

"Eroticising um, violence and power dynamics": Men's talk about 'rough sex'

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Abstract

The term 'rough sex' has become increasingly used in mainstream media. It is becoming more relevant in the criminal legal field after the so-called 'rough sex' defence was used by a man in a high-profile murder case in Aotearoa, New Zealand. However, little is known about 'rough sex', and how it is understood by New Zealand men who practice it. In this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 men who have had 'rough sex' experiences. Though the majority of interviewees primarily discussed experiences with women, two of the participants identified as gay, and their 'rough sex' experiences were exclusively with other men. They were asked about their experiences of 'rough sex' and their views on the wider context of 'rough sex', including gender relations and New Zealand legislation. Interviewees had varying perceptions of what 'rough sex' is and how it sits in relation to BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadomasochism) and mainstream sex. Most agreed that it is sex that involves some level of force.

In this thesis, I present two analytic chapters. In both chapters, I identify and examine the patterns in the way men talk about 'rough sex' in general and their personal experiences, using the analytic concept of interpretative repertoires. In the first analytic chapter, I highlight two opposing interpretative repertoires that men draw on, to account for the relevance or irrelevance of gender in 'rough sex'. In the second analytic chapter, I examine how men talked about consent and communication in a 'rough sex' context, through their use of two interpretative repertoires. All men discussed the importance of having consent and communication, yet most described instances where consent and communication were absent or ineffective. For both chapters, I discuss gay men's perspectives separately, due to the difference in the patterns and their expressed difficulty in imagining the context for heterosexual 'rough sex', which most other men's experiences are based on. Overall, I

discuss the implications of the discursive resources that men drew on to talk about 'rough sex' in relation to the broader dominant discourses of heteronormative sexual practice.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In late 2018, a 22-year-old British woman, Grace Millane, was murdered by a then 26-year-old New Zealand man, Jesse Shane Kempson. This was the first high-profile case in Aotearoa, New Zealand where the defendant used the so-called ‘rough sex defence’ for murder. The ‘rough sex defence’ argues that the killing was accidental during or after consensual ‘rough sex’, in this case, strangulation during sex (Bows & Herring, 2020). Internationally, arguments using such a defence have become increasingly popular for male defendants, arguing that the murder of the woman was during or immediately after sex, suggesting that it was a ‘sex game gone wrong’ (Edwards, 2020; Monckton-Smith, 2020; Yardley, 2021). Mr Kempson’s case, unfortunately, confirmed that Aotearoa, New Zealand is not exempt from this trend.

The concept of ‘rough sex’, which is central to the ‘rough sex defence’, does not have a concrete definition shared between studies in the field. The term ‘rough sex’ generally refers to sex that is harder (Herbenick et al., 2022), involves physical aggression (Vogels & Sullivan, 2019), and includes a different level of violence (Burch & Salmon, 2019). Some examples of acts of ‘rough sex’ discussed in the literature are hair pulling, spanking, slapping, choking, and punching (Burch & Salmon, 2019; Herbenick et al., 2021a; Vogels & Sullivan, 2019). It is worth noting that though the technical term for putting external pressure on the neck, restricting blood vessels and/or airways, is strangulation (Sauvageau & Boghossian, 2010), ‘choking’ is a term commonly used for having one’s hands or an object on or around another person’s neck during sex (Herbenick et al., 2022). In this thesis, I will use these terms interchangeably.

Internationally, there is increasing awareness that acts of ‘rough sex’ are becoming part of the mainstream sexual repertoire. Burch and Salmon (2019) found that approximately half of the university students in their study based in the United States

reported having had ‘rough sex’. Another United States study by Vogel and O’Sullivan (2019) showed that most young people who participated in their online survey had tried at least one ‘rough sex’ behaviour. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, a poll commissioned by BBC showed that most women have had ‘rough sex’ done to them, including slapping, choking, gagging, spitting, hair pulling, and biting (Savanta ComRes, 2019). In Aotearoa, New Zealand, based on their observation of university students’ talk during a gender studies class, Beres et al. (2020) suggested that there may be an emerging trend of spitting, hitting, and choking during sex among young people, but there was no local empirical data to support this claim. Though there is limited literature on the general prevalence of ‘rough sex’ in practice, recent studies suggest that many people either enjoy or are interested in aggression or violence during sex (Burch & Salmon, 2019; Herbenick et al., 2022; Ryan & Nohr, 2005; Vogel & O’Sullivan, 2019). The so-called ‘rough sex’ content is also becoming a mainstream part of pornography. Vera-Gray et al. (2021) carried out a pornography content analysis and found that ‘rough’ was one of the most popular keywords to describe pornographic contents that they looked at. These studies highlight that the concept of ‘rough sex’ is becoming increasingly relevant to sexual practices, especially between men and women.

