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## Power and subjectivity: Making sense of sexual consent among adults living in Sweden

Ida Linander <sup>a</sup>, Isabel Goicolea <sup>a</sup>, Maria Wiklund <sup>b</sup>, Anne Gotfredsen <sup>a</sup>  
and Maria Strömbäck <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Epidemiology and Global Health, Umeå University, Sweden; <sup>b</sup>Department of Community Medicine and Rehabilitation, Umeå University, Umeå, Sweden

### ABSTRACT

While sexual consent has been a hot topic during recent years in the Swedish context, there is a lack of empirical studies on the issue. The aims of this study were to analyse how adults in Sweden experience and make sense of sexual (non)consent in sexual encounters, and to contribute to a conceptual discussion of ‘sexual consent’, especially in relation to a Foucauldian understanding of power and subjectivity. The analysis is based on 31 interviews with adults living in Sweden. Participants describe consenting to sex due to being exposed to interpersonal forms of power, ranging from violence and clear violations of consent to nagging and being subjected to pressure from others. But they also feel pressure and give consent to sex based on self-regulation and disciplinary forms of power, connected to normative ideals about ‘the good relationship’, monogamy and heterosexuality, men and women, and age. Our Foucauldian analytical lens allowed us to explore and challenge understandings of autonomous, rational subjects who communicate consent on the basis of authentic feelings. It also provided an analytical strategy for analysing and understanding the complex power relations that matter in the negotiation of sexual consent.



### KEYWORDS

*sexual consent; gender; subjectivities; Foucault; sexual violence*

## Introduction

In 2018, in the wake of the #metoo movement, and after persistent efforts by non-governmental feminist organizations, Sweden introduced a new sexual offences law (Proposition, 2017/18:177), which focuses on ‘affirmative consent’. Despite this promising development, authors such as Beres (2007), Bindsbøl Holm Johansen et al. (2019), and Muehlenhard et al. (2016) argue that affirmative consent laws, or shifting the focus from ‘no means no’ to ‘yes means yes’, might not fully address all the complexities involved in sexual consent. Instead, they argue that there is a need to consider the role of power and gendered discourses in shaping consent, and the importance of moving beyond simplistic or binary models of consent in order to capture aspects of ambivalence and uncertainty. However, ‘ambivalence’ and ‘uncertainty’ have often been discussed in the consent literature without any connection to broader theoretical discussions about, for example, power or subjectivity.

In this paper, we aim to explore how adults in Sweden experience and make sense of sexual consent. Two research questions guide the analysis and are used to structure the findings. Firstly, we explore why people consent to sex in specific situations. Here, we are especially interested in situations where people have sex even though they lack the willingness or desire to do so, and how such processes connect to a Foucauldian understanding of different forms of ‘power’ (Foucault,

**CONTACT** Ida Linander  [ida.linander@umu.se](mailto:ida.linander@umu.se)  Department of Epidemiology and Global Health, Umeå University, SE-901 87, Umeå, Sweden

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1978, 1982). This means that we will empirically explore how different forms of power produce consent in specific situations; and try to understand how consent is linked to social identities, expectations, and norms (see also Beres, 2007; Gavey, 2013). The second research question concerns how the process and communication of consent can be understood. In this part, we draw upon Foucault's understanding of 'subjectivity' (Foucault, 1978, 1982; Mansfield, 2000; Oksala, 2011), which can add to the consent literature by problematizing and questioning the understanding of consent as an entirely rational process during which subjects act and communicate based on their authentic willingness or desire.

### **Conceptual framing of sexual consent**

The concept of 'sexual consent' has various usages and definitions. However, based on both conceptualizations in previous research and lay understandings, it is often considered to be an agreement to engage in sexual activity (Beres, 2007; Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Within the research community, there is disagreement about the conditions under which an 'agreement' must be reached in order to be regarded as consent. According to many researchers, in order to be valid, consent must be freely given; hence, given without coercion or threat (Beres, 2007). Hickman and Muehlenhard (1999), for example, define consent as the 'free verbal or nonverbal communication of a feeling of willingness' (p. 3) to engage in sexual activity. When power is exercised interpersonally, for example in terms of coercion or threat from one party, most people will consider that there is no consent, even if the victim in that case does say 'yes' (Beres, 2007). When power is expressed through norms or societal discourses, the 'pressure' can be less clear; hence, the concept of 'free consent' can be problematized.

Consent, and the connected issues of gendered power relations and sexual violence, can be understood from different feminist perspectives. From a liberal perspective, for example, legal issues have been important, and researchers have examined and scrutinized how legal systems respond (or do not respond) to sexual violence and how the rights of women are enacted. From another perspective, radical feminist researchers have argued that women can never freely consent to sexual acts with men in a patriarchal society (see, for example, MacKinnon, 1989). Hence, they argue, the power relations between men and women are inescapable and will unconditionally affect the consent. Radical feminist positions often emphasize a top-down understanding of power or, in other words, men's *power over* women, which can be traced to a structuralist or Marxist understanding of power. Within such frameworks, consent violations and sexual violence are often understood as expressions of the patriarchy asserting power and control. However, conclusions about the impossibility of free consent can also be drawn from post-structural and/or Foucauldian feminist thinking on sexual consent and sexual violence, but for very different reasons. Foucault questioned ideas about a pre-discursive authentic self (Mansfield, 2000; Oksala, 2011). This means that 'free consent' and, more broadly, our possible fields of action, will always be saturated with normative ideas and power relations.

