessible to new practitioners who are intimidated by kink-dedicated spaces, as people are usually required to adhere to non-kinky social norms with

their behaviour and clothing. For more on the social importance of munches, see Webster and Ivanov (2019).

Pansexual BDSM subculture: A branch of BDSM subculture that differs culturally and historically from gay/leathersex (Weiss, 2011b) and lesbian/queer BDSM subcultures (Simula, 2019b). This is named “pansexual” not to be inclusive only of pansexual people, but to identify that any sexuality is (in theory) welcome. See Chapter 1 and Simula (2019b) for more detail.

Play: At its simplest, “play” can refer to the activity that BDSM practitioners do, e.g. “I like rope play” or “we played last night”. “Play” is also a theoretically complex concept; as Weiss (2006a) writes, “play is a form of collective belonging based on the bracketed activity of SM” (p. 236) and can be “a transformative, active process of engaging with the world and re-imagining, tweaking or recreating it. Play is recreational (something pleasant, not-work) as well as re-creational (productive of new worlds or relations)” (p. 238). In this dissertation, I use it in context as my participants do, embracing its varied depths and meanings. For a thorough exploration of “play”, see Weiss (2006a).

Rigger: A person who ties, sometimes synonymous with “rope top”. In some contexts, “rigger” may imply more expertise, experience, or status than “rope top”.

Rope bottom: A person who is tied by another person with rope. Can also be a verb, e.g. “rope bottoming.”

Rope top: A person who ties another person with rope. Can also be a verb, e.g. “rope topping”.

Self-tier: A person who ties themselves with rope. Can also be a verb, e.g. “self-tying”.

Service top: A role where a person is the active player applying something to another person in order to be of service to that person. “Service” in this context may mean meeting the person’s needs, following instructions, or otherwise engaging in activity that will please the service bottom. Disrupts the expected power distribution implied (but not required) in “top” and “bottom” language that suggests “tops” are in charge while “bottoms” are not. Can also be a verb, “service topping”.

Shibari: Purportedly “a conjugation of the verb Shibaru ‘to tie’ in Japanese.” (Rope 365, n.d., n.p.) Refers to a rope bondage tying style that relies on frictions rather than knots, usually utilizes natural fiber rope (see Introduction), and traces its stylistic roots to rope bondage invented in Japan.

Suspension: Rope bondage that involves some (partial suspension) or all (full suspension) weight being supported off the ground.

TK: “TK” is a short-form for “takate kote”, or Shibari-style chest harness. The arms are commonly (but not always) tied behind the back, with the arms folded together parallel to the ground and tight wraps around the person’s arms, shoulders, and chest.

Introduction

“Exactly what you think it is, and nothing like you think it is”

“The practice of S&M is the creation of pleasure, and there is an identity with that creation. And that’s why S&M is really a subculture. It’s a process of invention.”

Michel Foucault (1997, pp. 169-170)

This dissertation is a love letter to rope bondage. “Rope bondage” refers to the act of being tied, tying another, or tying oneself in rope and is a subset of kinky or BDSM activity. Rope bondage is a physical practice, a form of intimacy, a sexual outlet, a style of expression, a type of art, and countless other things. There is a subculture and many smaller communities that have been built up around this practice. Two aspects of rope bondage—personal play and social world—are the foci of this project.

The existence of rope bondage is common knowledge, as is reflected in its representation in film (Brody et al, 2015), television (Behm et al., 2019), art (e.g. Yoshitoshi, 1885, as cited by Kruijff, 2017), and academic inquiry (Newmahr, 2011; Martin, 2011). In these representations, it is depicted almost exclusively as a sexual or sexual-adjacent activity. More varied representations of rope bondage experience are rare, and the social *world* of rope bondage has been almost entirely overlooked. In this dissertation, I draw on 23 qualitative interviews with rope bondage practitioners, informed by my own personal experiences as a practitioner, to provide a more comprehensive account. My analysis frames rope bondage as a vibrant and discrete subculture as well as a diverse and complex practice that includes people who theorize their own experiences. These elements—the subcultural/social and the personal

experiential—are intimately related to one another as participants’ experiences with the exceptionality of rope bondage influence the intensity of their subcultural involvement, the effort they dedicate to maintaining or changing their communities and relationships, and the serious consequences of harm, conflict, marginalization, and discrimination that can occur within this world.

BDSM commonly refers to a wide variety of different activities and desires involving the giving, receiving, and/or exchange of pain, power, and other unconventional expressions of pleasure-seeking (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006a) and play (Weiss, 2006; Faccio, Casini, & Cipolletta, 2014; Turley, Monroe, & King, 2017). Rope bondage as a practice can be just one of these many activities and is usually represented as such, which is possibly why outsiders—academics, journalists, and “vanilla” (or non-kinky) people “walking on the wild side”—have most frequently encountered rope bondage in generalized BDSM spaces (e.g. Newmahr, 2011b; Martin, 2011). This may be why rope bondage as a *specific* subculture seems to have been overlooked¹ as a rich site of academic study. Explorations into other offshoots of the BDSM ecosystem include practice-specific explorations like Wignall and McCormack’s study of pup play (2015), Plante’s analysis of erotic spanking (2006), and Dancer, Kleinplatz, and Moser’s exploration of 24/7 SM slavery (2006). Like these targeted analyses, this work will tease out the practice and sphere of rope bondage not as a world independent from BDSM, but one that operates both within and alongside it.

¹ A notable exception is Martin’s (2011) dissertation “Powerful Exchanges”, which includes a sixteen-page section on his experience and analysis of a Shibari studio.

In this dissertation, I approach and define rope bondage as an expressive human experience, a sadomasochistic pursuit, a high art, an athletic endeavor, a personal grounding technique, a connective practice, a tool for intimate communication, a sexual experience, and more. It is everything to some people and barely anything to others. Rope bondage—and, similarly, kink in general—is a practice limited only by the boundaries of human imagination, creativity, desire, and physical (or emotional, or psychological) capacities.

Why Should We Care?

Throughout my years studying rope bondage and BDSM, I have heard these questions countless times: why should we care? Why does it matter? Who cares what people do behind closed doors?

It matters. As we will see in Chapter 1, BDSM practitioners in Canada and the United States (and elsewhere in the world) face varying levels of stigmatization and criminalization that impact their ability to live their lives. BDSM practice has been cited in child custody cases (Klein & Moser, 2008)², has resulted in people being fired from work (Moye, 2018), and BDSMers have had their consensual practices caught up in and legislated against in recent developments to criminalize sex work (such as the FOSTA-SESTA bill package in the United States in 2018, and Bill C-36 in Canada in 2014). Public shaming and the disclosure of intimate details in news media sometimes occurs, as

² Luckily, kinky parents are becoming increasingly able to remove BDSM behaviour as a relevant fact in child custody cases (Wright, 2014).

in the case of Cpl. Jim Brown, an RCMP officer who was investigated for “images of him in sexually explicit bondage poses wearing his Mountie boots” and who ultimately resigned after four years on administrative leave (CBC News, 2016, n.p.).

Outside of interviews, participants and kinky friends have confided to me that they would have liked to press charges or get help for abuse or harm they suffered in the past but were too afraid of being criminalized due to Canada’s confusing laws surrounding consent and bodily harm. The *Canadian Criminal Code* (RSC 1985, s. 265, s. 267) seems to allow that assault must be nonconsensual in order to be assault, as the definition of assault includes the words “without the consent of the other person”. This consent clause is notably absent from the description of “assault with a weapon or causing bodily harm.” Some BDSMers interpret this to mean that a person may consent to *some* violent activity if it does not have major physical repercussions (such as light spanking with a hand), but if it involves a weapon or “bodily harm”, one is legally not able to provide consent. This is further complicated by the fact that the definition of a “weapon” in the Canadian Criminal Code was redefined to include bondage materials in Bill C-10, the *Safe Streets and Communities Act*, which was passed in 2012³. The actual application of this law is unclear. While BDSM practitioners have been criminalized under assault-related provisions for consensual activity (Khan, 2014), to my knowledge, no actual case of consensual rope bondage has heretofore been criminalized in Canada. Nonetheless, this reframing of rope as a weapon and the murky state of Canada’s consent

³ The current definition of “weapon” in the Canadian Criminal Code includes a reference to “any thing used, designed to be used or intended for use in binding or tying up a person against their will”.

laws as they pertain to consensual physical injury can deter BDSMers from seeking legal and even medical assistance. Further, practitioners have shared concern with me that a duty to report could result in a partner being arrested if they were to present in an Emergency Room with accidental injuries, or if they were to seek out physiotherapy or other healing support after the fact. A lack of accurate public awareness as to the complexities of consent and BDSM may be one of the key culprits in this issue. While BDSM is becoming more prevalent and, potentially, acceptable in mainstream media (Khan, 2017), stigma persists for BDSM practitioners (Khan, 2020; Iannotti, 2014).

This project is an effort to combat the stigmatization of BDSM⁴ by providing analyses and stories grounded in the lived realities of BDSM participation. I hope to thoroughly describe one slice of the world of BDSM to showcase its brilliant variety. The accounts of rope bondage practitioners contained within these pages show how much *more* BDSM can be, how much it can mean to people, and how much power these experiences can hold and generate in a micro-social world created for this very purpose. These stories will illustrate the visceral and unintelligible pleasure of rope bondage, the degree of effort and care that goes into this practice, and the layers of formal and informal education, knowledge transference, and community building that come together to comprise rope bondage subculture.

In this work I also seek to intervene in some of the more troublesome aspects of the rope bondage social world. As I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7, the experiences of

⁴ For more on the stigmatization of BDSM, see Tanya, Weinberg, and Edgar, 2012 and Pitagora, 2019.

disabled and racialized rope bondage practitioners show that this subculture struggles with issues of ableism, racism, and other forms of social oppression that harm and marginalize people within it. I hope that the data and analyses presented in this dissertation will provide support for the ongoing work that many participants reported engaging in as they resist and disrupt oppressive power dynamics—at times through conscious activism, and at other times by refusing to be sidelined, alienated, and permanently pushed out of a practice that they love.

These small glimpses into the lives and experiences of rope bondage practitioners will serve to fight the many harmful myths and stereotypes that contribute to ongoing stigmatization of BDSM practitioners. Further, as my participants regularly explained, more awareness of this practice may make it easier for rope bondage hopefuls to find safe(r) educational resources and community supports to mitigate the risk of their own injury and harm. In academia and outside of it, the pursuit of knowledge has value, and this one ultimately seeks to better the circumstances of BDSM players worldwide.

Positioning Myself

I chose to pursue this research in large part because I am kinky. I “do rope.” I am part of the rope world. I am also an academic, and a nerdy one at that—the kind of academic that will search the school’s database for academic analyses after watching a movie she particularly liked. Similarly, one idle spring day, I dropped core words of rope bondage (“shibari”, “kinbaku”, and “rope bondage”) into Carleton’s library database, expecting to find a stray ethnography, a paper here or there, maybe a book. In my experience as a sociologist, criminologist, *and* “rope person”, the rope world seemed

perfectly suited to ethnographic and qualitative research methods, while also being unique enough to be interesting and different than many other field sites.

My hopes were quickly dashed when I discovered that using these search terms revealed only one substantial peer-reviewed article and one published response. This top-hit article was Roma et al.'s "Double hanging during consensual sexual asphyxia" (2013), and a response to this article written by Lee, Klement, and Sagarin (2015). The former is a case study of a rope scene in Italy that involved drugs and alcohol, the death of one participant, the coma-inducing injury of another participant, and the criminal trial of the rope top in question. The article focuses on the mental health of the surviving rope bottom and makes several comments connecting body weight, childhood sexual abuse, and psychiatric diagnoses to the victims' involvement in rope bondage and BDSM. For example, Roma et al. write: "While playing shibari, the victim, who was severely obese and had a history of psychiatric treatment, died as a result of violent mechanical asphyxia" (2013, p. 898). On the first page of the article, the authors transition from explaining BDSM to "paraphilias are often found in borderline personality disorder" (2013, p. 895). In the conclusion of the article, they go on to indirectly blame the injury and death on the availability of "paraphilia and pornography" in Italy (2013, p. 899), raise questions "regarding the involvement of people with psychiatric disorders in these extremely dangerous games", and finish with: "Given the number of fatalities that result, or may result from this practice, this topic warrants further research and that more case studies of living participants should be collected" (2013, p. 899).

The discovery of this article—and almost *only* this article—was a shock to me. Not only did the authors seem to not fully understand what "shibari" was, oddly listing

the definition after explaining autoerotic asphyxiation and BDSM without more context or explanation, but the overall tone of the article felt deeply stigmatizing and pathologizing, with abrupt shifts between explanations of technical case study and one of the victims' diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. This representation of rope bondage stood in stark contrast to my impression of the practice. This felt particularly true as my local community had recently been debating how people with mental illnesses can engage in rope play most safely; further, I knew that a number of elements of the scene described by Roma et al. (2013) violated international community norms regarding risk management during play. At best, Roma et al. were taking an outlier case study as representative of a community it did not, in fact, represent.

Lee, Klement, and Sagarin (2015) published a response to this article that clearly outlines the stigmatizing assumptions and connections made and the inaccuracies in the original authors' understandings of rope bondage and BDSM. They argue that a “problematic implication from the article is the characterization of BDSM practitioners as pathological” and go on to “dispute the idea that if someone is diagnosed with a mental disorder, then that individual necessarily would be unable to successfully engage in BDSM activities in a safe and healthy manner” (2015, p. 1752). I still feel indebted to Lee, Klement, and Sagarin for their professional and well-sourced rebuttal. I would go on to discover that a number of nerdy kinky people had, like me, come across the original “Double hanging” article (which is available on Google Scholar for free)⁵, but not found

⁵ At the time of this writing in 2020, four years after my initial foray into rope bondage literature, Roma et al.'s (2013) article remains the top search result on Google Scholar for the term “shibari”. The rebuttal is ninth.

the rebuttal, and had subsequently developed negative impressions of academic research on rope bondage.

Within a short period of time, I decided to initiate a rope bondage project of my own. At a minimum, I hoped (and still hope) to add to the literature enough—and/or inspire further study enough—that future rope bondage practitioners may have a better experience than I did when they wonder what academics think of them and their play.

The Project

After a second look at sociological and criminological research on kink and BDSM, I found that many research projects approach BDSM with a set of assumptions and stereotypes that deeply inform both methods and analysis. The framings of these studies appear to oversimplify kinky people and kinky lives into a narrow way of being, or perhaps present and understand their data as fragmented pieces of larger and more diverse human wholes. As a whole, complex kinky person and academic, this was jarring. Disquieting. It seemed obvious to me how frequently this style of academic inquiry misses the importance of a particular piece of data they shared or an experience they had that related to a more complex and holistic understanding of kink. Informal conversations with fellow kinksters showed that I was not alone in this impression, and many kinky academics and kink nerds⁶ felt that researchers do BDSM practitioners a disservice. Their impression (and mine) was that the researchers' titillated focus on sexual deviance often caused them to overlook important elements, or design research studies that were only

⁶ Here I fondly refer to the many kinky people who love talking, reading, and thinking about kink in the abstract, and who often are well-read and informed about publicly accessible BDSM research.

capable of reinforcing the researchers' pre-existing biases. For example, many kinksters were aware of BDSM research in the 1990s and 2000s that recruited in sex clubs, relied on sex-based surveys of online kinky people, and forgot or refrained to ask questions that challenged the assumptions of their approach. These works rarely, if ever, acknowledged the limitations of their design⁷.

Fortunately, a deeper foray into BDSM literature revealed that a number of researchers have explored BDSM as a site of inquiry in a more diverse and participant-influenced fashion. The work of Charles Moser (1998), Peggy Kleinplatz (2006; with Moser, 2006), Margot Weiss (2006a; 2006b; 2011), Staci Newmahr (2008; 2010; 2011a; 2011b), Emily Prior (2013), DJ Williams (with Prior, 2015; with Prior, Thomas, and Alvarado, 2016), and Ummni Khan (2014) exemplify this sub-body of research and will be examined in more depth in Chapter 1. Their collective works, along with many others, inspired this project and influenced its direction.

My goals for this work are twofold. First, I aim to continue in the tradition of the aforementioned kink- and sex-positive (Williams, Prior, & Vincent, 2020) researchers and provide an ethical, participant-centered, unique piece of research that intervenes in this oft-sensationalized body of literature. This intervention includes the intentional and over representative inclusion of marginalized people within the BDSM community and a focus on a subculture heretofore unexamined. Second, I aim to give something valuable and useful to the community/ies in which I and these participants belong. I feel

⁷ Cross and Matheson (2006) are one notable exception to this, which I will explore in more depth in Chapter 8.

responsible for this in part due to the trust and goodwill given to me and this research by hundreds of supporters in rope bondage communities, and also because of the meaning and support these communities have given my own life. This dissertation is for them.

(For you.)

What *Is* Rope Bondage?

At its most literal, rope bondage is the practice of tying a person with rope, tying oneself in rope, and/or being a person tied by another in rope. These people can be of any gender, ethnicity, race, body shape and size, dis/ability, class, sexual orientation, and more, and may tie in any power configuration one can imagine⁸. Every aspect of rope bondage can (and often does) have meaning for rope bondage practitioners, starting with the bare foundation blocks required to engage in bondage: the rope as well as the frictions and knots that hold it together upon a person.

Rope can be made of many flexible natural and synthetic materials, but the types most commonly used in bondage are natural fiber rope made of jute, hemp, or cotton (see Nawakiri, 2017), and synthetic rope, which is usually made of nylon, polyester (POSH), or artificial hemp (such as Hempex, which is commonly manufactured for use on sailing vessels; see R&W Rope, 2018). The tactile experience of rope is one of the elements around which peoples' passions may be organized. When I asked Adam what rope bondage means to him, he told me: "So much of rope bondage for me is in the

⁸ The most typical example in mainstream Western culture represents one white, cisgender, abled, heterosexual, male dominant tying one white, cisgender, abled, heterosexual female submissive (such as in the successful *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise). This is only one of many power and demographic configurations where one can encounter people practicing rope bondage.

texture, the feeling, the smell, and... just the total sensory experience of the rope itself.” These qualities differ wildly depending on how a piece of rope is constructed and conditioned. Hemp may smell like grass, or like a barnyard; jute may smell like the beeswax used to condition it; nylon may be thrilling in its softness; paracord may be deliciously painful in its thinness.

Once a type of rope is chosen, the mechanism of tying differs somewhat based on what material is being used. For example, rough natural fibers like jute and hemp are frequently tied using what are known as “frictions”, which are not actually knots, but turns of rope *tensioned* over themselves, a style that is common in a Japanese style of rope bondage known as “shibari”. In the 2017 translation of Shin Nawakiri’s 2013 book *The Essence of Shibari*, Nawakiri (translated by Lee Harrington) writes that frictions are “often used, when ropes cross each other, to lock the rope in place and prevent sliding.” Frictions rely only on the “rope’s friction force to temporarily secure the rope”, which can divide shibari ties into smaller independent pieces (p. 48).

Synthetic rope is stronger but smoother in texture, and so rope bondage involving synthetic rope or stretchy, soft natural fiber rope (like cotton) more frequently uses knots to keep the rope secure (see Two Knotty Boys, 2007). Instructional manuals and rope bondage classes, which are ubiquitous in sex shops and rope spaces, tend to focus on only one of these two ways of tying. Rope bondage practitioners sometimes segregate themselves according to which style they prefer, but many (including participants in this study) use diverse techniques and styles and/or use multiple educational sources and influences to inform their practice and personal style. Like many

worlds of niche passions, rope bondage practitioners often discuss the best way(s) to tie or be tied, and these discussions can be heated.

The simplicity of rope bondage ends here. Participants related a wide variety of core purposes and target experiences which include: personal and partnered sexual, spiritual, and artistic expression; social connection; a physical, psychological, and/or athletic challenge; satisfying a need for peace, stillness, security, safety, and/or meditation; a functional method for immobilizing the self or other; and an outlet to pursue and experience the giving and/or receiving of consensual pain, also known as sadomasochism.

Rope bondage can be practiced in a literally grounded way, such as on a bed, a carpet, in a chair, against railroad tracks, or in a puddle of mud on a forest floor. It can also be practiced in the air, through a practice that is known as “suspension rope bondage” or just “suspension”, which we can understand as the act of being held, holding oneself, or holding another in the air using rope. Suspension rope bondage can be static, dynamic, or some combination of the two. Static rope suspension involves a person being held in a (relatively) still position in the air by rope until they are brought to the ground or transitioned into a different static position. Dynamic suspension often involves more movement, which might include swinging, spinning, struggling, or the person being tied using their rope supports to independently “rope dance”, i.e. dance while in the air. Suspension is common in rope bondage photography due, in part, to the aesthetic possibilities of moving a person through three dimensions; suspension is also reported to be an intense experience, riskier than floor work, and requiring higher levels of knowledge and hardware investment. Tying in the liminal space in between floor work

and suspension is commonly referred to as “partial suspension”, colloquially as “partials”, to describe any play that uses *up* while the person being tied is, in at least a small way, in contact with the ground. Play that involves full or partial suspension is understood as something that is likely to be painful⁹, depending on the style of play, body positions, and amount and location of rope used to support the body of the person being tied. To pursue this type of activity in a way that minimizes (or at least manages) risk, many rope bondage practitioners use climbing gear rated to support dynamic human load, and share information on best practices in classes, books, and on the internet.

A technical explanation of rope bondage does little to describe the potential intensity, extremity, and dynamism of this practice. As we will see, attempting to concretely define the heart of rope bondage risks flattening it for easier conceptualization and consumption. Rope bondage as a critically visceral and potentially disruptive experience resists definition. Participants in this project describe rope bondage as “infinite expression”, as “all-consuming of my intention”, as “paradoxically freeing”.

HW describes rope play as:

a medium of communication and connection between two people, sometimes more people, and sometimes there’s also an audience. And it can mean so many different things. It’s like a language that has a... that has a lexicon, includes so many things. Anything from communicating a feeling of safety and love and support, to consensual degradation and humiliation and sadomasochism, in the

⁹ As previously mentioned, rope bondage can also be intentionally and consensually painful. Rope can be used as a tool to give and/or receive pain for sadomasochistic play in a manner that can evoke an enormous range of emotions for those playing. For many (but not all) rope bondage practitioners, sadomasochism is a foundational goal for their rope play, leveraged in conjunction with a meditative goal, as part of a sexually arousing experience, and/or pursued solely for its own sake.

same way as a language can communicate so many different feelings and ideas.
That's what rope bondage is for me.

Bird similarly understands rope bondage as a complex and difficult-to-define practice:

Rope bondage is probably exactly what you think it is, and nothing like you think it is. ... It might be about sex, it might not. It might be about power, it might not. It might be about pain, it might not. It might be *love*. It might not. And... I think that... it can be as many things as people want it to be. ... It's as complicated as we are. I think rope is just a vehicle. I think it's a tool for desire. Whatever that desire is. I wish more people realized that.

Rope bondage is understood by most practitioners who participated in this project as a form of *edge play*, a type of kinky activity that is dangerous or plays on the edge of something, such as the edge of safety, or of sanity¹⁰. More than half of the participants described rope play as dangerous or risky without being prompted or specifically asked about danger and risk. Angel described rope as “an extremely dangerous thing. You know, I classify that as one of the most dangerous kink things that can be done.” Another participant, Denis, explained to me that consent in BDSM and rope needs to be more sensitive and heightened than the norm because “what we do is so dangerous that we *need* to elevate consent to such a level.” Celeste illustrated some of these risks when she

¹⁰ Edge play is discussed in more depth in Chapter 1. BDSM researchers like Newmahr (2011) connect edge play in kink to the theoretical concept of edgework (Lyng, 2004), but the origin of “edge play” as a type of or approach to play within the community is unclear.

explained that practicing rope risks nerve damage¹¹. This risk is a serious one for her in a physical sense, as it could result in her losing her job, but she further explained:

it's also psychologically dangerous because... at least in the kind of rope that I do, you explore a lot of dark feelings and things that you don't necessarily explore in other facets of life. So there is a real big danger of psychological harm when you're playing with dark and intense emotions. ... I know that is a big danger with a lot of people. Especially if they do rope with people that they're not necessarily so familiar with.

In most cases, participants in this project did not frame their interest in rope bondage as coming from an *attraction* to this danger and risk, but instead accept the risk of injury or death¹² as a consequence of pursuing what they love, while taking measures to mitigate that risk according to their own logic, knowledge, philosophy, and experience. While some BDSM practitioners in the world likely enjoy kink as a risk-taking activity, each participant interviewed for this study framed danger and risk as obstacles to overcome in their pursuit of rope bondage, if they spoke of it at all.

Rope bondage practitioners' understanding of their practice is deeply influenced by their interactions with other people who "do rope". Accordingly, the subculture itself

¹¹ For a report exemplifying this kind of nerve injury in rope bondage, see Khodulev, Zharko, Vlasava, & Charnenka 2019.

¹² Injury is a potential risk of any and all rope play (as one participant explained, even classic bedroom bondage can risk nerve damage in the wrists); death is a potential risk of a smaller subset of types of rope play, including inversion suspension where a person could fall on their head, and rope that involves breath play or strangulation.

is a critical site to recognize when discussing rope bondage in both a practical and abstract sense, and so is one of the main focuses of this dissertation.

Rope Bondage Subculture

I refer to the rope bondage subculture at times as a “world” because for the people within, it can be everything, and the scope of this social sphere is enormous. In this world, rope bondage practitioners in small-town-Ontario may have more in common (and correspond more frequently) with a rope bondage practitioner in Amsterdam than a whips enthusiast who lives down the street or a non-kinky coworker they sit beside during their work day. Rope bondage practitioners speak to each other to share passions, but also to share critical knowledge and skill development techniques required to pursue their practice. For some practitioners, local connections across BDSM activity matter more than a shared practice (particularly if they frequent local kink bars, clubs, or social meetups), but international connections between rope bondage practitioners is an important characteristic of rope bondage subculture.

These networks seem to influence most, if not all, rope bondage practitioners in a given scene, whether directly or indirectly. A rope educator in Chicago may learn their skills from peers across the country and across borders, then host their own local classes, skill-shares, or practice space; their attendees might only have local connections, but adopt this collaboratively created knowledge in their own practice, which is witnessed by and influences others. Those attendees will seem like experts to their less-involved friends and partners and may continue to pass on knowledge and skills to people too shy or disinterested to attend formalized rope spaces (or perhaps those spaces are not

accessible to them). In this way, networks of rope knowledge transmission penetrate the practice of exponential numbers of people interested in pursuing rope bondage¹³.

This convoluted explanation leads us to understand that rope bondage as a subculture and community may not be meaningfully visible at the local level. This may explain why such a subculture is rarely mentioned in BDSM research, although individual practitioners are often found and described. Seen too closely, these micro pieces of rope bondage networks may look like solo practices divorced from a greater social context or influence; they can seem like individual pieces of a multi-kinked mosaic when they are often actually connected to and networked with many other like-minded people.

When reviewing this vast international world of rope bondage through the lens of my own experience, I chose to focus on one piece of it that seems culturally and socially cohesive: the rope bondage scene in Canada and the United States. The border between countries is largely porous as it relates to rope bondage knowledge/skill transmission and social connections¹⁴ (with some notable and legally-influenced challenges or barriers¹⁵).

¹³ One might argue that rope educators who write instructional books, blogs, or create tutorial videos are also influenced in this way, and that the most secretive and private rope skill-seekers who utilize their materials are also connected to community norms and perspectives; however, I can only extrapolate that this might be the case, as I did not interview any formal authors for this project, nor did I speak to those who have never been a part of a rope bondage community.

¹⁴ Note: This analysis was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic which has, thus far, resulted in a multi-month closure of the Canada/United States border. This will likely have a lasting and unpredictable impact on rope bondage subculture.

¹⁵ For example, Canadian and American laws about sex work, obscenity, and pornography differ, which has resulted in rope bondage practitioners being banned from crossing the border and being fearful of prosecution by a foreign legal system.

The field of study as I entered into it looks like this: thousands of people in Canada and the United States who practice BDSM, have a particular interest in rope bondage, somehow discovered the pansexual BDSM scene, and hold varying degrees of social connection to other practitioners. Most major cities (and many smaller ones) host spaces that are temporarily or permanently dedicated to rope bondage education, practice, and performance; some host annual or biannual rope bondage conventions where hundreds gather to learn from multiple teachers during the day, and ‘play’ at night. This world connects via websites like Fetlife, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, local sex, swinger, and kink clubs, sex shops, and word of mouth. Shared language (like “friction” and “ropespace”) and norms (like etiquette in rope spaces and safety best-practices) help us find and see the edges of this world. This is where, and why, I start to use words like “subculture” and “community”.

Dissertation Outline

In Chapter 1, “Kink, Desire, Race, and Rope in Sociology and Criminology”, I begin this analysis with a critical literature review of research in the social sciences that is most relevant to this project. The chapter primarily draws on sociological and criminological approaches to BDSM with some foundational psychological works included, as well as making reference to rope bondage community-produced documents that occupy the vacant space where academic rope bondage literature could exist. This chapter also identifies some weaknesses in the methods in many of these works, particularly the whiteness of samples and a lack of discussion around the causes of this and implications for the resulting data. Next, in Chapter 2, “Theory and Methodology”, I explain the theoretical points of departure that inform this work. Foundational theories

and concepts include an overarching critical approach to society informed by feminism, critical disability studies, critical race theory, and rope bondage subculture's own theorizing. Further, I explain how I mobilize symbolic interactionism as a tool of analysis and draw upon stigma and a theoretical understanding of "community" to conduct micro-scale investigations of participants' accounts. Finally, I explain my methodological approach, which consists of a paradigm both critical and interpretive.

In Chapter 3, "Methods and and Kinking Research," I outline and discuss the steps I took to conceptualize, design, undertake, and analyze this research. I describe my qualitative research methods, engagement with formal and informal ethics, analytical processes, and also reflect on moments of tension and growth that occurred during and after interviews. I also theorize *kinking methods*: how incorporating a kinky understanding of consent and human relationships can provide a useful template for ethical approaches to qualitative research and, in particular, interviews with human subjects. In Chapter 4, "Meet the Participants", I present the demographics of the participants along with brief biographies of each in order to provide context and depth for their accounts and stories.

In Chapter 5, "'Because it's Community': Unpacking rope bondage subculture", I present a description and analysis of rope bondage and the rope bondage subculture based on analysis of this dissertation's data along with my personal experiences as an insider in this world. This chapter wrestles with the tensions that surround the concept of community and the relevant meaning it holds for different participants.

Chapter 6, "Marginalization and Disability in Rope Bondage Subculture", focuses on the stories of disabled rope bondage practitioners and their experiences with stigma

and microaggressions in the rope bondage subculture. Some of these narratives show how disabled rope bondage practitioners enjoy rope and mobilize rope bondage play as a method for resisting normative stereotypes about the way they should (or should not) take up space in the world.

In Chapter 7, “Race and Resistance”, I build upon the previous chapter’s exploration of marginalization in rope to investigate the experiences of racialized rope bondage practitioners. In this chapter, I explain the exhaustion and alienation that many kinksters of colour shared with me about their time in a consistently racist social world along with their stories of joy, pleasure, and power. I draw upon hooks’ (1992) consideration of the power of imagery and its potential for resistance and explore how racialized rope bondage practitioners engage with their own efforts to embody positive representation as visibly Black and brown people in rope bondage.

Chapter 6, “‘Beautiful, Scary, and Really, Really Unsettling’: Unintelligibility and Theorizing Pleasure”, draws on Weiss’ (2011) use of “unintelligible desire” to frame the visceral embodied experiences described by people who do rope. In short, this chapter will argue in support of Weiss’ assertion that kinky desire is *unintelligible*, and this unintelligibility exposes it to misunderstanding and discrimination as outsiders attempt to liken it to other desires they can more readily comprehend—primarily sex and non-consensual violence. This chapter will provide examples and analyses of the unintelligible pleasure of rope bondage, and center this discussion on the theories and explanations practitioners provide to make sense of (and theorize) their own physical, emotional, and psychological experiences. Ultimately, I argue that pursuing and experiencing this type of radical pleasure is subversive and provides a path to resist a

world that often seeks to deny autonomy and enjoyment particularly to people marginalized by race, gender, sexuality, and disability. The last chapter, “Conclusion”, will synthesize the work of the previous chapters, present words that participants wanted me to share with my reader, and identify areas that would benefit from further study.

Chapter One

Kink, Desire, Race, and Rope in Sociology and Criminology

BDSM is a complex human phenomenon that has been, in some respects, thoroughly researched. This research has examined the peoples' motivations to participate in BDSM, finding interests ranging from sexual enjoyment to psychological healing to play (Newmahr, 2008; Turley, 2016; Turley, Monro, & King, 2017; Hammers, 2014; Hammers, 2019; Ciasullo, 2008; Ardill & O'Sullivan, 2005; Prior & Williams, 2015; Stiles & Clark, 2011; Weiss, 2006a). From a psychiatric perspective, researchers historically understood BDSM to be a deviant sexual behaviour or identity, while more recent academic inquiry, for the most part, seeks to de-pathologize BDSM (e.g. Cross & Matheson, 2008; Stiles & Clark, 2011; Simula, 2019b). This research, though, rarely includes the perspectives of BDSMers in research design, analysis, or authorship; this may be a contributing factor to the elements of the BDSM subculture and experience that have largely been missing from this field and are only recently being tackled by participant-centered researchers and people with experience with BDSM and/or kinky communities. These efforts include conceptualizing BDSM as a type of leisure (Prior & Williams, 2015; Newmahr 2010), exploring the personal and psychological effects of emotional components of BDSM, like subspace and "drop" (Pitagora, 2017; Sprott and Randall, 2016; Carlström, 2018), and examining the relationship styles, structures, and skills of BDSMers (Kleinplatz, 2006a; Sloan, 2015; Rubinsky, 2018; Rogak & Connor, 2018).

As I explain in the Introduction, one of these missing pieces is the practice of rope bondage as a discrete and unique subculture underneath the umbrella of BDSM. This is

potentially connected and related to BDSM researchers' tendency to fixate on sexual motivations and experiences while missing or disregarding less expected emotions, feelings, sensations, and passions. This chapter will situate my research project among BDSM literature and then integrate rope bondage into this discussion.

In order to contain the scope to the most relevant areas, this literature review primarily focuses on a subset of sociological and criminological inquiry into BDSM with inclusion of particularly foundational psychological studies that influenced these fields. These focuses include: the history of BDSM practice and subculture; the pathologization and stigmatization of kink; the relationships between sexuality and BDSM; theories of pleasure and desire; and the underrepresentation of marginalized people in BDSM communities and research. These areas are particularly important to understand as later chapters chart rope bondage subculture, experiences of marginalization in the community, and complex understandings of kinky pleasure and joy. For broader, more interdisciplinary coverage of BDSM literature see Simula (2019b) and Weinberg (2006).

What is BDSM?

BDSM, also known as SM or S&M (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006a), has been defined in myriad ways¹⁶. Michel Foucault (1997, p. 169) wrote that BDSM can be understood as “the eroticization of power, the eroticization of strategic relations”, while Dancer, Kleinplatz, and Moser (2006, p. 82) describe it as “an interest in giving or receiving intense stimulation, bondage, or the purposeful enacting of dominant and

¹⁶ For a thorough overview of the barriers to/complexities of developing a concise, universal definition of BDSM, see Moser and Kleinplatz (2006a).

submissive roles, usually for sexual gratification.” Cross and Matheson (2006, p. 134) present SM participants’ conceptualization of BDSM as “highly ritualized, mutually enjoyable role-play, in which pain is emblematic of power or powerlessness, rather than being sought for its own sake”, while Margot Weiss (2006a, p. 232) writes that,

...while at base, BDSM is the adult, consensual exchange of power, pain and pleasure, in practice, the community embraces a wide range of practices, relationship types, roles, desires, fetishes, identities and skills ...

These definitions share some elements in common, namely a focus on consensual adult practices that involve pleasure, pain, and/or power. However, whether BDSM is defined as primarily a sexual activity varies widely.

Choosing Language: BDSM? SM? S/M?

As Weiss (2011, p. vii) writes in *Techniques of Pleasure*, “in BDSM, terminology matters”, and each of the terms chosen for use in this paper come with a purpose. First, I will be using the acronym “BDSM” when referring to something that is also known as SM, sadomasochism, and kink. BDSM refers to bondage and discipline (B and D), dominance and submission (D and S), and sadism and masochism (S and M). While “fetish” is not included in this acronym, activities based in fetish generally *are* included in research on BDSM/SM and are folded into the existing acronyms (e.g. Lenius, 2011)¹⁷.

¹⁷ Simula (2019) understands this differently and defines “kink” as a word that encompasses BDSM *and* fetish, while BDSM does not include fetish. This is an excellent example of the importance of operationalizing language. This difference was reflected in my research as well, with one participant assertively explaining that “kink” is an umbrella underneath which “BDSM” exists, while others used “kink” and “BDSM” interchangeably, as I do.

For the purposes of this paper, BDSM encompasses individuals and communities focused chiefly or purely on fetish¹⁸. Depending on grammatical context, I will use the terms “BDSM” and “kink” interchangeably, where “kink” and “kinky” may be nouns, adjectives, or adverbs that refer to BDSM. For example, I may write “Being kinky is core to Samantha’s identity”, “Neil prefers kinky play to walking his dog”, or “Sheila explained that all of her partners share an interest in kink”.