Recent media reports indicate that the local relevance of ‘rough sex’ is not just isolated to Mr Kempson’s case. An article published by Stuff revealed the preliminary findings of an online survey led by the research team Project Gender (Gender Justice Collective, n.d.) in Aotearoa, New Zealand (Duff, 2022). Their survey consisted of 823 respondents a third of whom said that during consensual sex, they have experienced choking, biting, hair pulling, or spitting—most of which are considered ‘rough sex’ acts, as discussed above (Duff, 2022). Two important findings regarding these ‘rough sex’ acts

were lack of consent practices and a gender dynamic—where more men (27%) reported having choked their sexual partners compared to women (6%).

Another article published by Newsroom covered the story of a female university student being ‘groomed’ by her male lecturer who initiated ‘rough sex’ on her without consent (Sumner, 2022). Some of the sexual activities described in the article involved pulling hair and forcing oral sex resulting in gagging. The article said the woman called the sex ‘rough’ and that there was a lot of blood after the unwanted sex. The lecturer allegedly talked to the woman about his preference for ‘rough sex’ after the incident. When the woman reported the incident to Police, they did not acknowledge that a power imbalance could exist between adults, saw the incident as not necessarily non-consensual, and suggested that she has an ‘educational talk’ with the lecturer. These recent articles indicate that there is potential for the ‘rough sex’ concept and practices to be normalised in Aotearoa, New Zealand—because of the high prevalence of ‘rough sex’ practices (Duff, 2022), and the fact that the aggressiveness and violence during sex were not problematised by Police (Sumner, 2022). Also, the articles raised some concerns about ‘rough sex’ practices like gender dynamics, non-consensual experiences, dismissal of potential nuanced power dynamics (which are especially significant for ‘rough sex’), and recommendation to educate about communication and consent—implying the unethical ‘rough sex’ was a result of miscommunication.

The coexistence of the rise in ‘rough sex’ defence strategies and the possible mainstreaming of ‘rough sex’ practices raises an important question. Do men in the wider society use the concept of ‘rough sex’, and if they do, how is the concept used? In particular, given that sex, especially heterosex is heavily impacted by societal norms about gender (see Edwards, 1987; Gavey, 2005), I sought to examine whether there is any gender dynamic within the content and the way that men talk about ‘rough sex’. Another aspect I

wanted to explore was how men differentiate ethical and unethical ‘rough sex’: whether men draw on the mainstream idea of consensual and non-consensual ‘rough sex’, which is commonly used to distinguish ‘just sex’ and sexual assault, respectively (Gavey, 2005). Though the initial interest in ‘rough sex’ sparked from the problematic use in the criminal defence argument for Mr Kempson’s case, I am hopeful that men may engage with the concept in a positive way. For example, men might provide insight into nuanced ways that gendered power imbalances may impact men and women differently during heterosexual ‘rough sex’ experiences. With this nuanced understanding, they may offer an alternative way of viewing ethical and mutually wanted ‘rough sex’ in heterosexual encounters, instead of the dominant dichotomic consensual versus non-consensual categorisation.

In the following sections, I situate my thesis based on existing literature on ‘rough sex’ and sex in general. To begin with, I outline the complexity arising from the lack of consensus on the definition of ‘rough sex.’ I then critically challenge the neoliberal rhetoric behind the idea and portrayal of ‘rough sex’ as better sex. Consequently, I discuss the possible normalisation of ‘rough sex’ and its implications. After that, I explain the current gendered context that heterosex is situated in, and what it could mean for ‘rough sex’ practices. Finally, I review the complexity around consent, and how it may impact consent within ‘rough sex’ encounters.

What is ‘Rough Sex?’