West (2002) argues that, when young people have sex because everyone else is doing it, or married couples are having sex for the sake of their marriage, there can be 'coercion' that is societal and not interpersonal. Such sexual encounters might be consensual but nevertheless harmful and important to explore (West, 2002). Thinking with Foucault (1982, 1978), we can understand that there is both what we will call 'absolute power' (for example, expressed as interpersonal pressure), connected to a form of sovereign power, and also a kind of disciplinary power that is more dispersed, relational, and connected to social norms. According to a Foucauldian understanding of disciplinary power, it is not a property that some people possess or control and that in a causal way hinders the actions of others. Rather, power is productive in the sense that it produces subjectivities and opens up some fields of action, while shutting down others (Foucault, 1978, 1982). Hence, subjectivity becomes central in Foucault's understanding of power. It is not, as mentioned above, an expression of an inner truth but an effect of power that leads us to think about

ourselves in particular ways (Mansfield, 2000; Oksala, 2011). Power forms the boundaries of what is intelligible in particular situations, and disciplinary power contributes to social norms becoming internalized by the subject, often in terms of ‘good behaviour’ or as being ‘for one’s own good’, and thus we police and regulate ourselves according to such standards (Foucault, 1978, 1982). It is therefore important to explore how norms affect consent, which might help to explain, for example, how some sexual acts might be neither non-consensual nor violent, but still experienced as problematic.

## Methods

This is a qualitative interview study that was conducted with sexually active adults living in Sweden. Participants were recruited via advertisements in three different local newspapers, four broad Facebook groups covering different geographical areas (not any specific theme), and three large workplaces in different sectors (healthcare, industrial, and cultural). We recruited 31 individuals aged 23–65 years, who had experiences of one or more sexual relationships and who spoke and understood Swedish. People who had recently been victims of sexual violence (as defined by the potential participants because this information was included in the ad) were excluded, since we believed that an interview could lead to a deterioration in their well-being and be ethically problematic. The selection of participants aimed for a wide range in terms of relationship status, gender, age, sexual identity, and occupation (see Table 1).

The interviews were conducted in closed rooms in public spaces, such as libraries, universities, or hospitals, and three were conducted by telephone. The interviews were semi-structured, focusing on topics related to understandings of sexual consent, sexual communication, sexual relations, and experiences of both wanted and unwanted sex. Four experienced qualitative researchers conducted the interviews, which lasted between 40 and 70 minutes. The recruitment and data collection were carried out during autumn 2018.

Thematic analysis was used to identify and describe patterns and prominent themes in the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the first phase, we read and summarized the interviews and discussed the summaries and our preliminary interpretations within the research team. We

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the participants.

Gender	Men	17
	Women	13
	Intergender	1
Sexuality	Heterosexual	21
	Bisexual	8
	Queer/polysexual	2
Age	23–40	16
	41–65	15
Education	College/University	24
	Other	7
Occupation	Employed	23
	Unemployed	2
	Studying	6
Living circumstances	Partner/cohabiting	21
	Partner/living apart	3
	Single/dating	6
	Several partners <sup>1</sup>	2
Children	Legal guardians	20

then shared the coding process between the team members so that each interview was coded by a researcher who had not conducted it. We regularly discussed and negotiated our interpretations and the emerging themes. In the next step, we began to write about the emerging themes, and analysed and elaborated on them in relation to the conceptual framework. This also became a process of renegotiating and refining the themes.

### **Methodological and ethical considerations**

This study explored a wide range of experiences. However, one limitation is that all the participants had a Nordic background. Also, a large proportion of the interviews concerned heterosexual practices, although several of the participating women identified as bisexual. There could be a risk that those who signed up to participate are people who have thought more about consent than the general population. However, several participants stated during the interview that they had not previously reflected much on consent, at least not before #metoo and the public conversation about the 'consent law'. In addition, the fact that participants may have already reflected on the topic could add to the richness of the material, especially in relation to our aim of conceptualizing consent.

Ethical considerations were important throughout the whole research project because sexual practices can be experienced as sensitive issues and the interviews contained descriptions of experiences of violence and assault. The voluntary nature of their participation was emphasized to participants, and written consent was collected before each interview began. Confidentiality was assured by anonymizing the material and using pseudonyms. The Regional Ethics Committee in Umeå approved the study (2018/172-31).