Research on BDSM originally used “SM” and “S&M” to refer to this activity and related communities, but in recent years, language has begun to include the broader BDSM as a reference term for kinky behaviour, attractions, and identities. “SM” or “S&M” is shorthand for sadism and masochism or sadomasochism, terms with clinical origins in Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (first published in 1886, as cited in Khan, 2014) that, in a clinical context, refer to the desire to give and/or receive pain. In psychiatry and the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), sadism is still defined as a paraphilia involving a desire to subject another to “pain, humiliation, bondage, or some other form of physical or psychological suffering”, and masochism is defined as a desire to submit to such (Colman, 2015, p. 106). Within the academic and kink-practicing communities, however, SM can also include references to play that involves power exchange (such as domination and submission) and fetish¹⁹ with or without the involvement of consensual pain. Although the literature indicates that

¹⁸ Fetish-oriented play can be a fundamental aspect of some kink communities and private practice. For example, according to one member of the international latex community, latex fetishists have a complex and vibrant international scene that is particularly prominent in Europe, and enthusiasts commonly travel from across the globe to meet with like-minded fetishists (private communication, 2016).

¹⁹ For examples of ‘SM’ used in this context, see Dancer, Kleinplatz & Moser (2006), Newmahr (2010), and Chaline (2010). Weiss (2006a) demonstrates how SM and BDSM can be used interchangeably.

SM/sadomasochism is used by some researchers and communities as an umbrella term to refer to kink, today practitioners generally use “BDSM” (rather than SM or S&M) to describe what they do, with references to sadomasochism reserved to talking about play and identities that have some relationship to physical, psychological, and/or emotional pain. This was also reflected in Chatterjee’s (2012, p. 753) research; in her notes, she comments that:

... the term BDSM is increasingly used by those who self-identify as such, in preference to the term SM, as it is felt that the latter has pathological associations and places too much emphasis on the pain aspect of such practices. Thus BDSM is descriptive of a broader range of practices, a non-pathological term, and a self-definition arising from communities themselves (Bauer, 2008).

In order to maintain cohesion with kinksters’ use of language, in this discussion I will be using BDSM to refer to the overarching community and practice, and “sadomasochism” will be used to refer specifically to activities that involve the giving and/or receiving of pain (respectively sadism, masochism, or sadomasochism as it is experienced within/by an individual).

A Short History of BDSM Research and Findings

The words “sadism” and “masochism”, named after the Marquis de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (Khan, 2014), first came into popular usage after the publication of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886 and were used to refer to individual deviant sexual pathologies or paraphilias (Sisson, 2007; Weinberg, 2006). Until the late 1960s, academic research and psychological interventions regarding BDSM

largely approached kink practice and desire from the angle of an individual pathology when the paraphilia was strong enough as to interfere with the person's so-called natural sexual drives (Cruz, 2016), but not uncommon or inherently unhealthy if it were perceived as "mild" and occurring within heterosexual couplings (Khan, 2014). A pathological understanding of (at least some) paraphilias has resulted in significant social, legal, and employment-related harm to BDSM practitioners into the 21st century (Wright, 2014; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006b; Wright, 2006), a reality that is only recently being mitigated by shifts in diagnostic practices and psychological understandings of sexual difference (Wright, 2014; also see Kleinplatz, 2006). The constructed deviance of sadomasochism in academia and mainstream media seems to have been amplified and supported by the extreme nature of the cases that captured the attention of psychologists and psychoanalysts and became enshrined in publications, in addition to medical diagnoses rooted in social and historical stigmas (Kleinplatz, 2006). The conclusions made regarding these forensic practices have persisted for decades and continue to inform academic work and psychological practice.²⁰

While the origin of official terminology for BDSM is relatively easy to discover, the emergence of BDSM communities in the United States and Canada²¹ is more difficult to track with assurance, likely due to the need for practitioners to remain covert when

²⁰ This can be observed even recently in academic debates surrounding the removal or significant alteration of the "paraphilia" entry in the DSM-IV, which was split into two concepts: "paraphilia" (a non-pathological descriptor of activity) and "Paraphilic Disorder" (pathological) in the DSM-V. See Moser & Kleinplatz (2006), Spitzer (2006), and Kleinplatz & Moser (2006b) for a representation of this debate, and Wright (2014) for an explanation of the impact of the later change.

²¹ This is difficult regardless of location, but in this particular research study I will be focusing on BDSM in the context of the USA and Canada.

practicing pathologized, stigmatized, and/or criminalized (sexual or nonsexual) behaviours. Weiss (2011), for example, identifies the end of World War 2 as the beginning of the (mostly gay, leather) SM scene in San Francisco, which was developed by returning veterans in the 1940s, and the 1980s as the emergence of the new pansexual scene²². Denney and Tewksbury (2013) argue that BDSM as an organized activity and subculture began in the 1950s and 1960s in the U.S. in connection to the gay leather scene, while Chaline (2010) describes the 1950s as the beginning of the leather subculture in the United Kingdom, which grew to a pluralization of gay SM and the emergence of large bisexual and heterosexual SM social worlds in the late 1990s. Gayle Rubin (2012, originally published 1984) argues that the 1940s-1960s were a time of particularly harsh treatment of erotically different individuals, specifically gay people. One example she provides is a significant police crackdown on homosexuality in San Francisco in the 1950s, an initiative intended to “driv[e] the queers out of San Francisco” (Rubin, 2012, p. 145). It is possible, then, that the pansexual BDSM scene, which has been critiqued for being significantly heterosexual in more recent times, particularly in San Francisco (Weiss, 2011), may have emerged as gay leather spaces were destroyed.²³

²² This chapter specifically focuses on the pansexual BDSM scene except where historical influences are noted. There is some overlap between the leather community/leatherfolk and the pansexual BDSM scene; however, culturally and academically it operates in largely different spheres, and so a thorough summary of leather research is not included here. The leather community can be described as “a marginalized gay community” (Tyburczy, 2014); this community made many of the initial steps required for a pansexual BDSM scene to develop, but currently operates largely separately from this scene, and with different members.

²³ The historical relationship between the gay and pansexual BDSM scenes is worthy of future study. The timing of the fall of gay BDSM subculture in San Francisco and the rise of pansexual BDSM subculture in the same location may be reflective of an intriguing social genealogy.

The scope and size of the BDSM scene has been expanding through the decades, and this growth of BDSM communities “has led to demands for research that is congruent with the phenomenology of the participants themselves” (Langridge, Barker, & Richards, 2007, p. 5). Researchers tracing the origins of BDSM in the United States and Canada generally do not address the time period before 1940, and yet Sisson’s research (2007) shows that kinky activities are not new phenomena. Sisson (2007) finds mention of erotic use of flagellation in social or commercial contexts as early as the 1600s in Europe – the chances that these activities were absent from American²⁴ life until 1940 is difficult to envision. It is more likely that Americans and Canadians prior to 1940 may have kept kinky activities private or covert enough to escape documentation, although there is no evidence to prove this that I could find.

Research on BDSM communities and subcultures in the United States and Canada beginning in this period focused largely on gay leather communities, a trend that continued until relatively recently. For many researchers, gaining access to BDSM practitioners can be a barrier to data collection, and so a great deal of research involving human participants begins with access to public or semi-public spaces where BDSM is allowed or encouraged. This means that, according to Weinberg (2006, p. 27), the gay leathersex scene, which has been accessible in public gay and leather bars, has been more researched than “the heterosexual sadomasochistic subculture”, which has traditionally not been centered in visible commercial locations (if a subculture of this has existed at all). Similarly, Simula (2019) posits that racialized kinksters and queer women are more

²⁴ The minimal literature on Canadian BDSM does not yet cover this early period.

likely to play in private and therefore not become subject to the gaze of academia. Likely due to this lack of visibility/access, or possibly because it was seen as more deviant, participation in BDSM activities has generally been understood in sociological and criminological research as an exclusively or mostly male homosexual activity in previous decades of research (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013). This subset of scholarship has been critiqued for its almost singular focus on kinky men (Plante, 2006); even contemporary researchers who have difficulty finding non-male participants assume that this is due to their lack of participation in BDSM²⁵ (e.g. Nordling et al., 2006), despite repeated indications that men and women with multiple sexual orientations enjoy BDSM practice and community (e.g. Prior & Williams, 2015; Newmahr, 2011; Prior, 2013; Plante, 2006; Moser, 1998; Weiss, 2011)²⁶.

The question of gendered participation in BDSM makes visible stark contrasts between disciplines and fields of study. Most of this literature review is drawn from sociology and criminology, reflecting my academic background and field of study, with occasional inclusion of foundational psychology research. The question of gender and gender representation is mostly disregarded in these fields²⁷. Indeed, across the entirety of sociological and criminological research reviewed for this chapter, few researchers made mention of people who identify as neither men nor women (e.g. gender non-conforming,

²⁵ This seems to be particularly true of women who are not heterosexual.

²⁶ The *DSM-IV* reinforced this assumption by claiming that “... for Sexual Masochism ... the sex ratio is estimated to be 20 males for each female” (APA, 2000:568 as cited in Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006b:103), an assertion that is not supported by research. See Moser & Kleinplatz (2006b) and Kleinplatz & Moser (2006) for more discussion on the DSM-IV’s construction of paraphilias and BDSM.

²⁷ One notable exception is Alvarado, Prior, Thomas, and Williams (2018) which explores the connection between gender and self-reported stress among BDSM participants. This article is also one of the few that acknowledges the general lack of conversation about people who are not cisgender.

genderfluid, two-spirit, and nonbinary people), or allowed that there may be binary transgender participants in their sample. This is particularly exacerbated by the use of form surveys where an absence of input options aside from “male/female” or “man/woman” may have led to missing or imprecise data²⁸. This phenomenon is not completely unexpected, as widespread awareness and inclusion of varied gender identities in society is a relatively recent occurrence, and yet other fields of social science have more easily grown to be inclusive of transgender participants, such as communication studies (Davidson, 2016), various iterations of LGBTQ+ studies (McNabb, 2018; Bradford et al, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2014), human geography (Johnston, 2016), education studies (Beemyn, 2015), media and sexuality research (Oakley, 2016), and health research (Goldhammer, Malina, & Keuroghlian, 2018; Gomez, Walters, & Dao, 2016).

This oversight can be remedied, in part, by drawing on the research on queer sexualities and BDSM within feminist theory and gender studies—work that is generally not acknowledged or cited in sociological and criminological works. A case in point is the lack of awareness of or reference to Patrick Califia, Gayle Rubin, or the extensive research into lesbian SM scenes in BDSM scholarship prior to 2010. However, more recent work is more likely to adopt an interdisciplinary approach and be informed by this

²⁸ When I spoke privately to one researcher about this issue in their own methodology, I was brushed off with the explanation that they required binary data in order to conduct their planned quantitative analysis. The results from this research were later published in a peer-reviewed journal without mention of the conscious exclusion or mis-categorization of participants who were not binary men and women.

critical work in feminist theory as well as studies that focus on gender, women, and/or sexuality²⁹.

One example of this gendered lens is provided by Lieff (2017, p. 70), who argues that 1990s BDSM online community included vibrant and heated conversations around the nature of assault within BDSM communities. These discussions were primarily driven by a feminist subset of Usenet (an online forum), “particularly kink organizations focused on queer women”. Patrick Califia has been writing on lesbianism, transgenderism, and sexuality, with direct and indirect inclusion of SM sexualities, since 1980 (see Califia, 1988; Califia, 1997; Califia-Rice, 2000). Gayle Rubin’s ethnographic and theoretical work on sexuality, focusing on gay and lesbian sexualities, spans similar decades, with “Thinking Sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality” (2012, originally 1984) being of particularly weighty relevance to considerations of gender, sex, normativity, and kink. Other scholars who explore the experiences of transgender BDSM practitioners include Bauer (2008, 2014, and 2016), Stryker (2008), and Zahn (2018). When considering this literature in addition to the aforementioned sociological and criminological works, it is evident that BDSM participation crosses gender lines and is not primarily the purview of cisgender gay men.

Simula (2019) goes some way to identifying and remedying this gendered split by arguing that there are three BDSM communities, which she refers to as the gay (presumably men), het/pan, and queer/lesbian communities; these are social worlds that

²⁹ For an exploration of how BDSM practitioners grapple with gender equality and often gendered power dynamics in kink, see Carlström (2017).

have distinct histories and different relationships with sexual stigmatization. She writes that “at present, in the American and European cultural contexts, these BDSM communities operate largely as mutually exclusive rather than overlapping scenes” (2019, p. 10). These histories are difficult to track with assurance, particularly that of the heterosexual/pansexual communities, potentially because these populations have been under-researched in early decades in favour of a hyper-focus on kinky gay men (Simula, 2019).

In the past two decades, social scientific scholarship on BDSM has had more success identifying and accessing a more diverse group of BDSMers, while theoretical understandings of their practices have evolved from models of pathology and mental illness to include more sociological and social psychological understandings of kink. These have chiefly focused on formations of community and subjective experiences of sadomasochistic sexuality (Weinberg, 2006). There is a relatively new, vibrant body of BDSM research that centers the reality of BDSM practitioners, the social context within which they practice, and the activist priorities of BDSM practitioners in their work, particularly as they combat stigma and criminalization in relation to consensual adult practices. Contrary to a pathologizing view of BDSM practitioners, Weinberg (2006, p. 37) argued that “sociological and social psychological studies see SM practitioners as emotionally and psychologically well balanced, comfortable with their sexual orientation, and socially well adjusted.” One example of this is Chaline’s (2010) study of gay SM sexualities and sexual identities tested for but could not confirm a pathological explanation for involvement in BDSM. On the contrary, Chaline found that participants had heterogeneous sexual careers and identities with a wide variety of drives and

histories related to their engagement with BDSM, and ultimately theorized that BDSM sexuality can be understood better as sexual identity practice. Similarly, Cross and Matheson's (2006) in-depth survey research investigated the viability of a number of theories used to explain BDSM involvement, including the theory of BDSM as pathology. BDSM practitioners filled out a battery of psychometric tests, and the researchers found that pathological understandings of BDSM were not supported by their data.

Research that frames BDSM practitioners as mentally unwell is increasingly being countered by an empirically informed understanding that BDSM itself is not a marker of pathology. This research explores other rich and wide-ranging areas of inquiry. For example, researchers are recognizing that a model that understands BDSM as completely and only sexual may lack nuance reflected in the actual lived experiences of some BDSM practitioners (e.g. Faccio, Casini & Cipoletta, 2014; Moser, 1998; Weinberg, 2006; Kleinplatz, 2006). Other researchers are finding indications that kink or an attraction to BDSM play may be best understood as a sexual orientation or inherent part of the self (see Weiss, 2011; Gemberling, Cramer, & Miller, 2015; Williams & Prior, 2016; Dancer, Kleinplatz, & Moser, 2006). Stiles and Clark (2011) explore how BDSMers navigate belonging to a largely "secret" subculture, and others investigate how power is an integral part of BDSM activities (e.g. Cross & Matheson, 2006; Nordling et al, 2006). Newmahr (2010), Prior and Williams (2015), and Williams and Prior (2015, p. 63) explore how the concept of leisure can be usefully applied to "simplify and complicate" our understandings of kink. Rogak and Connor (2018) discuss relationship satisfaction within BDSM relationships, countering pathological understandings of kink

as inherently unhealthy, while Kleinplatz (2006) showcases lessons from BDSM relationships that can be extrapolated to expand and benefit people who are not kinky. Vriend (2020) applies a drama therapy perspective to consider the positive functions of kink, and Pliskin (2018) explores the connection between relationship management skills (like communication) and BDSM. Overall, social science scholarship on BDSM is exploring an increasingly diverse range of conceptual framings while they seek to understand individual and group involvement in BDSM, as well as contextualizing BDSM practice within larger theoretical understandings of society, economy, and power.

Conceptualizing Kink Desire

Kink desire has classically been understood as a type of desire that is fundamentally sexual in nature, with some notable exceptions³⁰. Indeed, the bulk of social science research on BDSM begins by asking research questions related to sexual behaviour and desire (e.g. Chaline, 2010; Denney & Tewksbury, 2013; Ernulf & Innala, 1995; Faccio, Casini & Cipoletta, 2014; Nordling et al., 2006). However, recent research described previously in this chapter suggests that these approaches to BDSM as a sexual behaviour, while not necessarily inaccurate, cannot alone capture the complexity of BDSM experiences, motivations, and associated desires. In essence, academic work on BDSM has focused disproportionately on sexual motivations and contexts for BDSM activities, resulting in literature where BDSM is defined as an activity related to a person's sexual interests. For example, survey research and online content analysis

³⁰ For some of these exceptions, consider Charles Moser's (1998) work on the social norms and experiences of kink practitioners at play parties.

(which together comprise the majority of human-subjects scholarship on BDSM) generally do not investigate the gratification that participants receive from their activities with open-ended or non-sexualized questions, non- or less-sexual contexts where they practice kink, whether or not they do kink alone, whether or not skill development is involved (and how), and if kink is inherently sexual for them. This contributes to the erasure of asexual kinksters in academic understandings of BDSM³¹ (Simula, 2019b).

Weiss (2006b, p. 230) approaches BDSM desire and sexuality from an alternate angle when she applies David Valentine's (2003) concept of "unintelligible desire" to BDSM. "Unintelligible desire" refers to desire that falls outside of the typical organizing principles of *homosexual* or *heterosexual*. As I will discuss in more depth in Chapter 5, considering BDSM desire as a type of unintelligible desire can aid our understanding of wider societal interpretations (and stigmatization) of BDSM as well as the wide variety of avenues for and experiences of pleasure; that is, one explanation for the (mis)interpretation and stigmatization of BDSM may be a broad lack of comprehension of the desires that drive this behaviour. As Sagarin, Lee, and Klement (2015, p. 50) write: "BDSM ... is often defined solely as kinky sex. BDSM practitioners recognize, however, that BDSM can encompass more than just sexuality." Encouragingly, recent research on BDSM in the social sciences has begun to explore alternative framings for understanding desires for and experiences of BDSM. Cruz (2016, p. 223), for example, utilizes Freud's concept of polymorphous perversity to conceptualize BDSM erotic desire as "degenitalized", similar to desire experienced by children. This understanding provides a

³¹ See Sloan (2015) for an exploration of how asexual people use BDSM to form non-sexual relationships.

framework to consider desire that is not rooted in sexual intercourse or other genital involvement. When data presented in previous research is reviewed with a lens to understanding that degenitalized desire may exist in BDSM practice, it becomes apparent how frequently genitalized desire is presumed, and the rich potential of adopting a more inclusionary lens.

In “Working at Play”, Weiss cites a participant who identifies as a heterosexual kinky woman. She frames her own hierarchy of sex versus kink by explaining that if she were going to be isolated on a desert island with only one person, she would choose a kinky woman to play with over an attractive vanilla (non-kinky) man every time. In this way, this participant is explaining that she values sadomasochistic activity over sexual orientation, and the two do not necessarily need to overlap; in other words, for this woman, kinky play with a woman is not considered sexual but is still her salient desire. For non-kinky individuals, this choice might be similarly reflected if they were to choose to be stranded with a good tennis partner over a sexual/romantic prospect if, for them, practicing and playing tennis was more important than having satisfying sex. As Weiss writes, kink identity is greater than sexual identity for this person, and likely many others.

This example gets at the heart of the misunderstandings that often emerge in research when a researcher’s gaze interprets choices and actions differently than they are intended by the kinky subject. Even the above example, when read by non-kinky friends and colleagues during the drafting process of this chapter, was read to mean that Weiss’ participant is saying that she would prefer to have *sex* outside of her orientation than not have kink. From the lens Weiss provides, though, and my own experiences in the BDSM scene, this example clearly lays out that a heterosexual woman would *choose to go*

without sex before she would choose to go without kink. This dynamic is critical to understand in order to move forward with the broader conceptualizations of kinky desire and pleasure that undergird the analysis sections of this dissertation.

This perspective is conspicuously missing from BDSM literature, which becomes evident when authors categorize practitioners based on their sexual orientation and/or the gender of their play partners, as if that is core to their identity, role, and experience. In contrast, Weiss' findings show that people can play outside of their sexual orientation for reasons separate from sexual gratification, and that misunderstanding this can lead to the unintentional misrepresentation of data and lost opportunities for inquiry³². For example, in Faccio, Casini, and Cipoletta's (2014) work, they specifically investigate the construction of sexuality and sexual pleasure by BDSM practitioners. In their research they find that pleasure "does not have to be specifically sexual, rather it may stem from power: total power for the dominant, no power for the dominated" (p. 753). Despite this compelling finding, their research began with a focus on sexuality and concluded by writing that:

In line with previous literature (Hoff 2006; Richters et al. 2007), our findings support the idea that BDSM is a sexual interest or subculture attractive to a

³² For example, as a practitioner I attempted to participate in an academic research study on BDSMers but was stymied when I reached a question asking about the genital makeups of my partner(s). I did not in fact know the genital makeup of my rope partner, as we were practicing non-sexual rope as platonic friends, and I thought that this question likely represented a conceptualization of kink that did not match my experience. I ended my participation in this study. If I had happened to know the answer and continued in this research, it is probable that my experience would have been mischaracterized—either by assuming the genitals of my play partner implied something about my sexual orientation, or my knowledge of their body meant that rope was equivalent to sex.

minority, rather than a pathological symptom that may be derived from past abuse or difficulty with ‘normal’ sex. (Faccio, Casini & Cipoletta, 2014, p. 761)

In this case, as in many others, a research study based in sexuality unearthed intriguing implications for understanding the nuances of not-necessarily-sexual BDSM play, and yet concluded by reinforcing the definition of BDSM as a sexual practice.

Fortunately, recent research into BDSM practice, community, and experience is diversifying the literature and providing a platform to argue for more varied avenues of inquiry. Sagarin, Lee, and Klement (2015) investigated parallels between practitioners of BDSM and those who do extreme rituals such as fire walking. Their work shows fascinating points of similarity and difference that can heighten our understanding of BDSM as an embodied experience. For example, these researchers found indication that people who bottom to extreme physical play and people being pierced during a ritual both experience heightened levels of stress hormone, cortisol, and decreased psychological stress, where BDSM tops and ritual piercers both experience decreased psychological stress without the increase in cortisol³³. BDSM tops more commonly perceived the activity as sexual more than sadomasochistic or spiritual, while BDSM bottoms perceived it as sadomasochistic and ritual participants perceived it as spiritual. This research provides intriguing points from which to conceptualize diverse experiences of BDSM and their relationship(s) to sexuality.

³³ Pliskin (2018) also found a connection between BDSM play and decreased stress between pre- and post-scene measurements.

Others such as Moser (1998), Newmahr (2011), and Carlström (2018) look at the social and emotional experiences of engaging in BDSM play. Moser (1998) presents a description and analysis of his experience observing BDSM play parties over 25 years, which includes a discussion of the surprising (to him) absence of “genitally focused orgasm-seeking behavior” (p. 19). In this article, Moser explains that he does not have an explanation for the lack of intercourse and genital stimulation in what seems to be an overtly sexual and sex-friendly environment, and found that attendees at the party, if asked, could not explain it either. Newmahr (2011), on the other hand, conducted an in-depth ethnography of one BDSM community and focused intently on the constructions and experiences of intimacy that occurred in kink relationships, environments, and play. Newmahr theorizes that kink can be understood as a form of edgework (from Lyng, 2004), a concept to understand voluntary risk-taking that plays along the edges of life and death, sanity and insanity, and other such limits in the context of extreme sports. Newmahr introduces and develops a concept of *intimate edgework*, a practice that reframes the edges of risk to understand that such risks can be internal, intimate, and emotional, such as the line between consent and non-consent (Newmahr, 2011). She argues that studying experiences of kink can challenge mainstream understandings of intimacy, sexuality, and sadomasochism. Carlström (2018, p. 209) extends this focus on emotional intensity in BDSM in her ethnographic fieldwork on BDSM rituals in Sweden. She argues that the “ritual aspect of BDSM can be understood as an enabler of expressions and emotional energy”. Her in-depth exploration of emotional energy and ritual is a significant contribution to BDSM literature.

This research suggests that kinky desire may not actually be inherently incomprehensible to academics, but only that mainstream understandings of BDSM come with a series of assumptions based in a sexuality-centric framework that can inhibit rich academic inquiry. Shedding these assumptions allows for diverse and varied theoretical and empirical explorations into BDSM, like the explorations of community, marginalization, and pleasure that I discuss in this dissertation. Social science likely holds still more theoretical concepts that can provide insight into BDSM life and practice and complicate our academic understandings beyond, but inclusive of, kink as a perverse³⁴ sexual practice.

Race and BDSM: Research Sampling and Racial Representation

Research on BDSM, for the most part, refers to and includes white participants when the topic is not specifically about race, a fact which appears to reflect the mostly white demographic of practitioners in Canada and the United States. In *The Color of Kink* (2016), Ariane Cruz presents a critical reading of race and BDSM in the United States and posits that people of colour —particularly Black women, the focus of her analysis— are not absent, but invisible. She argues that BDSM as a practice and a subculture is deeply informed and affected by Black women’s sexuality and expressions of deviance/perversion, but that this subculture fails to acknowledge or give appropriate space for the actual contributions and participation of Black women. Cruz (2016, p. 14) grounds her analysis in two projects created to increase the visibility of Black women

³⁴ “Perverse” is described by Cruz (2016:12) as something which deviates from the norm, and yet (drawing on Freud) is “natural rather than aberrant”.

who practice kink, and argues that kink in and of itself is both queered and influenced by Black women's sexuality, which "informs and further queers the dynamics of subversion, reproduction, power, and pleasure that undergird kink."

This lack of visibility has been apparent in most academic research as much as in the dominant BDSM scene³⁵. Most BDSM literature drawing from human subjects effectively focus on white participants; in the literature included in this chapter, most researchers explicitly did not, or were unable to, include the experiences of non-white participants. In some cases, such as Newmahr's (2010) and Weiss' (2011) research studies, the low proportion of people of colour compared to white participants meant that identifying their ethnicity in the research study would identify the participant to their local community³⁶. Newmahr further notes that the racial makeup of her participant pool did not reflect the ethnic diversity in the area the community was located. Cruz's (2016) work suggests that this is an issue with the mainstream BDSM scene at large, not (just) academic research focus and access; further, she argues that the whiteness of the public BDSM scene is a question of *visibility* rather than participation, which suggests that researchers must find new points of access to encounter and recruit a fuller spectrum of

³⁵ I am using "dominant BDSM scene" to refer to the scene which is the most visible and accessible to researchers, reporters, curious individuals, etc. There are other scenes which operate within the dominant BDSM scene (i.e. they still attend some of the same events, but also hold private events and have a smaller social world), as well as some who operate separately from it.

³⁶ This is, to some extent, true of the present study as well. Approximately one third of my participants identified as a non-white ethnicity, with enough variance across ethnicities that if I were to identify their specific ethnicity (e.g. Afro-Caribbean), city, gender, age, and rope orientation (e.g. switch, top), they would likely be easily identifiable within their community, and so I am not disclosing all of those details. This is not true of their white counterparts, who are not identifiable by those characteristics alone due to the volume of people with similar demographics.

people involved in BDSM practice and community³⁷. One example to support Cruz's assertion is the event "Weekend Reunion", a weekend-long kink convention in New Jersey that is billed as "like a Black family reunion, but a whole lot kinkier!"³⁸ This suggests that the issues with non-white representation in BDSM research is not due to a lack of BDSM interest/kink among non-white participants (as there were enough Black BDSMers while Weekend Reunion ran to fill a whole convention for a weekend), but is potentially an indicator of some element(s) of systemic racism that may be affecting how general pansexual BDSM communities are constructed, in addition to a lack of specifically targeted recruitment and research design in academic studies. This point regarding the construction of pansexual BDSM communities will be addressed in part in Chapter 7 when I share the perspectives of people of colour whom I interviewed for this project.

Kinksters of colour are more visible, interviewed, and discussed in academic inquiries that focus on the relationship between race and BDSM³⁹. For example, there is a small but vibrant body of work in areas such as feminist theory, porn studies, critical race studies, and media studies that examine *race play*, which is "a BDSM practice that explicitly uses race to script power exchange and the dynamics of domination and submission". This type of play frequently involves interracial dynamics and the eroticization of racism (Cruz, 2015, p. 410), a process which can involve accessing and

³⁷ Cruz's assertion influenced the sampling protocol of this research project, particularly how I understood and reacted to an almost entirely white initial recruitment pool. See Chapter 3 for more on subsequent sampling methods to include racialized kinksters.

³⁸ Weekendreunion.com; at present (2020) no longer running.

³⁹ Studies of whiteness in BDSM are remarkably absent.

critiquing power (Cruz, 2015), working through the trauma of racism (Thomas, 2020; Kuzmanovic, 2018), and “appropriating gendered racial stereotypes to counter standard racist narratives” (Smith & Luykx, 2017, p. 488). Further, Kuzmanovic (2018) argues that race play “can be seen as undermining white privilege by taking whiteness out of its normative invisibility and turning it into an equally marked category as blackness⁴⁰.” Race play is highly contentious in many BDSM communities. McLachlin (2014) argues that the tendency for (mostly white) kinksters to argue against and critique race play actually serves to uphold the dominant whiteness of BDSM subculture and normalized sexuality. This suggests that there may be a relationship between the whiteness of general BDSM literature, the whiteness of dominant BDSM subculture (Weiss, 2011), and the potentially critical engagements with power and trauma that racialized kinksters can evoke through BDSM.

Rope Bondage Practice and Subculture

While there is an emerging body of literature centered on BDSM subculture and a robust history of research on BDSM practice, there are only infrequent discussions of the existence of rope bondage-specific practice and subculture. In some respects, BDSM as a subculture can be understood as a coalition of complementary groups joined by similar social and legal circumstances, although there are many points of overlap between them, and rope bondage can be one of these groups and practices. Rope bondage is usually

⁴⁰ Most academic explorations of race play focus on Blackness and play that draws on the imagery and history of chattel slavery, but Cruz (2015) acknowledges that race play occurs with many groups of racialized people.

classified as a form of “edge play”⁴¹, a phrase which denotes a type of BDSM activity that carries a high level of physical or psychological risk (Lee, Klement, & Sagarin, 2015) or a BDSM activity that seeks to push the limits of human physical, psychological, or emotional experience (Newmahr, 2011). Research, almost solely conducted by graduate students, has begun to establish and explore rope bondage as a specific subculture and practice within a wider umbrella of BDSM. This work covers various countries including Germany (Martin, 2011; Ordean & Pennington, 2019), Singapore (Sheela, 2008), Paris and London (Ordean & Pennington, 2019; Pennington, 2018), the United Kingdom (Galati, 2017), and Budapest (Pennington, 2018).

In “Rope Bondage and Affective Embodiments: A rhizomatic analysis”, Ordean and Pennington (2019) describe rope bondage as a practice that is difficult to define in more than general terms as it is “not a unified body of techniques but rather a growing collection of styles and approaches” (p. 68), not all of which are identified by participants as BDSM. They highlight a wide range of purposes and practices within rope bondage, including aesthetics, sex, and performance as guiding priorities and philosophies. These scholars mobilize the concept of *affect* to explore identity, the embodied sensation of rope bondage, and the fluid, ever-shifting concept of *time* within rope bondage play to argue that rope bondage can be understood as an affective practice. In their earlier Master’s thesis, Pennington (2017) studies rope bondage (specifically referred to as kinbaku, see

⁴¹ “Rope bondage” may be colloquially understood as a relatively harmless activity outside of BDSM subculture, but the communities I researched within for this dissertation regularly argue that there is “no such thing as safe rope”, and that there are significant physical risks to even seemingly tame acts of bedroom bondage (e.g. tying limbs to a bed improperly can easily result in nerve damage).

Glossary) as performance, separating it conceptually from BDSM practice and examining its context within contemporary and historical Japanese tradition.

Galati (2017) adopts a similarly corporeal understanding of rope bondage in their Medical Anthropology (M.Sc.) dissertation, informed by different academic traditions and focusing on the practitioners' lived experiences. Galati describes the rope bondage community in the United Kingdom as empowering and inclusive, and the practice itself as therapeutic. Sheela (2008, p. 6) alternatively finds that "the BDSM body in Singapore is gendered, classed and racially marked", and particularly explores the positioning of Chinese men at the bottom of this social hierarchy with respect to rope bondage practice and spaces.

This scarce research⁴² on rope bondage can be supplemented by knowledge of this practice and subculture that resides mostly in non-academic instruction manuals (see Wiseman, 1999; Midori & Morey, 2002; Kent, 2010; Harrington & Riggerjay, 2015; Nawakiri, 2017), internet blogs, formal and informal gatherings, and word of mouth. These varied sources indicate that rope bondage in BDSM subculture is mostly associated with two formal forms of learning: Western rope bondage and Shibari (or Kinbaku), Japanese rope bondage⁴³. There are myths and norms associated with each, although they have not as yet been thoroughly documented in academic research. Popular wisdom

⁴² It bears noting that, while these publications are few in number, the variety of academic traditions they draw upon, diverse methods, and compelling arguments make for a rich beginning to this area of inquiry.

⁴³ Academic explanations of the differences between these two styles are absent in the literature, but each can be seen in the style of rope bondage instructional books available, which are either Shibari/Kinbaku (e.g. Harrington & Riggerjay, 2015; Nawakiri, 2017) or Western style (e.g. Two Knotty Boys, 2012), as is described in the introduction.

within BDSM communities suggests that Shibari is (or draws from) an ancient Japanese martial art (Martin, 2011)⁴⁴, and this influence can be seen in many trappings that surround Shibari practice such as Japanese characters and words, the use of kimono during performance/play and a deference in the United States and Canada to rope practitioners who are or learn from Japanese teachers⁴⁵. Western rope bondage, on the other hand, holds its origins in the early days of rope bondage pornography in the United States; Irving Klaw reached particular renown for his work photographing a bound Bettie Page and creating the first bondage film in 1949 (Sisson, 2007). The pornography empire built around rope bondage was characterized by philanthropic sponsoring of photographers and directors by more well-off erotica producers (which Sisson refers to as a fetish “family tree”), beginning with Charles Gruyette in the 1930s.

In the American and Canadian rope scenes, rope bondage is featured in regular performances, some of which are accessible to the public in a non-sexual and artistic setting. Examples in Canada include Morpheous’ Bondage Extravaganza (MBE), which ran for 10 years in Toronto⁴⁶, and La Nuit Des Cordes (NDC) in Montreal, which is (at the time of writing) currently in its fifth year of operation. These events, running

⁴⁴ Martin (2011) found that rope practitioners in Berlin did not actually believe that Shibari is an ancient Japanese martial art, but choose to believe this apparent fiction in order to enhance their personal experiences in rope bondage. These experiences include practicing in a Japanese-styled rope dojo, murmuring Japanese phrases upon the conclusion of class, and the adoption of Japanese customs when attending rope dojos. Sheena (2008) found that these trappings of exoticism and artistic refinement assisted her Singaporean participants in reconciling their personal conservatism with their anxieties around attraction to a sexually deviant practice.

⁴⁵ Ordean and Pennington (2019:66) resist this easy history by drawing attention to how “the ostensible origins of rope bondage in feudal Japan” are used to validate rope bondage practice.

⁴⁶ From 2007 to 2016; this event is documented in the Lord Morpheous Collection at the University of Toronto (within the Sexual Representation Collection).

concurrently with each city's Nuit Blanche nights, include(d) rigid restrictions on nudity, sexual expression, and visible expressions of sadomasochism, instead focusing on being palatable to a vanilla (non-kinky) audience. Both primarily feature(d) Shibari-style rope. Large, recurring performance events for other types of kink activities (such as spanking, hot wax, whipping, and fire play) are formally absent in Canada and the United States, although individual performances of these types of kink (and more) occur at many individual events.

Contributions

Academic understandings of BDSM are wide-ranging and promising, increasing in diversity and variety every year. While this literature is still often influenced by its roots in psychopathology, recent social science research on BDSM practitioners, subcultures, and communities seeks to explore the theoretical implications of these methods of consensual adult interactions. There are wide swaths of uncharted waters, some of which are theoretical in nature, and others which may require better access and commitment to diverse research participants, ethical research design, and research questions that move away from only investigating sex.

Research on BDSM is trending toward a destigmatized understanding of consensual adult BDSM practice focusing on complex understandings of power, sexuality, and human experience; this dissertation contributes to this direction. In the following chapters, I will build upon the work of BDSM scholars by exploring the construction and experience of rope bondage subculture/communities, the

marginalization of disabled and racialized kinksters, and how rope bondage practitioners make sense of their experiences of desire and pleasure.

Chapter Two

Theory and Methodology

Brainstorming Theory

Articulating the theory for this project has been a difficult endeavor, not minimally because of the ground-level theorizing that contributed to my own intellectual growth as well as the project's direction by BDSM practitioners. My time in local, national, and international BDSM community spaces (both physical and virtual) has given me the opportunity to learn from a diverse and brilliant group of humans who sometimes adopt or draw from academic outlooks, sometimes alter these frameworks to suit their needs, and sometimes theorize purely from their own lived and collective experiences. For example, my concept of gender was, from the start, influenced by emerging community norms that seek to avoid binarized gender logics and make room for a deconstructed approach to gender that is simply defined by the people who experience it. This is reflective of queer theoretical approaches to gender (McNabb, 2018), and yet I know that I did not learn it there. Efforts to pursue gender justice in kink communities sometimes prioritize the experiences of women, but also often prioritize all people marginalized by gender rather than women specifically. This approach is inclusive of trans men, agender people, genderfluid people, genderqueer people, and any others who are not cisgender men. Similarly, my own (rather progressive) kink spaces adopt an inclusion framework that hearkens to intersectional feminist approaches to layered and interacting oppressions based on different socially marginalized identities and contexts. In these spaces, we work to privilege the experiences and needs of people marginalized in wider society by gender, race, dis/ability, class, and sexuality, an approach that I adopted

for quota sampling for this research (see Chapter 3). This list of angles from which people experience oppressive power dynamics in society must be familiar to anyone versed in intersectional feminism, and yet, I would argue, feminism still prioritizes gender and patriarchy as the main focus (as reflected in its name), while progressive kinky spaces generally do not. As bell hooks (2015, p.1) writes, “feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. ... To understand feminism it implies one has to necessarily understand sexism.” What do we call it when this framework is expanded to include further axes of oppression on equal footing? What word do we use for the theory that proverbially calls itself “a movement to end sexism, racism, ableism, classism, homo/transphobia, and oppression” equally?