One of the potential issues for ‘rough sex’ as a concept is the lack of consensus on what constitutes ‘rough sex’. People can have varied constructions of ‘rough sex’ based on their sexual relationships, partners, peers, mainstream media, and pornography (Kaur, 2022). Vogels and O’Sullivan (2019) defined ‘rough sex’ as an umbrella term for sexual acts involving physical aggression, though people may have different ideas of what is

considered aggressive and how aggressive an act can be. Herbenick et al.(2022) found that people often suggest that sexual practices exist between the ‘gentle sex’ and ‘rough sex’ continuum. The former is associated with comfortable, intimate, slow, soft, and affectionate sex, and the latter is associated with passionate, harder, and vigorous sex. Burch and Salmon (2019) claimed that, from researching undergraduate university students in the United States, common ‘rough sex’ acts involve less violent acts like hair pulling, spanking, name-calling, ripping clothes, being pinned down, and slapping. These examples are described as minor compared to behaviours like burning, threatening, usage of weapons, choking, and punching. However, the behavioural categories are limited in showing the full extent of people’s experiences of a certain act, as each act can be carried out with varying intensities. Burch and Salmon (2019) dismiss the importance of what they conceptualise as the more severe ‘rough sex’ acts in the name of scarcity. Yet, those ‘rough sex’ acts could significantly impact people who are on the receiving end of them. When people use the term without a shared definition, there is a danger of someone agreeing to partake in ambiguous ‘rough sex’ that could be anything from verbal teasing to punching (Vogels & O’Sullivan, 2019). This adds to the complication of consent for ‘rough sex,’ which will be discussed in a later section.

Is ‘Rough Sex’ Better Sex?

Some studies suggest that, to a certain extent, some people regard ‘rough sex’ as better than sex that is not considered rough. Burch and Salmon (2019) claimed that women reach orgasms faster, more frequently, and more intensely during ‘rough sex’, and partners make more efforts to satisfy each other. Similarly, Vogel and O’Sullivan (2019) stated that instrumental aggression during sex—aggression that is intended for pleasure—can be enjoyable, compared to hostile aggression—aggression with intent to harm. In general, the majority of college students in a study said that they enjoy playful force and aggression,

though their definition of playful force and aggression ranged considerably from tickling, light taps, and pinching, to hitting, wrestling, restraining, and physical abuse (Ryan & Nohr, 2005). Also, another study found that female university students reported feeling pleasure, excitement, intimacy, and emotional connection after being choked during sex if it happened in consensual sex with good communication (Herbenick et al., 2022).

Contrary to the idea that ‘rough sex’ is better sex, many studies found that often, ‘rough sex’ experiences are unwanted or not enjoyed, which challenges the very idea that ‘rough sex’ is better. Internationally, studies have reported unwanted experiences of ‘rough sex’ acts in the mainstream heterosexual setting and in the BDSM community. Women in a United States study conducted by Herbenick et al. (2019) reported that heterosexual anal sex and choking were the most common scary sexual experiences apart from rape and sexual assault. According to some participants in Ryan and Nohr’s (2005) study, forced anal sex is considered ‘rough sex’, with choking more commonly regarded as a ‘rough sex’ act in a recent study by Herbenick et al. (2021a). In another study by Herbenick et al. (2022), women reported having had unwanted experiences of getting choked during sex, especially if it was their first time. Even within the BDSM community (which is known to practice rougher sex in general) women reported having unwanted sexual experiences (Barker, 2013; Beres & MacDonald, 2015). An Australian study conducted by Beres and MacDonald (2015) found that some heterosexual women part of the BDSM community have had unwanted experiences of BDSM play—which refers to people engaging in BDSM practices. Similarly, Barker (2013) stated that BDSM community bloggers are increasingly voicing their concerns about potential abuse and unwanted sexual experiences of submissive women. These findings are echoed in some recent studies based in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Faustino and Gavey (2021) found that many women have had unwanted experiences of heterosexual anal sex. With regards to more diverse ‘rough sex’ acts, the

wider research team for this current study has been interviewing women about their unwanted ‘rough sex’ experiences (Gavey et al., 2021-2022; see also Kaur, 2022).