### **Making sense of consent and grey-zone experiences**

On the whole, participants' experiences and ways of making sense of sexual consent were multifaceted and contextualized. Some participants understood consent as easy and uncomplicated; for instance, expressed as: 'To show with the whole body that you want it, it's clear. And everything that's not [that clear], is a no' (Aina, 41 yrs). Later in the interview, however, Aina also referred to situations when it has not been very clear and described a continuum of non-consensual sex, but emphasized that: 'it's a big step from nagging to rape, but it is still within the same category'. Other participants also narrated an understanding of consent as a continuum. Fredrik (28 yrs) said:

There are several different kinds of consent. The ultimate consent is when both want to have sex with each other and are stoked about it, both want the same thing with it. Then, I think there's consent where one agrees to have sex because one likes the other person. Yes, because it's nice to do something together. And then, I think, there's another type of consent when one person wants it and the other agrees without really wanting it; it doesn't feel really good, but something still gets this person to join in, maybe because it would be embarrassing or difficult otherwise/.../And finally, when there is no consent, when there's only one person's will that drives over the other.

Participants thus described situations when they had consented to sex without having the desire or willingness to do so. Previous research has also discussed such issues and problematized the binary that it is either sex with consent or rape (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Muehlenhard et al., 2016), while others have differentiated between different aspects of sexual decision-making, such as wanting, assertiveness, and consent, or internal feelings of wanting and external expressions of consent (Darden et al., 2019; Walsh et al., 2019). In our interviews, some of the encounters when one or more party lacked desire or willingness were constructed as unproblematic, being described as 'doing something fun together', 'taking care of the relationship', 'being kind to one's partner', or having sex for reproduction. However, more commonly, situations or experiences of sex without desire or willingness were narrated as problematic in some way, as being within the grey-zone or that there is a greyscale:

I really think, like, both sexuality in general and sexual consent is . . . Well, difficult questions. There's a lot of greyscales, I think. It's hard to say that this is exactly how it should be. (Fredrik)

We use 'grey-zone experiences' to refer to situations that for some reason felt problematic or not perfectly good but were not explicitly violent (see also Gunnarsson, 2018). Johan (44 yrs), for example, described it as 'sex on the wrong premises'. It involves situations when participants consented to sex despite not wanting to, when they felt uncomfortable, or when they were unsure about the desire and willingness of themselves or the other(s). In our analysis, we focus in particular on grey-zone experiences because these represent interesting power-related processes, and because they can be useful when further understanding why people consent to sex in particular situations. One reason why the participants have sex despite a lack of willingness or desire is due to being subjected to violence and/or threats. Such experiences of violence and clear violations of consent connect to interpersonal/absolute power. These will not be the focus of this paper, however, although they do form an important context.

In the following, the findings are structured in accordance with the research questions. In the first theme, we focus on narratives in which the participants consent to sex when they (know that they) lack willingness and desire. Our analysis demonstrates how different social power relations (connected to the form of relationship, gender, age, and sexual orientation) affect the negotiation of consent and how Foucault's (1978, 1982) division between 'disciplinary power' and what we call 'interpersonal/absolute power' (connected to sovereign power) can help to advance our understanding of the production of consent. In the second theme, we further complicate the notion of consent by exploring the participants' narratives describing being unsure about what they want or desire, and about how to communicate such feelings. Influenced by Foucault's understanding of 'subjectivity' (1978, 1982), our analysis problematizes a commonly made assumption about sexual consent: that it involves two (or more) rational subjects who communicate (or at least have access to) more or less authentic feelings of willingness and/or desire.

### **Consenting to sex despite a lack of desire or willingness**

In this theme, we explore why the participants consented to sex in specific situations, especially focusing on when people have sex when they lack willingness or desire (grey-zone experiences). Following Foucault (1978, 1982), in the first part we explore how such situations connect to different forms of power and normative ideals of relationships (both short-term and long-term) and then, in the second part, we look more closely at how stereotypical ideas about men and women produce consent.

Participants described how different types of relationships carried with them different challenges and possibilities for consent. In short-term relationships, or at the beginning of longer relationships, some participants linked grey-zone experiences to when they or a sexual partner have had sex for validation, or as Klara (33 yrs) said:

If it's a new relationship, you really want to be liked and then maybe you don't communicate that much, but you agree to a few more things because you don't want to be dumped.

Besides consenting for validation or for being afraid of 'being dumped', being at a 'sensitive age' (young) was also experienced as involving difficulties in knowing one's boundaries, which had contributed to an earlier sexual debut than they had wanted and having sex even though they did not really feel like it. This can be tied to normative ideals of when and how to have one's sexual debut and when consenting to have sex, and had led the participants to self-discipline themselves and consent to sex despite lacking desire or willingness. But it can also be connected to a fear of being rejected, an aspect to which we will return.

Some participants said that in a long-term relationship they have sex after a partner has been nagging, expressing expectations, exerting pressure, or repeatedly asking. Gunilla (45 yrs) described how her ex-partner sometimes pushed her:

Yes, [he] nagged. I don't see it as abuse, it was just pushing or nagging like that. And I thought afterwards that it was good. So, I wasn't against it. I didn't feel exploited.

Even though Gunilla did not think these experiences were problematic, they can still be partially related to pressure and interpersonal/absolute forms of power. Benjamin (23 yrs) described being the one who did the nagging when he was younger:

But now in retrospect, I've felt that 'oh, god, but I was pushy there for a while', that it was almost a bit like nagging. That it was like this, 'oh, but shall we not . . . ?'