This work is informed and influenced by these theoretical concepts and movements occurring, as it were, “on the ground”, or from the site of inquiry, as much as academic fonts of knowledge and theory. In this chapter I will lay out my points of departure for this work and identify, when possible, the overlapping influences of ground-level kinky theorists and academic theories. Summarily, my theoretical orientation consists of two pieces: a critical overarching approach to society, power, and oppression that is influenced by feminist theory, critical race theory, critical disability studies, and the informal modes of education described above; and a symbolic interactionist approach to the meaning people ascribe to their actions. Utilizing both of these frameworks I argue that the social world in which rope bondage occurs is influenced and affected by power dynamics and oppression that marginalize people along lines of race, gender, class, disability, and sexuality, and that rope bondage subculture (and the people who construct and live within it) is affected by and reflects these types of

power and oppression dynamics. This critical framework can help us understand some of the broader social context behind the insights yielded by a symbolic interactionist analysis of rope bondage practitioners' lived experiences.

Critical Theoretical Influences:

Feminism, Critical Race Theory, and BDSM Subculture

The simplest macro framework for this research is a critical theoretical understanding of the social world as shaped by power dynamics and oppression, and that people who occupy particular identities or social locations are more subject than others to these oppressions. I considered five classic axes of oppression identified by feminists (Kilty, 2014) that are also the primary focuses of BDSM practitioners seeking to make more inclusive spaces: race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, and disability. In my interviews, it quickly became apparent that disabled and racialized rope bondage practitioners had weighty and thorough reflections on their place in rope bondage subculture, which resulted in the analyses present in Chapters 6 and 7. In order to make sense of and theorize their experiences I mobilize anti-oppression theories that center each of these experiences: first, in Chapter 6, I utilize critical disability studies (Goodley, 2013), and next, in Chapter 7, critical race theory (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2017) and bell hooks' (1992) theorizing of race and representation. In each case I also conduct a more micro-level symbolic interactionist analysis of their experiences of discrimination drawing upon Goffman's (1963) stigma and spoiled identity.

Feminism

Feminist theory is relevant to the theoretical orientation of this work not as a direct analytical tool but as a contribution to this research's theoretical atmosphere. While, as I stated earlier, I did not prioritize the experiences of women, nor did I particularly focus on sexism or sexist oppression, my own feminism (along with community influences) motivated me to ensure that I spoke to a diverse array of people. As Sara Ahmed (2017, p. 3) writes, "Feminism is bringing people into the room," and too many people have not been "in" the room that is BDSM research. The feminism in this dissertation is quiet; it resides in the sensitivity paid to oppression, in the necessity of including transgender, racialized, and disabled participants, and in the decision I made to forego difficult questions of consent violations and assault during interviews (see Chapter 3). My feminism influenced the manner in which I wrote this dissertation. For example, instead of presenting a seamless and linear process, I identify and reflect upon mistakes I made during the research and writing. Further, when members of the community theorized their own lives and contributed to my own theoretical orientation in this project, I have made sure to attribute credit to this on-the-ground knowledge production. As Kilty (2014) writes in her summary of feminist criminology, feminists do not avoid criticism; the changing sociopolitical climate of feminist work calls on critical and feminist scholars to "remember our roots, our communities, the issues that drive us, and the need to lend our support to and learn from those working on the front lines for women's causes" (Kilty, 2014, p. 139). I do not prioritize "women's causes" over other causes. Instead, I consider privilege and marginalization more holistically, intersectionally, and contingently. Still, this quote reflects my philosophy in this dissertation to keep forefront

the fact that this research draws from my own community, a community largely constructed by and among marginalized people with their own needs, issues, and hopes for this work. Feminist theory—in the tradition of Ahmed (2017), hooks (2015), and fourth wave feminist criminology (Kilty, 2014)—resides subtly but powerfully upon these pages.

Critical Disability Studies

Critical disability studies is a transdisciplinary and emerging field of scholarly inquiry that begins, but does not end, with disability as an object of study. As Goodley (2013, p. 632) writes: “disability is *the* space from which to think through a host of political, theoretical and practical issues that are relevant to all” (emphasis in original). A critical disability lens includes analyses of ableism, inter/trans-sectionality, racism, hetero/sexism, and decolonizing the medicalization of disability. This area of scholarship contributes to both my conceptualization of disability that informed initial recruitment and to the analysis in Chapter 6, in part due to the movement of some critical disability scholars to separate the concept of disability from medical sociology and into its own sociological framework within mainstream sociology; this framework mobilizes disability as a key dimension of social life that can be analyzed from a host of analytical, theoretical, and substantive directions, akin to feminism’s focus on gender (Thomas, 2012). This approach understands disablism (or, in this dissertation, ableism) as:

the *social* imposition of *avoidable restrictions* on the life activities, aspirations and psycho-emotional well-being of people categorised as ‘impaired’ by those deemed ‘normal’. Disablism is *social-relational* in character and constitutes a

form of *social oppression* in contemporary society—alongside sexism, racism, ageism, and homophobia” (Thomas, 2010, p. 37 as cited in Thomas, 2012, emphasis in original).

Critical disability studies’ focus on the process of ableist oppression—the categorization of a person as “impaired” by those deemed “normal”, and the subsequent effects on their well-being—is a valuable angle from which to consider the experiences that rope bondage practitioners report. This is the perspective from which I consider the issue of microaggressions as theorized by critical disability scholars Keller and Galgay (2010) in Chapter 6.

A critical disability studies approach to disability itself is also more reflective of disabled participants’ own experiences. Frequently, as I discuss in Chapter 6, disabled rope bondage practitioners discussed their experiences of impairment and its impact on their everyday lives. 20th century disability studies reconstructed disability as socially and politically defined, a process that, while politically useful, erased the experiences of the individual that *are*, sometimes, rooted in their bodily or biomedical experiences; in this vein, some critical disability scholars seek to re-center the body as a site of potential impairment, pain, and even tragedy (Goodley, 2013). Still, a critical lens also conceptualizes the body as a site of possibility, a framing that resonates with the stories told by rope bondage practitioners who mobilize their bodily differences and skills in their rope bondage practice.

Critical Race Theory and Representation

“Critical race theory” refers not to one specific theory, but to an umbrella under which a wide range of scholars critically investigate race, racialization, and racism. Several of critical race theory’s basic tenets are foundational to the theoretical orientation of this project. First, while not all critical race theorists would necessarily agree, most conceptualize racism as “ordinary”—part of “the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in [the USA]” (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2017, p. 8). Second, critical race theorists hypothesize that “because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class whites (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it” (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2017, p. 8). These two philosophies together provide a basic theoretical foundation for understanding the experiences that kinksters of colour shared during their interviews. Their experiences can be further understood by mobilizing the concept of racial microaggressions (Huber & Solorzano, 2015), a fundamental concept that critical race theorists utilize to understand “those many sudden, stunning, or dispiriting transactions that mar the days of women and folks of color” (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2017, p. 2).

Within this larger context I draw upon bell hooks’ (1992) introduction to *Black Looks: Race and Representation* to contextualize the issue of race and representation in rope bondage subculture. Racialized (particularly Black) rope bondage practitioners regularly spoke of their efforts to *embody* positive “representation”, whether it is as a participant or teacher at events, in digital form via social media photography, or in a position of authority as organizers and hosts within the scene. hooks’ (1992) book

focuses on Blackness in film and the revolutionary work of Black directors and filmmakers, and yet, the introduction concerns (in part) the topic of media and representation more generally. hooks (1992, p. 5) argues that images have an “ideological intent” , and that “the real world of image-making is political—that politics of domination inform the way the vast majority of images we consume are constructed and marketed”. In such an environment, hooks (1992) calls for Black people to continue to take ideological hold of power via imagery and representation, something that racialized rope bondage practitioners are frequently contemplating and doing. Considering hooks’ (1992) approach to race and power in film provides one avenue to recognizing the radical and critical engagement that many kinksters of colour engage in when they photograph themselves or others or choose to occupy and find joy in majority-white rope bondage spaces.

Micro-to-Macro Symbolic Interactionism:

Meaning-Making, Stigma, Community, and Resistance

Symbolic interaction holds that social reality is constructed and experienced in interactions, and this type of inquiry generally involves a micro-scale investigation of subjective human experiences and meaning-making (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interaction lends itself well to the interpretivist paradigm that I adopt in this research which understands reality and knowledge as socially constructed (Tracy, 2013).

While normally a micro-level theory, Hannem (2012) argues for the expansion of symbolic interactionism by utilizing structural theories that can better account for power dynamics and oppression that occur at the societal level or across groups of people and

affect individuals' lived experiences. Hannem's (2012) work developing Goffman's concept of stigma (by applying Foucault's power/knowledge) is a particularly valuable framework to consider for this dissertation. Goffman's (1963) stigma and the spoiled identity has proven a useful set of concepts to understand the experiences of disabled rope bondage practitioners, as I outline in Chapter 6; however, Goffman's approach focuses so precisely on individual experiences of symbolic stigma that higher-level critiques or observations of how power (and knowledge) are constituted are left undone. Hannem's (2012) demonstration of combining stigma *and* power/knowledge as concepts positions this dissertation to consider what disabled rope bondage practitioners' experiences of discrimination and stigmatization suggest about the rope bondage subculture and power dynamics within it. As Hannem (2012, p. 23) writes:

The issue of symbolic stigma becomes one of sociological concern when it is symptomatic of stigma at a structural level: when stigma is systematically applied by agencies, institutions and individuals to a particular group of people or population as a whole—moving beyond stigma as a perception of an *individual* attribute, to a wider, stereotypical concept of stigma that taints an entire group and pushes them to the margins of society.

This last comment is what I refer to in this dissertation when I speak of the *marginalized*—people pushed, in the words of Hannem (2012), to the margins of society by virtue of belonging to a group or holding a particular identity. I refer to them as marginalized even within the context of this dissertation where, hypothetically, people *already* are pushed to and play within the margins of society as BDSM practitioners and therefore could (and sometimes do imagine themselves to be) beyond further

marginalization or discrimination. Instead, as we see in Chapters 6 and 7, people remain stigmatized, discriminated against, and marginalized even within the margins of a marginalized subculture, pushing them further to the social edge. Considering the experiences of disabled and racialized rope bondage practitioners in this context allows us to both privilege their lived experiences and examine the implications their stories hold for the structure of rope bondage social life. Indeed, there *is* a structure to rope bondage subculture that is apparent in these interviews. This structure is, at times, only referring to the broader structure of society, but also can refer to the structures rope bondage practitioners construct and support within their own social world to pursue knowledge creation and dissemination, find like-minded people, and enjoy themselves at parties and other events.

In a similar vein, Bessant (2018) traces the symbolic interactionist approach to community in *The Relational Fabric of Community*. Symbolic interactionists see community as a type of social organization built and constructed by the everyday interactions of people; historically (particularly in the 1950s) these constructions primarily revolved around shared geographic space, cultural events, social institutions, and other in-person interactions, and are being continuously re-theorized (since the 1990s) to conceptualize more disparate, physically distant, and virtual communities (Bessant, 2018). These everyday social interactions can, “over time, assume structural patterns”, a characteristic which Bessant describes as a “micro-to-macro process [that is] intimately involved in the social construction of organized social life” (Bessant, 2018, p. 7). I mobilize a symbolic interactionist approach to community in Chapter 5 to both examine the individual experiences that my participants shared and to

consider the structural patterns of rope bondage community with which they are continuously constructing and engaged.

Power

Finally, I must attempt to define the concept of *power* as I use it in this dissertation. This is, without doubt, one of the most theoretically difficult concepts to operationalize due to its competing definitions in academia and BDSM spaces. In broad terms and in an academic sense, I refer to power as Foucault conceptualizes it: power is relational and integrally connected to the constitution of knowledge (Hannem, 2012; Stehr & Adolf, 2018). Power cannot exist without knowledge, and knowledge cannot exist without power (Stehr & Adolf, 2018). This is an important lens from which to consider the issues vocalized by disabled and racialized rope bondage practitioners, as their stories of marginalization reflect many of the same oppressive power dynamics critical theorists observe in wider society, which are frequently rooted in or shored up by (ableist, racist) knowledge⁴⁷. They also speak, at times, of the powerful people *within* rope bondage subculture who either contribute to and heighten participants' experiences of existing oppressions or simply fail to counter them in a meaningful manner. The powerful are often in a position to create and share knowledge from their platforms as trusted and/or respected authority figures, teachers, and more. When I speak of power dynamics and oppression, then, I refer to the structural elements of society and rope bondage subculture both that allow the powerful to create, disseminate, and transfer

⁴⁷ Knowledge here does not refer to *truth*. In fact, the powerful can create and disseminate untrue knowledge that has real and long-lasting effects, like stereotypes, which directly impact peoples' subjective experiences of stigmatization (Hannem, 2012).

knowledge that marginalizes and oppresses people who, in some respect, challenge or are undesirable to the status quo. However, as Foucault argues, where there is power, there is also always *resistance* (Foucault, 1982). This framework aids us in recognizing the resistance of disabled and racialized rope bondage practitioners in Chapters 6 and 7.

This academic conceptualization of power is not completely reflective of what “power” means within the rope bondage community, and is likely not what participants meant when they spoke of power in an intersubjective sense. Some of these conversations referred to structural engagements with power, like the power of authority figures in the rope bondage subculture, and in these instances Foucault’s “power” is still useful; but they also refer to power as something to be *played with*, as an (at times) defining feature of their desire and/or sexuality, and as a deeply visceral and intimate experience. Power was also sometimes framed as something that confers responsibility, because the abuse or misuse of such power could have wide-ranging implications for individuals and their communities. As Emily Prior (2013, p. 3) argues, power in BDSM play can be considered “both symbolic and actual”, and I suggest that this is true in the rope bondage subculture as well. In this work, I do not offer a definition of power within BDSM play and allow my reader to interpret participants’ references to power in kink as they will.

Methodology

This project is rooted in a philosophical and academic outlook that hovers between interpretivist and critical methodological paradigms (Tracy, 2013; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Theoretically, as I have outlined above, this work is informed by symbolic interactionist as well as critical theories (feminism, critical disability studies,

and critical race theory), theories which lend themselves to these two different, but in this case complementary, methodological outlooks.

Interpretivists approach research with an ontology that understands knowledge as gained and understood through lived experiences (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2005) and that understands reality and knowledge as socially constructed (Tracy, 2013). I chose to conduct interviews with participants in order to gain access to their accounts of their own social constructions and personal realities; I also felt that interviews would offer an opportunity to engage in dialogue and knowledge co-creation with interviewees. A critical paradigm, though, understands the world and human interaction to be influenced by historical and contemporary social structures that produce and reproduce forms of oppression and power struggle. As Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2005, p. 102) wrote, “this leads to interactions of privilege and oppression that can be based on race or ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, mental or physical abilities, or sexual preference.” In other words, a critical paradigm conceptualizes a world influenced and framed by axes of oppression and marginalization.

My research design, implementation, analysis, and write-up were driven by an ontological and epistemological base that draws upon these interpretivist and critical paradigms. Specifically, this project relies on understanding participants as experts in their own lives; their accounts of being rope bondage practitioners showcase constructed personal realities that hold sociological significance. Further, participants’ experiences are influenced by and/or reflective of wide-scale social oppressions and social power dynamics. The importance of applying a critical lens *over* or alongside an interpretivist one is best exemplified in Chapters 6 and 7, which draw upon the experiences of disabled

and racialized kinksters to understand their lived realities as well as identify potentially oppressive elements within the social structure of rope bondage subculture.

According to Tracy (2013), classic qualitative researchers prefer to adhere to one paradigm and frown upon mixing, matching, and otherwise blurring the boundaries between paradigms. Interpretive and critical qualitative researchers see themselves as particularly oppositional, as there can be fundamental disagreements about the very nature of reality (subjective and constructed versus objective and true). I maintain that this is not the case; subjective and constructive does not necessarily mean “not real”, and power and oppression are nothing if not constructs themselves. Accordingly, the subjective experiences of people who are entangled with and implicated in struggles of power, oppression, and marginalization (which, arguably, may be everyone) can hold valuable insights into the nature of social structures as much as their own personal realities.

Interpretivist traditions held more influence over the practicalities of engaging in this research. This means that I did not dissect participants’ experiences with an eye to examining power dynamics *behind* what they were saying or searching, for example, for evidence of false consciousness, racism, privilege, ableism, and more if they were not identified by the participant. The data for this dissertation are their stories, words, thoughts, and experiences as they were relayed to me and are privileged as such, with the recognition that their realities and knowledge are mediated through me and my analytical process. However, maintaining some connection to a critical paradigm is not only in line with my academic outlook on power relations and oppression in society, but is a theoretical commitment that rope bondage practitioners specifically asked me to make.

Participants and non-participants both spoke to me, informally and formally, of their concerns of the impacts of marginalization and harm on their communities. The interpretivist foundation of this project influenced me to privilege these requests, along with the theories that community members offered me during our interviews, as it is a tradition rooted in collaboratively constructed academic inquiry and reality (Tracy, 2013; Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba, 2005). This guiding purpose reflects the priorities of a critical paradigm that seeks to “empower the oppressed and [support] social transformation and revolution” (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2005).

Chapter Three

Methods and Kinking Research

The methods of this qualitative research project are inseparable from the final outcome, and so this is a rather hefty chapter. This project was particularly tricky from a methodological perspective due to several factors: my insider status, which some academics consider a controversial position from which to conduct research; the sensitivity of researching a stigmatized, potentially vulnerable⁴⁸, and underground demographic in a robustly ethical manner; and potential clashes between university ethics and community ethics. Each of these elements played a part in investigating my main research question: How do rope bondage practitioners navigate, explore, and experience rope bondage practice and community?

This chapter is broken into five parts. Part 1 deals with the theoretical influences, methodology, and practical preparations I undertook to conceptualize and design this research project. In this section I introduce my methodological paradigm (which, as I explained in Chapter 2, is both interpretivist and critical) along with the core theoretical influences in symbolic interactionism, feminism, critical disability studies, and critical race theory. I explain how and why I chose interviews as my data and narrate the rise and fall of an attempt to observe rope bondage play in private as a form of participant observation. Finally, I describe my interactions with Carleton University's Research Ethics Board and achieving ethics approval. In Part 2, I describe and explain how I

⁴⁸ Some rope bondage practitioners feel vulnerable and guard their identities closely in an effort to avoid being "outed"; this requires special attention paid to issues of confidentiality and data security.

entered the field of study via Fetlife and Twitter, recruited participants, and conducted interviews with 23 rope bondage practitioners. Part 3 discusses my iterative analytical approach to data analysis; this includes both successful and less successful avenues of inquiry, each of which lead to a valuable lesson, if not outright insight. Part 4 presents some of the limitations and strengths that came from being an insider into the community I studied, some of the more disruptive ethical quandaries I encountered, and a reflection on the experience of interviewing racialized people about race. Finally, in Part 5, I propose that future qualitative researchers consider “kinking” their methods by drawing upon some core concepts of BDSM practice—particularly consent and aftercare—to improve our praxis as qualitative researchers.

I hold this work to not only institutional and methodological standards of ethics, but those held within the kink scene as well. In some ways, this standard is higher than those held by institutional review boards, as kink etiquette and ethics often concerns itself with the micro interactions between individuals. For example, in my experience, people in kink spaces are increasingly working on respecting and using appropriate pronouns, gaining explicit consent before even mild physical contact, being transparent about motivations and intentions, and prioritizing enthusiastic informed consent which should be ongoing and revocable at any time⁴⁹. Further, people in (particularly critical) kink

⁴⁹ This priority actually runs in conflict with academic priorities regarding data retention, analysis, and publication. In my initial ethics application, I proposed that participants would be able to ask for their data to be removed from the study at any point if it has not been anonymized into analysis (i.e. individual data points impossible to separate from the whole). The research ethics board felt that this was not reasonable and could interfere with my future academic work, so this was altered to reflect a four-month period post-interview where participants can remove their data from the study. Please see further in this chapter, “Kinking Ethics”, for a discussion of this mismatch in ethical priorities.

spaces pay careful attention to both macro and micro expressions of power and how said power can influence the ability to give consent. I have held these principles close throughout this study, and they have informed the ethics protocol and application.

Methods Part 1:

Project Design and Research Ethics

Data Sources, Research Structure, and Institutional Ethics

My first approach to this project involved conducting interviews as well as participant-observation in order to be able to analyze and speak to both individual experiences and group dynamics, along with providing an avenue to describe the physical act of rope bondage and examine the unique social spaces of BDSM and rope bondage events. However, I quickly realized that my insider status and the underground nature of my local rope bondage subculture made most participant-observation options ethically tricky. For example, I could ask for permission from a local venue to attend as a researcher and observe people engaging in rope activities; I was uncomfortable, though, conducting said observation without permission from those being observed (even though this is a common practice in BDSM research), while observing with consent in a semi-public space would identify them as participants in my research. I reached out to and consulted with another BDSM researcher who has conducted participant-observation in BDSM spaces. When I mentioned this potential problem, they told me that they only gained permission from the event host(s) and disclosed their researcher role to any attendee of the event who approached them and asked what they were doing there. For

me, this approach would not suffice, as I was already known as a participant and people would not question my presence or wonder if I would be there in another capacity.

After disregarding participant-observation at a BDSM event, I built a data collection plan that relied on interviews and an “observational group” as my sources. I felt that I could avoid the issues of being seen to observe participants if they conducted their rope play in private and allowed me to watch⁵⁰. Members of the observational group would be drawn from interviewees so that I would have context and information about what rope meant to them before witnessing their rope play. I intended to observe 2-3 rope sessions and felt that this would provide me some basic data to be able to describe what rope bondage play is like in my dissertation. I designed two consent forms, one for each type of participation (interview and observation) (see Appendices A and B).

As expected, my institution’s Research Ethics Board (REB) was curious about the initial proposal to observe people doing rope bondage in private. They requested a meeting with me to discuss the project and potential risks to participants and myself. I was surprised to find that the REB was mostly concerned about the risk of physical or sexual violence to participants from each other. I explained to the REB that there would be risks, as rope bondage is a physically risky activity, but that engaging in research would not heighten that risk. Their inquiries led me to develop a safety protocol that drew upon standard safety protocols in many BDSM dungeons (see Appendix C) and some changes to the observation consent form (see Appendix B). Once these concerns were

⁵⁰ In retrospect, this seems startlingly voyeuristic; at the time, it seemed like a logical solution to the problem of ethical participant-observation.

addressed, the Research Ethics Board approved the research plan (see Appendix D for certificate).

However, after conducting my first three interviews I decided to reshape the research project to focus only on interviews and discard the “observational sessions” component. One of the early interviewees mentioned to me that, while he would be happy to participate in this part of the research, he felt I would not be witnessing anything “real”, since the experience would be more like a private performance specifically constructed *for research* than a window into private play. I agreed with this assessment and decided to change the project design. I updated my Ethics protocol to reflect the change, which was quickly accepted by the REB.

Interviews

I designed a semi-structured interview process which drew upon some of the benefits of structured interviews (like being able to compare data across interviews) while also allowing for more flexibility than a typical structured interview with a strict interview schedule (Tracy, 2013). I wrote and followed an interview schedule (see Appendix E) and ensured that I covered each major topic during the course of the interview, with two optional interview paths if an opening arose. I also allowed for deviation from the interview questions if a conversation took a different path that was still related to rope bondage practice or subculture. I made some adjustments to the interview schedule after the first three interviews; for example, I struck the question “Do you have any concerns about criminalization and rope?” from the schedule after it became apparent that this was an uncomfortably direct and jarring question for some,

which seemed to bring up stresses they had not previously considered, without yielding much of a response.

I recorded all of these interviews with an external voice recorder. In-person interviewees signed a consent form they had been provided ahead of time, and remote interviewees were emailed a consent form and asked to give oral consent at the start of our interview. Each participant was offered a copy of their transcript after transcriptions were complete. Most accepted the transcript, and none requested or suggested changes or redactions.

Methods Part 2: Finding, Meeting, Speaking

Preparing to Enter the Field

Entering the field for this research was less of a literal step and more of a conceptual one, as I was already physically “in” the space the field technically occupies. My previous research, interviewing clients of sex workers (Jones, 2013), required an initial foray into the online world of an Erotic Review Board (where sex worker clients review sex workers and connect with each other) to familiarize myself with the regular actors and norms, common language and terms, find and communicate with relevant gatekeepers, and grasp enough of the community’s priorities to inform my interview schedule and recruitment post. Entering the world of rope bondage as an insider researcher was much different. Instead of developing rapport and learning terminology, I generally already held these connections and this knowledge; in its place, most of my concentration focused on entering respectfully, transparently communicating my

community/social location and motives to potential participants, and clarifying the boundaries between my existing community self and my newly-introduced academic self.

Some elements that inform this research occurred before the research began. The first among these was unofficial consultations—*conversations*—with the community I hoped to study. Before and after I approached my committee about researching this topic, I talked to my friends, partners, acquaintances, and fellow community members. Mostly I asked: should I do this? Can I do this? Do we need it? Will it help us? The response I received was unanimous: *yes*. More people than I expected were academically and intellectually fascinated by our practice, and similarly frustrated with the limitations of existing research. Many had felt firsthand stigma and harm in their own academic and personal pursuits when they read BDSM literature or saw it reported in the media. Many were intrigued by what I might find, and how we might be able to utilize the research as communities. And of those who talked to me and shared their feelings, each one helped me frame the priorities of this research, the theoretical direction, and the strict ethics protocols⁵¹.

⁵¹ I must add that while some of these peoples' fascinations can be addressed and answered with sociological and/or criminological inquiry, many could not. In addition to areas of inquiry that informed my interest in this present project, people expressed interest in psychological and psychiatric understandings of rope bondage practitioners, neuroscientific explorations of brain chemicals and BDSM, and international legal analyses of BDSM-relevant laws, to name a few. This indicates that many disciplines would be well served by exploring kink as an area of research and would likely find enthusiastic participants if the research centered the participants' needs in research design and communication.

Entering the Field: Gatekeepers, Recruitment, and Sampling

Recruitment

I intended to recruit for this research using a combination of Fetlife.com (kink social media), Twitter, and physical posters in a local dungeon, a swinger's club, and sex stores that sell kink gear. My goal was to interview roughly the same number of people (10) locally and non-locally (defined as anywhere other than the recruitment city within Canada and the United States) to capture some of the macro nature of the rope bondage world. Clarke and Braun (2013) establish that approximately 12 single-interview participants are needed to reach saturation, while Green and Thorogood (2004) argue that roughly 20 participants are required. Charmaz (2006) writes that 25 is an appropriate number for smaller research projects. BDSM research based on interviews usually rely on samples roughly around these numbers, such as Carré, Williams, Hesperus, and Prior (2018), who interviewed 14 sexual vampires; Sloan (2015), who interviewed 15 asexual kinksters; and Wignall and McCormack (2015), who interviewed 30 gay and bisexual men who engage in "pup play". Recruiting 10 participants from each group allowed me to have sufficient numbers to analyze them separately if the groups seemed to be conveying different types of stories and meaning, while also keeping the overall number (20) manageable in the event that there seemed to be little difference across location⁵².

⁵² This was the case, and the sample set was treated as one after a preliminary analysis showed more similarities between participants' accounts if they shared marginalized identities than if they resided in the same city.

At the outset, I suspected that there are elements of rope bondage subculture, community, and experience that can best be identified from a distance—that is, while a rope bondage subculture may exist, it may not actually be *visible* or comprehensible at only a local level. I felt that targeting both local and non-local participants would provide the data to explore both local and national/international patterns. I proposed that the nature of rope bondage practice lends itself to a more comprehensive network than many other BDSM practices; it is a skilled activity, but many local communities do not seem to hold enough (and varied enough) skill to meet their educational desires and needs and so practitioners reach for education, connections, and relationships outside of their geographical boundaries. In my experience as a rope bondage practitioner and amateur event organizer/volunteer, rope bondage subculture is characterized by people and their skills *moving* across physical and virtual borders to connect, play, and share with likeminded kinksters. I included both local and non-local participants to allow this work to see and consider connections, patterns, and differences between their experiences. This strategy yielded rich and valuable data that both affirms and complicates this understanding of the rope bondage social world. In fact, the practitioners' accounts were so similar across locations that they are presented as a single dataset in this dissertation.

Once the sample sizes and locations were decided, I needed to gain access to one of the most critical sites of subcultural connection: Fetlife.com. In my experience and those of my participants, Fetlife was (and is) a major site of communication between kinky people locally and internationally. Not being able to use it would certainly hamper my ability to reach community members or disseminate findings meaningfully, although secondary methods (like posters in local sex shops) would have been backup options.

In September of 2016, I contacted the “Caretakers”—Fetlife’s word for moderators and site gatekeepers— to begin the process of gaining approval to post my call for recruitment. At the time, Fetlife’s Terms of Use stated that “academic or corporate research cannot be undertaken without the permission of BitLove [Fetlife’s parent company]” (“Terms of Use”, 2018). The Caretakers responded to inform me that only “opt-in links to research surveys located off of Fetlife” could be allowed, with their approval, and pending the provision of further information, including proof of approval from an Institutional Review Board (or Research Ethics Board, in my case). After some discussion where I explained the nature of qualitative research, I secured permission to post recruitment information on my personal profile and in a small number of relevant groups after REB approval. In April of 2018, the posts went live.

The response to the call for recruitment was so enthusiastic that within hours of posting my initial recruitment online, I had more than reached my target number of participants, and the volunteers kept coming. Within the first 24 hours, I reached my local recruitment goal and doubled my non-local goal. I ended recruitment with over 70 potential non-local and 13 local volunteers.

Due to this strong response, I did not post physical posters to recruit locally; I could more than meet my recruitment goals and I hypothesized that choosing to focus only on people who engage in *online* rope subculture might offer insights that would be

obscured by more varied recruitment sites⁵³. This choice further focused the social world that became my field of study.

Sampling and Diversity

As Chapter 1 outlines, literature on BDSM subcultures in Canada and the United States usually either demonstrates or discusses the underrepresentation of visible minorities in kink research. After reviewing the perceived demographics⁵⁴ of the initial 70+ non-local⁵⁵ responses (based on information available to me, e.g. Fetlife profile information, photo, Twitter bio), this underrepresentation seemed to be recurring in my work as well, and a “first come, first serve” sampling basis would have resulted in an almost entirely white sample. After discovering that I would be able to meet my minimum number of participants, I adjusted my ethics application and protocol to allow for quota sampling in four major categories: race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability⁵⁶. The positive recruitment response provided an opportunity to further tighten the scope of my project and prioritize including people whose demographics are

⁵³ I had initially planned for more varied recruitment methods because I was expecting to have difficulty finding a sufficient number of participants if I only used one method.

⁵⁴ I say “perceived” because in many instances people did not identify characteristics like race/ethnicity in their profile information and assessing this information from photos alone is problematic. I did not rely on this as a concrete assessment of their demographics, but more to identify any obvious trends. Other demographic information like gender, age, and BDSM role were often identified on social media.

⁵⁵ Local volunteers were much smaller in number, and so I was able to include all local people interested in participating.

⁵⁶ This includes all but one of the critical matrices that feminists (like Kilty, 2016) identify as axes of marginalization. “Class” is notably missing from this list. I found that participants were much more reluctant to share information about their employment, or income level than race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and ability, and so class was not included as a category of quota sampling. This is likely influenced by kinksters’ interest in anonymity; disclosing employment or income levels (which can make a person somewhat identifiable) is not common within many kink communities, while the other categories are functionally relevant to or visible in hands-on kink experiences and relationships.

underrepresented in BDSM research (see Chapter 1). The ensuing quota sampling protocol that was approved by the REB read:

I will use the following criteria to choose participants (people can belong to more than one group): at least 2 people of colour, at least 2 people with a disability, at least 2 people with a queer and/or LGBTQIA+ sexuality, at least 2 people with a queer and/or LGBTQIA+ gender. All of these will be self defined and optional to disclose. (Amendment to Ethics Protocol in 2018)

In order to collect data to select the sample, I designed and distributed a brief demographic-based questionnaire using SimpleSurvey, a Canadian-based survey company with high security protocols.

Of the 38 non-local respondents who completed the screening survey, exactly 1 person was not white (the other categories were represented enough to achieve quota requirements). I felt strongly that this was not reflective of either the scene as a whole or my own social networks, although it was reflective of racial demographics in BDSM research. In an effort to diversify the sample, I posted a second call for participants on Twitter in August 2018, in a series of tweets specifically calling for participants who were people of colour:

Recruitment for this research project has been fascinating – I’m getting such a variety of folks volunteering, except almost all of them are white! If you’re a POC interested in talking about your xps with/in rope & live in the US or Canada, I’d deeply appreciate talking to you! If you have any concerns or suggestions or anything at all, I’m happy to talk to you about them. :) One thing I’ve been

running into is POC worried about maintaining anonymity because of the low, low numbers of *their ethnicity* people in their area. I'm going to tackle this by talking really generally and looping in those folks when I write or want to use quotes, to make sure they think it's un-identifiable enough <3

This second, targeted recruitment—while very informally worded and somewhat awkward to include here—yielded valuable results. When I interviewed people of colour who had responded only to the second, targeted round of recruitment (n=4), their experiences and perspectives suggested that they were so used to being overlooked in whitewashed kink spaces that they did not feel particularly compelled to volunteer and did not expect that their experience was being looked for (or would be appreciated)⁵⁷. The second round of recruitment explicitly asked for and valued their experiences and seemed a better environment within which to participate in research. Their perspectives proved to be crucial in this dissertation.

Due to prioritizing the experiences of people of colour, genderqueer and transgender people, and people with disabilities⁵⁸, most of my participants belong (in one way or another) to at least one marginalized group within society and the pansexual BDSM scene. In this way, this qualitative research study is not representative of either the pansexual BDSM world or the rope bondage scene that operates within it. Instead it

⁵⁷ While they did not explicitly say, my own whiteness likely played a factor here as well.

⁵⁸ I did not need to prioritize participants with queer sexualities as almost all of the volunteers were not heterosexual.

primarily (but not exclusively) focuses on the experiences of those at the margins of society and, at times, the margins of the rope bondage world as well.

Interviews

In total, I interviewed 12 local participants in a private or semi-public space comfortable to both of us, for 1-3 hours. Locations included my home, participants' homes, and outside sitting on logs in a playground; this last location featured a nearby cricket who guest-starred in the audio recording. These locations lent an air of informality to the process. In one memorable interview, the participant and I—who had already been long-standing acquaintances and casual friends—sat on her bed while her dog repeatedly joined us for attention, sometimes knocking one or both of us over. That participant fed me home-made pizza after the interview. In another location, the participant confided in me that she had purchased the most comfortable couch she could find in order to help deal with her chronic pain; we sank into its deep, soft cushions and spent the start of the interview marveling about how comfortable we both felt.

After completing these local in-person interviews I began again with 11 non-local participants. I interviewed one person via Skype audio and video, and the remaining 10 on audio only (telephone or Skype). The audio-only remote interviews had a distinctly different feeling. In many cases, they felt more formal, and involved less casual chatter or banter before and after. The one remote interview that took place using video *and* audio felt similar to the in-person interviews, where we engaged in social conversation prior to the interview and could read each other's body language and avoid speaking over one another or interrupting pensive silences. However, the differences in these interviews is

difficult to fully attribute to the method of communication, as many factors were at play. In most cases, the audio interviews were with people I had not met in person before (9 out of 10)⁵⁹, while the video and in-person interviews were mostly with people I had met and become familiar with prior to conducting research (11 out of 13). This likely played a factor in our rapport, comfortability with each other, and length of the interview, which was slightly shorter on average with people I had not physically or virtually met before.

Interviewing as a Scene

Soon after beginning interviews, I noticed familiar rhythms beating underneath the formal structure of the interview. I cannot say or know if this is an aspect of all interviews and it became more obvious due to the content, or if it was a unique creation between BDSM practitioners (I suspect the former). I felt peculiarly like each early interview was being constructed and experienced like a *scene*, a concept in kink used to describe play interactions that have a negotiated start and end point. Near the end of my in-person interviews, I drafted the following (embarrassingly dramatic) passage in my notes to process and understand what I was sensing:

Depending on who you ask, a scene can be described as a moment bracketed apart from (or within) time. A scene can represent a departure from, a dive into, reality. A scene can come with rules, spoken and unspoken, about how each person will behave, or what limits and boundaries are in place, or about a shared

⁵⁹ In most cases, however, we shared an online social connection or friendship; only 2 out of 10 audio interviews were with people with whom I did not have any social connection.

purpose or intention. A scene can be many things, and apparently an interview is one of them.

I was only two interviews into data collection when I noticed this. I had interviewed participants for research before but never anyone I knew particularly well, and certainly no one who shared a stigmatized, marginalized, and sometimes criminalized social sphere with me. Those earlier interviews contained rules, but rules which applied to most of our interactions together, inside the interview and out. These, though. These were something different.