Moreover, it is possible that people can enjoy ‘rough sex’ encounters without enjoying ‘rough sex’ acts themselves. With regards to a specific ‘rough sex’ act (choking) findings from the United States suggest that there is a possibility that those involved in sexual encounters may be incorporating choking despite neither party feeling sexual pleasure from the act itself. Herbenick et al.(2022) found that some women accepted being choked during sex despite not personally feeling aroused by it because they perceive that their sexual partner gains sexual pleasure. Though some reported simultaneous feelings of being scared and excited, others described fear, discomfort, and confusion, which were not linked to sexual pleasure. Some women in Herbenick et al.’s (2022) study reported that they simply endured being choked or faked arousal by moaning when they felt fear, discomfort, and confusion. Another study with young men recruited from a university in the United States found that most men reported enacting choking during sex for their sexual partner’s pleasure (Herbenick et al., 2021b). Some stated that they felt pleasure and enjoyment from choking their sexual partner, but it was primarily through seeing their partners’ reactions which they interpreted as sexual pleasure. The findings from these studies suggest that, at least in some cases, both men and women reported enjoying choking during heterosexual encounters based on the perception of the sexual partners’ pleasure during the act with the absence of anyone feeling aroused by the act itself. However, the possibility of people finding ‘rough sex’ more pleasurable is not ruled out.

Though some forms of ‘rough sex’ may be enjoyable, mainstreaming the rhetoric that ‘rough sex’ is better can be problematic. The rhetoric suggests that ‘rough sex’ acts generally elicit more sexual pleasure for people—including women. Associating specific sexual acts with sexual pleasure is particularly detrimental for women because of the

existing rape myths about sex in general. Weiss (2009) stated that rape myths aid victim-blaming narratives like the woman wanted or enjoyed rape. Based on rape myths, the idea of ‘real rape’—that rape was acted upon by a stranger who used violence—was established, and used to distinguish which victims are legitimate victims of ‘real rape’ (Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008). According to existing rape myths, violence would have been a factor that legitimises the rape experience. Though having such a perception is detrimental to women with varying experiences of sexual assault or rape, mainstreaming the idea that ‘rough sex’ is better takes away the ‘legitimacy’ of rape by rendering violence trivial. If ‘rough sex’ acts—which are said to include different levels of violence (Burch & Salmon, 2019)—are considered sexually pleasurable, one can argue that ‘rough sex’ was enjoyed by women, much like the way rape myths claim women enjoy rape. In the courtroom setting, Bows and Herring (2020) stated that during murder trials where the deceased are women, men minimise their use of violence by claiming that women enjoy being subjected to violence and/or that women instigated ‘rough sex’ acts. Though this example entails extreme consequences of ‘rough sex’ acts, the idea that ‘rough sex’ is better also affects people in more subtle ways.

The idea that ‘rough sex’ is better sex exists in the current mainstream neoliberal rhetoric of ‘sex positivity’, which calls for a critical examination. What ‘sex positive’ or pro-sex feminists argue is that women should be seen as sexual beings, moving away from keeping sex taboo and shameful for women (Glick, 2000; Snitow et al., 1983). However, it is not as simple as encouraging women to be sexually ‘free’. Snitow et al. (1983) conceptualised that since sexuality is a social construct interconnected with social structures, sexual freedom should attend to women’s sexual vulnerabilities. Similarly highlighting the complexities, Downing (2013) argued against the dichotomy of ‘sex positive’ or ‘sex negative’ perspectives because posing a specific sexual act as either good

or bad is too simplistic. Instead, Downing (2013) suggests taking a sex-critical stance: whether a sexual act is considered ‘rough sex’ or sex that is not perceived as rough, sexuality should be critically examined about the ideologies they uphold. Yet, according to Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008), the neoliberal perspective makes the simplistic assumption that individuals have complete control of the self, and hence women can freely choose to be sexually empowered. Based on these assumptions, women ought to be sex-positive, needing to ‘enjoy’ sexual freedom to its fullest (Fahs, 2014), which could mean needing to try new ‘rough sex’ experiences regardless of one’s desire. As Fahs (2014) claimed, the neoliberal sex positivist rhetoric only focuses on the freedom of women’s sexual expression and diversity without attending to the freedom from repressive requirements with their sexuality. More specifically, according to Fahs (2014), women should have freedom from a mediated version of their sexuality, like media portrayals, heteronormative ideals of ‘normal sex’, and assumptions about what satisfies women. The inadvertent consequence of the sex positivity rhetoric is that it allows men to have unconditional access to women, pressuring women to ‘enjoy’ the freedom to its fullest (Fahs, 2014). Therefore, the notion that ‘rough sex’ is better sex can place women in a disadvantageous position in the context of ‘rough sex’.