Here Benjamin also highlights being 'pushy', and others also talked about themselves or others being pushy or feeling pressure. Hence, participants described experiences of interpersonal pressure (absolute power/power over) in terms of such actions as nagging or violations of consent. However, when participants talked about feeling pressure without being explicitly forced, pushed or nagged on by others – for example, having had an earlier sexual debut than they wanted, or having sex for the sake of their relationship – many of these situations can be connected to Foucault's notions of disciplinary forms of power and techniques of self-regulation, rather than interpersonal pressure or threat defined as absolute power (Foucault, 1978, 1982).

One aspect of sex without willingness or desire involved encounters in which participants felt that they 'had to go all the way' once they had started to have sex. As Anna (26 yrs) described it: 'But now I've agreed to this, so then I have to go all the way', or as Pernilla (48 yrs) expressed it:

Basically, you should be able to change your mind when you feel that 'no, but this doesn't feel quite perfect', even if it has felt good until then. But it hasn't really been like that. It's more, well, if you've taken on this thing, you have to complete it, kind of.

Other experiences of consenting to sex despite lacking desire or willingness took place within longer-term relationships when people had sex for the sake of the relationship. For example, Stina (61 yrs) said:

Yes, then when you had longer relationships and you lived with guys and so there, then it wasn't always that you thought it was so interesting to have sex every time and so on, but one put up with it [to please the other person].

Neither Stina nor Pernilla, like other participants, connect these experiences to particular behaviours displayed by their sexual partners. Instead, experiences of having to 'go all the way' and having sex for the sake of the relationship were sometimes solely connected to normative ideas, or unarticulated expectations. For example, the 'good relationship' is seen as including having sex regularly and participants expressed feelings of pressure if 'it has been a while' since they had sex (for a study about temporality and consent, see Chin et al., 2019). Thinking with Foucault, this can be seen as suggesting that ideas about sex as important or as a signal of a good relationship had become internalized and signposted a direction for desirable behaviour. This can be understood as what Foucault calls self-governing, a technique of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1978).

Another issue that could lead to consent being given in situations when someone lacked desire or willingness concerned difficulties with maintaining desire in long-term relationships. Gustav (39 yrs) said: 'desire goes up and down in waves'. Some participants argued that desire went up and down in relation to having small kids, working late hours, or being stressed, and also how a gendered division of labour at home could influence it: 'If he had helped out a bit more with the cleaning and putting the kids to bed and everything and surprised me in some other way, maybe then I would have had a bit more desire' (Gunilla, 45 yrs). This also challenges notions of an innate sex drive, an aspect to which we will return.



Connected to these issues, there were perceptions in longer-term romantic relationships that it creates a ‘balance’ and decreases the risk of pressure being felt or applied if both (or all) parties want to have sex, and initiate sex, just as often as each other. Henrik (50 yrs) described the function of what he calls ‘having balance in the sex life’ in a long-term relationship:

[Then] you don’t have to chase it, or it’s not a struggle to get laid, there’s no one who has to be persuaded. Instead, there’s more, it’s like you’re on the same level.

What is implicit here is that, in cases where there is no ‘balance’, persuasion or a struggle might be needed. Similarly to Henrik, some of the other men talked about a need to curb or police themselves because their partner did not have the same need or desire for sex. We want to make two connected points from this. Firstly, Henrik’s words allude to an idea that something needs an ‘outlet’, which reflects a sexual-drive discourse. Secondly, monogamous coupledom can be seen as a strong rationale here. Following Brown (2006), who has developed Foucault’s thinking on governmentality, a ‘rationale’ can be understood as an underlying normative reason that forms the boundaries of what is intelligible and affects the participants’ fields of action. Monogamous coupledom as a rationale and a normative reason hence orients the understanding and actions so that ‘unbalanced needs’ have to be taken care of or handled *within* the monogamous relationship. This can be connected to wishes and beliefs that monogamy is an important aspect of a relationship, where ‘to take care of the relationship’ or other values within the relationship are more important than finding an outlet for sexual needs. However, this rationale effectively silences other ways of organizing one’s sexual and romantic relationships. There were, however, some participants who challenged the ideals of the monogamous relationship and had organized their romantic and sexual relationships in queerer ways.

### ***Gendered stereotypes and heterosexual ideals producing consent***

Regardless of relationship type, gendered stereotypical ideas emerged as decisive in producing consent. The ideals and norms about the relationships that we explored above are strongly shaped by ideas about men and women, and we will now look more closely into how such gendered ideas produce consent, especially in relation to grey-zone experiences. Martin (36 yrs) said:

And then it’s more often that you hear that the woman should, as it were, serve for the sake of the man’s needs, but there are quite strong ideas that the man should also be, well, able to deliver, capable and just keep going and so on. (Martin, 36 yrs)

Here, Martin described how women become responsible for men’s needs in heterosexual encounters. Norms around having sex for the sake of the relationship and having to go all the way once one has started to have sex can be linked to heteronormative ideas that women provoke and trigger men’s arousal, but also to social expectations that women will take responsibility for the relationship and caring for others’ needs and desires (Jackson et al., 2010). However, Martin also described expectations on men, which were also present in other interviews; that men are expected to ‘just keep going’, that they have a stronger and inherent sex drive, that they are the ones who should take the initiative to have sex and that their pleasure and orgasm are the focus. Participants of all genders both reconstructed and challenged such stereotypical images of men and women. Connectedly, Elin (29 yrs) reflected:

Why do we put up with this? If it’s not for my satisfaction, what do we then become? Are we just objects? Are we there for the sake of the man’s sexual satisfaction if it [sex] doesn’t give us anything?