These interviews start with a preamble. “You don’t have to pretend we don’t know each other,” I say. “But I won’t use what I know about you to inform this interview.” Usually a pause, where they might look confused, or they just wait for more. “What I mean is, I won’t ask you how your partners are doing, because I know you have partners. I won’t ask about that performance I know you did last week. If you want to bring information into this, it’s up to you to do so.” They get it. We’re creating something new.

There are more rules, so many of them! We establish that they can use names, places, and other identifying information if they like, but I won’t transcribe them. They can skip any questions, and we can change the subject to suit their interests. The purpose of the interview, I clarify, is to talk about what interests them most about rope. My questions will hopefully guide us, but they are not written in stone.

I ask again if I can record this interview, and they assent. I turn on the voice recorder. I say hello to the microphone, and every time, much as I try not to, my voice changes. So does theirs. We sound more formal. We speak clearer and slower (at least, at first). The parameters have been explained, consented to, and constructed. The purpose of the interview is established. The players are connected and the roles adopted. The interview has begun.

This feeling that the interview was a scene co-created between myself and each participant lingered through all in-person interviews and a handful of remote interviews. I found myself adopting kink etiquette responses to topping a scene, like checking in with the participant after they have an opportunity to “come down” from the interview, ensure they are still feeling good about it, and offer an opening for feedback, complaints, or support. The interviews felt like sessions of suspended reality, where existing relationships were briefly heightened, and new relationships were forged. I even experienced some type of *headspace*, an altered state of consciousness (see Glossary, Sprott & Randall, 2016). For me, it felt like a combination of reality suspension and hyper-focus, an experience that left me dizzy and energized and academically alive. Undoubtedly, it was an odd experience.

Methods Part 3: Analysis

The analytical approach I implemented for this research project can be best described as an iterative analysis. An iterative analysis involves utilizing both emic (emergent, inductive) and etic (deductive) reasoning to consider the data from the research subjects as well as the relevant literature and theories as analysis progresses

(Tracy, 2013). As I discuss in the introduction, the initial inspiration for this project came from the literature itself and the lack of what I, as a practitioner, expected and wanted to see. The theories and analysis were therefore shaped in part by what was and was not in the literature; still, more weight was given to themes that emerged from the data itself. For example, etic reasoning led me to consider the presence of themes around leisure and emotional edge work because of compelling and existing research. This meant that if an interview subject hinted at emotional intensity being the draw of rope bondage, I would pursue that avenue of inquiry, or when they discussed the effort they invest into developing their rope skills, I heard that in the moment as a reflection of rope bondage as serious leisure. Still, thematic analysis focused on what themes were most prevalent in the data, and the ultimate findings chapters center on the topics that most participants seemed to prioritize. The work most influential to my research design and implementation was Newmahr (2010), Prior and Williams (2015), and Williams and Prior's (2015) explorations of kink as serious and casual leisure; Weiss' (2011) subcultural analysis in *Techniques of Pleasure*; and Cruz's (2016) discussion of race and racism in *The Color of Kink*. Each of these are described in more detail in the previous chapter.

Once data was collected and coded, I engaged in inductive emic analysis that, at times, produced laughable results. For example, when analyzing the code for “pleasure”, I dove deeply into the data and had an epiphany that what I was reading was all about *power*. I feverishly wrote out an explanation of how participants' accounts were infused with experiences of power—giving it, taking it, feeling it. This analysis reads, from my notes:

Some of the pleasure of rope bondage comes from making power palpable, visible, comprehensible, understandable, evident, exaggerated. Who is and is not in “control” is negotiated and abided by. Who makes the decisions are pre-decided. This gives structure for not thinking or the boundaries within which you can think or play. Some of the pleasure, relief, fulfillment comes from these verbalized and literally embodied types of power.

I wrote in this vein for two full pages before realizing that I had, of course, accidentally invented power play. Of *course* much of rope bondage is about power—and if you ask, the participants will tell you that themselves. These people swim in power like fish swim in water and birds fly in air. Their accounts were therefore so deeply reflective of power play that they spoke to themes of power at every turn, whether or not they used that specific word. Fortunately, emic analysis led in most instances to less obvious insights.

I analyzed the results of data collection using several different methods. First, I wrote memos after each interview to capture my initial impressions, and so a quiet kind of analysis began after the first interview. When transcriptions were finished, I used NVivo 12 to code the interviews, looking for thematic patterns. Initially I attempted to use an *in vivo* coding style (Given, 2008) which draws coding inspiration from the specific words and phrases used by participants. This method had served me well in previous projects but did not here—the data was so rich and varied that I soon had over 50 distinctly different codes, and had not yet coded even half of the interviews. More importantly, I had the distinct impression that I was losing something in the process of minutely coding my data. I kept reflective memos during the coding process, and one such early memo reads:

Working on 350, something I've noticed—I don't like the feeling of splitting up the really visceral descriptions of rope into art/body/sexuality/etc. It doesn't feel right to fragment it. I'm going to code things like that into 'purpose of rope' (if it suits, I might change it) as a catchall category and work on it from there. I don't think I should erase the ties between the different motivations etc. by separating out individual sentences yet.

[Later]

Okay, I'm stressed out. I feel like I'm losing meaning because it's all getting spread out. This isn't working. I have too many codes. I want to narrow it down to make sure I am not losing things between one interview and the next. Fuck.

Soon after this internal debate, I decided to change my coding practice. I solicited advice from my committee (particularly Chris Bruckert, who proved invaluable) and also turned to Tracy (2013). I filed away my codes and started over again.

In my second round of coding, I started with what Tracy (2013, p. 189) calls the "data immersion phase", or what Chris had called "just read it again! And keep notes to develop a codebook *first*". I re-read 10 transcripts until I had reached saturation for *descriptive* codes, or codes that only described the literal words and not the meaning I felt they had. This means I retired some early codes like "power", "privilege", and "expression", and introduced more simple ones like "origin stories", "pictures", and "money". I then coded each interview using these codes, a process Tracy refers to as "primary-cycle coding", which includes "an examination of the data and assigning words or phrases that capture their essence" (2013, p. 189). I preferred the bucket type of coding

approach, which separates types of stories and commentaries into large thematic *buckets* instead of coding minutely at the start. Some of these “buckets” were as large as “ROPE⁶⁰” (with sub-categories for practice, play, styles, materials), “knowledge and information”, “social, inside”, and “social, outside”⁶¹.

Bucket-style descriptive coding more closely suited my instinct that analytical value lay in whole stories more than individual sentences. For example, during this process I wrote:

This interview is fascinating. This participant was so good at eloquently and viscerally explaining what rope means to her. It gave me chills, and my heart started racing near the middle as I was coding. It feels so analytically rich that I am stressed about cutting it up with codes, so I changed the way I’m coding a bit to reflect that—more holistic/chunk/narrative coding, less split up sentences/phrases (for now). I expect I will sub-code within each theme, but I would like to keep them whole for now, and then I can consider each broad topic together.

One of the most surprising and rewarding categories emerged during data immersion as “pleasure”, and morphed into “Sensation, feelings, pleasure”, to encompass all of the accounts and thoughts about peoples’ feelings about or during rope play. This

⁶⁰ I wrote this code in all-capitals initially because it felt ridiculous and too-obvious to code for “rope” during a rope bondage study; later I found that having such a code was actually critical in my data analysis.

⁶¹ These two codes may seem unnecessarily binary, but exist because I found that stories of the inner social world of rope and kink were often separated from stories of their lives and relationships outside of rope and BDSM. I created a “Social, overlapping” for instances where the lines was more blurred, but it was rarely used. The number of references for each category were: Social, inside (280); social, outside (50); and social, overlapping (17).

code resulted in 144 references, the third largest after “social, inside” (280) and “ROPE” (174). Similarly, I was surprised to find that the code “pictures” grew after each interview, and implied an importance and weight to photography, representation, and imagery that I had not expected; in fact, “pictures” resulted in more references (39) than codes I thought would be important, like “consent” and “abuse, violence, harm”.

After these rewarding rounds of primary-cycle coding, I developed a second-level or analytical codebook by repeating the above process within the codes I chose to focus on: discussions of community/subculture, experiences of marginalization by race and disability, and experiences of pleasure.

Methods Part 4: Postscript

Limitations and Strengths: Insider Research

There are limitations to the structure of this research project. The most prominent is that some parts of academia consider insider research to be a limitation. While I argue that my position was a strength more than a weakness, it did affect a great deal. For example, I knew almost all of my participants, and their knowledge of me clearly influenced interviews. In one instance, a participant mentioned that she felt that rope education in our city is priced too highly, and directly cited a workshop I had organized myself. She then seemed to become concerned and spoke more quickly to scale back or qualify her statements as a complaint about capitalism, not a comment on the value of teachers and organizers.

Evelyn: The classes that I’ve seen offered in Ottawa have been relatively expensive for me, just because um... I think the set of workshops

that you were trying to set up in the fall was like, sixty bucks a day or something like that? And like... I'll spend sixty bucks on a week's worth of groceries. ... And personally, because my income is so low, I can't justify spending a week's worth of grocery money on like, a day of workshops.

Zoey: Yeah. That makes total sense.

Evelyn: I think a lot of people don't realize? And I'm not, I'm not saying that these workshops are unfairly priced, because, like, it takes time to learn all of this information, and like, they're putting the effort into developing the workshop, and putting effort into teaching it, and that's a lot of work. So I'm not saying that people shouldn't be paid for the workshops, I'm just saying that, just because of the way capitalism works, they're pretty expensive. If you don't make a lot of money.

At the time and afterward, I interpreted this exchange as Evelyn being concerned that she had offended or insulted me and made sure to assuage my potentially wounded feelings or pride. This experience was disorienting for me; I had been interviewing her in a frame of mind that hardly recalled I existed, and to have my own actions brought into the interview (and subsequently affect it, at least temporarily) was a surprise to me. I later assured her that her feelings and opinions are valid, and I would not take them as censure on myself.

I also noticed, on occasion, that a participant might hesitate or be confused if I asked something they felt I already knew the answer to. Sometimes this was met with laughter, as in the case of Bird, who referred to her relationship with me in the third person; when I asked a clarifying question about that relationship, a question I would reasonably already know the answer to, she burst into peals of laughter. Alternatively, when I interviewed Denis, he made reference to *subspace*, a word regularly used in our shared social world to refer to a state of mind rope bottoms and submissive players may feel. To draw out his understanding of the word, I asked: “So what is subspace?” This question was met with a pause and a strange, sideways look that I interpreted as “are you feeling quite well?” I interrupted a long pause to say:

Zoey: When I ask questions like that, it’s not a test –

Denis: Yeah...

Zoey: It’s not like I have an idea –

Denis: I know.

Zoey: I just mean, what do you mean by it?

This seemed to clarify the situation, and Denis went on to explain what he had meant by subspace. I made sure to incorporate an explanation of this for later interviews, so participants did not feel ill-at-ease or as if they were being tested when I asked their definition of terms they knew I was familiar with.

At other times and more commonly, my insider perspective was acknowledged by the participant in a positive way. This mostly occurred when referring to the almost

indescribable feelings of being in rope, as well as the odd types of overlapping platonic/physical/sexual/emotional relationships that are common in this world. For example, Celeste told me:

I would say rope family is people that you all kind of do rope with each other. Kind of like a life-long orgy. Yeah, you all do rope with each other, and you spend a lot of time outside of rope together. But pretty much mostly talking about rope anyways. I think they're the kind of people that you have a relationship with. You know what I mean?

The essence of this last phrase—“you know what I mean”—as both a statement and a question echoed through many interviews, and played a part in developing an impression that I was receiving information and details that were primarily shared with me *because* they assumed that I already understood. My interview with Serena reached a similar point when, like Denis, I asked her about subspace:

I'll have to think about it for a second, because I actually have no idea. This is a word I use without actually knowing what it *means*, it just signifies like a headspace or mood that... mood... yeah, like... headspace is just the better word. Like, it's like a state of mind, or an emotion, I guess. Um... I'm trying to think of a word for something, and it's just... anyway. You get it.

This effect is even more noticeable in the transcript of my interview with Olivia. Olivia was describing to me what it feels like to have a good rope scene, and explained:

Olivia: It can be beautiful, it can be scary, it can be really, really unsettling. But yeah, it is... for my money, it's just a good use of time. [Laughs]

Zoey: That's a really good summary. Rope is definitely a good use of time.

Olivia: Yeah. Oh, and the time dilation effect, have you noticed that?

Zoey: Oh really?

Olivia: Like yeah, so one of the things I noticed, like you can tie and tie and tie for hours or just tie a little bit, and, you know, it feels like you just started.

Zoey: Yeah.

Olivia: Right? Sometimes you get... it seems like that. And sometimes when like, I'm... when I know I'm going to have a busy day, I'll take 3 minutes, I'll set a timer, and it will just... that time can expand for me too.

As our conversation continued, it seemed that Olivia was marveling at this time dilation effect as a potential or likely shared experience (and, in fact, it was), a moment to dish between people who both knew what this strange thing was like.

Messy Methods

I write this section with hesitation. As academics, when we review the research of others, sometimes we can see bits and gaps where some of the messier parts of

researching people may have risen. We wonder how researchers behaved in and experienced their fields of study, particularly when they have something to do with sex⁶². In some useful cases, authors unflinchingly present and discuss their ethical dilemmas and unconventional experiences (e.g. Kilty, Felices-Luna, & Fabian, 2014; Bruckert, 2014), while in other cases they may not. Perhaps they encountered no such strangeness. Or perhaps they chose to keep those experiences close.

I think particularly of Hannem's (2014) piece on emotional labour and reflexivity interviewing individuals convicted of sex offences against children. Hannem talks transparently about the personal and ethical conflicts she underwent, her feelings and reactions to the stories of her participants. Similarly, Khan (2015) openly discusses her experiences visiting a "John School", analyzing her presented self and motivations, and speaking to the sex worker clients there. Khan candidly describes and analyzes the voyeuristic thrill she feels entering this space. It is no coincidence that after being supervised and mentored by each of these scholars, I feel a pull to confront and be transparent about the more uncomfortable pieces of doing this particular fieldwork.

Tensions in Interviewing Ethics

Interviewing close friends and acquaintances within the rope bondage world was unexpectedly difficult and disorienting. If I know this person is a performer and educator, do I ask them about that, or let them bring it up? (The latter.) If I know that they are coping with trauma from a serious consent violation because I have supported their

⁶² For a proposal of how researchers could approach research about sex with transparency, see Thomas and Williams (2016).

healing work, do I ask about that specifically? (No.) If I hear one side of a story from a person, and the other side from their partner, how do I reconcile those? (I do not.) What if I believe that they're lying to me... because I was there?

Most seriously: what do I do with knowledge given to me that makes them or someone else seem a hidden danger to my community, my friends?

This last question demonstrates a clash of ethics between academic research and the norms of BDSM communities. In an unregulated world⁶³, rope bondage practitioners (like other BDSM practitioners, see Holt, 2016) rely on word of mouth to keep themselves and each other safe and do their best to avoid predators, bad faith actors, and others who are likely to cause them harm. I found some guidance for the former questions in methods literature that explores the boundaries between friendship and participant (Tillman-Healy, 2003), but the latter question felt both the heaviest and least addressed, while being among the easiest to answer technically. Of course, if there was no imminent risk to themselves or others, I would maintain confidentiality to the utmost, and this was never actually in question. Instead, when this question became relevant to my work, it caused a “small-e” ethical and moral discomfort for me, specifically because of my socialization into BDSM subculture.

In September of 2018, during the second round of interviews, I wrote the following in my field notes:

⁶³ As discussed in Chapter 1, this world is still subject to criminal law and other laws that govern the countries they are physically placed within. However, members of these communities are frequently reluctant to involve law enforcement, meaning that even criminal behaviour is sometimes managed without the involvement of the criminal justice system.

I feel like... in my time in this community, I have learned how valuable cultural constructions of reputation are, and it feels actively contrary to my place in this community to keep this information to myself. This is happening both when someone is sharing good and bad things with me. I am feeling a strong desire to tell my friends and those around me who the 'good people' seem to be—who is telling me things that reflect ethical consent practices, mostly, and otherwise who seems like a responsible community member. (What does that even mean?)

Similarly I'm struggling keeping to myself the attitudes that seem like red flags for me – people who steamrolled over me during the interview, who lamented the fact that their actions are scrutinized if they make a mistake regarding consent, people who seem manipulative and like their priority is their own pleasure (or reputation, or ego, etc.) rather than the health of the community.

I do not actually feel like this is going to compromise my ability to keep things confidential and take my participants in good faith, it just feels in tension with my role as a responsible community member.

These conflicted feelings did not present a real methodological problem, exactly, but instead highlighted a piece of rope bondage culture that I had largely taken for granted. I felt a compulsion to collect and share information on peoples' attitudes and experiences of safety that had been ingrained in me by my communities, by whisper networks that have kept me and my friends safe (-ish). In this passage, I was beginning to confront the uneasy feeling that I was keeping secrets from a community that relies on the transmission of precisely these kinds of secrets.

This was not a hypothetical problem. In social settings, I encountered multiple instances where my interview-generated knowledge had substantive relevance. For example, when socializing in a small group online, the topic turned to a particular rope top, and whether or not they were a safe person with whom to potentially tie. I had had an interview with this person, one where I felt they expressed unrepentant views about admitted past consent violations and shared a conscious disregard for common consent models in kink spaces (i.e. that consent should be fully informed, enthusiastic, and ongoing). Withholding that information felt like a betrayal of my friends and their efforts to keep themselves safe, while I also still deeply respected and valued my participant's right to privacy and confidentiality. Similarly, but less seriously, I overheard friends discussing a rope person who had a reputation for making serious and dangerous mistakes in rope with seemingly little care; unable to share details they told me about dedicating time and effort to fixing this problem, I remained silent.

I also personally developed my opinions and perceptions of people during these interviews, notwithstanding my best intentions to do otherwise. I promised friends and acquaintances that there would be no benefit or punishment for participating/not participating, and this was easily held to—I did not struggle to compartmentalize my own priorities (collecting data for a dissertation) and my relationships. I was not expecting how participants *treated* me to be so emotionally challenging. For example, one participant had a manner of speaking that placed *me* at the center of their hypothetical stories, particularly ones involving victimization or harm. They might say, “say you had your consent violated. Wouldn't you say something if you didn't like what was happening?” or “you know, when you're a rope bottom like yourself, sometimes bad

things happen to you, you just know to accept that”. The most egregious instance involved the graphic telling of a fictional consent violation story, with “you” (me) as the subject, including comments like “say you were tied up, and spanked even though you hadn’t negotiated that, and you started crying, and then...” It continued.

I recall reaching my limit with these framings, which left me less effective as an interviewer near the end of our conversation, to my (at the time) shame. I still followed my interview schedule, which was luckily written down, but struggled to focus and control my expression. Time slowed. I could hear my heartbeat and the rustle of the participant’s feet against the floor; I jumped when the door made a *click* sound in the doorjamb. I felt both cold and uncomfortably hot, and kept removing my cardigan, replacing it, and removing it again.

After the interview, I remained in place, my mind still unable to completely process the sense that I had been unwillingly and unnecessarily cast in the role of a hypothetical victim over the course of two hours.

Transcribing this interview was a fascinating trial. I could *see* the value in their words, and even in their framings. The participant’s perspective was rife with *power*. The participant’s construction of events and subject/object, and how *I* was the most easily at-hand object of harm, exists in stark contrast to similar real and hypothetical stories told from the perspective of the participant (where they placed themselves as the potential victim). As this was one of my first interviews, the experience sowed seeds for exploring minute expressions of power in people’s understandings and experience in the rope world. Still, it was not a *fun* experience.

I include this narrative uncomfortably. I include it because, first, qualitative researchers are people; we are affected by our interviews, our research, our subjects, as much as the final products most frequently refrain from discussing the researchers themselves. Transparency serves us well as a tradition, as other scholars can learn from our experiences and our mistakes. I also include it because there is a ripe subject here for qualitative methods training⁶⁴. These examples of ethical and moral unsettlement, of internal tensions and conflicted loyalties, shed light on complex elements of interviewing human subjects that are due full consideration.

These examples also draw attention to how important it is for each researcher to practice self-care and have good support networks. When I encountered a similar problem in my Master's research I found it quite difficult to process the experience and how it impacted me. In this instance, however, I knew how to handle the situation best for myself. The experience remained with me as an interesting (if somewhat negative) learning experience, but was not actually disruptive to my work or my life. Some of the techniques I employed included:

- Recognizing this labour as emotion work and a critical part of the research process (Hannem, 2014)
- Including my emotional reaction and experience as a part of field notes following the interview

⁶⁴ This was not the first time I encountered this sort of hypothetical framing. During my Master's research, at least three participants similarly told stories centering me as the fictional subject, with similarly unconventional content. Such examples included semi-innocuous, likely flirty statements like "say you were a sex worker I was calling for an appointment" as a way to introduce their preferred type of contact. Other examples include more boundary-pushing narratives, including one where a participant detailed how exactly he would have sex with me in the interview room if I were a sex worker and he were my client.

- Reaching out to my support network for anonymized support (e.g., “I had a tough interview today” without details)
- Discussing the experience with a mentor/friend who could help give the experience some emotional as well as theoretical feedback
- Employing self-care tactics such as taking a day off the following day, making sure to listen to, record, and give space for feelings that arose in the subsequent days, and paying particular attention to physical needs and comfort immediately after the interview

I am grateful that self-care mechanisms I had developed through the course of my PhD were so well-suited to managing this situation, but they were not intentionally built to do so. Experiencing *two* such instances with radically different outcomes, separated by five years and a great deal of academic and personal development, has shown me that it may be ideal for researchers to develop such a robust self-care plan *before* an issue occurs. If I were to start over again, I would tell myself to prioritize four things: 1) learning about emotion work in the research process and its impacts on people; 2) developing a personal support network that *understands academic research*, at least enough to listen to functional details and still be supportive; 3) developing an academic and professional relationship where it is safe to be vulnerable or unguarded; and 4) having a personal self-care plan for what the researcher needs during a time of stress or disruption, which may include specific meals or activities. In this way, a researcher would be prepared for a host

of different needs, from basic physical needs to intellectual, social, and professional needs⁶⁵.

At this point, it bears mentioning that I am *deeply* grateful to my participants—in some ways, particularly so to the people who were not my friends, who had the most to risk by trusting me, who shared viewpoints regarding consent with which they knew I disagreed, and who did not seem to expect me to be a sympathetic listener. I appreciate the vulnerable position they adopted by sharing mistakes, challenges, complaints, and insecurities with me. These were key narratives when it came to deepening my understanding and analysis of some critical issues and themes. Part of my hesitation to present and discuss my internal experiences has been out of concern that those very people will feel violated by my inner thoughts and experiences of our interviews. I hope that is not the case, and they take at face value my real gratitude for sharing their differing viewpoints with me. Nor do they need to feel responsible or guilty for my discomfort or emotional reactions to our interviews. As Stacey Hannem taught me, “it’s all data!”

Ultimately the analysis in this dissertation was complicated and deepened by the inclusion of perspectives that differed so seriously from mine. There is real intellectual and theoretical value gained by earning the trust and hearing the perspectives of people who cause (or could potentially cause) harm, and I feel a weighty sense of gratitude to those people for speaking to me at all. Some knew that I would not like what they were

⁶⁵ This is further explored by Kumar and Cavallaro (2017, p. 648), who discuss the “tremendous amount of mental, emotional, or physical energy” that can be involved in research and the accordingly high need for self-care that novice researchers are generally under-trained to manage.

saying, and shared their perspective regardless, while others did not seem to be aware of how their words might seem. A small number of significant insights and perspectives shared in this dissertation would have been impossible to reach without these accounts. I am indebted to criminological qualitative methods training (particularly with Carrie Sanders, Stacey Hannem, and Chris Bruckert) for helping me develop the conviction that it is critical to listen to and respect these voices as well as those that are easier to hear.

I still do not know how to handle some of these issues emotionally, but I know how to professionally: prioritize the privacy, confidentiality, and welfare of my participants to the utmost and value the words that they share with me. As a qualitative researcher, I have no choice, nor do I truly want one. And yet, the design of this project, choices made throughout, and events out of my control like these shaped my dissertation.

Interviewing on Race and Racism

While I prioritized recruiting people of colour and intended to ask questions about their experiences as racialized people in rope bondage subculture, I did not adequately prepare myself to explore this topic during our interviews. I am grateful that these participants spoke to me about their experiences even as I fumbled awkwardly through my questions. I struggled throughout with a combined feeling that it was voyeuristic for me, a white researcher, to ask about their experiences of racism, while also feeling it was irresponsible not to. I was not prepared to delve into participants' experiences of race and racism.

This was most obvious in my interview with Cora. Several (white and Black) practitioners had told me that they were concerned about an over-fetishization and

appropriation of Japanese culture and Asian women in rope bondage subculture, and this was an issue I had been concerned about and had seen evidence of myself. I broached the topic with Cora, who is an Asian woman. The conversation did not go well. Cora had been one of the few participants completely unknown to me and it felt as if some of the rapport we were building was lost after this exchange:

Zoey: Did you end up running into anything that conflicted or felt different for you when you started with Japanese rope, being Asian and having that cultural background? How did that go for you?

Cora: What do you mean?

Zoey: Well... in my experience, it's mostly white people teaching Japanese-flavoured things that they created. So I'm just... did you find anything like that? Or was it comfortable for you?

Cora: I'm not sure I totally understand the question. Is the question what it was like to learn Japanese rope being Asian?

Zoey: Yes. Like, how did you find that atmosphere?

Cora: I imagine there was no difficulty whether I was Asian or not learning the Japanese style. ... I just don't think it matters, you know, whether I'm Asian or not.

This exchange showed me how unprepared I was to adequately interview racialized people about their own experiences of racism. My findings regarding the experiences of racialized rope bondage practitioners (particularly in Chapter 7) are robust

and enlightening thanks entirely to the generosity of my participants, who, at times, seemed to recognize my fumbling and forgive or disregard it. In other cases when the participant was my friend, we generally already had an existing rapport regarding issues of race and racism that circumvented the need to have a well-designed interview path. I am grateful that I could investigate the issue of racism in the rope bondage subculture and learn this valuable and uncomfortable lesson. By being transparent about these awkward (at best) moments, I hope to identify pathways that future white researchers may take to grapple with how white fragility can play a part in the research process. White fragility—white people’s inability to handle even the most minimal race-based stress (DiAngelo, 2018)—interferes with the ability of white researchers to conduct ethical and robust qualitative research, “drives scholars of colo[u]r away from the field” of research (Corrigan, 2016, p. 87), and insulates structural white supremacy in academia from criticism (Parasram, 2019).

Methods Part 5: Kinking Methods

At the culmination of this research, I suspect that there are further lessons that qualitative researchers can learn from how kinky subcultures relate to consent, ethics, and respect for human beings. One such area of application is hinted at earlier in this chapter, in my unexpected experiencing of interviews as scenes, while another lies in more holistic understandings of consent.

A scene is a constructed piece of time, a suspension of reality where a kinkster, or two kinksters, or more kinksters agree to set rules that apply for a period. Sometimes this length of time is explicit (e.g. ten minutes, one hour, 24 hours, a weekend), while other

times the end time is less specific. The construction of a scene serves a valuable purpose for kinky people that allows them to set aside “real” life and focus exclusively on play. Scenes are highly individual and defined differently by different people. This is similarly true in a semi-structured interview, where everyone involved agrees on set rules of behaviour, agrees on a symbolic or explicit beginning and end, and allows for each individual interview to take a different path if needed.

When I interviewed participants for this research project, I sent them consent and information forms ahead of time, and we talked about what would happen during the interview. Some of them asked specifics: what kinds of questions will you ask? How long do you think this will go? Should I prepare anything? Would you like some strawberries? When the interview time arrived, I would greet the person, we would talk informally, and would settle ourselves in whatever location we were conducting the interview. (A comfortable couch with rope coiled on the floor and jute dust scenting the air; across tables in a room at the university, with chalkboards in the background; hammock chairs on a porch under the sun.) I would go over, again, the rules of the encounter, and would clarify their awareness and consent. I reminded them that they could end the interview or skip questions at any time, that they could speak freely and I would not include any identifiable names of people in the final work, that they would have an opportunity to see their transcript and redact anything they wished they had not said. One such interview began with:

I’m going to anonymize everybody. I won’t use your scene name or your real name, which I don’t think I even know. And if you tell me any identifiable stories, I likely won’t include them. If I want to, I’ll check with you. So if it’s like

hey, this one time I was teaching a class at RambleGRUE last year ... people would know who it was.

Sometimes they had further questions, but often they did not. I set the scene, confirmed consent, and started the voice recorder.

Every single time I interviewed someone in person, my voice changed once the recorder was on. Usually theirs did, too. We both would talk slower (at least to start) and clearer, conscious that some future version of me would be listening to this. Occasionally, one or the other of us would even speak to “future Zoey”, like when Rebecca described her hand actions (“making chicken wings with my arms!”) for the recorder. In other cases, participants were comically aware of the recorder, like during this exchange with Althea:

Zoey: So we can still be ourselves.

Althea: Okay.

Zoey: But now there's a record, so that I don't lose things.

Althea: Okay, it will hear my farts too.

Zoey: Yes! That's what I'm here for. I'm just gonna isolate
the farts. (Both laugh)

The interview would end, one or both of us would awkwardly say goodbye to future me and the voice recorder (one participant sang “turn it off” to a made-up tune), and the stop button would be pressed. Every time, I felt an atmospheric shift following the halting of the voice recorder. We would usually exhale, laugh, or do something else to

mark the change back to our less formal selves. Often a more relaxed conversation followed, sometimes related, sometimes not.

Interviewing kinksters taught me that qualitative research is like a scene—but it is missing one of the best parts of a scene, specifically the concept of *aftercare*. Aftercare refers quite literally to the care of a person or people after a scene. Aftercare is usually negotiated between players and may include physical affection, emotional support, and care for basic bodily needs (e.g. providing a blanket to be warm, water, food). Conversations about aftercare responsibilities most frequently seem to frame them as the purview of the top or Dominant, who is responsible for caring for the bottom or submissive post-scene⁶⁶. According to Jozifkova (2013, p. 392), one of the functions of aftercare can be to “decrease (the differences in) the hierarchy disparity after the scene”, which can also be understood as rebalancing power disparities between partners who play differently with power in and out of scenes⁶⁷. Normatively, aftercare does not only include care immediately after a scene, but often includes a commitment to communicate for some amount of time afterward: the norm in my community is to “check in” 24-48 hours later; not doing so can deem you an irresponsible top, as you may be leaving a bottom or submissive to handle “drop”⁶⁸ or injury without support. The purpose to

⁶⁶ There is a sub-narrative that tops and Dominants deserve aftercare too, but it is usually included as an afterthought or add-on.

⁶⁷ This is an appropriate description of the period after each in-person interview where we would talk about our lives, reconnect to our existing relationship to one another, and (in my case) attempt to disperse the feeling of “power *over*” that came from the interview process.

⁶⁸ See Glossary

committing to at least one instance of later communication comes from an understanding that feelings develop and change in the aftermath of an event.

A concept like aftercare is notably missing from qualitative methods. I found myself often (but not always) reaching out to participants in the days following interviews, only realizing near the end of data collection that I was subconsciously following aftercare etiquette—I considered their feelings and reactions to being interviewed my responsibility, and understood those reactions as feelings that might change in the hours after an interview. When I contacted them, like I would follow-up with a play partner, I asked how they were doing, how they felt about our interview, and if there was anything they would like to talk about or tell me. Without exception, everything was fine; occasionally a participant offered further information (e.g. a link to some writing they had done, a few words to clarify something they had said). If I had found a participant in need of support, I would have offered it if capable⁶⁹ or connected them with relevant local resources⁷⁰ if not. However, my approach to post-interview care was not consistent, as it was not conscious or intentional. Adopting an explicit model of aftercare into future qualitative research may allow for even better outcomes and experiences for participants.

A second potential area where we may *kink methods* relates to informed and ongoing consent outside of the interview event itself. One common and critical

⁶⁹ For example, if they had second thoughts about a particular anecdote, I would highlight it for removal or later discussion; if they were belatedly concerned about my ethics procedure, I would have shared my ethics protocol, supervisor information, and ethics department information.

⁷⁰ Such as local help lines or drop-in counselling services.

philosophy of modern-day kink is that consent should be ongoing and can be revoked at any time, either through plain language (“I want to stop now”) or the use of safe words (“say RED if you want me to stop”)⁷¹. This is certainly paralleled with common interview methods that allow a participant to end or suspend an interview at any time to protect their safety and wellbeing.

What happens when this principle is applied to the research process more generally? During my ethics process, I attempted to fold a kinky understanding of ongoing consent into my research process and stumbled when it reached the Research Ethics Board. Allowing for participants to withdraw at any time (barring publications that removed their words from my physical control) would be inconvenient to my progress and was unnecessary. They required a specific time limit within which participants must withdraw consent to remove their materials from the project. I nominally followed this instruction by including it in my consent forms, but functionally would still destroy data if any participant requested it after the given date. I found that participants *understood* some of the limitations of late consent withdrawal: their words would still have informed my analysis if I removed quotes at a late date, for example, and it would be nearly impossible to re-do analysis while removing only their contribution. But considering the anonymizing process I was using (assigning ID numbers to participants, then giving each ID number a pseudonym), they could still functionally withdraw their specific words at a very late time. If a participant said “I was participant 567”, I could check my files,

⁷¹ Some kinky people do not play with safe words or an ability for the bottom to end the scene, but this is usually considered advanced BDSM for people who are comfortable with other methods of communication and the associated risk.

confirm that 567 was assigned the pseudonym “Lily”, and remove any quotes from Lily in the current drafts, along with deleting their transcript and associated NVivo code contributions. Would it be difficult? Yes. Could it delay my progression in the PhD, or prove bothersome when drafting journal articles? Absolutely. And yet, following a kinky conceptualization of ethics and consent, this is a small price to pay for the trust participants gave me at the start.

During one research project, I identified these two elements of kink etiquette that may improve qualitative research methods, and there are likely many more. Incorporating aftercare into our research methods increases the likelihood that we may catch harm we cause through the course of interviewing and increases our opportunities to support participants after drawing so heavily from them; it also may force us to reckon with instances where participants have negative feedback to share. Further, we may be able to use community models of ongoing consent to improve our conceptualization of data ownership and work harder to make data withdrawable later in the research process. These are two significant examples of how academia stands to improve by taking guidance from kinksters.

Chapter Four

Meet the Participants

The data that informs this dissertation is drawn from 23 qualitative interviews with rope bondage practitioners in Canada and the United States. They ranged in age from 22-46. Around 30% (n=7) were people of colour (Black, Asian, and multiracial people), and 26% (n=6) were nonbinary/genderqueer, transgender, or agender. 48% (n=11) of the participants self-identified as having some kind of disability, which included physical, mental, and cognitive disabilities. Participants ranged vastly in terms of income, including people who described themselves as living “below the poverty line” and people who did not disclose their income, but identified as “well off” and able to travel frequently. In this sample, most participants belonged to at least one marginalized or minority demographic⁷². Only five participants did not relate any stories of discrimination or marginalization along axes of race/ethnicity, gender, or disability within rope bondage subculture.

These bare numbers begin to describe the sample and indicate some trends that shaped the data, but I also offer a more holistic introduction of each person below. These brief vignettes help to understand each participant as a full person, and not only a BDSM

⁷² Establishing a strict binary of marginalized/not marginalized is difficult and not entirely useful, particularly since some identities that are discriminated against outside of the BDSM scene can be normative within it. The best example of this phenomenon is the positioning of white, able-bodied, cisgender queer women, who did not report any experiences of discrimination or marginalization due to their sexuality. This is not always the case, as I have had discussions with queer kinky women who, for example, feel the pressure of a sexualizing male gaze when they tie with other women in dungeon spaces, but these types of experiences were not mentioned by the participants.

practitioner; in many cases their other life experiences influence their experiences of rope bondage, and vice versa. Each person was given the choice to choose their own pseudonym, or not, and so roughly half of these were chosen by them. Some minor details are altered to protect anonymity and locations are not shared to further protect confidentiality. Their descriptions of their own gender, race, rope roles, and pronouns are also shared in their own words.

Robin (she/they) is a queer, white, non-binary person in her late 20s who talked to me about her experiences with physical disability, chronic pain, and autism. They identified themselves as a self-rigger, rope bottom, and rope top, “in that order”. Robin likes to self-tie for meditative and relaxation purposes and finds that her long experience managing pain in her daily life translates well to pain-management skills she can use within BDSM, be it impact play or rope. They find that rope bondage helps focus their mind on the present and help them not deal with other thoughts. She told me, wistfully: “Just to be outside under a tree and to have that meditative space, it’s like one of the best things for my physical and mental health, is to just be outside and calm my mind for a bit.” Robin likes video games and occasionally service topping her friends, who often feel that people would not want to tie them because of body shape, disability, or other characteristics that they have.

Kristen (she/her) is a demisexual Black cisgender woman in her early 40s living with multiple disabilities. She rope bottoms and self-suspends and has been exploring rope for five years. Right now, she is struggling with her relationship with rope; as she calls it, she has “rope PTSD”. “Right now, rope is confusing, it’s... I feel a little shafted by it. I don’t know, I don’t... when I get tied, I’m working on letting go and enjoying it.

Whereas most of the time with it now, I kind of feel like emotional hurt.” In her five years, she has experienced a lot of rejection as a rope bottom, which has impacted her feelings of self-worth and attachment to rope. She thinks this is likely because of her weight, and possibly her Blackness. She explained that when she can, she likes to do rope photography:

I feel like I’m representing a part of the community that does exist. Occasionally I’ll put a picture on Fet[life], and someone’s like, ‘You know, I saw... I went through your photos and I saw this picture and I was like, I want to do that. And I wouldn’t have done it had I not seen you do it.’ They’re typically either Hispanic or Black or whatever.