Here, Elin illustrates how women ‘put up with this’; hence, how women’s satisfaction is given lower priority. Other women also mentioned that their pleasure is not valued as highly as men’s in heterosexual encounters. This can be seen from the way in which women sometimes consent to



particular forms of sex, for the sake of someone else's pleasure. But Elin's questions are also a way of challenging and opening up space for other ways to imagine gendered roles in sexual encounters.

Women also experienced a risk of being positioned as 'the Madonna or the whore' and such a risk might mean that not only do women sometimes consent to sex when they do not feel desire or willingness but also that they may refrain from having sex in situations when they want to do so. Elin said: 'I think it comes back to this, that either you're the Madonna, or you're the whore. Men want both, but not at the same time.' This reflects the 'tightrope-walk' of femininity (Hoskin, 2017). From a Foucauldian perspective, this can be seen as the possible field of action being smaller for women.

Connectedly, ideas about women being more passive than men and not having the same degree of sexual drive were also put forward and internalized by some of the participants. Some of these stereotypical ideas about men and women were narrated in terms of being 'physical' (Henrik, 50 yrs) or 'instinctual' (Elisabet, 52 yrs). Participants who resisted and tried to renegotiate such stereotypical ideas about men's and women's sexuality also related to these narratives when describing how they differed from them or did not recognize themselves within them.

Stereotypical ideas about men and women were also mirrored in same-sex encounters. Linda (bisexual, 26 yrs) said:

I think it feels more okay to say no to a girl than to a guy. And it feels like women might listen to each other more because you can imagine yourself in the situation in a different way than what maybe a guy does with a girl. So, I think there's a big difference, actually. Of those [women] I've met, it's never been a problem, there I've been able to say 'no, but there will be nothing' and then that's been settled. It's not been this, well, nagging, like 'yes, but come on, we can continue, there's no problem'. Instead, a no has been a no, as it should be, and not as if a no is the beginning of a yes.

Thus, Linda constructed her same-sex sexual encounters, where 'a no has been a no', differently from her sexual encounters with men, where a 'no is the beginning of a yes', and stated that this difference can be linked to women being able to imagine themselves as being the one who says no. However, participants also had experiences of grey zones in same-sex sexual encounters between women, and Elisabeth (52 yrs), another bisexual woman, stated: 'I was surprised, that it was so similar/ . . . /that a woman can also be pushy and insensitive' and said that she herself had also been lacking in responsiveness in sexual encounters with women. This shows that it might not always be so easy to imagine oneself being the other person, and it also illustrates experiences of interpersonal pressure producing consent in same-sex sexual encounters between women. Elisabeth's narrative and experiences are very different from Linda's; however, both illustrate an expectation that women should behave differently from men, and not be 'pushy and insensitive'.

The fact that Linda says it 'feels more okay to say no to a girl' might be connected to an experienced unequal balance of power in relation to men, and hence reveals how heterosexuality and gendered power relations produce consent. Although participants of all genders had experiences within the grey-zone, women's vulnerable position was repeatedly mentioned – that women might be more likely to consent to sex when lacking willingness or desire. Previous quantitative research shows that it is common for both men and women to consent to sex in situations where they lack willingness or desire, but it is more common for women to report such experiences (Darden et al., 2019; Impett & Peplau, 2003). In the participants' narratives about patriarchy, hierarchy, and women's vulnerable position, disciplinary and interpersonal forms of power become intimately interwoven. Grounded in Foucault's understanding of power, Lauri (2016) points out that different forms of power reinforce each other. Knowledge about, and experiences of, interpersonal/absolute forms of power (for example, in terms of sexual violence) might serve to reinforce disciplinary forms of power in relation to sex and consent practices. This can also be seen, for example, when participants described how previous violent experiences had affected them: 'even if that [violation] has not traumatized me, it's still something that has affected me in how I choose my sexual situations afterwards' (Alice, 26 yrs). Hence, interpersonal/absolute forms of power ('the

violation’) reinforce self-regulating techniques of disciplinary power (‘affecting me in how I choose’). At a collective level, the (well-grounded) fear of sexual violations against women has been a powerful way of controlling women’s sexuality (Gavey, 2013). Fear of sexual violations may lead women to refrain from engaging in sex even if they want to, and normalized fear can contribute to putting the responsibility on women to prevent consent violations, because they should assume that this could always be a possibility.

## The communication and process of consent

In this second theme, we will explore communication and the process of sexual consent. We will further complicate the notion of consent by exploring the participants’ narratives about being unsure of what they want or desire, and about how to communicate such feelings. We discuss this in relation to Foucault’s thinking around subjectivity (Foucault, 1978; Mansfield, 2000), which allows us to problematize the idea of consent as a process between rational subjects experiencing authentic willingness or desire.

Sexual consent, when it works at its best, was narrated by the participants as obvious and mutual – and as characterized by respect, trust, clarity, and responsiveness. These aspects of consent can be understood as both experiences of consent when it works well and also as hegemonic ideals of how consent should work. In the previous theme, we focused on narratives and situations in which, for some reason, people had consented to sex despite lacking desire or willingness. In these narratives, sometimes the boundary between what is consensual sex and what is not was not entirely clear in the participants’ experiences. Some encounters had given rise to contradictory experiences; for example, Benjamin (23 yrs) described how, on a particular occasion, he had reacted simultaneously with sexual arousal, unpleasant feelings, and shame when a woman approached him sexually. We argue that some of these ambivalent and contradictory experiences, and ways to make sense of consent, are connected to the reality that subjects are not always rational and coherent, or that what they (try to) communicate is not always or only an expression of an inner authentic desire or willingness (see Mansfield, 2000).

Muehlenhard et al.’s (2016) move away from a binary conceptualization – that it is either consensual sex or sexual violence – is fruitful for starting to understand the complexities of sexual consent. However, the participants’ experiences, and their ways of making sense of consent, also reveal that the distinction between willing and wanting does not always explain why it is sometimes difficult for them to know what they want. Anna (26 yrs) puts this as:

And sometimes I can think ‘yes, I want to, but I can’t’, or I can feel ‘oh, now . . .’ It can even be like this ‘oh, now we haven’t had sex in a while. Now we could have time, but do I have the energy?’ Because I don’t know. It’s so hard to know, like, do I want to have sex now because it might fit well, or do I want it because I’m really desiring it? And then you try to navigate between those emotions. It’s not always that easy to know what it is you’re feeling.

Others explained that their experiences of wanting and willingness might shift, not only during a sexual encounter but also in retrospect. In some cases, participants experienced hesitancy concerning what they wanted or were willing to do, and sometimes ‘tried things out’. Some encounters could begin with one party lacking desire but consenting to sex, then the desire emerged later and gave rise to thinking: ‘then when we had sex it was like “why did we wait so long?”’ (Gunilla, 45 yrs). Hesitancy and not knowing what they wanted were described as being, for example, because they felt they changed as sexual persons in different contexts. Håkan (50 yrs) said: ‘It changes over time, that’s how it is. Because no person is the same all the time.’ Elias (35 yrs) expressed it in another way: ‘It’s also about what kind of image you have of yourself, and who you become in relation to the other, because I don’t think that’s static in any way.’ Also, the passing of time could shed new light on previous sexual encounters and practices of consent. We argue that this reflects the contingent aspect of consent, and it can also be connected to a Foucauldian

understanding of subjectivities in which subjects can be understood as, among other things, continuously constructed, undetermined, or contradictory. The quotes above further problematize communication as a linear process whereby a subject is 'able to formulate an utterance and then make it mean what it says, in a manner which draws a line of coherence between intention, utterance and interpretation' (Philadelphoff-Puren, 2004, p. 244).

### ***Communicating consent – so clear, so difficult***

While some participants described communication as easy and uncomplicated, others talked about it as being more complicated. Turning towards BDSM was viewed as providing clearer frames for how sexual consent is communicated and evaluated: 'For me, this [approach] with BDSM is the clear, obvious interaction before, during, and after' (David, 42 yrs). Furthermore, the fact that some participants (including men) stated that they would prefer to have a verbal questioning of consent instead of someone assuming that there is consent until a 'no' is explicitly expressed, also demonstrates that communication might not always be clear or straightforward.

Participants used indirect questions and cues for obtaining consent; for example, concerning contraceptives in heterosexual relationships, going to bed and cuddling, or going to bed early. Indirect communication was also used to reject or say no to sex; for example, 'No, I have a headache.' Others used more direct questions and statements, both to initiate sex and to give consent, phrased as: 'should we have sex?', or to decline an invitation. When asked why some people avoid direct communication, Alice (26 yrs) replied: 'I think you're afraid that someone will say "how could you think I wanted sex."' This ties into an underlying rationality of the fear of being rejected and, from a Foucauldian perspective, becomes a technique of self-regulation.

While some participants stated that the use of body language or passivity to show lack of interest were clear enough in most cases, verbal communication was sometimes perceived as clearer if they wanted to withdraw their consent during a sexual situation:

Because if I feel that I don't want it anymore, that I want it to stop now, then I think it [verbal communication] is a much more, like, effective way to say that. (Anna, 26 yrs)

The need for different kinds of communication can be understood as utilizing an approach that is intelligible in a specific situation, reflecting the fact that communication (and desire) takes place within a discursive frame and how the participants (unintentionally) relate to different hegemonic ideals about sex. Following a normative path might not require the same explicit kind of communication, as, for example, withdrawing previously given consent. Verbal communication was explained by some as clarifying boundaries and preferences. Alice (26 yrs) said:

Well, like this: 'Do you remember that time? How did that feel? How was it?' Because I believe the tension might have let go a bit then, that it's not exactly when you're having sex, it's not then that you're going to talk about so much stuff.