Kristen expressed frustration about the state of rope bondage culture, which seems to her to reflect mainstream norms about beauty, body shape, ability, skin colour, and more. Of all the non-white people she has talked to within the rope scene, she feels that most of them “feel super alienated and unwelcome in their communities. Like there’s these things that are coming up in people that live in San Francisco as well as like, rural Massachusetts, and Canada as well.”

Ivan Delacroix (they/them) is a genderqueer white pansexual person in their early 30s. They are mostly a rope top, but occasionally bottom, and identify as a “Master (of myself)” in terms of BDSM roles. Ivan is fascinated with Japanese culture, martial arts, and history, and shared with me some of the detailed studies they have undertaken into classical Japanese documents that may hint at the history of Japanese rope bondage.

They approach rope as a practice⁷³ that requires long term dedication and commitment and is worth the effort: “If I’m going to spend my time on something,” they told me, “it needs to be something deep and potentially profound.”

Celeste (she/her) is a white, queer, cisgender woman in her early 20s who is mostly a rope bottom and is learning to top. She described rope as “like all of my life. It’s my job, it’s my passion, it’s my way of having sex with someone, for the most part. ... It’s my community, I would say. It’s my primary source of friends and social interaction.” Celeste joined the rope community two years ago and now organizes and teaches for her community; she told me about traveling internationally to do rope, learn rope, and make connections in other cities. Celeste regaled me with rich stories of power, eroticism, and self-expression in her rope bondage.

Adam (he/him) is a pansexual white cisgender man in his early 30s living with mental illness. He rope tops, bottoms, and ties himself, along with educating people about rope and performing occasionally. He is a low-income person living below the poverty line, and shared with me some of the alienation and stress he feels not being able to afford often-expensive rope education and events. Adam likes to volunteer and perform at events, which helps him gain access in trade rather than paying an entry fee. When I asked about his earliest rope bondage desires and experiences, he recalled wrapping himself in blankets as a child and gaining a feeling of safety and security, feelings that he still associates with bottoming in rope.

⁷³ Ivan Delacroix’s conceptualization of rope bondage as practice resonated with other interviews, and has informed how I describe and explain rope bondage in this dissertation.

Gabrielle (she/her) is a white, heterosexual, cisgender woman in her late 20s. She likes to bottom in rope and is starting to learn how to tie—she calls herself a “baby switch”. Her day job is with children and she worries sometimes about anonymity in the scene, but mostly feels like if parents know that she does BDSM, it is likely because they do as well. Gabrielle has been playing with rope for three years and likes sensual rope, where “you give me feelings and I give you feelings”.

Serena (she/her) is a white queer “transgender gal” in her early 20s who loves to rope bottom. She is also a 24/7 submissive, and sometimes is a service Dominant. Serena is a graduate student, low-income, and likes playing video games. Our interview was occasionally derailed by talking about video games. She has been playing with rope for around a year. Serena has some social anxiety and found that rope gave her something to do and focus on when she wanted to connect with people in a kinky way. Since she began, she has developed her knowledge of anatomy and is very proud of her self-education: “like I know where my radial nerves are, and like... I know more about my body and the ways that it works!”. She thinks about risk in rope in a “harm reduction-y way”, saying that she’s proud of herself for learning about the significant risks of rope bondage as well as methods to mitigate those risks, “instead of just being like, YOLO I don’t give a fuck!”

Olivia (she/her) is a bisexual Black cisgender woman in her early 40s who primarily self-ties, but sometimes bottoms for learning purposes. She refers to herself as a

“bottom-leaning switch” and a “small letter⁷⁴” in terms of power dynamics. Olivia started playing with rope four years ago, and now teaches and hosts events regularly. She talked to me about how much she loves and prefers attending small rope learning groups to large, formalized events, like rope conventions. Olivia also has strong feelings about financial accessibility in the rope bondage scene and feels that there are many financial barriers to entry when it comes to trying to gain rope bondage skills and education. “Rope groups are where change happens”, she says, and she wants to see and nurture that change.

Chen (he/him) is an Asian cisgender man in his early 20s who is questioning his sexuality, but thinks he is primarily straight. He is a rope bottom and submissive, and an exchange student from an Asian country who has only been in Canada a small number of years. Chen told me about his long-time interest in BDSM and rope bondage, starting with fantasies of being captured in elementary school or even earlier, but he felt ashamed of this interest for most of his life. In his late teen years, he found rope bondage on the internet and felt relief that he was not the only person who liked this taboo activity. He is not very involved in in-person rope bondage subculture in Canada, though, and does not find them very welcoming or comfortable spaces for him. He learns rope play mostly on his own using online resources; “there’s lots of people sharing videos on different sites”, he told me, “and sometimes just if you have a certain skill, you can look at a picture and

⁷⁴ Some BDSMers identify as “big letter” or “small letter” to indicate which side of power exchange slashes, or acronyms, they usually occupy; the top’s role is usually written with a capital, where the bottom’s is written in lowercase. For example, in “D/s” (domination/submission), the dominant partner’s role is capitalized (Dominant) while the submissive partner’s role is lowercase (submissive), indicating the power exchange roles through letter casing. This capitalization convention has not been followed in this dissertation as the imbalanced capitalization has proven confusing for readers unfamiliar with BDSM.

try to figure out how it works. ... Sometimes you can just figure it out yourself.” Chen finds the feeling of being bound “psychologically satisfying”. Rope bondage can create feelings of safety and peace for him, “a physical boundary that you cannot go beyond”.

Denis (he/him) is a white, straight, cisgender man in his early 30s. He is a rope top and Dominant within the scene, although he bottoms to rope occasionally (or ties himself) for educational purposes. He works in law enforcement and has a critical perspective of extrajudicial measures and social sanctions the rope community often employs to manage consent violations and crimes within the scene. Denis is introverted and finds that rope helps him be social and “get out of [his] shell”. Since joining the community five years ago, he has developed many friendships and relationships with other rope and BDSM practitioners that go outside of rope play alone.

Ewok (he/him) is a Black, straight, cisgender man in his late 20s. He identifies as a rigger, rope top, Master, Dominant, and semi-sadist. Ewok started playing with rope in his late teens using zip-ties with his girlfriend and found his interest exploded from these initial bondage explorations. Ewok has been practicing rope for seven years, and has a feisty small dog who he loves. He likes to cater his rope-topping style to what the rope bottom(s) want and has a varied style he has learned mostly from a friend and mentor.

Althea (she/her) is a white, bisexual, cisgender woman in her early 30s with a disability. She likes to rope bottom and also identifies as both a sadist and a masochist. Althea likes rope because she finds it helps her feel secure, loved, and safe: “For me, rope has facilitated therapy, in times where I’ve needed to *belong* somewhere, may it be as part of the community with rope, or just physically tied down.” She has been doing rope for around 3 years and likes to perform and model along with playing privately.

Rebecca (she/her) is a white cisgender woman in her early 30s who describes her sexuality as “bi/pan/fluid”. She is a submissive-leaning switch and has disabilities. Rebecca really enjoys energy exchange in rope, but finds that she often does not have the physical, mental, or emotional energy to play after managing her disability daily; the social organization required to set up a rope date compounds this problem. “There’s lots of times where I could be doing rope,” she told me, “but organizing, planning, and getting together with people to do rope... is... something that I fail at.” When she is able to do rope, she finds it can be very supportive of her “crumbling body” when tied correctly, and makes her feel warm and safe. It can also be erotic, friendly, or fun; as she explained, “it can be so many things depending on your mood and you kind of adjust.”

Cora (she/her) is a “mostly-lesbian” Asian cisgender woman in her early 40s. She is a rope top and occasional switch who has been practicing rope for about four years. Her first ever rope experience was bottoming for rope suspension, an event she still marvels at. Cora met her current partner via rope, and likes to be flexible with her tying style, not only adhering to one school of thought. One of her favourite things is rope topping people who feel they could never do rope—she told me a story of talking with friends who felt that because they are fat or heavy, they cannot do rope bondage. She worked to help them play with rope comfortably, and this experience made her very happy. She thinks any “size, gender, height, body type, gender, anything” can do rope. Cora approaches rope topping as an “ever-learning process” and has enjoyed continuously learning about the principles and functions behind rope patterns so she can adjust them to suit peoples’ bodies better.

G (they/them) is a white, asexual, agender person with some physical and mental disabilities in their late 20s. They sometimes rope top but prefer to bottom. They do other types of BDSM play as well, including impact play, and are sadomasochistic. G has run and volunteered at a number of rope events. They have particularly been involved in helping develop and use event policies for handling consent violations within their space and/or by their leadership, and they spend time making sure that they learn from their own mistakes and those of others as well. G is working to build more inclusivity within their local community; they believe that injecting more rope education into their area will help, as it might increase the diversity of rope tops available and decrease a local reliance upon bad actors for people who want to be tied.

Angel (she/her) is a white, pansexual, transgender woman in her early 40s who is a rope bottom and submissive to her partner. She has been rope bottoming for two years and primarily likes to use rope as an internal and intimate connection. Angel is passionate about rope; she enjoys travelling to different cities to meet other communities and rope practitioners, expanding her personal network and bottoming skills alike. She says that connecting like this “makes [her] feel good”. She has ambitions to host events to foster more community in her local area, which is somewhat small and does not have a very active rope scene.

Tara (she/her) is a white, bisexual, cisgender woman in her late 20s who has a disability. She does a variety of rope activities including topping, bottoming, and self-tying, all of which are influenced by her penchant for sadomasochism. Tara is fascinated with the psychological aspects of rope bondage. She thinks that it is a valuable way to experience varied expressions of intimacy and power. In her self-tying endeavors, she

creates “bottom space” for herself, “which is the feelings of like restraint and control and confinement and strain and torture and all these wonderful things that I like to get out of my bondage.”

HW (he/him) is a white, Jewish, cisgender man in his late 30s who is heterosexual. He is a rope top and occasionally bottoms. HW has been in the rope scene for almost twenty years and was a compelling storyteller when it came to explaining the last decade of rope scene development in the United States. He sees rope bondage as a medium of communication and connection between people, “like a language that has a lexicon, includes so many things”. For him, rope can be everything from an art form to a method of meditation to a creative outlet, influenced by varying levels of sexuality and power and trust. HW teaches rope bondage and hosts events.

Adrien (they/them) is a non-binary/genderqueer Black person in their early 30s living with chronic physical disability and mental illness. They are queer and demisexual, a rope bottom and self-tier, and identify as both a submissive and a pet. During our interview we made figures out of playdough and interrupted the recording to laugh about our results. Adrien is an educator in and out of the rope bondage world. They are low-income, and very concerned about the state of racism in the rope scene, as well as issues of accessibility along axes of ability and finances/class. They have not been able to do as much rope as they would like, so “at this point, it’s largely a bit of community work”. When they are able to do rope, they like to use it as “an outlet for power exchange, so like, subverting and/or specifically purposely playing within, playing around with social power dynamics.”

Mark (he/him) is a heterosexual, white, cisgender man in his late-40s. He is top-oriented in rope and power play and would like to bottom in rope as well, but has difficulties finding someone to rope top him. “You know,” he explained, “I guess because I’ve been doing it for so long, people don’t want to put rope on me because, you know, I’m generally a bit of a judgey apple, I guess.” He prefers to be involved in informal skill-shares and classes with chatting and where “people come in and throw rope around and then take off”. He teaches and organizes, mostly because he did not find what he wanted for himself in his local community and had the ability to make it happen. He is proud that his events are well-attended.

Stephanie (she/her) is a white, bisexual, cisgender woman in her late 20s living with disability. She tops, bottoms, and self-ties, and is also masochistic, sadistic, submissive, and dominant. She likes to organize and host events in order to give people opportunities to learn and connect with each other. She is passionate about accessibility, especially rope bondage accessibility: “it shouldn’t matter if you have different mental or physical health issues, as long as you’re able to give informed and enthusiastic consent, and ongoing consent.” She talked about the financial (in)affordability of the scene and her own low-income status, as well as gender representation in teaching roles and rope social media photography. Stephanie deeply feels that people should all have access to reliable rope education in order to be able to practice their play informed.

Evelyn (she/her) is a pansexual Chinese cisgender woman in her early 20s. She is a rope bottom who is slowly learning to tie. Evelyn wore pants with deep, deep pockets to our interview, and delighted in showing me how many things she could fit in them. She is very concerned about the financial stress that can come with trying to be a part of the

rope bondage scene, and feels that, while rope educators deserve to be compensated for their time, mostly the rope bondage scene is exclusionary in its financial requirements.

Bird (she/her) is a white cisgender woman in her early 30s with physical disabilities, chronic pain, and mental illness. She is demisexual and pansexual and likes to do a range of things in rope—rope bottoming, topping, and some self-tying, when her body allows for it. She is sadomasochistic and a low-income student. Bird loves thinking about kink play as real *play*, something that can be fun, playful, and silly. “I feel like a little kid, except not,” she explained to me. “Cause I’m doing rope bondage (laughs).” During our interview, she offered me strawberries on her patio in the sun, and we laughed almost constantly. She is passionate about rope bondage education and hosts events when she can, primarily in a service-to-the-community capacity. Bird is worried about the state of rope community and consent issues within the structure of rope education.

These vignettes are only glimpses into the personalities and lives of the people who contributed their data to this research. They are a starting place from which to consider the diversity and wide range of rope bondage styles, roles, purposes, and experiences represented in this dissertation.

Chapter Five

“Because It’s Community”: Unpacking Rope Bondage Subculture

Rope bondage is a fulcrum around which a subset of the BDSM subculture turns; this subset can be understood as its own unique subculture. Using rope bondage as a focal point, kinky people gather in person and online to share information, build relationships, practice, play, and create art. People typically travel through BDSM subculture to find and explore rope bondage as a practice, and so this subculture is strongly influenced by and overlapping with said BDSM subculture, which has been studied, described, and analyzed at some length (see Chapter 1). As Adam explained, “there is a separate rope community. It’s like a subculture in some ways, in that the punk scene is a subculture of the greater culture of music.” This unique and disparate social world of rope bondage has rarely been recognized, described, or the main focus of academic inquiry. Rope bondage subculture is characterized by traditions, rituals, norms, ethics, symbols, etiquette, language, events, spaces, and activities that are relatively self-contained within its proverbial borders; these components of social life are often foci of analysis for subcultural scholars working to recognize and delineate a subculture from the world around it (Gelder, 2007). Some of these elements will be included in this chapter as I describe and interrogate rope bondage subculture.

The social world of rope bondage must be understood to begin to grasp the social and personal realities of being a rope bondage practitioner. Through the course of this research, participants repeatedly demonstrated how integrally their personal experiences of rope bondage are intertwined with social constructs, social spaces,

relationships, and more. In order to guide that understanding I will draw on participant interviews and insider knowledge to describe and investigate the meaning that “community” has for rope bondage practitioners. I argue that rope bondage subculture is structured by many levels, types, and expressions of community that are both subjective and intersubjective; these communities are at times as small as a single friend group, and at other times as large as every person networked together in the global rope bondage scene. This chapter will lay the groundwork to understand the social lives of the people who participated in this project and provide a foundation for understanding the chapters that follow.

“Subculture” is a word that I use in the tradition of symbolic interactionists and the (neo-)Chicago School (Jenks, 2005; Gelder, 2007) to refer to a group of people connected by a social reality materially different than that of the mainstream culture within which they operate. I employ the concept of subculture to “highlight the symbolic normative structure of groups smaller than the society as a whole” (Jenks, 2015, p. 6). The concept of subculture is useful here to specify that people who do rope bondage and are connected to one another’s experience, and to describe a texture of social life that is, to varying degrees, shared amongst one another. This is not to say that the rope bondage subculture is insulated from BDSM subculture or wider mainstream culture, but that “subculture” is a conceptual tool to help consider a social world unified by an interest in rope as well as shared symbols, norms, and customs unique to them.

Bird’s interview reflected this conceptualization of rope culture/rope bondage subculture when she said: “We’re a subculture. Actually, we’re a sub-subculture.” When I asked her to clarify who “we” is, she explained:

People that do rope bondage socially. Because there are of course people that do it just in the privacy of their home, with their one partner, and that's all, and that is fine but I don't consider them to be a part of the rope bondage *culture* because they don't go out to it, it's not a thing for them, it's not an identity for them. But kink is a subculture. And rope is a subculture of kink.

Within this subculture are varying expressions and experiences of *community*. Community is a contested concept in academic literature (particularly “community studies”, an interdisciplinary field of sociology, social geography, psychology, and other social sciences) and holds a diversity of meanings across scholars and decades (Bessant, 2018; Cohen, 1985). As I will outline in this chapter, rope bondage practitioners engage with the concept of “community” in similarly complicated ways, often drawing upon multiple definitions of (and approaches to) community as they describe their lived experiences.

Community: Discovery, Construction, and Meaning

Finding Community

For most of the participants I interviewed, their entry to rope bondage community was a pivotal moment in their rope bondage careers⁷⁵. How a person enters into this subculture is a key narrative that is useful to outline the differences between

⁷⁵ I use the term “careers” here in the vein of scholars who study serious leisure, like Sprott and Williams (2019, p. 76), to refer to a level of investment and commitment characterized by “significant planning, continued effort and perseverance, and skill development.” This type of engagement is also often connected to an internal sense of identification with the practice.

personal and socially isolated rope practice and engagement in a social world. Most of the discovery stories related by research participants were particular enough that, shared verbatim, could easily identify their participation to their friends. Instead, based on the findings of this research, I present you with the creative story of “Jennifer”, a dramatized character made up of composite data who exemplifies one of the common paths that lead people to a rope bondage community.

Jennifer has always been attracted to the idea of bondage. As a child, she watched The Princess Bride, her favourite movie, over and over again. She told her parents that it was the princess she loved so much, but in truth she lived for the scene of the handsome adventurer being tied and shackled to the wall, helpless. She didn't understand her attraction, but played out versions on the playground, turning her friends' 'cops and robbers' games into high stakes hostage scenarios. She delighted in collecting vines on the playground and creating increasingly elaborate ways to truss up her prey.

In most of the versions of these stories, Jennifer places these games to the side as she grows older, but does not forget about them, until one day a partner says:

You know, I wouldn't mind it if you tied me up.

The first explorations are clumsy and thrilling and perfect. Jennifer finds rope at the hardware store – rough twine, it reminds her of the dried vines of her childhood – and buys spools of it, nervously telling the uncaring cashier that she has taken up crafting. One day, though, perhaps there is an injury, or perhaps Jennifer grows hungry

for more, or perhaps the partners separate; whatever the reason, Jennifer turns to the internet, types in the right search terms, and finds it.

This is a practice. There are people who do this. There are classes in her city, videos, books. There are parties, and dating events, and munches. This secret love, which was first hers alone and then shared with one, is actually the foundation of an entire secret world. There are underground performance events where people share their passions to deep bass under blue lights in the dark. There are picnics where friends in yoga pants snap Instagram photos of each other dangling from trees. There are subsidies, scholarships, international conventions, volunteer opportunities, career opportunities, and an entire social structure tying these pieces together. If she wants it to, rope can become Jennifer's life.

It does.

“Jennifer’s” story consists of four elements that came up repeatedly in the stories that rope bondage practitioners told about themselves and their discovery of rope bondage subculture: initial interest in rope, introduction to rope bondage, expansion of their practice, and community connection. Occasionally, a participant would relate a story like this without the initial interest element and explain that they were introduced by a partner, but, in most cases, participants knew either from childhood or their early sexual life that rope and/or bondage was a fascination of theirs.

An alternate type of origin story began with a participant not understanding or knowing that rope bondage exists the way they now practice it, and so their introduction and interest are chronologically reversed. For example, HW explained that his interest in

BDSM led him to a munch, then a relationship, which in turn led to attending a rope bondage workshop:

It was the first time I had actually seen that really in person in that way. I think I'd seen some rope bondage before, but it wasn't really... it didn't really resonate with me at the time—what I had seen. But the people that were teaching were really very professional and really skilled. And I got to do it, like try it myself. At the time there really weren't a lot of online resources or books that could teach the skills. ... So that's how I first saw it in a way that really connected with me. And when I saw what they were teaching and then I saw them doing suspension, I said oh my God, this is what I... this is something that I need in my life.

Similarly, Chen's interest in rope bondage was sparked by discovering imagery:

I didn't know that this is a thing that people enjoy. ... In high school, middle school, one day I was browsing online and something like that showed up. I just clicked a rope bondage picture. I was like... and I know I'm not supposed to like that. But anyways, that's the first time I realized that this is something that other people do as well. And later on, probably a couple of months later, I discovered this is the definition of BDSM, and so on and so on. And immediately it feels like, okay, now I find some people who are actually like me. I'm not alone in this world.

These stories explain, in part, why many of the participants were passionate about public education as to the realities of BDSM and rope bondage, because the ability to come

across rope bondage in one venue or another (in person, online, in books, in film) was often a critical and memorable point in their life stories.

These origin stories also explain how they came to participate in the research, as they all ultimately lead to subculture and communities. I utilized community—my place in it as well as its networks—to form the initial research questions and serve as a starting recruitment location. Many rope bondage practitioners likely have different stories, or stories that stop earlier on in this path from self-discovery to group connection; perhaps the interest remains throughout life, without acting on it, or perhaps they are satisfied after introducing beginner bondage techniques into their life. Others may pursue the invention of their own practices in relative isolation, or within small mini-communities separated from the larger where, for example, a group of friends might study rope tutorial videos and remain self-contained. These sorts of people are not visible to this project, nor was the project visible to them. Instead, this chapter and this research is about people who continued to search for more extensive involvement, more information, more connection, more *rope*, and eventually became connected to rope bondage community and subculture—whether or not they remained.

The Meaning of Community

Words matter in a context so rich with social meaning; as I introduce in Chapter 2, “community” is one such word that is particularly loaded. Some participants in this research rejected the use of “community” to refer to their own rope bondage social world, arguing instead that due to local harms and power abuse, there was no *community*, which by their definitions should be characterized by supportive and well-meaning people.

Others felt they could see a community that they were not a part of, while still others shared stories of their own engagement with and connection to community. One participant helpfully suggested that the concept of “folk groups” is a more apt description of the rope bondage social world.

The tensions and debates that take place in rope bondage subculture surrounding the concept of “community” are amazingly precise reflections of academic debates around this same issue. Indeed, the concept of community is, according to Bessant (2018, p. 1), “one of the most heavily contested concepts in the social sciences.” In the 1950s, social scientists primarily considered community to be “place-based” or bound by shared geography, culture, social ties, institutions, and in-person interactions (Hillery, 1955; Mercer, 1956; Bessant, 2018). More recent theorizing of community includes many of these aspects, though they are becoming more separate and disparate, and contemporary community scholars theorize that communities also confer a sense of social identity and can occur in geographically distant or virtual spaces (Flora & Flora, 2008). Community can be understood as a “a network of social relations’ held together by emotional bonds and feelings of mutuality” (Bessant, 2018, p. 4, citing Bender, 1978). Beyond this vague description, community has no universal academic *or* non-academic definition or understanding (Bessant, 2018).

During initial writings, I found myself unintentionally using “subculture” and “community” interchangeably, a practice that occurs unchallenged in a great deal of academic work on each (Jenks, 2005) and is likely reflective of the theoretical confusion that surrounds “community”. Indeed, Gelder (2007, p. 26) argues that in subcultural studies (which overlaps with sociology, criminology, cultural studies, community studies,

and other social sciences), “we shall see [community] put to use both as a sometimes richly connotative synonym for subcultures as well as an antithetical category—just like ‘society’—from which subcultures are to be clearly distinguished.” “Community” in this context can refer in almost nostalgic or wistful terms to social groups tied together by kinship, belonging, a sense of unity and solidarity, but also geography, acquaintance, and commonality (Gelder, 2007). This means that “community” can in fact hold contrasting meanings depending on its usage and context. This definitional conflict was apparent in participants’ accounts as their definitions could, at times, be in direct tension or contradiction with one another. For example, if one participant believes that community members must share values, while another believes that their community includes anyone in the world who does rope bondage, we cannot easily reconcile these two perspectives and establish a boundary for what rope bondage community actually *is*. Instead of avoiding this messiness, I opt to embrace it, and utilize “community” in a way that allows it to remain a concept with multiple, sometimes-overlapping, sometimes-contrasting meanings.

After reviewing the data, it is most accurate to say that “community” for these participants most frequently refers to the people that one feels a kinship with, troubled or not. The social dynamics of this kinship vary widely, from what Bessant (2018, p. 8) describes as a “community of practice” or people who are “collectively involved in exchanging experiences, knowledge, and information about a particular issue” to “intentional communities”, which refer to communities that may or may not be physically connected in space or place, but share “values, beliefs, and practices” (Bessant, 2018, p. 8). Further, some participants also conveyed a sense of a global rope bondage community

which reflects the concept of “imagined communities”, which refer to people who share a *symbolic* sense of unity and connection (Bessant, 2018, p. 10). This latter kind consist of people who share an identity sign and feel a sense of communion—community—based on this shared sign, regardless of their ability to ever actually meet each other and interact.

The divisions in participants’ experiences are marked. Some rope bondage practitioners spoke of their communities while emotionally and mentally segmenting out the local kinksters who do harm or who do not share values with them. When they refer to their “community”—a type of intentional community—they mean the people who are in their social groups and follow a similar set of values, exclusive of those who reject their values or fail them. This is further reflective of a community built on *communion* (Bessant, 2018, p. 11), which involves “being drawn together in collective responsibility, affinity, and relation”. Communities drawn together by communion commonly share values, priorities, and “a deep sense of intersubjective closeness and intimacy” (Bessant, 2018, p. 11). As Adrien explained, “there needs to be a common goal that folks are working towards.”

Other participants explained “community” in more geographical and/or practice-based terms (as communities of practice), and so included people who they do not particularly like, even if they *wished* those people were not a part of their community. These people were more likely to support or refer to initiatives to help harmful people learn to not cause harm and were also more likely to include acquaintances in their concept of community. For example, Evelyn described community as “I mean, you go to

a party and odds are you'll recognize a bunch of people, and those people will also recognize a bunch of people.”

Several participants broke the concept of community into smaller components by using “community” primarily when talking about their friend group, while others included the entirety of the world’s rope bondage practitioners in their imagined community. To complicate things even further, participants frequently used *multiple definitions of community* in the same conversations—sometimes even the same sentences.

For example, when I asked Angel what rope bondage means to her, she described the many ways that rope interacts with her life:

I do rope on a very regular basis. ... I have had numerous rope partners. I try to get to rope classes as often as I can. I try to be involved in the rope community as much as possible. I’m hoping to start going to rope conventions now that I’ve got a little bit of money to go.

Angel later went on to explain that she would be soon starting up an event of her own; within the context of her interview at this point, “community” seemed to mean the collection of events and people in her local area, which require energy and investment from its members to thrive. However, when I asked her what she meant by “rope community”, she answered:

Well, I mean there’s the general rope community to include everyone in the world obviously. You know, I think rope is, excuse the pun, it’s very binding. We all have kind of a... it’s a general kink that we all enjoy. But then you’ve got your

local communities that, you know, we visit people who you get to practice with, you get to know.

It was “obvious” to her that I would know that there is a global imagined community of rope bondage practitioners—and, in fact, I did, although operationalizing it was difficult. When Angel says that she tries to be involved in the rope community, she means this in both global and local respects. “Community” here at its broadest definition means people bound together by rope.

Bird similarly described experiencing multiple levels of community. She told me that she experiences two communities: one, her local city-based community, is a place to invest her energy and try to “make a difference.” This community has hurt her and contains people who have hurt her, but she feels that she can work toward improving it so others are not harmed like she has been. Her second community, though, is more personal, and “is as much about beliefs as it is about location”; this second community is both smaller and safer, a place where “I feel like I belong.”

In other cases, people recognized that (a) community⁷⁶ exists, but conceptualized themselves as not belonging to it. For example, even though Chen sometimes attended events, he felt like he still did not belong, due to cultural differences as an exchange student from an Asian country, being a male rope bottom and violating gender norms, and having trouble making friends with strangers. He had neither a close friendship-based

⁷⁶ Even the grammar ranged between and through interviews, between “community” as an abstract concept (e.g. “it is hard to find community”) and “a/the community” as a noun or object (e.g. “I joined the community”).

type of rope bondage community nor a geographical one despite attempts to attend events and join one himself. Chen's experience is reflective of Pohtinen's (2017, p. 29) findings that "A lonely individual who is not actively invited to participate may indeed feel estranged and not very safe." Pohtinen (2017) argues that physical presence at events is not enough to be welcomed into kink community, and that the experience of a "not-so-warm welcome" can be alienating and agonizing.

In semi-contrast to these interpretations of community, Denis used "community" to describe what sounded like a discrete and almost objective environment. He would make comments like "when I joined the [local] community", as if it is a thing one must actively enter to be a part of. He felt that "the community" has a responsibility to lobby against elements of the formal criminal justice system that stigmatize or criminalize BDSM practitioners; "Since we are a very small community," he said, "the odds of [the law] changing are small. That being said, *as* a community, we *should* lobby to change it." He also referred to strangers as people "outside the community bounds", and regularly referred to the health of the community and things people must do to maintain it.

Olivia's conversations of community similarly constructed it as a thing that requires investment when she talked of "building community and using rope as the tool for that." Cora also grappled with the relationship between her knowledge, teaching ability, and her community's needs; she explained that her teaching efforts were dedicated to contributing to community development rather than any effort to gain status, and she was particularly concerned about teaching people who might use their new skills in unethical ways.

I really want to know that the people who I'm teaching have a solid level of integrity and that they really, they will take their knowledge responsibly. ...

Basically, I want to teach people that will be good community people. People who are good people, who will do right by others. ... I don't want any fame. I don't want any popularity. The only reason I teach in my community is when I see really questionable things and I struggle with, I have the knowledge, do I share it or do I not? If I can help people, and I don't do my job to share the knowledge, then am I being responsible?

Olivia's reflections and concerns can be understood in the context of Foucault's concept of power/knowledge (Hannem, 2012) described in Chapter 2. Here we can see that Olivia's access to knowledge, and the status and skill that she possesses to create and disseminate this knowledge to other rope bondage practitioners, confers upon her responsibility and *power* that she takes very seriously. Further, she is cognizant that sharing—or giving away—her knowledge transfers some of that power to other people, people whom she may not completely trust and who may be irresponsible with this knowledge. Olivia's conscious and careful engagements with power and knowledge here are representative of themes of power and abuse that surfaced during many different interviews; often, such care was the result of witnessing how much harm some people can do with knowledge when they did not prioritize, as Olivia says, “do[ing] right by others.”

These themes of power, responsibility, and potential wove through many of the participants' accounts of community. One of my interview questions asked: “Do you think there is a community?”, “if yes, what does it look like?”, and “are you a part of it?”

Althea responded to these questions by explaining that her community was complicated and shaped by recent interpersonal turmoil:

It looks very divided. And it looks very confused, and that makes me really sad. And sometimes the rope community looks helpful, especially when the parts that are divided can come together. And... when you are, like, I find that the rope community has sub-communities within it. And when I am in one of the sub-communities of the rope community, where there is mostly everything is smooth and okay, it just feels really nice. And I have come back from certain rope events or rope parties in the past, that I would hang out all day, I've come back from them feeling, feeling a high because of within that rope community, like sure we're being tied up with each other and we're all giggling, but people are braiding my hair. And I'm being fed. And I'm able to just (purrs) be a cat. And and, in these communities when it feels good in the rope community is when I can really embrace parts of myself. Really naturally. It's not even like "oh okay I'm in a safe kinky space so I can purr like a cat". It's like "there is cake and I am a cat and", you know?

To complicate this further, as I refer to in Chapter 2, some communities are geographically bound or based in event spaces⁷⁷, but some are not. Many participants told stories of groups of friends and like-minded rope practitioners who share support, information, and play with one another between cities and countries in relationships that are more meaningful to them than their local community. This may be precipitated by in-

⁷⁷ Bessant (2018, p. 5) refers to this as "place-based" and "non-place-based" communities.

person contact from one or more people traveling to other cities/rope communities or meeting at a gathering event of some kind (such as a rope convention), or may spark from meeting online, and is facilitated by ongoing connection in rope bondage social media worlds. In most cases, these personal communities were relayed as critical to a participant's sense of self and belonging within the rope bondage world and frequently represented some of the most meaningful relationships in their life.

In contrast, some participants related feelings of alienation, either while they remained involved in community or opted to avoid it. These feelings were often tied to experiences of marginalization, some of which will be unpacked in more depth in Chapters 6 and 7. On occasion, participants related experiences organizing events or spaces for a sub-section of community to which they felt more closely aligned. Adrien explained:

I think when it comes to building community and community organizing, there's a lot of trying to make nice with people who have different goals altogether. And that ends up making trying to organize the space more difficult, because people don't want to be the bad guy ... and um, in my experience so far, the people who want the kind of space that *I* enjoy will come. Even if they can't always afford it, they will do their best to support that space, and so I'm finding myself incredibly frustrated with folks I see in community organizing who are constantly trying to... appeal to people who don't care about things like making sure that the space isn't racist. (Laughs) Like, who don't care about things like making sure that the space is accessible to people economically, who don't care about building a space for other people, they want to build a space for their own egos. ... If someone

isn't interested in building a safer space, meaning sort of in the activity sense of a space that is as safe as possible for the people in it, so that it's not racist, it's not being homomistic⁷⁸, that oppressive and colonial ideals are not being upheld within that space, if they don't *care* about making sure that that's not *happening* and making sure that that space is being deconstructed in a way that makes it safe for everyone, then I don't personally really care about having that person in my space. If their need to have sexy fun is more important than making sure that people who are in the space feel welcome and safe? Then we have different goals, and I'm not organizing for those people in that case.

The kind of engagement with community that Adrien describes is representative of a small number of organizer-type participants who work, when they can, to create separate spaces that affirm their values and resist some of the problems (like racism) that pervade the mainstream kink scene (see Cruz, 2016).

From these explanations and more, it seems like rope community is something that you join, and are a part of, but has bounds that may be defined by people you do or do not know. It is something that can be built, formed, and constructed, but also can exist naturally where interests are shared. It can be built on shared practice, or on common beliefs and values, or a symbolic sign and identity that all share, or all of these at once. Community can be healthy, sick, supportive, harmful, or varying combinations of each,

⁷⁸ See Glossary.

and that status depends on the actions of the members that belong to it. Community is *complicated*.

This type of complex social dynamic is an example of social realities most frequently missed by BDSM research that focuses on one physical locale as an object of study. As Chapter 1 discusses, this type of research is often more accessible to outsider researchers, but serves to obfuscate the complexity of community and subculture. The ebb and flow of information and relationships transcend geospatial boundaries while often being quite firmly contained within the social boundaries of the subculture. At its most impactful, an incident can shake or change the daily life of rope bondage practitioners across the globe without becoming a focus for news media, gossip columns, or inspiring TV shows, even though it is often interesting enough to do so.

So, what is (the) “rope community”? Something at once intangible and profound. Pinning down this amorphous concept risks stripping it of its ever-changing and living meanings. Instead, I argue in favour of leaning into its messiness and leaving the specifics ambiguous among the competing and overlapping meanings described above. “Community” in this dissertation means people connected by rope, but the bounds of that, how it works, and how it is constructed, are more complicated than any definition can allow.

Community is also likely the reason why recruitment for this research was so successful, where previous BDSM researchers have mentioned difficulty finding participants. When I thanked Olivia for her interview, she said she would be happy to help with any follow-up questions and added: “count on me if you need a hand, because it’s community.”

“This is Where Community Happens”:

The Role of Events and Spaces in Rope Community and Subculture

In Canada and the United States, many people who practice rope network with one another on the website Fetlife.com. This website has a functionality that allows people to create groups to discuss certain topics (which can be regional or general), host events that others can RSVP to, and engage with other people’s profiles (such as clicking ‘love’ on photos and writings they like, sending private messages, posting public comments, and publishing ‘writings’ or personal blog posts on their own profile). This is how I found my local rope bondage community—indeed, how most of these participants found a rope community—and was one of the chief recruitment locations for this research (see Chapter 2). Rope bondage practitioners also network on other social media sites and applications like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, and find one another through event postings shared by sex shops, queer community spaces, and more.

Depending on its relative size and concentration of interested rope practitioners, each city, town, or region may have their own events and spaces. These spaces and people are connected to each other via the internet in a complex international social network. While not all countries, languages, and cultures use the same websites to communicate, this practice is spread across the globe, and some degree of communication and cross-pollination occurs at this international level, the intensity of which seems to be affected by how culturally porous their borders are. Because of this, the United States/Canada border does not seem to have much influence on segregating the rope cultures of each country; indeed, people frequently travel across this border solely to

attend, run, or teach rope related events⁷⁹. Continuous cultural exchange is facilitated by rope practitioners who can travel between communities and countries to bring back knowledge, but also norms, etiquette, and other practices that shape this subculture⁸⁰. A small number of participants voiced an awareness that the factors that commonly shape this ability include economic privilege and the ability to not draw the attention of American border security, which means that the people responsible for cross-border teaching and event attendance may be overwhelmingly white, cisgender, not sex workers, and possibly less visible in their scene participation. As we will discuss in Chapter 4, the demographic make-up of events and teachers is important to people of colour who participated in this research and directly impacts their decisions to attend events.

Like many mainstream spaces, rope bondage events and places all have their own norms, their cast of regular characters, dramatic interpersonal histories, and explicit and implicit rules and regulations (or an intentional lack thereof). The community can be understood to be built, maintained, and experienced through this give and take relationship between online and real spaces and characterized by complex power

⁷⁹ This was more accurate prior to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. In the four years since then cross-border travel has slowed, and then stopped altogether in early 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The impact this will have on rope bondage subculture is not yet clear.