Hence, verbal communication about sex and consent away from the sexual act could release tensions. This can be contrasted with experiences of verbal communication interfering with the 'magic of sex', which can be linked to ideas of sex as something 'special' that takes place in an unplanned way and thus prevents practices in which agreements are made in advance (Jackson et al., 2010; Muehlenhard et al., 2016).

Talking about sex was also understood as taboo, stigmatized, and embarrassing, and there was a sense that conversations about feelings or preferences were not 'allowed' to take up space. Elias (35 yrs) said: 'I would like to have more of a forum, where you could talk about it [sex and consent]. There's still so much that's taboo, so it's difficult. When people talk about sex, it'll be pee and poop humour, or it'll be conquest talk.' This was perceived as a barrier to clarifying boundaries and preferences, as well as to exploring and learning about sexual communication and consent. In contrast, Sven (49 yrs) said:

We live in a pretty sexualized world, where society sexualizes people rather early, and of course, that can probably mess things up for some, who don't have that confidence to communicate a clear no, and instead, well, what shall I say, in some ways send the wrong message. (Sven)

Sven is suggesting that a sexualized world hinders people from communicating 'a clear no' and that it contributes to some people sending 'the wrong message'. Foucault (1978) argued that, during the Victorian period, while sexuality was often proclaimed to be a taboo, or repressed, topic, in fact it was increasingly talked about, but in different ways than before; for example, defined and categorized in relation to medical knowledge. This relates to participants' experiences of sex education as being 'too clinical' or too focused on anatomical aspects of sexuality. Foucault (1978) argued that power is closely connected to knowledge production and that knowledge production constructs certain types of subjectivities. Hence, the different issues that participants connect to grey-zones, sex education, and sex as taboo are not only ways to make sense of certain experiences but can also be argued to contribute to constructing and shaping them as sexual beings. This also connects to their experiences of unwanted sexual encounters that they did not articulate as violations, abuse, or sexual violence. Fantasia (2011) describes this as a normalization of non-consensual sexual activity and, according to Burkett and Hamilton (2012), such difficulties may be linked to ideas of what sexual violence or coercion is. In other words, dominant understandings of consent and sexual violence both contribute to forming the participants' experiences and are also ways to make sense of them.

Conceptualizing sex as taboo also clearly connects to how the participants emphasized communication as an important aspect to work with in relation to social change. The rationale here was that, if the taboo were to break, people would be able to know their preferences and clearly communicate consent or rejection. Hence, communication was mentioned as important both in relation to sexual practices and also in a broader sense, with mainly men asking for contexts in which it would be possible to discuss and share experiences of sex and consent (see Elias' quote above). Krister (50 yrs) said that issues around consent 'need to be discussed in several different contexts. It's not enough with only one school lecture.' This emphasis on the need for communication could be connected with ideas about miscommunication being the cause of, or used to excuse, consent violations, and that improved communication could resolve such issues. However, this argument has been questioned and problematized (Beres, 2010; Bindsbøl Holm Johansen et al., 2019; Burkett & Hamilton, 2012). The focus on communication and the ability to express feelings can also be related to Foucault's (1978) analysis of confession, which is 'governing the production of the true discourse on sex' (p. 63). Foucault argues that confession, with its basis in the religious confession, has been a central technique for the production of truth and the individualization of power in relation to sexuality. This confessional practice has shifted from confessing what the subject wished to hide to an idea that it can extract what is hidden for the subject; a latent essence of sexuality (Foucault, 1978, p. 66).

Foucault (1978) argued that a focus on confession compels us to become occupied with improving ourselves, which can be seen as unproductive for social change. This is not only because it keeps us preoccupied, but also because it misunderstands the fundamental aspects of sexuality, as the experiences and perceptions of sex, according to Foucault, are 'organized by power' (p. 155). Power is intimately connected to bodies (p.151), to our pleasures, desires, and willingness, and ultimately to our sense and communication of consent. This was also touched upon by Martin (36 yrs), who argued that 'our society may have constructed people who do not see themselves as victims but instead see themselves as genuine in what they desire'. What Martin is challenging here, and what is a central argument in Foucault's study of sex (Foucault, 1978, see also Oksala, 2011), is that there is no authentic, natural sexuality that is waiting to be found and liberated by communicating and sharing experiences.

However, the participants' experiences of #metoo can go some way towards challenging the notion that communication is completely unproductive for social change in relation to consent. The

#metoo movement was, among other things, described as providing opportunities to share experiences and talk about sex and consent. This contributed to a reassessment of grey-zone experiences, with issues of responsibility being re-evaluated and participants thought that they had gained new insights into the meaning of sexual consent. Anna (26 yrs) said: 'I then [in connection with #metoo] started to think about things that might not have been okay.' Participants also articulated how #metoo might lead them to challenge issues that had previously been normalized. Hence, we can see that the societal meaning of consent was renegotiated in relation to #metoo, and that such a reconceptualization compels individuals to make both consent and previous experiences intelligible in new ways.