⁸⁰ Legal, financial, and political influences in either country also seem to affect the subculture at large, and so affect individual rope bondage practitioners in both Canada and the United States. For example, FetLife founder John Baku cited the “political climate” as a reason for sweeping changes to the material allowed on the website (Scott, 2017), and Tumblr’s new ban on all “adult content” is impacting rope bondage content creators across the globe (D’Onofrio, 2018; Liao, 2018). Patreon’s recent move away from supporting adult work, escalating to the suspension of accounts that host adult material (Cole, 2018), has affected the income of many professional rope practitioners (e.g. rope teachers and people who create their own rope bondage pornography). Two out of three of these major social media changes (FetLife and Patreon) cited pressures from merchant accounts as reasons for the changes (Scott, 2017; Cole, 2018), but are hosted and owned in two different countries: Canada (FetLife) and the United States (Patreon).

dynamics between practitioners based on knowledge/skill, authority, financial status, appearance, connections/relationships, and experience.

In a social world so stigmatized, underground, and connected to the internet, this focus on in-person events may seem out of place. In fact, while all participants in this research study were in some way connected to rope bondage community (in order to hear about recruitment at all), many felt they were either not a part of a community or actively taking a break from/exiting community. Their explanations of disconnection always centered around *events*. Even some people who described an intense engagement with rope bondage social media circles and discourses considered themselves separate from any rope bondage community because they cannot, or choose not to, attend events.

During their interviews, participants often referred to “community” and “events” interchangeably. For example, Rebecca told me that she does feel she is a part of a community but is “taking a little bit of a vacation from that right now”. When asked about this, she explained that,

it’s pretty much just my health has been not so good, or I only have so much energy to deal with things. So I was dealing with a lot of paperwork [for disability]. So I was like, do I do paperwork or do I eat? Do I do paperwork, or do I bathe, you know? Do I do paperwork or do I go to this event? And if I go to an event, then it’s like three days... that I can’t, because I need the day before to rest, and the day after to rest. And resting before I go to the event. (Laughs) So. Yeah, I just, dealing with stupid medical crap.

For Rebecca, it seemed obvious that her disability impacting her ability to attend in-person events would naturally result in a “little bit of a vacation” from the community⁸¹. She did not seem resentful about this state and was hopeful that when her medical issues eased up, she would be able to attend events (and therefore be involved in community) more often. Gabrielle was another participant who felt that she was not participating in community as much since she had not been to events: “I don’t feel like I’m a huge part of the rope community in [city], and part of that is because I haven’t been going to rope events [here].”

Similarly, Olivia highlighted the importance of events to community when she explained her personal investment in small-scale local rope groups. She told me that “the smaller rope groups for me are just, you know, this is where community happens, this is where memories happen, this is where people can either be ignited with a love of something or be turned off”. The responsibility, power, and impact of small events “can make a big difference in peoples’ lives”.

Evidently something critical is occurring in physical spaces that is not replicated online. Pohtinen (2017) similarly found that in-person events within a BDSM community (in this case, in Finland) was critical to developing a sense of solidarity between kinksters and a feeling of belonging within community. This may be, in part, what Bessant (2018) is describing when he writes of micro-to-macro processes, where individual interactions within community/ies create and construct social structure. However, as the accounts in

⁸¹ This is important to recall when I discuss disability in the rope bondage world in Chapter 6, as it illustrates how the physical accessibility of spaces impacts who feels they do and do not belong to a community.

this dissertation show, if rope bondage subcultural structure is built by and for the people who occupy physical event spaces, those spaces are being built and influenced by people who can physically access them and feel comfortable there. This means that people who have less access to (or feel unsafe within) these events may be unwillingly disenfranchised from community, disempowered within it, and will have these inaccessible and potentially dangerous or harmful dynamics constantly reinforced by those who *are* able to attend.

Community, Consent, and Conflict

A description of the world of rope bondage would be incomplete without a discussion of the serious social and interpersonal conflicts that frequently pervade these spaces. Traces of this social conflict are often easy to find as they occur but difficult to track afterward, as Fetlife—the most common locus for sharing information about these incidents—has no “search” function or tagging system for personal writings; more importantly, these stories and writings are not able to be included in academic discussion due to Fetlife’s restrictions on research on their website. Participants primarily referred to community-based conflict centering on three things: interpersonal violence/harm; harm against individuals or the community by community leaders, which they generally saw as a different issue; and the policies and practices of event spaces. All three were frequently framed within a discussion of power abuse. The ripple effects of these conflicts often had wide-ranging consequences far past the parties directly involved.

The first and second in this list are the most likely to be misunderstood by people outside of the rope bondage or BDSM communities because conceptualizations of

“interpersonal violence” differ in- and outside of BDSM subculture. In some cases, this is because non-kinky understandings of harm differ from kinky understandings of harm. In the rope bondage world (and, indeed, generally in BDSM subculture), people can positively experience violence within a consensual and negotiated context, but negatively experienced violence can also occur within a negotiated and consensual scene when a person subjects the other to an activity that was non-negotiated. A scene may consensually include, for example, rope suspension with punching to the rope bottom’s body, but does not include sexual activity; if the rope top were to inflict unwanted sexual activity on the rope bottom while they were bound, the interpersonal violence and subsequent harm of their action is difficult to explain to, for example, a police officer who is focused on the bruises that resulted from the consensual punching and rope suspension. In this case, BDSMers focus on the presence or absence of consent, the conditions the consent was given within, and whether said consent was withdrawn or able to be withdrawn⁸². In this hypothetical case, the threshold for interpersonal violence may seem higher than it is understood to be outside of BDSM, since some hallmarks of interpersonal violence (punches, bruising) are actually allowed, consented to, and sometimes desired. In other ways, though, kinksters see and define interpersonal violence in circumstances that do not satisfy legal or mainstream definitions of assault and violence. In these situations, communities tend to consider interpersonal and social dynamics of the people involved in the altercation to assess how they should react and

⁸² Some types of play (e.g. a rope in a person’s mouth) remove easy ability to withdraw consent, unless other precautions are taken. Similarly, some rope bondage practitioners understand a person being in “subspace” (Pitagora, 2017) or “rope drunk” (intoxicated by rope play) to be altered states of consciousness within which a person’s ability to give informed and non-coerced consent may or may not be impacted, similar to legal links between intoxication and consent.

potentially implement sanctions, and normally refer to these incidents as “consent violations”. When these events are brought to light, they can result in extreme censure from the BDSM and rope bondage communities, and the social power of the aggressor (i.e. if they are an event host, venue owner, teacher, or other authority figure) plays a significant role.

The boundaries of what is and is not a “consent violation” and what should be done with those who commit them is an ongoing topic of discussion within kink and rope bondage spaces. These discussions often include or begin with a survivor of interpersonal violence posting an account of their experience to Fetlife, and may result in more people confessing experiences of harm, statements from the person accused of abuse, statements from relevant witnesses and venue-owners/volunteers, partners and friends of those involved, and comments on all of the above. These conversations are often involved in a formal or informal extrajudicial (social) justice where the fate of the reputation of the accused and their ability to attend/teach at/run events stands in for mainstream justice’s sanctions of fines, community service, and prison time⁸³. Subsequent discussions would be familiar to those who followed the public accusations of Jian Ghomeshi: peripheral or unconnected parties debate the culpability of the victim, one or more people ask whether the accused’s life should be significantly impacted for a mistake, and eventually,

⁸³ Holt (2016) found that some BDSM community members said that they use retaliatory violence and threats of violence to punish consent violators. I did not find evidence of this kind of behaviour in my research or personal experiences.

someone starts asking when “enough is enough” and they should be allowed to reintegrate into the community⁸⁴.

These incidences are often very taxing to the individuals involved, their support networks, and the related community/ies. Only a small number of participants in this project had direct experience in these conflicts as the accuser, accused, or immediate support network, but almost all referred to the escalating frequency of these conflicts as negative and draining aspects of being involved in rope bondage subculture. Most referred to choices they have made to avoid particular people or events run or attended by people accused of violating consent.

Refusing to attend an event for social political reasons is one method that rope bondage practitioners have and use to reclaim or resist the power wielded by event and venue organizers and owners. Many participants shared that they would or could not attend at least one local event due to ethical problems with an authority figure associated with that event, and—because of the significant connection between events and community—some participants felt completely separated from their community because of it.

Belonging, Joy, and Pleasure:

“The Rope Community is Love”

⁸⁴ This sequence of events likely sounds similar to those familiar with the #MeToo movement that gained traction in 2017 (Gash & Harding, 2018). These social interactions in BDSM predated the #MeToo movement by a number of years. The first time I witnessed this process, from public statement from the victim to public statement from accused to the ostracization of the accused in rope bondage subculture was in 2015, when a world-famous rope bottom called out a similarly famous teacher and rope maker. This does not mean that was the first incident.

Why, you might be asking, if there is such danger and harm in this world, does it continue to exist? Mostly because, for many of the participants in this research project, it provides something valuable and compelling that they cannot find elsewhere. The meaning and purpose of rope, as a practice and a social world both, was regularly described in terms almost indescribable. For example, Olivia said:

Rope in particular, because I experience it not just as bondage, it's just infinite possibilities. It's art, it's communication, it's all sorts of things. It's a lens and a focus. It's just a wonderful medium for expression that I found for myself. And that applies to all of my roles—as a top, as a bottom, as a switch, as a self-suspender. It's just infinite in a way that so few things are.

Many of these participants recognized that the troubles facing the community are ones commonly found elsewhere, and so were not motivated to give up. As Bird explained,

there's been consent issues, there's been abuses of authority, um, it's just, it has the same mess that it does in the real world. Like, when one group is viewed to be better than the other, they get privilege and they, some of them abuse it.

This refrain was common among those, like Bird, who were trying to fight injustice in the community rather than leaving. They explained that there was something *good* and *powerful* about rope that they simply did not want to lose. When they did leave the community and/or the practice due to the bad parts, as in the case of Adrien and others, it left them with feelings of loss, alienation, wistful nostalgia, and sometimes anger.

Celeste explained what it means to say that her life is centered on rope bondage:

it's like all of my life. I mean, it's my job, it's my passion, it's my way of having sex with someone, for the most part. Not to say that I have necessarily a lot of sex in rope. While my rope is really erotic, I don't very often have like, penetrated sex in rope. But rope is my primary way of having sexual contact with other people. Yeah, apart from that, like I said, it's my job. It's my community, I would say. It's my primary source of friends and social interaction. Rope bondage is everything to me.

This quote is special in its intensity, as Celeste was one of the few participants who was a professional rope bondage player, teacher, *and* performer, but the sentiment was reflected through more than half of my interviews: rope bondage is *everything*. It stands for something deeply private and personal and well as something social and external. The connection between private play and public engagement frequently overlapped like this, suggesting that one cannot be considered without the other. These experiences of pleasure will be described, discussed, and analyzed in more detail in Chapter 8.

At the end of each interview, I asked participants if there is anything they wish people outside of the community knew about rope bondage. Althea answered:

I wish that they knew the love that it feels in your heart, that makes rope *so* important. I feel like they just look at these pictures and I understand why there's that disconnect, but they don't know that. Sure I'm being tied in this really strange position, but before it happened, I was asked how my day was. And I was fed. And I was taken care of. And I was loved.

This quote perfectly exemplifies why participants were so consistent in connecting their experiences of community with their pleasure and joy in rope.

Rope bondage subculture is a rich and multi-faceted social world hidden in plain sight. This is a world built around “bits of dead grass⁸⁵”, passion, intimacy, connection, social involvement, and the many, many complicated pieces that can come with that.

Next I will dive more deeply into the experience of rope bondage by exploring the experiences of disabled (Chapter 6) and racialized (Chapter 7) rope bondage practitioners and the unintelligible pleasure of rope bondage (Chapter 8).

⁸⁵ This phrase is often used in rope bondage conversations to draw attention to the simplicity and, perhaps, triviality of the object that is the focus of so much conversation, passion, effort, and organization.

Chapter Six

Marginalization, Stigma, and Disability in Rope Bondage Subculture

The rope world faces similar issues of (mis)representation and oppression as is faced by the wider BDSM world (see Chapter 1). In addition, though, many practitioners experience discrimination and exclusion within rope bondage communities along axes of ability, race, gender (particularly gender queerness), class, and sexuality. The people who experience the brunt of these challenges reported various results, from feeling “pushed out” and alienated from rope community and education to creating alternative spaces, imagery, and educational tools where they feel safer and better represented. Some felt pushed out of the social world of rope bondage to the point of questioning whether they could participate in this research project or had anything to offer, since they are no longer “really” rope practitioners. Of course, they *were* engaged enough to hear about or read my call for participants, which was solely circulated on social media within rope bondage circles, and in all cases had had experience with rope and compelling reasons why they currently were not practicing as much as they felt they should be or would like to be. These feelings seemed to speak to a disenfranchisement from or disempowerment within the rope world rather than their commitment to or interest in rope bondage.

People who are marginalized by race, gender, ability, and class are frequently not included in BDSM research or cultural representation of who practices BDSM (Tellier, 2017; see Chapter 1) and so, when I noticed that I was finding people who could speak to these experiences, I chose to over-represent them in my sample (see Chapter 2). I was then fortunate to hear a range of stories that reflected a diverse array of experiences.

Some participants felt excluded by rope social worlds by virtue of inaccessible locations, homogenous social media imagery, and primarily white, abled, financially privileged, cisgender male-top/female-bottom teachers⁸⁶. Some explained that the rope itself is not inherently for one type of person or body and then told stories of how they practiced and found community in ways that honour themselves, their needs, and their identities.

In this chapter I will review the experiences of rope bondage practitioners who are marginalized both in- and outside of the rope social world by disability, and in Chapter 7 I will examine the experiences of people marginalized according to their race⁸⁷. Some participants were both disabled and racialized, but in our discussions, these explanations of experiences remained apart, and so will be analyzed as such⁸⁸. As I introduced in Chapter 2, I mobilize Goffman's (1963) stigma and social identity to make sense of the underlying social interactions and patterns in participants' stories of disability. I will also utilize more contemporary research on microaggressions pertaining to disability (Keller and Galgay, 2010). The concept of microaggressions enable us to examine some of the subtextual and everyday expressions of ableism and racism within rope bondage subculture as well as their concrete impacts and damage.

⁸⁶ This gender pairing is the normative framework for who is dominant/submissive or top/bottom in BDSM.

⁸⁷ These two elements were most frequently spoken of and cited when participants spoke of discrimination and marginality. As discussed in Chapter 3, many participants did not disclose their class status. In addition, discrimination based on gender identity and/or sexual orientation was rarely, if ever, mentioned.

⁸⁸ In the real world these factors likely interact with each other. The intersections of different angles of oppression should have been explored in more depth during interviews, and would have been an excellent opportunity for applying a combination of intersectional feminist, critical disability, and critical race analysis.

Disability, Stigma, and Social Identity

Of the 23 participants interviewed for this project, 11 of them identified as having some type of disability⁸⁹ including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, fibromyalgia, lupus, Ehler-Danlos Syndrome, and autism. A small number use mobility devices such as canes, while a large proportion of them experience chronic pain. Many of these participants engaged in deep and often theoretical thinking about their experiences of disability, rope bondage, and pleasure, with many of these conversations revolving around: discrimination and ableism within kink communities; how their experiences of disability interact with their experiences of rope; and how they have navigated limited access to useful educational materials and interested partners. They also commonly advocated for the needs of people disabled in different ways than themselves. For example, Adam, who suffers from depression, explained in detail the accessibility issues with local venues, which do not have wheelchair access; Stephanie, who has invisible disabilities, expressed concern about the lack of visibly disabled bodies in popular rope social media imagery. Rope bondage practitioners with disabilities seemed to feel a sense of solidarity with their fellow disabled kinksters and related many efforts to combat ableism and inaccessibility in rope bondage social and physical spaces. These efforts mirror activist constructions of disability as a type of social oppression to organize around and find solidarity within, which classically allows disabled disability activists to pool resources and fight for change for one another (Dougherty, 2020). However, the

⁸⁹ To preserve confidentiality, most diagnoses/specific disabilities are not mentioned in this section with specific stories/pseudonyms unless given explicit permission from the participant.

participants with disabilities were also more likely than abled participants to voice concerns about racism, classism, cissexism, and fatphobia in the rope world. This is reflective of the contemporary development of critical disability studies, which seeks to develop ties of solidarity with other marginalized groups (Goodley, 2013), and is also consistent with the disability social movement's history advocating for and with others who experience oppression in society (Malhotra & Isitt, 2017).

G summed up the prevailing opinion of my participants when they said:

“Everyone could be in rope. Every body, every gender, everything. And everyone can top in rope if you just know the technical skills. And that's all it is, it's just technical skills, and a will and a way.” Similarly, according to Stephanie, “it shouldn't matter if you have different mental or physical health issues, as long as you're able to give informed and enthusiastic consent, and ongoing consent, then you can, like, [do rope].” When we talked about the relationship between disability and rope bondage, Adrien expanded upon these sentiments:

I don't think rope has to be inherently inaccessible. I think currently it *is* because people aren't taking accessibility into account. ... I mean, rope is literally just a long piece of rope. And there's nothing about it that is stopping people from adjusting it to their body, other than the educational tools that we have in place already. Most of which don't consider people with disabilities or people with differing abilities or people who aren't very flexible.

The stories of participants with disabilities reflected this. People frequently shared examples of how they were capable of doing rope if it was done in a way that accommodated their needs. For example, Rebecca explained that one of her most

valuable skills was the ability to communicate well as a rope bottom. She found that being able to accurately and thoroughly describe her body's needs and sensitivities that day would result in a more informed top and a better scene. With clear communication and a good connection, she delightedly shared stories of being tied in positions that provided support for her body and resulted in physical and emotional pleasure for her, as well as important opportunities to connect within her relationships.

When participants spoke of barriers to their full and enjoyable participation in rope bondage, they sometimes commented on challenges with their own disabilities, but more commonly cited social discrimination, inadequate educational opportunities, and inaccessible locations as the true barriers. For an example of the former, consider Bird's explanation of why she no longer practices self suspension:

I used to self suspend as well, which I really enjoyed. It was a very different headspace. It was about... every time that I did it, it was about like, this goal and this challenge and overcoming. It was very physical, it was very... surpassing my limit sort of thing. It was very personal. But I have fibromyalgia, and it's made it so I can't do that anymore. It tires me out too fast. And I can, I can adapt things when I'm bottoming or topping, but when you're self-suspending, you are both topping and bottoming at the same time. So that uses more energy. So it's much harder if you are limited. It's become basically inaccessible for me now, which is a shame, but I still enjoy the other things a lot.

Rebecca shared a sadness that her interests and desires do not match her current ability. When I asked her what role rope plays in her life right now, she responded: "Right now... it's something I want to do a lot more of, but I'm not doing anything. But

that's also maybe like disability, just having energy and you know, crises after crises.” For Rebecca, the effort required to make it through each day often precluded the chance to make plans with friends or partners, let alone having energy to carry them out. She spoke wistfully of times when she did have more energy and looked forward to when she would have it again.

More frequently, rope bondage practitioners with disabilities found ways to make rope work for them but ran up against issues of ableism in the rope community and exclusion from rope educational materials and events. Robin explained that she came to self-tying as a way to play with rope despite a difficulty finding partners:

Being a disabled bottom, it's really hard to find partners. So I just kind of paid attention to the few times I was suspended, or I'd pay attention to classes where I was bottoming. I'd watch other people suspend. And once you've done enough floor work, like moving to self-suspending is not super difficult as long as you're paying attention to what all the riggers are saying.

Robin had not been to a “rope event” in two years or more, because when she did go, she found they taught a “very specific way of tying for a very specific body” that did not suit her.

A lot of that doesn't work for me. Like even the standard hip harness. I can't put weight on my waist because I have a paralyzed digestive system that makes me feel really sick. But I can put a lot of weight on my hips because my bones really don't care about anything anymore. So like, a lot of the common ways to teach tying don't work for me. Or they expect you to weigh less than I do.

In some ways, Robin’s experiences with chronic illness and disability gave them strengths as a rope bottom that they otherwise may not have had, from being able to manage a lot of weight on their bones to pain processing skills⁹⁰. Robin worked with rope and their body, picking up further tools and skills where they could, and self-taught themselves what worked for them. Their trial and error process (which they described as “well, that hurts, that didn’t work. Or oh, that really helps!”) led them to a style of tying that meets their needs and desires and works for their body absent the opportunities of their abled peers. Still, they explain that they are often infantilized and desexualized as a disabled person, a phenomenon that is replicated outside of rope bondage spaces as well (Reynolds, 2007; Kattari, 2015).

Bird is an example of a rope bondage practitioner with disabilities who remains integrated into community but focuses primarily on her group of friends. She said that since her fibromyalgia has gotten worse, she has:

...been working harder to have more than just one-night-stand rope situations⁹¹.

... I’ve been putting more into my relationships and people who give a shit about me as a person, as well as what I can give them in a scene. And so that means that I’m often working with people that are willing to find out what *I* can do, as top or

⁹⁰ For a more targeted exploration of the experiences of kinksters living with chronic pain, see Jobson (2020).

⁹¹ Bird is referring to play scenarios where she would connect with a new person or acquaintance specifically to do rope once due to mutual interest, rather than doing rope with existing friends/partners or building long term rope relationships. This “one night stand” language does not refer to sex, although it might for other practitioners.

bottom. And we can make it work and still have a good time. It just requires a bit more finagling.

Some examples of this “finagling” were tying sitting down, to conserve her energy, and asking to be tied while sitting. The less energy she needs to use at an early stage, she told me, the longer she can go in the scene, as both a bottom and a top. Her techniques are sometimes met with pushback, ableism, and unsolicited advice from other rope tops:

I’ve definitely dealt with some criticism from people that don’t realize. Who will say things like ‘you know that’s easier if you’re standing’, or ‘why don’t you just do this.’ And they don’t realize that I’m doing it very specifically so I can keep doing my scenes, so I can have a good time with the person I’m with.

Bird felt frustrated with encounters like these, encounters that show how differently others see her than how she (and her partners) see herself.

Stigma, Social Identity, and Microaggressions

Goffman’s (1963) theory of the “spoiled identity” provides a valuable conceptual point of entry to understand the experiences of disabled kinksters, particularly when they engage with wider rope bondage community. A person’s identity is “spoiled” through the social process of stigmatization (Camlin et al, 2017) when their “virtual” social identity—or the identity (often based on stereotypes⁹²) that an outsider expects them to have—differs from their “actual” social identity, which can be understood as a person’s

⁹² The construction of these stereotypes is reflective of oppressive power dynamics in both society and rope bondage subculture, as the creation, maintenance, and dissemination of stereotypes is a part of the realm of *knowledge* (see Chapter 2).

capabilities, beliefs, experiences, skills, etc. (Goffman, 1963, p. 2). A person with a spoiled identity has been stigmatized.

We can understand the social identity of the disabled kinkster to be stigmatized in a few ways. First, they do not fit the stereotype of what a rope bondage practitioner should look like or be. A rope player is expected to be white and cisgender as well as able; they do not have hyper-mobile joints, they do not have mental illness, they do not use mobility aids, they do not have chronic pain. Varying from this standard renders an individual different in a supposedly socially undesirable way. Second, though, if they are recognized by the other as disabled, they face further stigmatization when they deviate from the stereotypical behaviour associated with disabled people^{93,94}.

Goffman (1963) discussed an array of techniques the stigmatized undertake in order to manage their stigma, but two particular methods resonate with the stories of disabled rope bondage practitioners: accepting alienation from normative social life or finding sympathetic others with whom to build community. The latter, he suggested, may consist of the stigmatized person finding and connecting with others who share their stigmatized characteristic. The accounts of most disabled rope bondage practitioners fell into one or the other of these categories⁹⁵. Rope bondage practitioners with disabilities reported either feeling alienated and removed or spoke of an alternate social sphere where

⁹³ For a critical exploration of disability stereotypes, see Clare (2017).

⁹⁴ This reading of disability in BDSM runs counter to some other scholarship, which finds that BDSM communities can be welcoming and accepting places for people with disabilities as BDSM practitioners are more accommodating of bodily difference (Reynolds, 2007). While this may be the case in some spaces, my participants did not refer to this type of dynamic outside of very intentional spaces created for and by disabled and otherwise marginalized BDSMers.

⁹⁵ The only explicit exception is Mark, who did not generally feel stigmatized or marginalized by his disability.

they could spend time with sympathetic friends and partners (often who have disabilities themselves), like Bird's explanation of investing more time and effort into her existing relationships. Of those who reported feelings of alienation, one described going in and out of kink spaces at will and as needed to use their facilities, but generally made herself self-sufficient and able to do rope outside of the rope social world. As I discuss in more depth in Chapter 5, Rebecca's account of taking "a break" from both rope and community is another example of feeling alienated or separated from rope bondage social life until her body is somewhat less disabled. Conversely, Adrien neatly summarized the experience of socializing with friends when they explained:

There are enough people around who are chronically ill or mentally ill, or temporarily injured, that, in that regard, I know that I can have sort of my needs met if I need to leave a space because it's too loud and I'm too stimulated. Like, people aren't gonna be weirded out by that. Or if they are, most of them aren't. And if they are, they probably aren't people who know me.

Interestingly, the social spheres of disabled kinksters and their sympathetic others—microcosms themselves located within (or at least initiated out of) a sub-subculture—showed people finding unison not only in their shared disabilities, but other types of social marginalization (particularly race and gender), even if they did not share them. This supports scholarly assertions that belonging to a widely marginalized identity or group is enough of a common factor/experience to unite people facing various types of discrimination and, more tellingly, to fight for each other (Malhotra & Isitt, 2017; Roberts & Jesudason, 2013).

Microaggressions are a type of interaction and experience that can come from stigma and stigmatization, and this concept provides a symbolic analytical tool to consider some of the specific interactions disabled rope bondage practitioners report. The term “microaggression” in the context of disability refers to “covert expressions of discrimination” (Keller & Galgay, 2010, p.243) that a marginalized person might experience; Keller and Galgay (2010) focus on microaggressions experienced by people with disabilities, but the concept originates in experiences and research on racial discrimination (Huber & Solorzano, 2015). Microaggressions are crucial to consider when examining the experiences of people in rope bondage subculture because in most cases, participants did not report experiences of *overt* discrimination—they were not subject to slurs or specific targeted anti-disabled violence, but instead reported more subtle expressions of discrimination that left them feeling out of place, undermined, violated, dehumanized, and more, without the behaviour technically being illegal or (in most instances) violating a local policy. These experiences negatively impacted peoples’ feelings of belonging in their local communities.

Clashing Social Identities

The stigmatization of disabled rope bondage practitioners is particularly visible when they describe the interactions they have within semi-public BDSM spaces. Consider Bird’s story of receiving criticism and patronizing advice while tying. This type of scenario is labeled by Goffman (1963, p. 13) as an example of how stigmatization can play out in interactions between people:

When normal⁹⁶ and stigmatized do in fact enter one another's immediate presence ... there occurs one of the primal scenes of sociology; for in many cases, these moments will be the ones when the causes and effects of stigma must be directly confronted by both sides.

When Bird relates a story of being interrupted during a rope scenes earlier in this chapter, a number of things are taking place. First, Bird's usually invisible disability/ies have become visible by virtue of her doing something differently to accommodate them. In the words of Goffman, this visible manifestation of her disabilities has moved her from "discreditable" (a person with a hidden, stigmatized characteristic) to "discredited" (a person whose stigmatizing characteristic is no longer hidden). The now-visible nature of her disabilities opens her up to the invasions of privacy that disabled and stigmatized people routinely face, from staring to conversations asking questions about a person's condition, and, like Bird experienced, "in which they proffer help that [she] does not need or want" (Goffman, 1963, p. 16). Goffman further writes that "[t]he implication of these overtures is that the stigmatized individual is a person who can be approached by strangers at will, providing only that they are sympathetic to the plight of persons of his kind". Outsiders feel entitled to approach Bird and ask questions about her choices or offer suggestions to alter them precisely because she has made her stigmatized difference visible.

⁹⁶ Goffman (1963) operationalizes "a normal" as the opposite of a person with a discredited/discreditable social identity.

This behaviour is also reflective of a common type of microaggression described as a denial of privacy. According to Keller and Galgay (2010, p. 252), in these cases “[t]he target experiences the microaggression as often abrupt, without hesitation and consideration for their comfort. These demands seem to transcend appropriate social norms and ignore the impact that levels of intimacy play in the self-disclosure process.” Indeed, when participants reported experiences of their privacy being violated by scene interruptions or invasive questions, they fit this description precisely. One of the most basic social norms of BDSM play spaces is that one does not interrupt another person’s scene—this can literally be dangerous, as a person may be engaging in risky play that requires focus but is also generally considered rude. Bird was one of three people with disabilities who reported their scenes being casually interrupted by people who wanted to ask questions, offer unsolicited advice, or attempt to help with their scene.

These moments of active stigmatization and microaggression are costly and harmful. Many of the disabled rope bondage practitioners I spoke to work hard to develop their rope skills, often more than the average kinkster since they also need to learn and build in accommodations or custom alterations to existing rope patterns and practices⁹⁷. In many instances (some of which I witnessed myself, or was subject to), a

⁹⁷ As one practitioner explained to me, it takes more knowledge to create or adapt a rope tie than to copy it when suspension is concerned. For example, a chest harness is a tie that can help support and stabilize a body during suspension, and chest harnesses are frequently taught by rope bondage educators in person, online, and in instruction manuals. They are usually highly engineered, and each knot placement carries a purpose from weight displacement to protection from nerve impingement. Alterations can be a serious matter, as careless changes to developed harness patterns can result in injury, and so the purpose behind the structure must be understood to be successfully and safely adapted. The risk of unsuccessfully adapting a harness can range from minor discomfort to serious nerve injury, falling, fainting (in the case of accidental blood chokes) or, theoretically, death. Not all rope bondage practitioners necessarily approach adaptation with the same degree of caution, but the people I spoke with seemed to.

tying pair who is interrupted by a well-meaning⁹⁸ and stigmatizing outsider risks having their scene deflated, the power they were constructing redefined or leeched away as the gaze of the other intrudes into a private moment. These engagements by the normal⁹⁹ other remind the subjects that they are visibly *not* normal, are seen as disempowered or incapable, and are being watched.

Robin also related experiences of being interrupted or spoken to by others and receiving advice and sentiments that she did not need or want. When Robin explained her rope experience to me, it was evident that she is both very skilled and very proud of her skill—and yet, she also reported experiences of being treated as “inspiring” or mythical in rope bondage spaces when she dared to be both visibly disabled and also hyper-competent.

Sometimes when I do stuff in rope, I get that whole inspiring speech. They’re like, “Oh well if you can do it, I can.” I’m like, well, no, because this is hard. I’m not crap at *everything* just because my genes are a little bit different. Like, that’s gross.

This is a different but equally compelling example of stigmatization. Robin’s experience here is an example of an outside viewer seeing her as “inspiration porn” (Grue, 2016) or a “supercrip” (Howe, 2011); the interloper expects Robin to be incapable, because she’s disabled, and when she is capable and excellent, the outsider feels comfortable invading

⁹⁸ As Keller and Galgay (2010) explain, a person being “well-meaning” does not reduce the harm of their actions.

⁹⁹ I use this word as Goffman does to provide a counterpoint to the stigmatized, so “normal” here refers to a lack of stigmatization rather than an objective characteristic.

Robin's privacy (and reality) to declare how impressed they are. This outward expression of Robin's virtual social identity is jarring in comparison to Robin's actual social identity, which is of a competent and skilled rope bondage practitioner who has worked hard for said skills. The cause and effects of stigma and objectification are rendered almost painfully visible here as Robin's rope play is redefined by the other and presented back to her in a manner that interrupts her own pleasure and goals.

Benefits to Rope

For most of these participants, the effort they invest into rope pays off for them in a way that interacts with their disabilities. For example, when Rebecca explained her problems with finding energy to do daily tasks, she explained that bottoming for rope play can sometimes *give* her energy, while tying generally took more than it gave. She also told me:

Rebecca: ... it's weird, though, because I have pain. I always have some sort of pain. But even the pain of rope is like... good pain? And so it can also just take my mind off of other, the other pain, it draws my focus. Sometimes it's just kinda centering, like, ahhh¹⁰⁰.

Zoey: That sounds really nice.

Rebecca: That's why I want to do more rope! But just like, energy planning.

¹⁰⁰ For more on this concept of "good pain", see Newmahr (2010).

Robin also related stories of using rope for pain management as well as a form of physiotherapy, specifically her self-tying.

As far as self-bondage and stuff goes, for me I use it as physiotherapy and pain control. ... so if I'm bedridden all the time, if I'm going to do suspension then I don't have to bear weight with my joints the same way I would if I stood up because the rope's supporting me. But I still... you still have to flex your muscles and move around. So I'm still using my legs in ways that I can't always.

Her disorder was undiagnosed for over a decade, and she learned that over-the-counter painkillers did not help her chronic pain, but meditation did. Rope play combined with meditation helped to an even greater degree.

A lot of [meditation] involves being in your body and being mindful of what it's going through, and being in the right headspace to kind of cope with things. It's sort of like subspaces are very similar space where if you're being spanked and you're going through subspace, you are feeding the endorphins and relaxing into pain, and it stops being uncomfortable. Well, it's just a sensation. I use rope to do sort of that. Especially in self-suspension because you're so focused on what you're doing that all other thoughts are just gone. You're completely focused on what you're doing and how your body feels because there's no space for anything else. Now it's the one thing my brain is focused on, and there's nothing, and there's just beautiful violence in my brain and this really relaxing meditative thing.

Many participants echoed this sentiment, explaining in some way that the visceral experience of rope fills up their body and/or awareness to combat an unpleasant sensation (like chronic pain) or unwanted feelings and thoughts (like stress and mental illness). The way they explain it, rope can overwhelm a person; choosing to do this play and designing it to their needs gives them some agency, control, and power over their mind and body. This is surprisingly and specifically mirrored in the minimal literature on BDSM and disability, like Tellier (2017, p. 488), who writes that BDSM “could positively assist a person with disabilities regarding communication, sexual exploration and gratification, personal empowerment, meaning-making, and pain management”. Tellier (2017) argues that pursuing and inducing pain that one is in control of can have a twofold effect of relieving disability-related pain (by overwhelming/replacing it with another kind) and giving an individual the feeling of authority or power over their own pain.

Rope was also a grounding tool for two participants with autism. Ivan Delacroix told me about their hyper-focus on rope bondage, its history, and links to Japanese martial arts¹⁰¹. Another participant used tying as a sensory tool:

Because I am autistic, so, like... a lot of autistic people use weighted blankets to stay calm when we're anxious and stuff. And TKs¹⁰² literally sit in the exact same spot and put pressure pretty much in the same kind of area. So it's really calming and relaxing. So I notice that if I'm anxious, if I just wrap a large rope around my

¹⁰¹ Ivan Delacroix's extensive knowledge about Japanese documents and historical rope bondage practices was invaluable to me. Our two-hour interview and follow-up emails yielded many leads in my attempt to track down the history of Shibari vs. Western-style rope bondages in the United States. Thank you, Ivan!

¹⁰² See Glossary.

shoulders, I can just pull on it and I start relaxing and calming down because it feels like I'm in a hug. But I don't have to like... I can be home alone and be kind of over-stimulated or something. I can just pull out my rope and calm down.

This effect also helped their anxiety during partnered sex and intimacy. Introducing rope to their sex life allowed them to feel calm and in-the-moment.

Referring to concepts like “spoiled identity” and “discreditable” run the risk of framing disability as a bad thing, something that is spoiling or discrediting. They quite literally are, in a theoretical sense as understood by Goffman (1963), but Goffman also did seem to understand stigmatizing characteristics as disadvantages and net-negative attributes. At minimum, to a non-academic eye these words seem unpleasant. The narratives of disabled rope bondage practitioners challenge this; while they do not dispute that the status of being disabled is discrediting in a wider society (and that they experience it as such, socially, via ableism), their personal experiences of themselves were not as identities that were spoiled or less valuable, nor were their experiences with friends. Some did share stories of suffering due to pain and/or other aspects of their disability, and many also shared strengths and skills that came along with them¹⁰³. In these cases, peoples' actual social identities are not actually *worse* than their virtual social identities—they are just different in a way that one side sees as disadvantageous, while the other may not necessarily. The gap between the two makes mainstream kink spaces

¹⁰³ I do not suggest that all of the participants are happily disabled. Many did share wishes that they were abled or at least free from pain, but all seemed to challenge normative constructions that devalue disabled lives and experiences. This is consistent with recent developments in critical disability studies to make room for disability being, at times, a negative experience, while also seeking to critically consider how social constructions of disability contribute to marginalization (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2017).

and socializing sometimes uncomfortable and undesirable, but most participants were able to find or create environments where their virtual social identities and actual social identities matched. This work can be understood as a process of *resistance* (Hannem, 2012); in these instances, disabled rope bondage practitioners invest a variety of their own resources into crafting alternative physical and virtual spaces where the hegemonic narrative of those in power can be challenged, subverted, and redefined. In these spaces, the power of knowledge—the power to craft, share, and engage with knowledge—is brought into the purview of those normally marginalized. Being in these social spheres of like-minded friends, lovers, acquaintances, teachers, and even strangers was often framed as a person’s best reprieve from an otherwise oppressive and harsh world.

Interestingly, Goffman (1963) wrote that living within these circles of sympathetic others relegates a person to living a half-life—in this particular case, since one could argue that the process of finding sympathetic others applies to the entirety of kink subculture, as it consists of people banding together over difference, we could frame these circles of marginalized kinksters as living quarter-lives or less. This does not resonate with the stories and feelings conveyed by the participants. Instead of being *forced* to only socialize with a sub-sub-subset of people in order to feel accepted, disabled participants who talked about these social circles seemed to be grateful to have found supportive and like-minded people in a vast social world¹⁰⁴. Their explanations of friendship sounded similar to people bonding over any shared interest/experience, with a

¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the likelihood of meeting people outside of BDSM subculture who are 1) kinky, 2) rope bondage enthusiasts, and 3) marginalized must be vanishingly small.

strengthening element of shared traumas, concerns, activist priorities, and mutual defense.

In contrast, I posit that disabled rope bondage practitioners have experiences of empowerment and connection in their groups of sympathetic others. They are able to share techniques, support one another, and provide positive social experiences that are reportedly valuable to these participants. They are able to network, find partners, and be appreciated for their skill and value as rope bondage practitioners and people alike. And, perhaps most importantly, they are able to work with likeminded others to develop and hone their own theoretical understandings of their interactions within wider BDSM and rope bondage spaces.

Exceptions and Layered Marginalizations

Mark was the only participant who reported a physical condition that he needed to accommodate but did not frame it as a disability. Mark told me about a temporary injury in his hand which led to pain, reduced functioning, and a several-month break from tying while he prepared for and recovered from surgery. He found that it did not impact his involvement in rope in a meaningful way—aside from the time away from tying—and he did not share experiences of stigmatization. Mark accommodated his injury and recovery by tying with his non-dominant hand and becoming ambidextrous. Now, post-surgery and with occasional pain, he ties with a brace and wrapped wrist to avoid possible issues. Mark is still able to access rope spaces, educational opportunities, and partners. His accounts did not describe any barriers to acceptance or access within the

rope social or educational worlds, which may be the reason why he did not identify his injury or lingering pain as a disability.

Mark may have escaped social censure and stigma for a number of reasons. First, his injury is both visible (brace) and accommodated for (ambidexterity), meaning that there is no major gap between his virtual and actual social identities: he can meet the expectations and demands (as understood by Goffman) placed upon him by the other when they see him acting as a rope top in a rope space. Second, since he is still comfortable in and has access to normative rope social and physical spaces, he has no need to find a group of sympathetic others who can accept him more readily than his other peers will. This may have been further reflective of other identities shared by participants; in all of the previous examples, each participant who talked about their disabilities is also queer (sexuality), and many of them are either transgender¹⁰⁵, racialized, or both. Mark, on the other hand, is a white, cisgender, heterosexual man, and did not report any experiences of marginalization or marginalized identities¹⁰⁶. An intersectional analysis of this scenario suggests that Mark's potential marginalization by virtue of (temporary) disability was mitigated or buffered by his privileged statuses in terms of race, gender, and sexuality; these dynamics may have protected him for experiencing discrimination, inaccessibility, and microaggressions. Further exploration of

¹⁰⁵ Here I refer to the umbrella term of transgender as a person whose gender identity differs from the one assigned at birth. This definition is inclusive of agender, genderfluid, non-binary, and genderqueer people, as well as binary transgender people.

¹⁰⁶ It bears mentioning that prior to volunteering for this study, Mark specifically reached out to me to express concern that he did not want to take up space as "another cishet white male Dom" in my study, as this demographic is usually highly (sometimes disruptively) visible in kink spaces. I assured him that I did need to talk to some people who are generally considered normative, and so my description of him here is intended to identify potentially influential factors but not discount his experiences.

these dynamics would be beneficial both to BDSM research and BDSM communities' ongoing efforts to build more inclusive spaces.

Chapter Seven

Kinksters of Colour in Rope Bondage Subculture:

Race, Representation, and Resistance

Racialized people are commonly left out of academic research on BDSM (see Chapter 1) or, when they are a part of an academic sample, are small enough in numbers that identifying them would out their participation to their local community (e.g. Newmahr, 2011). In this project, the nature of expanding remote interviews across the United States and Canada allowed for enough recruitment to obscure identity, if specific location and heritages are not disclosed, and specifically explore the experiences of racialized rope bondage practitioners. In this chapter I will utilize a lens informed by critical race theory (see Chapter 2) and draw upon hooks (1992) to make sense of representation and resistance in the narratives of these participants. I will also mobilize the concept of racial microaggressions, which Huber & Solorzano (2015) describe as cumulative assaults that have a long-term impact much more serious than a single incident. This concept is a tool to support a symbolic interactionist analysis and recognition of the minute expressions of discrimination and stigma that racialized rope bondage practitioners experience in their everyday lives.

Overall, this analysis suggests that rope bondage subculture is not a particularly friendly place for people of colour. This is similar to how queer subculture has been critiqued as exclusionary, white-dominated, racist, and requiring intervention (Petzen, 2012; Lanzerotti et al, 2002). As Logie and Rwigema (2014, p. 174) wrote, “the normative idea of queer is a white person”—and the normative idea of a rope bondage

practitioner is also a white person. When racialized people do choose to be present or hold authority in figurative or literal rope bondage spaces, it is often motivated by their passion for rope and/or community and their own activist priorities. In this chapter I argue that these efforts can be understood as a type of resistance, and that pursuing pleasure in this environment (and, often, supporting the pleasure of other people of colour) is a radical and transformative act. By writing this chapter I aim to support, center, and celebrate their work while also offering an intervention into these subcultural spaces—organized and occupied by mostly-white rope bondage practitioners who frequently claim to want to de-center whiteness and build spaces that are more comfortable and welcoming for racialized rope bondage practitioners.

Critical Race and Rope Bondage Atmosphere

As I outlined in Chapter 2, there are two tenets of critical race theory that particularly resonate with racialized rope bondage practitioners' accounts: 1) racism is common and widespread enough to be considered “ordinary”, and 2) both elite and working-class white people benefit from white supremacy enough to have little incentive to functionally combat racism or support racialized people (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2017). Most (but not all) racialized rope bondage practitioners with whom I spoke felt deeply alienated in a subculture that does not seem to be invested in truly eradicating racism, while also often framing their regular encounters with racism and exclusion as disappointingly banal, expected, and “ordinary”. These participants typically assumed that other kinksters of colour experience racism as well. In this way, the general, widespread, usually-quiet racism of rope bondage subculture was a given for all racialized participants but one (see Chapter 3 for a description of this exception). While

the surface-level actions of these peoples' white peers are sometimes sufficient to address overtly racist behaviour in rope spaces, most participants had little faith that the fundamental structure of rope bondage subculture was anti-racist enough to create spaces within which they would ever feel truly safe or welcome.

Seven out of 23 of the participants in this project self-identified as racialized, all of whom were visible minorities. The responses varied in their language choices, but three are East Asian (with Chinese and Japanese heritages), and four are Black (African-American, Black American, Caribbean Canadian, and one multiracial person who identified as "Black, specifically various white and Black"¹⁰⁷). Our conversations about race intertwined with gender in a way they did not with other potential axes of marginalization, reflecting an intersectional reality to race-based oppression in both rope bondage subculture¹⁰⁸ and general society¹⁰⁹. There were several main themes that arose in almost every conversation with racialized participants.

First, Black participants spoke at length about visible representation within the rope bondage scene, of themselves or others; they commonly spoke of visibility (or lack

¹⁰⁷ I have opted to capitalize "Black" in reference to Black subculture, as these participants often referred to their peers and Blackness as a characteristic that united them with other Black people regardless of geographical heritage. See Lanham and Liu (2019), Braganza (2016), and Wachal (2000) for authors' arguments for capitalizing "Black" but not "white".

¹⁰⁸ For an insightful exploration of the complex relationships between race, gender, and sexuality for Black kinky women, see Cruz (2016).

¹⁰⁹ See Crenshaw (1991 and 1995), Cooper (2004), and Hill Collins (1990) for an overview of intersectional feminist approaches to gender and race. While this trend was apparent in the data, the numbers of each gender/race combination in the participants' demographics was too low to support an intersectional analysis here. For example, I spoke to only one Black man, one nonbinary Black person, and two cisgender Black women.

thereof) of other racialized people on social media¹¹⁰ and in educational spaces, and worried about their own responsibilities to take up space in order to be that representation. Many of them referred to the mostly white subculture's recent attempts to be more diverse and inclusive with a disappointed, disillusioned, and tired air. As I will outline shortly, bell hooks' (1992) introduction to *Black Looks: Race and Representation* provides context to understand the weighty work of representation as a form of resistance and claiming power within a subculture informed by white supremacy.

Second, racialized participants clearly laid out the importance of anti-racist work as they related a wide array of experiences of racism within the scene. This ranged from overt racism to discussions of the weight of racial stereotypes they feel in both physical and digital spaces. Racism could take the form of being hyper-sexualized and fetishized by strangers (via Fetlife private messages), as well as feeling subject to more subtle labels like "aggressive", "submissive," or "intimidating" in social life based on links between their race and gender norms rather than their actual behaviour. Microaggressions are a useful concept to consider here, as, like rope bondage practitioners with disabilities, racialized participants reported experiencing covert discrimination; unlike the stories of disabled kinksters, though, they also reported overt expressions of discrimination.

In addition to these two common themes, most of the racialized participants shared unprompted concern for other people of colour who have different but similarly bad experiences of racism within the scene. For example, a Black participant explained to

¹¹⁰ Rope bondage media (social and otherwise) seems, from these participants' accounts and my own observations, to mirror mainstream media's problem of centering white people and almost completely failing to include visual representation of people of colour (Downing & Husband, 2005; Kendi, 2016).

me the racism East Asian people suffer in rope bondage subculture via fetishization of Japanese cultural symbols, while a Chinese participant told me their concerns that Black men be subject to BBC (“big black cock”) stereotypes and fantasies in BDSM subculture generally (see Samuels, 2019). This type of cross-racial solidarity has been found to support peoples’ wellbeing (Kolly, 2018) as well as efforts to “contest racial hierarchies and structures of racial inequality” (Shah, 2008, p. 463; also see Hooker, 2009).

Responsibility and Visibility

Racialized participants spoke of representation and visibility from two angles: 1) the issue of seeing/being seen in person, at events and educational events; and 2) the impact of social media imagery and the demographic makeup of models/photography subjects, primarily on Fetlife, but also on other social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter. In both scenarios, participants shared a feeling of responsibility to *be* the representation they felt was sorely lacking, or guilt if they were not actively taking up space in a visible manner. They also seemed to feel alone in this responsibility, disconnected to similar initiatives by their peers¹¹¹.

An effort to improve the representation of racialized people in rope bondage subculture seemed to have even motivated some to participate in the first place. For example, Ewok’s participation was motivated by the encouragement of his (white) mentor, who had already interviewed with me, and a recognition that “there’s not too

¹¹¹ There another example of this type of visibility activism, see Stanley (2019). Stanley investigates the experiences of fat people, women, queer people, and people of colour who engage in social media photography to showcase their “unlikely hiking” and disrupt mainstream racist, fatphobic, sexist, and homo/transphobic ideas of who can hike.

many of us in the community”, and so he should participate. Ewok seemed to feel some cheerful responsibility to make sure I was able to talk to some people who had had experiences like his. He shared many thoughtful concerns, stories, and explanations about his experiences being a Black man in the Southern United States both in- and outside of BDSM subculture, and, indeed, was the only Black man I had the opportunity to interview. Before we even formally began the interview, he was talking to me about a lack of representation of Black people on “K&P”, which refers to “Kinky and Popular” and is essentially a highlights or “most popular” front page for Fetlife. He was the first, but not the last, to refer to K&P as a cultural shorthand for what is and is not popular, visible, and generally representative of the kink scene’s racial makeup and desires. Ewok explained:

Even the fact that if you go on K&P, for example, you’ll see white women, white men, then you might start to see like Asian women, and then women of darker complexion before you see a Black man. So it seems like women of varying ethnicities are kind of sexualized and eroticized. Whereas Black men aren’t so much.

This is one example of the deeply gendered experiences that racialized participants related during our interviews. All of these participants explained different stereotypes, restrictions, struggles, and harms based on the relationship between race and gender. Here, Ewok explains the hyper-sexualization of racialized women, but also later spoke of the sexual objectification of Black men. He felt that at times, Black friends of his had internalized the BBC or aggressively sexual stereotype, and so most of the Black people he sees “in the community or outside it, they always tend to be swingers or kind of in that

BBC kind of pigeonhole”. He explained, though, that he intervened when possible, sharing more about kink subculture and diverse opportunities with friends.

Each of these participants described an overwhelmingly white local scene where they were hyper-visible when they chose to attend. When I asked Kristen about other Black people in her community, she said:

They exist. A lot of them... you won't see a lot of [them]. Every time I go out, if I go to a rope thing, it's guaranteed I will be one of two. Because there's another one that comes up from the south. If I go to a dungeon, there's a good chance I'm going to be the only one. ... Like I'll go to some of the [major metropolitan area] ones. And I've been to like the [more rural] ones, and... yeah, I was the only person in the room. The only African-American in the room. And I know there are more in the community.

Ewok similarly explained that when he attends his local events, “I would say I'm not seeing a *single* rope top that [is] not white. I'm not just saying like African-American, I'm saying was not white.”

Adrien theorized about this phenomenon when they explained that “it's not that kinky people of colour don't exist, it's that there are so few of us, and when you don't see people like you in spaces, you don't feel safe going into spaces.” They painted a picture of an exhausting and white-dominated scene that drains and alienates people of colour, leading their visible presences to be brief, signaling to other racialized folks that those

spaces are not safe¹¹². Adrien felt that the lack of safety may be overt, as in the case of “racist assholes”, but they also identified a passive type of danger from complacent white people who claim to want diverse and safe spaces but “don’t want to put the work in to change it” from the (unsafe) current environment¹¹³:

Cause that requires that sometimes you’ll have to kick people out of your fucking event for being racist assholes, and no one wants to do that, cause no one wants to be the bad guy, cause no one wants to ruin their fun.

According to several of these racialized participants, the efforts of white people running events and event spaces to improve diversity and safety often result in requiring inordinate amounts of labour and vulnerability from the very racialized people for whom they are trying to improve conditions. At times, it seemed as if racialized people were responsabilized for absolving fellow community members of their white guilt. Self-identified white allies have regularly been attempting to improve the scene “for the last five years since I’ve joined”, said Adrien, but often are not receptive to suggestions of systemic or difficult change, and blame racialized people as a whole if their requests for help and feedback do not result in responses.

¹¹² This suggests that some (or many, or most) rope bondage spaces are what Anderson (2015, p. 10) calls “the white space”, or an overwhelmingly and normatively white space that appears “unremarkable” or “normal” to white people, but potentially hostile or uncomfortable for Black people. In these spaces, Anderson (2015, p. 10) argues, Black people will look for other Black people with whom to “commune if not bond”; “when judging a setting as too white, they can feel uneasy and consider it to be informally ‘off limits’.” These quotes are a close descriptor of how kinksters of colour describe their feelings in all- or majority-white rope and BDSM spaces.

¹¹³ See one of the core tenets of critical race theory in Chapter 2, which argues that white elites and working-class people both benefit too much from white supremacy to be truly investigated in its eradication.

Black participants in particular reported feeling a degree of responsibility for being visible in an effort to contribute to feelings of safety, belonging, and representation for other racialized people. When we talked about the lack of Black attendees and instructors at large “con¹¹⁴” events, Olivia said:

That’s part of the reason why I keep showing up. Like I said, it’s one of the things that motivated me to start presenting. ... Even if somebody isn’t physically present in my class, I’ll get the ‘Wow, it’s good to see you out here.’ People notice. They really do.

The number of Black educators and instructors is so low that, as Olivia explained, when she encountered another Black woman (who is also a friend) teaching at the same event, they laughed together about how “we’re going to get called each other’s names a whole lot this weekend. But I’m glad to see you,” along with offering “kudos” to the organizers for “upping the diversity because neither one of us felt like we were a ‘diversity’ hire.” The subtext here, of course, is that sometimes Olivia and others do feel this way, and still attend and instruct due to their political and personal priorities.

Adrien related similar stories of comradery when attending events and running into other Black people:

You always know exactly who the other people are, or, if I go to an event, I make a point of saying ‘hi’ to the Black people at the event. We’re always like ‘Oh

¹¹⁴ A number of “cons” or conventions occur throughout the year and focus on BDSM generally or, for most of these participants, rope bondage specifically. These events typically include full days of classes, evenings of social events, and an area for vendors of BDSM supplies.

yeah, there's—there's another one! I'm not the only one!' And everyone has that joke, because we're all so used to, in our local communities, being, if we're lucky, one of a handful, but probably the only Black person or person of colour in your community at all.

These moments of connection in a largely white scene were explained as if they were moments of relief. Racialized people appreciated finding moments of connection amongst common alienation and being, as Olivia named, the “lonely only”—and may have also been conveying a feeling of relief that maybe, for one bracketed piece in time, they were not solely responsible for the image of the racialized other in a white-dominated space.

Kristen's efforts to improve representation with her own presence were more informal, manifesting through attending events and posting photos to social media. She also seemed uncomfortable with the scrutiny and found it near-impossible to separate her hyper-visibility as a Black person from her presence at events:

I don't even go to rope events other than rope tops because for some weird reason, I feel like going there... I don't know, it's a weird... I feel like I'm representing a part of the community that does exist. ... The first day I went back to [rope event], there was a new girl in the rope community. And she's Black. She's 19. And she's been trying to get into rope. And she is like, 'I have never seen another Black person in rope, ever. This is so exciting.' I was like, 'Okay.' And she's like,

‘And they twist you all over the place.’ I’m like, ‘Yeah, I know they twist you all over the place.’ [Laughs] I like the twisties. I like the contortions¹¹⁵.

I asked Kristen if that experience was rewarding, getting that kind of positive feedback; it is, she said, “but it’s so freaking rare”. Kristen had similar experiences with her online social media presence and felt good about those interactions as well.

Occasionally I’ll put up a picture on Fet[Life], and someone’s like, ‘You know, I saw... I went through your photos and I saw this picture and I was like, I want to do that. And I wouldn’t have done it had I not seen you do it.’ They’re typically either Hispanic or Black or whatever. And so, occasionally that’s a feel good thing for me.

The accounts of these participants suggest that some (or many, or most) rope bondage spaces are what Anderson (2015, p. 10) calls “the white space”, an overwhelmingly and normatively white space that appears “unremarkable” or “normal” to white people, but potentially hostile or uncomfortable for Black people. In these spaces, Anderson (2015, p. 10) argues, Black people will look for other Black people with whom to “commune if not bond”; “when judging a setting as too white, they can feel uneasy and consider it to be informally ‘off limits’.” These quotes are a close descriptor of how kinksters of colour describe their feelings in all- or majority-white rope and BDSM spaces. Consciously occupying these spaces is a challenging but recognized tactic for racialized people seeking to change the status quo; as Sinclair (2018, n.p.)

¹¹⁵ Kristen is referring here to being twisted in the air during rope bondage suspension.

writes, “becoming a more equitable and inclusive society ... requires that minorities be more visible, active and empowered in spaces of the majority”. Still, being a minority person in a “predominantly privileged and majority space can sometimes be traumatizing”.

We can further theorize the connections between empowerment, representation, and visibility by considering bell hooks’ (1992) *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. In the introduction to a series of essays primarily on representation of Blackness in film, hooks (1992, p. 2) cites African filmmaker Ousmane Sembene when he explains:

You must understand that for people like us, there are no such things as models.

We are called upon to constantly create our models. For African people, Africans in the diaspora, it’s pretty much the same. Colonialism means that we must always rethink everything.

This comment—“there are no such things as models. We are called upon to constantly create our models”—reflects the experiences that Black rope bondage practitioners related. They felt called upon by themselves, others, or the subculture generally to *be* any representation that they wished they could see, if they were to see it at all. hooks’ analysis in *Black Looks* shows that the experiences of these kinksters does not occur in a vacuum, and is connected to larger issues of representation, race, and society at large, along with implicating representation issues in the rope bondage and BDSM subcultures. There is also a noted difference, though; hooks (1992) describes that in mainstream imagery (such as film, television, and more), the Black viewer generally cannot control their images or meaningfully impact that representation if they are not directors or famous artists. hooks writes:

the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identify.

In contrast, some Black rope bondage practitioners *do* feel empowered to control and change how they are seen and understood in rope and BDSM subcultures in a form of knowledge creation. However, this power is heavy and comes at a cost. This is likely a reflection of how small the world of rope bondage is, and the low barrier to entry for creating imagery that gains traction in social media spaces or being visible at in-person events. In some very important ways, Black rope bondage practitioners are engaging in the critical action that hooks (1992, p. 4) calls for:

To face these wounds, to heal them, progressive black people and our allies in struggle must be willing to grant the effort to critically intervene and transform the world of image making authority of place in our political movements of liberation and self determination. . . . If this were the case, we would be ever mindful of the need to make radical intervention. We would consider crucial both the kind of images we produce and the way we critically write and talk about images. *And most important, we would rise to the challenge to speak that which has not been spoken.* (emphasis added)

From these interviews, it is clear that many Black rope bondage practitioners *do* rise to the challenge to speak to and represent “that which has not been spoken” or seen—to be a Black woman rope top in a world that expects Black women to be submissive, to take up visible space as a Black nonbinary person in a subculture that aggressively genders Black bodies, to be a visible Black man rope topping in defiance of the stereotypes that get

attributed to him. This work, though, is challenging, exhausting, alienating, and disenfranchising; each person seemed to unhappily be working entirely (or almost entirely) alone in their mostly-white local communities, a single bulwark against white supremacy and a beacon for other possible racialized kinksters. This work takes a toll, and almost every racialized participant identified significant feelings of burnout at present or in their recent kink social history.

Further research supports the radical and revolutionary potential of imagery and representation. Edrington and Gallagher (2019), when examining widely circulated imagery of the Black Lives Matter movement, argue that activists' efforts and visibility in photographs works to shift or change the narrative of Black peoples' lived realities in the United States. Imagery serves to invite "the viewer ... into a social relationship with the subjects of the photograph" (Edrington & Gallagher, 2019, p. 203). Similarly, rope bondage practitioners' efforts to be visible in rope bondage photography (amateur and professional) invite the viewer—and their fellow community members—to *see* the presence, reality, skill, and pleasure of racialized rope bondage practitioners.

After speaking to racialized rope bondage practitioners and considering my own experiences in various rope bondage spaces, I suspect that the alienation and burnout of racialized activists is a function of a subculture influenced by white supremacy¹¹⁶, rather than an accidental effect. As I assert in Chapter 2, rope bondage subculture operates and

¹¹⁶ I do not mean to imply that rope bondage or BDSM is more racist or white supremacist than mainstream society, as my data does not support or deny an assertion like this, but that, like other institutions and social spaces that are white-dominant, a prioritization of whiteness and white experiences is built into the foundation and structure of this subculture. The stories of tokenism, racism, and efforts of white allies I heard through the course of this research supports this framing.

is embedded within a society that is racist, sexist, classist, ableist, and homo/transphobic, and the findings presented in the prior and current chapter demonstrate that the rope bondage subculture has not significantly escaped or countered these oppressive power dynamics. In this context, the work of Black rope bondage practitioners is a powerful site of resistance to the hegemonic whiteness of BDSM, a resistance that centers and prioritizes the experiences, interests, and images of racialized people and other marginalized groups. As Pratibha Parmar wrote: “Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access” (as cited in hooks, 1992:5)—if we can expand this to consider both imagery and in-person visibility, we can understand Black rope bondage practitioners’ engagement with representation as *work* and an effort to define and control the political and social power of racialized people in BDSM. This power is costly and tiring to wield and wrestle with alone, but while they do, they seem to say, *we are here, we can do this, we have power, we belong, we have place.*

The need for this work is never more obvious than when we consider experiences of overt and covert racism (like microaggressions) in rope bondage subculture. According to most racialized participants, their experiences of racism were not necessarily worse than in the regular world, but generally different, and more invisible. This latter dynamic is influenced by the tendency for kinky people to feel like they are marginalized by virtue of their interest in BDSM; this feeling of marginalization creates a sense of unity with other marginalized demographics, which is often linked to a failure to consider intersectional oppressions or their own intra-community harms. (This is also documented in queer subculture, e.g. Patel, 2019.)

Most of the participants' stories of outright, aggressive racism occurred online, like receiving hyper-sexualizing messages from strangers. As Adrien described,

Within my first six months of being on Fetlife, I had someone message me with a message that they probably thought was very flattering? Um... calling me their Nubian queen or something like that, and... just, they were fetishizing me and my skin and my Blackness. And then I went on their profile and realized they were someone who has a breeder fetish ... and seemingly had a Black woman fetish as well.

Adrien sent them a “really nice message”, politely explaining that this behaviour was not okay, and then blocked them. Adrien seemed to feel some responsibility for being friendly and not aggressive, even in the face of such racism¹¹⁷. This thread of “they probably thought it was very flattering” was consistent throughout many other stories of racism, particularly experienced within supposedly friendly interactions. This story is also representative of the labour that kinksters of colour reported having to undertake in order not to be seen as a threat in kink spaces. Emotional labour like this is similarly reported by racialized people in workplaces (Froyum, 2013; Evans, 2013), where they often must choose to manage their own reactions to and feelings about experiencing racism in order to maintain their belonging in that space.

Racialized participants described running up against insidious and subtle racial stereotypes, like being seen as automatically “submissive” (particularly for Asian and

¹¹⁷ This is an example of how people of colour are frequently responsabilized for the feelings of white people; as DiAngelo (2018) argues, people of colour are often required or expected to perform emotional labour in order to defuse or deescalate incidents of racist conflict.

Black women) or being framed as aggressive, intimidating, or bullying if they voiced their concerns with something in the community. Ewok described overhearing people who:

are totally against racism, but then at the same token, they'd be having a conversation with someone else, not aware I was around, and they'd be like, 'Oh well, they're just too aggressive... and that's why I don't really enjoy dating them, because I just think they're going to be too rough.'

Another participant recounted the story of a white rope bondage practitioner and stranger who, upon seeing her bottom in rope, expressed shock that she was capable of doing that. He told her: "I honestly didn't think... I didn't think your body could handle it"—a horrendously racist statement that he had meant as a compliment. This is another classic microaggression, which Keller and Galgay (2010, p.249) identify as "denial of personal identity"¹¹⁸, when a person only sees one aspect of the other's identity (in this case, being Black); the possibility that they could be capable of things other than being Black is a shock. The further subtext here, of course, is that Black bodies are less skilled, less athletic, less flexible, and less capable than their white counterparts¹¹⁹. Expressing such adds to the cumulative violence that the subject experiences regularly as a marginalized and racialized person in rope.

¹¹⁸ Keller and Galgay (2010) found this type of microaggression researching the experiences of people with disabilities, but their findings are applicable across marginalizations.

¹¹⁹ This also reflects a long-standing history of anti-Black racist ideas (see Kendi, 2016).

Racialized participants were also very conscious of subtle acts of interactions that *felt like* racism, but that they could neither confirm nor deny their nature. When Olivia spoke of being selected to teach, she described her self-talk as:

What's the real reason? Are you hiring me because, you know, because you want me to placidly endorse your event...? And that's the thing, there are definitely events I won't go to anymore because I feel a little used in that social capital space.

Ewok shared similar experiences of wondering, but not being able to confirm, whether racism underlay some of his treatment in the community. He explained to me:

I can do a rope scene next to someone who had their entire TK fall apart. And someone who's new will go up to them, complete strangers, and be like, 'Oh, can you tie me?' And I'm like, but his whole thing just fell apart! And it obviously wasn't structurally sound or good. Logically why would you go over to them? And that's when my mind starts to wonder.

Ewok's method of dealing with these thoughts was to say "you know what, either people have their own reasons or it's some cosmic force. Either way, I can't control it, so I don't really care."

The emotional and cognitive effort required to identify and process microaggressions as they occur is one of the elements that makes them so violent¹²⁰. This type of scenario, of doubting one's own interpretation of events, or at the least needing to

¹²⁰ See Nadal (2018) for an explanation of microaggressions as psychological trauma.

spend time and effort considering it, is a manifestation or consequence of this racism.

Kristen told me that her reactions to racism are “dismissed a lot ... they tell me that I’m overreacting or it’s not that serious.” She continued to explain how it feels to have her reality and interpretations constantly disregarded and dismissed by white people:

It’s crazy because I talk to other either Hispanic or Black people, and Asians actually too because we have a few here too, and they say the same thing. They’re like, “I just don’t mention it because, you know, they think that we’re making it up or that it doesn’t exist.” And it most certainly does. And you feel highly just out of place. And we have to deal with that in our daily lives anyway, so we just accept it. We accept it. But to hear somebody that has no clue tell you that it’s not a big deal or you’re just overreacting, it’s kind of like... it’s almost like beaten wife syndrome or something. Jeez, I don’t even know.

Allyship and Whiteness

The anti-racist work of white allies in these spaces does not seem to be enough to meaningfully spur change. As participants relayed to me, white rope bondage practitioners often seem to feel a sense of satisfaction from “following” Black creators and artists on social media, inviting a single Black educator to an event, or inviting racialized people to provide suggestions for fixing racism (that are not too difficult), while not actually providing supports for racialized people to become creators, educators, or experts in rope bondage. Most of the racialized people I spoke to seemed to feel that while white allies think they are doing good work, their effort and commitment to anti-racist and decolonized spaces is often seen as fleeting, surface-level, or lip-service to

their racialized community members. This mismatch between active effort from racialized people and passive encouragement from white kinksters likely contributes to the alienation and burnout experienced by many of the racialized participants with whom I spoke.

At times, participants did report feeling supported by their white friends and community members, but generally in a “back up” capacity to their own anti-racist work, rather than as intervenors. For example, Evelyn talked of hearing racist remarks at events, and feeling hesitant to speak up:

Obviously if I’m there with a partner or if I’m there with my friends, I generally trust my friends and my partner to back me up if I want to fight someone about being racist. But, I’m more likely to not say anything about it, because I would rather just not have a fight about this. I’ve spent however many dollars and time, hours, getting to this thing, and I would rather leave that person alone and not talk to them and have a good time on the other side of the party than spend my night having a fight with a racist person.

In this story, it seems to Evelyn that if anyone were to speak up against this racist person, it would be her, the only visibly racialized person at the table.

Discussion

The accounts of disabled and racialized rope bondage practitioners allow us to see some of the most problematic aspects of rope bondage subculture and some of the negative personal experiences that can come from participation in this world. These participants reported feelings of alienation, disenfranchisement, and experiences of

microaggressions that required significant emotional labour and made subculture participation uncomfortable or impossible. However, the counter-hegemonic work of both disabled and racialized participants is an important factor to remember when considering their presence in these real and figurative spaces. The acts of taking up space, consciously working to change representation with the visibility of their very own selves and seeking to shape the scene into a better place are both subversive and powerful.

The above analysis demonstrates that there are issues of institutional racism (Huber & Solorzano, 2015) in the rope bondage scene that mirror or mimic the race-based oppressions faced by racialized people in wider society (Delgado, Stefancic, & Harris, 2017)—this is difficult to explore or argue further with the current dataset, but is an intriguing and important area for further analysis. The consistency in experiences of stigmatization, discrimination, and microaggressions across cities and countries suggests that there are common elements of racism (along with ableism, see Chapter 6, and other types of oppression) built into the structure of the rope bondage scene itself.

Chapter Eight

“Beautiful, Scary, and Really, Really Unsettling”:

Unintelligibility and Theorizing Pleasure

There's not space for anything else. Now it's the one thing my brain is focused on, and there's nothing, and there's just beautiful violence in my brain. – Robin

Discussions of rope bondage subculture are incomplete without a consideration of the driving forces that motivate people to construct, belong to, and fight to improve this world. The pleasure of rope bondage—the feelings practitioners pursue, the functions it serves in their lives, the resonant experiences that have them returning again and again for more—is one of these such forces. The pleasure of rope bondage may seem to be sexual in nature, like BDSM is often framed, but this research showed otherwise. It is not simply that rope bondage is *not* sexual, though, but that the complexity of feelings, sensations, pleasures, and emotions that arise from the practice do not neatly fit into a single descriptive box¹²¹.

In my time as a rope bondage practitioner as well as interviewing these participants, I found that a part of the experience of rope is difficult to comprehend and explain with words. Participants used vague and powerful language to try to get at these elements by saying things like “it’s everything”, “it’s all-consuming of my intention”,

¹²¹ The most appropriate framing for rope bondage, in this sense, is as a type of leisure, which encompasses activity that is freely chosen and intrinsically motivated (Sprott & Williams, 2019). A leisure perspective has been mobilized effectively by Newmahr (2010), Prior and Williams (2015), and Sprott and Williams (2019) to understand the social organization and personal experience of BDSM while allowing it to remain sexual, not sexual, and every iteration in between. This understanding of BDSM provides an overarching framework that allows the pleasure of BDSM to remain diverse, complex, and unintelligible.

“the space after the pain is just glorious”, and “there’s just beautiful violence in my brain”. These quotes and language choices convey something, but that *something* is difficult to clarify.

The concept of unintelligibility (Weiss, 2011) can be helpful when considering the gaze of the outsider (researcher or otherwise) and much of the stigma that rope bondage practitioners experience. However, it is not simply that some people “get it” while others do not, but that a core part of the experience of doing rope seems to be grappling with a feeling, sensation, drive that requires theorizing in order to understand the experience for and within yourself—possibly because normative frameworks of pleasure do not have room for what they feel and want. This was reflected in the depth of explanation and detail most participants had for why they do what they do, what it feels like, and what it does for them. They had metaphors ready at hand, they were prepared with references to academic theories and scientific principles to explain it, and they wanted me to communicate these things to the people who usually do not understand via this dissertation.

In this chapter I will discuss the pleasure of rope bondage from two angles. First, I will focus on how “unintelligibility” is applied to BDSM by Weiss (2011) and how this can aid us in understanding broader frameworks of rope bondage that impact the people who practice it; and, second, I will present how participants theorized their own pleasures and experiences to try to communicate and understand something almost incommunicable and beyond understanding. In fact, I initially intended to focus this chapter on making the unintelligible intelligible by explaining and analyzing rope bondage pleasure. After analysis, though, participants’ experiences were no more

intelligible to me or, sometimes it seemed, even themselves. Writing the unintelligible proved to be an exercise in futility until I made room for how the participants theorize their own experiences.

Unintelligible Desire

Discussions on BDSM encompass an enormously wide range of kinky experiences, desires, and behaviours. As discussed in more depth in Chapter 1, the boundaries of BDSM are hazily defined as behaviour and desire that include one or more of the following elements: bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, and masochism, with many definitions also implicitly including fetish. BDSM includes experiences, behaviour, and desire that challenge normative ideas of what physical, emotional, psychological, and even spiritual connections between people and oneself can look like.

In “Working at Play: BDSM sexuality in the San Francisco Bay Area”, Weiss (2006) draws upon David Valentine’s (2003) assertion that sexuality in the United States is understood in terms of fixed, static identities that are either *heterosexual* or *homosexual*. Valentine and Weiss both argue that desires that fall outside of these “hetero/homo logics of identity” (Weiss, 2006, p. 230), which they refer to as *unintelligible desire*, have received little scholarly attention, and Weiss takes this opportunity to theorize a new logic of understanding sexual desire and behaviour like BDSM, which she terms “working at play”. Weiss argues that thinking about it as “working at play” more accurately captures the fluidity and ever-changing nature of

human sexuality and uses BDSM as a case study to understand a variety of millennial sexualities.

Weiss' introduction of Valentine's focus on unintelligible desire is useful when considering BDSM, but, while Weiss sees this as an opportunity to re-theorize an alternative logic of sexuality, I see it as a tool for understanding the widespread reductionism and stigmatization of BDSM practices. Valentine (2003) argues that sexuality in the United States is characterized by heterosexual and homosexual identities, without overlap; I argue that now, almost twenty years after Valentine's work, the hetero/homosexual distinction is less of a controlling and rigid binary than it may have been in 2003 and earlier. My research and review of relevant literature did not show as strong a divide between hetero/homosexual play; instead, it shows a strong tendency for BDSM researchers to interpret all kinky behaviour as consensually sexual, non-consensually violent, or some combination of the two. Actual accounts of this desire showcase a wide variety of experiences, desires, practices, and motives that defy such interpretations.

If we accept that most academic conceptualizations of BDSM understand kinky behaviour and desire within this sex/violence dichotomy, and we accept the evidence of this dissertation and a subset of BDSM scholarship that these are *not* the only types of BDSM behaviour and desire in existence, then this leads to the conclusion that we may be facing an issue of intelligibility. With this framing, I argue that BDSM desire, pleasure, and experience is so difficult for many to comprehend that attaching it to existing concepts and experiences, like sex and violence (or "work" and "play"), makes it more palatable, comprehensible, visible, and describable. The normal progression of

analytical methods and cultural interest both must require a thing to be *seen* before it can be considered, and it seems that kinky behaviour and desire that are not sex or non-consensual violence often go unseen.

To explain some of the problem of unintelligibility, let us consider a similarly stigmatized and even more seriously criminalized topic: sex work. When I conducted research on clients of sex workers, I regularly encountered people who could fundamentally not comprehend why someone would be a sex worker or be a client of a sex worker, and they would often ask me details to satisfy their curiosity. These questions occupied most of my discussions on the topic with non-academics. To me, this phenomenon showed that people understood that it happens—in that respect, the sex industry was intelligible to them, but they could not relate to and therefore comprehend *why* a person might be voluntarily involved in such. Answering these questions was (and still is) one technique I undertook to combat everyday stigmatization of the sex industry, but it relied on people being able to conceptualize that industry as existing in the first place. In contrast, as I began researching rope bondage subculture and practitioners, I frequently had problems speaking to people about my subject because the *very existence* of this practice as it is actually done was difficult (or impossible) for many to reconcile. When I said “rope” they heard “sex”, and our strange dual conversations were often frustrating and confusing for both of us. When I spoke of rope bondage details in classes the professor might blush, as if I had launched into a detailed explanation of blow job techniques.