## Concluding remarks

Our analysis demonstrates how power and subjectivity were crucial in the participants' experiences and making sense of sexual consent. Participants said that they sometimes consent to sex even when lacking desire or willingness because they are exposed to interpersonal forms of power, ranging from violence and clear violations of consent to nagging and being subjected to pressure from others. But participants also felt pressure to consent to sex based on self-regulation and disciplinary forms of power, which are connected to normative ideals about 'the good relationship', monogamy and heterosexuality, men and women, and age. However, interpersonal pressure and pressure due to self-regulation and disciplinary power should not be seen as two separate phenomena, not only because they reinforce each other but also because hegemonic discourses influence interpersonal/absolute expressions of power.

While some people have argued that disciplinary forms of power and self-regulation are less harmful techniques of power, others have pointed out that such ways of governing also produce suffering, and in more deceitful ways because they become intimately connected to the self, and thus it is harder to know where to direct resistance (Lauri, 2016). Furthermore, understanding power in sexual encounters as disciplinary still requires us to account for gender-based hierarchies and to acknowledge that the space for action is stratified in gendered ways. This is also clear in the narratives of the participants in this study. Hence, the act of sexual consent is located within a gendered social context characterized by power relations that limit women's ability to freely give consent. We have demonstrated how previous experiences of violence and fear of that being repeated, expectation to please and taking responsibility for someone else's pleasure, and fear of being positioned as a Madonna or a whore contribute to women's consent. This is also illustrated, for example, by participating women's experiences of the narrow 'tightrope-walk' of femininity, and hence reveals women's very limited field of action or, in other words, the impossibility of doing the 'right thing' (see also Hoskin, 2017).

The participants communicated consent in several ways and sometimes such processes were understood as clear and obvious. However, their experiences and ways of making sense of the process and communication of consent also revealed ambivalences and contradictions, which could not always be related to such aspects as previous divisions between being willing and actively wanting (Muhlenhard et al., 2016). Instead, some of these experiences can be connected to an understanding of subjectivity as being neither completely coherent nor rational or as having (access to) authentic feelings. By drawing on Foucault's understanding of subjectivity, we have also shown how communication takes place within a discursive frame and how discourses and power relations not only produce consent, and shape the experiences of consent, but also form the participants as sexual beings.

A common criticism of Foucault's work is that his understanding of resistance is so intimately connected to power that it does not provide any room outside the discourse. Oksala (2011), however, argues that Foucault opens up space for resistance in relation to sex and that it is within the body that the seeds of resistance, and also of freedom, can grow (see also Foucault, 1978). Even though a focus on communication and the sharing of experiences might be somewhat unproductive

in relation to social change, the participants' experiences of the #metoo movement and also their ability to identify hegemonic power relations – as well as continuously and in an embodied way challenging stereotypical ideas connected to gender and heterosexuality – open up opportunities for new ways to make sense of and practise sexual consent.

The knowledge gained from this study can help us to better understand how consent is experienced and made sense of by sexually active adults. We suggest that the findings could influence policy work. By problematizing commonly held assumptions around the binary nature of consent and the absolute nature of power, the study could contribute to a discussion around consent in, for example, sexual education and sexual counselling. We believe that our empirically grounded theoretical analysis of consent is a valuable contribution to the literature on the subject. Our Foucauldian analytical lens has allowed us to explore and challenge widely accepted understandings of autonomous, rational subjects who interact on the basis of authentic feelings, as well as providing a strategy for analysing and understanding the complex power relations that are essential for sexual consent. This is not only an important conceptual contribution but, crucially, it was essential to this study in order for us to understand and make sense of the participants' experiences, which might also be the case for future studies. Future studies also need to pay attention to a wider variation in terms of ethnicity and 'race' and deepen our understanding of consent in same-sex relationships and sexual encounters.

## Notes

1. One participant has both several partners and is cohabitating.

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## Notes on contributors

*Ida Linander* MD, PhD, post-doctoral fellow in public health and gender studies. Research interests include transgender people's health and access to healthcare, sexual and reproductive health, as well as gendered aspects of health systems and accessibility of healthcare.

*Isabel Goicolea* MD, MSc, PhD, Professor in public health. Her research interests are on young people's health and access to health care, men's violence against women, and sexual and reproductive rights.

*Maria Wiklund* PT, PhD in public health and physiotherapy, associate professor (docent) in physiotherapy, community medicine and rehabilitation. Her research studies mainly focus on stress and mental health among young people, lived body and embodiment, and sociocultural perspectives and gender theory on body and health – including gender-sensitive interventions.

*Anne Gotfredsen* Doctoral student in public health and also connected to Umeå Centre for Gender Studies. Her main research interests concern youth mental health, leisure/civic participation and participatory research methods.

*Maria Strömbäck* PT, PhD in physiotherapy and gender studies, specialist in physiotherapy, psychiatry and psychosomatics. Her research interests are young people's mental health, body, embodiment, gender theory and gender-sensitive interventions. An additional research area is exhaustion disorder and return-to-work interventions.



## ORCID

Ida Linander  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6401-889X>  
 Isabel Goicolea  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8114-4705>  
 Maria Wiklund  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6636-9597>  
 Anne Gotfredsen  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5011-2233>  
 Maria Strömbäck  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2597-2466>

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