The unintelligibility of kinky desire that is not about (normative¹²²) sex is also apparent in some of the few BDSM research articles that share interview questions or other methodological details in their publications¹²³. For example, Cross and Matheson (2006, pp. 160-161) recognized assumptions of sexuality that underlay their methods after the fact, which resulted in this insightful passage:

Subsequent to completion of this research, we were faced with the question of whether or not SM represented sexual behavior for those in our sample. This reflects the larger issue of whether or not SM is about sex, or whether, instead, it can be about the gratification of some other need or needs. ... Our research made the assumption that SM was sexual, springing initially, as it did, from a desire to question the diagnostic entities of sexual sadism and sexual masochism. In retrospect, however, we cannot be sure that all participants shared this implicit definition. Therefore, in collecting information about the number of sex partners and frequency of sexual activity, it may have been the case that some of our SM respondents were not referring to SM partners and SM activity in their answers, but were instead discussing a different set of behaviors conceptually separate from their sadomasochistic experiences. ... Future research should work to clarify

¹²² I add “normative” here to recognize that some kinky people redefine what “sex” means, but that these boundary-pushing behaviours generally do not seem to be the focus of sex-based research. For example, one participant said “rope *is* sex”, but later explained that they do not remove their clothes, involve genitals, or experience orgasm during this “sex”. Instead, it is sex because it involves intimacy, intensity, and a cresting wave of physical and emotional pleasure. Constructing this as “sex” is intriguing, disruptive, and likely not what researchers are intending to examine when they research kinky sex.

¹²³ See Chapter 3 for a more extensive review of this literature.

these issues. For example, it would be essential to obtain insight into participants' own assumptions as to whether SM is sexual for them or not.

Cross and Matheson's (2006) reflections help us see how the issue of thinking that BDSM is not only sexual but is *synonymous with sex* can hamper scholarly inquiry as well as other efforts to represent or understand BDSM. Motives, experiences, and desires that are not sexual or challenge the concept of "sexual" are unseen and unintelligible. Even while much of BDSM research in the 21st century utilizes a participant-centered, destigmatizing approach, it still presents and understands BDSM as primarily a sexual behaviour, to the extent that "sexual" is almost always included in the definition of BDSM and imposed upon participants' accounts without their explicit discussion of such, as in the case above. Cross and Matheson (2006) had the integrity to identify this potential error in their work; the likelihood they were the only scholars to make this mistake is very low.

The presence of non-consensual violence as the binary opposite to BDSM is hinted at in common academic parlance that uses phrases like "consensual, adult BDSM community" (Weiss, 2006, p. 110), "consensual SM practitioners" (Kleinplatz, 2006, p. 326), and "consensual sadomasochistic/dominant-submissive (SMDS) sexual play" (Weille, 2002, p. 131) without explaining why the word "consensual" is there. The implication in this "consensual BDSM" language is that there are, somewhere, practitioners and communities of non-consensual BDSM, which could also be termed criminal behaviour, assault, and violence. This is yet to be proven or argued explicitly, and indeed the more likely scenario is that these authors, experienced in researching and writing about BDSM and receiving backlash, include the word "consensual" to set the

reader at ease and address mainstream assumptions and concerns as to the general consensuality of BDSM practices. Weiss' framing of "consensual, adult" reinforces this impression since there do not appear to be BDSM communities of children. Instead, these scholars may be naming the community with consideration of criminal and violent associations the general public may have with BDSM.

Mobilizing Unintelligible Pleasure

If we apply the concept of "unintelligible desire" in this way, to aid us in understanding the gap between many of the activities rope bondage practitioners report and how they have been interpreted and represented by mostly non-kinky people, it leads us inevitably to the corollary: unintelligible pleasure. Unintelligible pleasure is the pleasure of BDSM play that similarly remains rarely described or understood.

Unintelligible pleasure is one of the theoretical principles around which this research is organized. The idea that some parts of BDSM experience may operate outside of, or challenge, both normative and alternative constructions of sex and kink informed everything from research design to analysis and write-up. It motivated me to ask basic questions when the answer seemed obvious or implied, clarifying how/if participants experienced desire, sexual attraction, and pleasure when choosing and playing with partners (or while playing alone) and what it is like to seek out and enjoy sensations and relationships that may not, strictly, be pleasurable¹²⁴. I was further motivated to ask

¹²⁴ Here I am referring mostly to masochism, where people enjoy or seek out experiences of physical, emotional, and/or psychological pain. Sometimes these are still coded as pleasure: as Serena said, "the pain ... is like recontextualized. It doesn't go away, because the sensation is obviously still there, but it's

probing questions to hear the shape and texture of those experiences, most of which challenge any orgasm-, genital-, or sexual orientation-focused conceptualizations of physical, emotional, and psychological pleasure. This probing revealed to me that my own understanding of rope bondage pleasure was, in fact, not adequate to cover the depth and breadth of experience my participants recounted, even after six years of practicing, talking about, and being around rope and rope bondage practitioners. Instead it showed that almost every single participant had an in-depth and often theorized explanation and description for what they felt in, around, and about rope. Even then, it often felt as if we were talking *around* the experience without being able to discuss it precisely.

How do rope bondage practitioners theorize their own pleasure?

It's art, it's communication, it's all sorts of things. It's a lens and a focus. It's just a wonderful medium for expression that I found for myself. ... It's just infinite in a way that so few things are. – Olivia

Rope bondage can feel like many things, some of which may seem easy to explain. Participants told me about enjoying the adrenaline rush of suspension or pain, enjoying the sense of power exchange while tying, enjoying a sense of comfort and stillness, and more. However, they often had stories that sounded well-practiced and thought out to explain and theorize the mechanisms behind these pleasures. I almost never had to ask follow-up questions because they had a narrative ready to share, full of detail and richness and, often, gravity. For example, as I briefly discussed in Chapter 2,

recontextualized to something that's good." Others do not enjoy the pain in this way but still want it and seek it out—these types of experiences seem even more difficult for non-kinky people to comprehend.

participants talked about things like the nature of time itself and how rope bondage can give a “time dilation effect”; they talked about “headspaces” at length, like subspace and topspace, including words and concepts drawn from psychology and neuroscience; they talked about the intricacies of human connection and sexuality, sometimes exploring the philosophical depths of what sex really is and what connection with another human being can mean. After reviewing and analyzing the data on pleasure many times, I believe that this may be because it is so difficult to simply describe and understand the experience, and it requires a great deal of work and thinking to process and make personally intelligible.

For example, this is Angel’s explanation of what rope means to her as a rope bottom:

I become one with the rope. There’s something about it ... I can get into that pain of the rope, and I can lose myself in it. ... You know, because then I’m... the pain is just there and it’s always there. And as far as my mind is concerned, it’s never going to go away. So I can really hyper-focus on that and lose myself. And so that to me just releases many endorphins and the adrenaline, you know. And it’s just, yeah, I literally... I just literally and figuratively fly when I’m in rope

Later, Angel expanded on this to add:

I just kind of lose contact with reality. You know, I’m not asleep. I can respond if somebody’s checking in on me. ... But I’m not aware of what all’s going on around me other than what... the only thing I’m really aware of is the rope. I feel

the rope, I feel the tightness, I feel it cutting into my skin. I feel the pressure. ...
So it's euphoric.

In order to process and explain rope, Angel talks about reality, euphoria, pain, and the functions of her mind (hyper-focusing), drawing on everything from physical to emotional and intellectual experiences that happen in the moment. These excerpts are part of a much longer explanation that included further examples, details, and stories to really explain what she meant.

Ewok offered a perspective from the other side of the rope when he explained to me part of why he likes to tie people. He went into detail about the mental state that he imagines that rope bottoms reach.

At some point, the only thing that matters, the only thing that is going through the person's mind, is what is happening then, they're no longer worried about their thesis, they're no longer worried about their kids, they're no longer worried about their work or money or so on and so forth, it's like, I'm here and *totally* there.
They're not anywhere else.

Ewok shows here that he conceptualizes not only his experience, but the experiences of the people he ties, and in more depth than just believing that they must find it fun. Some of the pleasure of rope bondage for him is derived from being a part of this process and he evidently has a theory about what is happening for those people.

HW, who is primarily a rope top but bottoms occasionally, provided an even more complex conceptualization of the experience of rope.

To be tied in a scene can be paradoxically freeing. ... the physical act of it can almost enforce a time-out and can quiet the mind. ... It can be very restorative and relaxing and feel safe. And also like, on the flip side of the coin, it can be an intensely erotic tool for the expression of power. It can also be somewhat dangerous physically, but especially psychologically and emotionally. Because most of us in our daily lives don't encounter a situation where we are physically restrained unless we are in trouble with law enforcement, right. So that kind of vulnerability is not something that most of us are used to. ... Emotions can come up that we wouldn't expect.

HW's understanding of rope and the pleasure of rope is bound up in a complicated web of sensations, feelings, emotions, and risks. Further, his description of one side of rope—as “an intensely erotic tool for the expression of power”—almost precisely mirrors Foucault's (1997:169) conceptualization of BDSM as “the eroticization of power”. This would have been intriguing whether or not HW was specifically drawing from or influenced by Foucault, but when I asked about this later, he told me that he is not familiar with Foucault's work on BDSM or otherwise; his theoretical framing of rope as an erotic tool for the expression of power is his own. An additional element to consider here is that where Foucault felt that this concept summed up BDSM entirely, HW identifies it as only one side of the coin¹²⁵.

¹²⁵ I agree with HW here more than Foucault. The “flip side” of the eroticization of power is the side of BDSM that is almost never the subject of academic inquiry.

One of the elements that HW mentions ran through most conversations and accounts of pleasure: the joy and desirability of not having to think. Explanations of enjoying stillness included personal psychological evaluations, sometimes contextualizing it with diagnoses of mental illness or trauma, and reflections on their lifestyles, explaining for themselves and for me why having a chance to be still was so meaningful. This was reported by rope bottoms and self-tiers (people who are in the rope, as opposed to people who only tie it) as well as rope tops who, like above, theorized their partners' experience. As G said of tying themselves: "it is all consuming of my intention. ... I'm just focused on me and taking care of me and doing this thing for me. And it's really nice and invigorating in that sense." Later, when speaking about rope bottoming, they reflected:

I like not having to think. You know, when I get to bottom, the only thing I have to think about is like does this hurt or not? Am I doing okay in this tie or not? And if everything's good, then it's good. ... So being a rope bottom is just being able to enjoy my body being pushed with limits and just focusing again on me.

Chen suggested that part of this state of unthinkingness, and part of its pleasure, is the sensation of trusting another person enough to give them control of your wellbeing or self.

I feel like psychologically it is something that allows me to relieve myself. It's something that allows me to just throw away all the burdens and responsibility I have in everyday life, and enjoy that moment where I know that I am in a hand that I can trust.

Serena felt similarly and explained it as “whatever things are stressing you out, they sort of just... don’t bother you anymore because nothing really bothers you anymore.” For Bird, the quietness of her brain was an almost transcendental experience, and very important to her. She said:

Rope is the most grounding of all the [BDSM] activities, it feels like when I’m in it as a bottom, I’m wrapped up and my mind goes quiet and I can just feel my body really really well, and I’m just very in touch with it. And I’m picking up on what the top is giving me, and trying to give it back. And it’s very small and very...very physical. And it’s so quiet.

This function of rope bondage—an opportunity to not think, to stop your mind, to feel cognitive peace and escape the stressors of life—is fascinating and supports the findings of academic experiments that have shown BDSM to be a stress-reducing activity (Sagarin, Lee, & Klement, 2015; Pliskin, 2018). These accounts also tended to overlap with explanations of rope bondage like meditation or as a grounding experience; like Olivia described, rope bondage can be “a sort of centered physical experience and just making me comfortable in my skin in a way that extreme events and athletic endeavors used to be my gateway.” Serena seemed conscious of potential stigmatization or medicalization of this experience and made sure to tell me: “I don’t want to say it feels like dissociation, because that’s a negative thing. It feels like... like a profound state of relaxation.”

Participants also often theorized the connection that they can find with other people in rope. Denis explained this as:

One of the things that I love the most about rope is it is the quickest way I know of to get to know somebody. Sounds weird, but the amount of trust required to do something, and the amount of touching that happens while you're doing something, will get you really close with that person.

Bird told me:

When I'm participating in rope, and rope bondage, I like to feel like I'm in the moment with that person. And the rope is kind of like a starter to get me there. ... It's kind of like a line of connection between two people. So when I'm being tied and when I'm being suspended, I feel more vulnerable and more open to express or feel the feelings that I wouldn't feel on a day to day basis. So deeper loving, and deeper compassion, or deeper sadness if that may be it. And it kind of just like opens a door, I guess, to having permission to express those feelings and to feel those feelings, and it's not something that I'm able to do every day. So like, rope for me is just, it's a way to have that.

Here we can see how rope bondage practitioners theorize rope as a metaphor, tool, bridge, or stand-in for trust, connection, and even the self. Using rope this way allows some rope bondage practitioners to access and express emotions that they normally would not and connect with a person in a way that can circumvent normal social interactions. Tara spoke of this theme of rope as communication in depth during her interview, providing details that seem to help understand the theorizing above:

it's like if you love the person then you want to say that you love them with the rope. It could be any emotion. But it's about taking that emotion and bringing it

into a physicality. ... And still like, you could be saying anything. You could say fuck you, you could say... like a lot of the time my rope is very playful and it's on that level. It's just cheeky and I like you and, you know, I want to make you suffer. But ha-ha, look at you! And like, I don't know. It's cute and playful. ... Like if you have a friend and you love laughing with that friend, then you're communicating that you love laughing with that person when you're tying them. ... I'm using rope as an extension of myself to connect with the person that I care about and to show them the ways that I feel about them. It's... and I can't do that if I'm speaking someone else's words.

In the last sentence, Tara is speaking about rope styles and why she prefers not to precisely follow other people's tying styles. As Tara theorizes it, rope can be better understood as a language than as a tool, and the choices, actions, movements one makes with it, within it, and around it communicate meaning to a tying partner. Gabrielle reflected this perspective as well, saying "I like rope that has the conversation, back and forth between the rigger and the bottom. ... I really don't have any interest in doing rope if there's not at least a little bit of connection, a little bit of feelings communicated."

For Ivan Delacroix, it was very important to understand that "rope becoming an extension of yourself" is more than a metaphor:

Once you get to the touching of the rope, then you start to experience how people interact with this purposefully inanimate object, what sort of atmosphere or sometimes even reverence someone might bring to it. And at that point you start to look at, you know, are they sitting there talking about the rope being an extension of the person or is it actually an extension of their person. And then to

what degree? Because, you know, my level, frankly put, pales in comparison to the people I look up to.

Ivan made it very clear throughout our interview that the dynamics of rope and rope play are *real*, and unique in comparison to other physical, psychological, and emotional experiences. Their treatment of rope was ritualistic in many ways, and they were one of the only rope bondage practitioners to identify themselves as theorists of their own experiences of rope. Ivan attributed their attraction to rope in part to the fact that rope is a deep enough experience to give room for theorizing; they explained it thus:

If I'm going to spend my time in something, it needs to be something deep and potentially profound. If I can see the bottom to something or if something's already supremely defined and you can already see the bottom to it, you can see its extent. And that... puddles are only so exciting to people that haven't seen the ocean, right?

Reconciling Self-Theory and Unintelligibility

The experiences of rope bondage practitioners show that, for many people, engaging deeply with their own practice is a necessary part of what they do. This may be a result of life-long socialization (see Jenks, 2015) that does not make room for pleasures like these. The frequency of participants' own theorizing in this data suggests that reflecting on one's experience and the reasons behind it are a core part of being a rope bondage practitioner, at least for these participants, and aptly showcase one of the main issues with the unintelligibility of rope bondage. If participants each need to individually reckon with themselves and their practice in order to understand it, there yet remains an

element to rope play that is difficult or impossible to define in simple and universal terms; if this is the case, the pleasure of rope bondage (and BDSM generally) may never be completely intelligible to people who do not practice rope, and so efforts to understand it must be centered on listening to the people who do.

Conclusion

Rope bondage subculture is a lively, rich social world composed of a diverse array of people with differing experiences, needs, strengths, and social locations. For the people interviewed for this dissertation, their experiences with personal and private rope were integrally linked to and interwoven with their social interactions and experiences in rope bondage subculture. Rope subculture defines what is and is not rope bondage, what relationships should look like, who normatively *does* rope, and even how a person can understand and explain their internal rope life; rope bondage subculture also marginalizes disabled and racialized people, and potentially more. Common threads in narratives of experiences like headspace and semi-public management of consent violations, often across borders, showed that subcultural discourses of even amorphous experiences and concepts contribute to peoples' own understandings of themselves, their passions, and their pleasures. They explained to me that rope as both a material and a concept is a tool, a symbol, a conduit, a connector, and an anchor, and how aspects of this subculture reproduce broader social inequalities.

Some of these discussions coalesce around "community". Community was described by participants in sometimes literal and geospatial terms and at other times as a word to denote belonging, mutual support, and shared values regardless of physical location. Community was both a thing ("the community") and a feeling ("finding community"), a place ("joined the community") and a project ("building community"). Participants linked community and subculture both to physical events and spaces, identifying rope events as a crucial site where norms and etiquette are

constructed/resisted/reinforced and a place to refresh feelings of social connection. Events were also framed as important spaces to pursue personal rope bondage goals by being a place to learn, develop skills, and meet potential tying partners to practice, connect, and play with. Being unwelcome or uncomfortable in those spaces frequently led to alienation from community, rope, and sometimes even their own passions.

The findings of this research indicate that this subculture is also characterized by oppressive power dynamics experienced by disabled and racialized rope bondage practitioners. These participants related stories of microaggressions and discrimination within rope bondage subculture and can be further understood in the context of Goffman's (1963) stigma and social identity. Disabled rope bondage practitioners commonly experience microaggressions and ableism, from being excluded from inaccessible spaces to being infantilized, constructed as "inspiration porn", objectified, and having scene norms violated when their disabilities are visible. Still, they also shared stories of positively interacting with their bodies and disabilities through rope, finding love, connection, and community among like-minded peers, and pursuing healing and self-love within their rope practice.

Similarly, racialized rope bondage practitioners reported experiences of both overt and covert racism that included hyper-sexualization, a denial of personal identity beyond race, and general exclusion and marginalization. hooks' (1992) discussions of the power and resistance potential of imagery provides a framework to consider the resistance that some of these practitioners engage in when they work to embody the representation they wish they could see in rope bondage spaces. Some of these participants identified areas where they fight for space to feel pleasure, power, and belonging, primarily with other

marginalized people among whom they can construct alternate and safer spaces to enjoy rope and community.

Further, this work supports the value of utilizing “unintelligibility” as a lens to understand the marginal status of BDSM and rope bondage pleasure in both academia and wider society. I argue that in some ways, the unintelligibility of rope bondage pleasure is a part of the experience for practitioners themselves, and thus many undergo their own theorizing in order to make sense of what they feel and desire. These accounts highlight the nebulous and fluid nature of rope bondage experience. Participants intricately dance with reality as their senses of time, the self, connection, and their bodies evolve and play through their experiences in and with rope. These stories are visceral, intellectual, analytical, and compelling. Doing rope bondage can mean experiencing pleasure that disrupts normative understandings of how we define and conceptualize pleasure.

Messages from the Other Side

As a part of this disruption, my participants shared messages for the readers of this dissertation. Most of these messages focus on combatting stigma and making the world of BDSM a safer place. This dissertation was written in my voice and with my lens; here I present some of the words rope bondage practitioners themselves want you to hear. Denis said:

Academia is where it starts. We need studies to actually realize why it happens, then we can make our argument that it is not criminal, we can make the argument that it is healthy. And once we can make *that* argument, once we can make that

safe BDSM, consensual BDSM practices is *healthy*, for the people who practice it, *then* we can address the issue of the predators and the people who are causing the issues. Because they hide in this culture, because it's easy for them to hide in this culture. And it shouldn't be easy.

Rope bondage subculture is a diverse, complicated, and multi-faceted social space—and, like Denis explains above, some of its parts are badly impacted by the stigmatization of BDSM. Denis supported this research because he strongly felt that education and exposure would help combat the stigmatization of kink; being less stigmatized would lead to opportunities for communities to grow, improve, and protect one another better. If predators hide in the shadows, Denis told me, “we need to bring the culture into the light”. Cora also spoke against stigma and in favour of wider acceptance—not just for rope, but everyone.

I would like the world as a whole to be more open-minded, and to try new things, to experience different things. So that's not just rope. It goes beyond rope. It goes beyond kink. It goes beyond gender. It goes beyond religion. It goes beyond who we are as human beings. So I mean I think if we can have a more open, accepting world, it would be good for everybody.

Robin told me:

I wish they knew that it wasn't always heteronormative. That it's not always straight men tying up straight women. That it's not about oppression, it's not about men being in control. That queer people do rope, and that I'm not brainwashed by the patriarchy to like this.

Stereotypes of rope bondage are a part of this stigma, and were addressed more specifically by some participants, like Olivia, who said: “I wish more people knew that it’s a tool for self-expression.” Ewok wanted people to know that “it can a) be non-sexual, and b) it can actually be really beautiful. If you ever look at the photos that people take, they’re epic.” Adam echoes Ewok’s first point by saying:

Just that it’s not... perverse, in a way. It’s not always sexual, it’s not always degrading, or humiliating, it’s something that can be beautiful, affirming, and a source of joy for the participants. And like ... everyone can *be* tied up. Everyone who wants to be. There’s physical limitations, but there’s no physical impossibilities.

Adrien had a perspective counter to Adam’s in content, but similar in purpose: “What I wish people knew about rope people is that it’s not as weird as you think it is. Sometimes it *is* as weird as you think it is and that’s also okay.”

The issue of pathologization and mental illness stigma arose for many of the participants as well. Ivan Delacroix said “don’t consider us to be just crazy people. That would be the best. That’s definitely something that I want to get across.” Stephanie similarly shared a desire for people to know that BDSM does not have to be linked to criminality or mental illness in a pathologizing way, “in a way that’s like, oh well, they’re crazy and that’s why they like that thing.” When I asked Adam if he had any hopes for the outcome of my research, he told me:

If one person reads this and it gives them a better understanding of why people do it ... it might help in not pathologizing the enjoyment of rope bondage. It might

help in figuring out, you know, what's healthy patterns and what's abusive patterns in rope bondage.

When I asked Rebecca what she might want me to do with this research, she told me to “share with the world!” because rope is fun, something many people might like to try, and is less threatening than some other types of BDSM.

Opportunities for the Future

Now that the lay of the rope bondage land has been established, we are better able to explore the many intriguing facets of rope bondage subculture and practice. Some such research questions would not have made sense without this context; for example, it would be difficult to explore how rope bondage practitioners make meaning of rope photography and imagery without first having a touchstone to explain the social landscape within which they are taken, produced, and viewed. Similarly, examinations of the fascinating breadth and scale of global rope bondage education would be incomplete without explaining the social and personal investments that drive this underground system.

With this research, I particularly seek to inspire kink scholars to consider diverse research questions beyond a focus on (relatively) normative sex and mobilize research methods that are cognizant of the diversity of BDSM subculture and wide range of interpretations of what “sex” can actually mean. This could involve reconsidering how sampling is conducted and investing effort into securing diverse samples. For example, the overwhelming whiteness of BDSM research may result in actual harm by over-emphasizing an already existing racial imbalance and further marginalizing kinksters of

colour. This is a particular risk for those who find and read BDSM research themselves and are aware of their systematic exclusion from this literature. Further, qualitative researchers may benefit from learning about kink community ethics and how these populations' conceptualizations of consent and aftercare could improve research with human subjects.

This work represents an effort to sketch the shape of an intense, visceral, social, and personal experience and to examine the construction of an underground subculture. Being a rope bondage practitioner is characterized by experiences and theories of pleasure, community, conflict, connection, and experiences of marginalization in a complex interplay of social and personal life. As some of my participants were so clear to convey: *rope is everything*.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Consent Form

Informed Consent Form #1

(Applicable date)

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled *Exploring Rope Bondage*. The purpose of this study is to investigate how people experience rope bondage, what role it plays in their lives, and how they feel about rope bondage community and subculture. This study is being conducted by Zoey Jones (sole researcher) in partial fulfillment of her PhD in Criminology at Carleton University, who can be reached by email at zoey.jones@carleton.ca. The research supervisor is Dr. Ummni Khan, who is available by email at ummni.khan@carleton.ca if any questions or concerns arise.

The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals experience rope bondage personally and as a part of a group. This may involve discussing motivation, visceral experiences, personal drives, and desire, along with discussions of how you conceptualize, understand, and experience community (or lack thereof) within the context of rope bondage. My goal is to improve the existing state of the literature on rope bondage and infuse academia with more accurate, nuanced, destigmatizing, and diverse discussions and representations of the people who practice rope bondage.

By participating in this research project, you agree to engage in an interview led by me, Zoey Jones. These interviews will be semi-structured; they will center on the themes mentioned in the previous paragraph, and may also follow different lines of conversation if they appear in your responses. You are not required to answer any question that you do not want to, and you may leave at any time.

Anonymity will be respected throughout this study. Pseudonyms will be used that do not reflect your existing pseudonyms. The information gathered from your participation will be utilized for my research, but neither your legal name nor community name(s) will be disclosed to any others during or after the course of this research. Furthermore, only my supervisor and I will have access to the recordings taken during the interviews; only my supervisor and committee members will have access to transcripts of interviews and notes taken.

As a voluntary participant in this study, you have the right to withdraw at any time up to the point of publication of this work in a journal, dissertation, book, blog, or article. Withdrawing from the study will mean that some or all of your data will be destroyed (based on your preferences). After publication, if you choose to withdraw from the study, any data not already published will be destroyed. At all times your anonymity and comfort will be prioritized over the study itself.

The information collected during the course of this research project will be encrypted and stored on a password-protected computer and a password-protect hard-drive; any physical documents will be stored in a locked cabinet. No cloud based storage devices will be used. This data may be used in the future for related projects pertaining to rope bondage and/or BDSM practitioners, which may include journal articles, blogs, the dissertation, books, conference presentations, and speaking engagements. This data will only be used in future projects that reflect the goal of this project as stated above.

Due to the nature of this research project and the activities being discussed, I am asking participants to record and reveal intimate information that may be considered private. There are potential psychological risks to this area of questioning. To account for these risks, participants can stop at any time; furthermore, I will provide you with information on local support services that will be available for support in case of distress. Participants are not required to reveal any information that requires them to bring up painful memories or feel uncomfortable.

This research project was reviewed by the Carleton Research Ethics Board and has received ethics clearance (REB #_____) until (date). If you have any questions or concerns about the board's involvement please feel free to contact _____.

Research Ethics Board

Carleton University Research Office

1125 Colonel By Drive

Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6

Tel: 613-520-2517 E-mail: ethics@carleton.ca

By signing this document, I confirm I have read and understood the above information. I give my consent to participate in the research project as stated above.

Signature of participant: _____

Signature of Researcher:

Date: _____

Appendix B: Observation Consent Form

Informed Consent Form #2

(Applicable date)

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled *Exploring Rope Bondage*. The purpose of this study is to investigate how people experience rope bondage, what role it plays in their lives, and how they feel about rope bondage community and subculture. This study is being conducted by Zoey Jones (sole researcher) in partial fulfillment of her PhD in Criminology at Carleton University, who can be reached by email at zoey.jones@carleton.ca. The research supervisor is Dr. Ummni Khan, who is available by email at ummni.khan@carleton.ca if any questions or concerns arise.

The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals experience rope bondage personally and as a part of a group. This may involve discussing motivation, visceral experiences, personal drives, and desire, along with discussions of how you conceptualize, understand, and experience community (or lack thereof) within the context of rope bondage. This may also include a description and/or explanation of your rope bondage practice and how it felt for you. My goal is to improve the existing state of the literature on rope bondage and infuse academia with more accurate, nuanced, destigmatizing, and diverse discussions and representations of the people who practice rope bondage.

By participating in this research project, you agree to invite the researcher, Zoey Jones, to observe your rope bondage practice in private, which may include any role involved in practicing, supervising, or acting as a 'spotter' or safety person for another/others practicing rope bondage. This invitation may be revoked if at any point you no longer wish to participate. This participation will only occur with the full, enthusiastic, and ongoing consent of all involved. This consent form indicates awareness of the research project itself, but consent may be revoked at any time. Any participant may end or leave the observation session at any time.

Your involvement in this research project may involve informal conversations before, during, and/or after your rope bondage practice. No aspect of this interaction will be audio recorded, video recorded, or photographed by the researcher. The researcher may take notes and sketch details during the session to support her recollection of the events.

Anonymity will be respected throughout this study. Pseudonyms will be used that do not reflect your existing pseudonyms. The information gathered from your participation will be utilized for my research, but neither your legal name nor community name(s) will be disclosed to any others during or after the course of this research. Furthermore, only my supervisor, committee, and I will have access to notes taken during this observation session.

As a voluntary participant in this study, you have the right to withdraw at any time up to the point of publication of this work in a journal, dissertation, book, blog, or article. Withdrawing from the study will mean that some or all of your data will be destroyed (based on your preferences). After publication, if you choose to withdraw from the study, any data not already published will be destroyed. At all times your anonymity and comfort will be prioritized over the study itself.

The information collected during the course of this research project will be encrypted and stored on a password-protected computer and a password-protect hard-drive; any physical documents will be stored in a locked cabinet. No cloud based storage devices will be used. This data may be used in the future for related projects pertaining to rope bondage and/or BDSM practitioners, which may include journal articles, blogs, the dissertation, books, conference presentations, and speaking engagements. This data will only be used in future projects that reflect the goal of this project as stated above.

Due to the nature of this research project and the activities being discussed, I am asking participants to reveal intimate information that may be considered private. There are potential psychological risks to this area of questioning. To account for these risks, participants can stop at any time; furthermore, I will provide you with information on local support services that will be available for support in case of distress. Participants are not required to reveal any information that requires them to bring up painful memories or feel uncomfortable.

In addition, due to the nature of rope bondage itself, there are potential physical risks involved in participation in this project. In order to mitigate these risks, the researcher will not request or encourage any particular activity during your rope bondage practice. Further, the participant(s) in each observation session will be required to assign one person the role of spotter or safety person. This may be the “rope top”, “rope bottom”, or, in the case of a person practicing solo rope bondage, must be a second person who will watch and intervene in case of physical emergency. The researcher herself will be supplied with safety tools (including a first aid kit and a cutting tool) and will intervene in

the rope bondage in the case of emergency that is not being managed by the safety person/spotter.

Further, by signing this consent form, you indicate that you are aware that the researcher may need to call for medical assistance in the case of physical injury or peril. In this case anonymity may be compromised.

This research project was reviewed by the Carleton Research Ethics Board and has received ethics clearance (REB # _____) until (date). If you have any questions or concerns about the board's involvement please feel free to contact _____.

Research Ethics Board

Carleton University Research Office

1125 Colonel By Drive

Ottawa, Ontario K1S 5B6

Tel: 613-520-2517 E-mail: ethics@carleton.ca

By signing this document, I confirm I have read and understood the above information. I give my consent to participate in the research project as stated above.

Signature of participant: _____

Signature of Researcher:

Date: _____

Appendix C: Safety Protocol for Observation Sessions

Item 7J: Risk of Physical Harm from Research Ethics Protocol Form (approved)

There will be no risk of physical harm to Group 1 [local] and Group 2 [non-local] participants during the interviews.

There will be minor risk of physical harm during the observational research sessions.

These will not be the result of the research itself, but the rope bondage practice, which involves physical activity and can result in injury. This will be mitigated in a variety of ways:

1. In groups of 2 or more, at least one person is always designated the “rope top.”
The rope top is responsible for the physical safety of both (or more) players, and will be responsible for having safety gear (ex. safety shears) on site. The consent form and planning for observational research will include a discussion of these safety practices to ensure that the “rope top” or someone else involved in the rope bondage is adequately prepared to handle any physical emergencies.
2. In cases where a single person is practicing rope bondage, the research will require them to include a “spotter/safety person” who will have the same responsibilities as the “rope top” described above. This is the norm for this type of rope bondage practice and will not be difficult to achieve. The spotter/safety person will also sign Consent Form #2.
3. All participants will be aware that in the event of an injury or accident, the researcher will intervene if the safety person is not adequately handling the situation. The researcher will also keep safety tools (i.e. a first aid kit and cutting

tool) with her. In addition, the researcher will explain that in the event of serious injury or emergency, she will call for medical assistance, which will violate the confidentiality of the session.

Note: In the researcher's personal experiences (3 years practicing rope bondage and attending events/groups), she has not seen a serious injury or accident occur.

It is extremely unlikely that this will happen during the course of research, but all methods will be taken to ensure that any incident is responded to appropriately.

The researcher will only conduct observational research with individuals with whom she has a pre-existing relationship of trust. Due to this, the researcher will not be at risk of physical harm during data collection.

Appendix D: Certificate of REB Clearance

CERTIFICATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ETHICS CLEARANCE

The Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (CUREB-A) has granted ethics clearance for the research project described below and research may now proceed. CUREB-A is constituted and operates in compliance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2).

Ethics Protocol Clearance ID: Project # 108608

Project Team Members: Ms. Zoey Jones (Primary Investigator)

Ummni Khan (Research Supervisor)

Project Title: [FULL BOARD] Exploring Rope Bondage: Experiences of Practice and Community [Jones]

Funding Source (If applicable):

Effective: **March 13, 2018**
2019.

Expires: **March 31,**

Restrictions:

This certification is subject to the following conditions:

1. Clearance is granted only for the research and purposes described in the application.
2. Any modification to the approved research must be submitted to CUREB-A via a Change to Protocol Form. All changes must be cleared prior to the continuance of the research.
3. An Annual Status Report for the renewal of ethics clearance must be submitted and cleared by the renewal date listed above. Failure to submit the Annual Status Report will result in the closure of the file. If funding is associated, funds will be frozen.
4. A closure request must be sent to CUREB-A when the research is complete or terminated.
5. Should any participant suffer adversely from their participation in the project you are required to report the matter to CUREB-A.

Failure to conduct the research in accordance with the principles of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans 2nd edition* and the *Carleton University Policies and Procedures for the Ethical Conduct of Research* may result in the suspension or termination of the research project.

Upon reasonable request, it is the policy of CUREB, for cleared protocols, to release the name of the PI, the title of the project, and the date of clearance and any renewal(s).

Please contact the Research Compliance Coordinators, at ethics@carleton.ca, if you have any questions or require a clearance certificate with a signature.

**CLEARED BY:
2018**

Date: March 13,

Andy Adler, PhD, Chair, CUREB-A

Bernadette Campbell, PhD, Vice-Chair, CUREB-A

Appendix E: Interview Schedule (version 2)

Interview Schedule

[Demographics sheet after consent form]

Topic: General information about rope and the participant

1. For you, what does “rope bondage” mean?
 - a. How do you think other people define it?
2. Could you describe for me what sort of role rope plays in your life?
3. Are you otherwise involved in BDSM (ex. power exchange, sadomasochistic play, etc.)?
4. Could you tell me about your journey in rope?

If relevant to above answers, i.e. if they recount other people being involved

5. How do you find other people who do rope?
 - a. How do you communicate with them?

Topic: Relationships

6. Do you ever do rope bondage with other people?
 - a. *If yes*: Could you describe some of those relationships for me?
 - i. What do they mean to you?
 - ii. What sort of role do these people play in your life?
 - b. *If no*: Do you practice rope bondage alone?
 - i. *If yes*: Could you describe that for me?
 1. What does self bondage (choose word participant has been using) mean to you?

Topic: Sexuality

7. Do you think that rope is sexual in nature?
 - a. For you?
 - b. For others?
 - i. How?

Topic: Education, skill sharing, and risk

8. How have you learned about rope? (Prompts: Skills, techniques, bottoming – encourage to talk about both ‘hard’ skills such as knots and harnesses, and ‘soft’ skills such as negotiation and body awareness)
9. Do you feel you know everything you want to in rope?
 - a. *If not*: What else would you like to learn?
 - i. How?
 - ii. Why?

Topic: Community and subculture

10. Do you feel like there is a rope bondage community or subculture?
 - a. *If yes*: Could you describe it for me?
 - i. Are you a part of it?
 - b. *If no*: How do you feel about that?

Other optional areas of inquiry, if relevant to conversation:

If they mention rope conventions, classes, dungeons, practices, etc.:

11. How do you feel about rope bondage spaces?
12. Could you describe some for me?
13. What are your favourite rope bondage spaces like?
14. What are your least favourite like?

If they bring up consent violations in the rope bondage community:

15. Have you ever been to/heard about spaces or events that have consent violation policies?
 - a. *If yes*: Could you describe them for me?
 - i. How do you feel about them?
 - ii. *If relevant*: Have you been involved in any of these processes?
 - iii. *If yes*: How?
 - b. *If yes*: Do they affect how you do rope in those spaces (or out of them?)

Final topic: Research directions, participant goals and desires for outcomes

16. What do you want the outcome of this research to be?
17. Do you have goals or desires for how the public views rope bondage practitioners?
18. Do you have any concerns about criminalization and rope?
19. Is there anything that you think the community needs?