The neoliberal assumption of freedom of individual choice also relieves the responsibility for those who use sexual coercion and aggression (Adam, 2005; Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). College women in Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras’ (2008) study tended to avoid perceiving themselves as a victim after unwanted sexual experiences at the expense of taking personal responsibility for male sexual coercion and aggression. In Adam’s (2005) study, many men, including those with HIV, reported having unprotected sex with other men because they perceived their sexual partner as a free, rational, contract-making adult who should be aware of the risks that come with having unprotected gay sex.

The neoliberal rhetoric of ‘sex positivity’ can be restrictive and provide legitimate reasoning for sexual coercion and aggression during sex. Due to these risks that may follow the neoliberal perspective, the conception that ‘rough sex’ is better sex should be viewed from a critical lens.

In this section, I introduced the rhetoric of ‘rough sex’ as better sex and discussed the contention around it with existing literature. Even if the statement is true for certain people in specific circumstances, if the rhetoric was to become part of the norm in society, studies suggest that women are at an inordinate risk compared to men due to the disproportional impact of rape myths (Mason & Monckton-Smith, 2008; Weiss, 2009) and sex positivity (Glick, 2000; Snitow et al., 1983). This overall pattern of women being in a more disadvantaged position than their male counterparts continues in the next section, where I discuss the potential issue of normalising ‘rough sex.’

Normalising ‘Rough Sex’

As discussed earlier, there is an increasing international recognition that people are interested in and/or practice ‘rough sex’ acts (Burch & Salmon, 2019; Herbenick et al., 2022; Ryan & Nohr, 2005; Savanta ComRes, 2019; Vera-Gray et al., 2021; Vogel & O’Sullivan, 2019). If ‘rough sex’ acts trend and become part of what is socially considered a normal part of sex in Aotearoa, New Zealand, as Beres et al. (2020) suggested, there can be some dangerous consequences. From the criminal legal standpoint, ‘rough sex’ can be utilised as a new strategy to normalise men’s aggression and violence against women. In the context of wider heterosexual interactions, normalising new sexual behaviours in Aotearoa, New Zealand, has resulted in harmful consequences for women. The new sexual behaviours I will discuss are heterosexual anal sex and men sending unsolicited ‘dick pics’

to women. In the end, I will outline a particular risk that can follow normalising the ‘rough sex’ act, choking.

Normalising ‘rough sex’ acts and/or concepts can disadvantage women in the courtroom after the women have been exposed to a different degree of violence or sexual assault perpetrated by men (Bows & Herring, 2020; Edwards, 2020; Monckton Smith, 2020; Yardley, 2021). Normalising ‘rough sex’ can reconstruct violence and control as a ‘rape game’ or ‘play fighting’, diminishing the seriousness of harmful actions, which was evident in instances of rape, murder, and manslaughter cases that used the ‘rough sex defence’ (Edwards, 2020). Edwards (2020) argued that women could be framed as desiring violence and liking everything men do. Similarly, after examining many ‘sex game gone wrong’ defence strategies in homicide cases in Great Britain, Yardley (2021) claimed that normalising BDSM activities allowed socially acceptable sexual scripts that male defendants could use regardless of the nature of their relationship with the murdered women. Edwards (2020) proposed that the ‘rough sex defence’ is simply an addition to the pre-existing trend of blaming women for men’s violence against women in the context of intimate partner violence. She stated that previously, men used excuses like suspected or actual female infidelity or men’s claims that a woman made them lose control, or that she was mentally unstable (Edwards, 2020). The damaging ramification in the criminal law context raises a question of how the ‘rough sex’ concept can be used in day-to-day life. The previous pattern of normalising other new sexual behaviours can help gauge what may happen as ‘rough sex’ gains more interest and attention.

In Aotearoa, New Zealand, studies examining the normalisation of new sexual behaviours discussed the detrimental consequences of normalisation, and ‘rough sex’ may follow a similar pattern. For example, women’s accounts in Faustino and Gavey’s (2021) study showed that the perceived normalisation of heterosexual anal sex affected their

engagement in unwanted heterosexual anal sex. Women used to have cultural support to resist unwanted heterosexual anal sex when it was considered taboo, but now, the emerging norm creates pressure for women to be sexually adventurous (Faustino & Gavey, 2021). The study found that even when there was an absence of explicit interpersonal coercion, women reported being affected by sociocultural coercion—coercion by social expectations, dominant beliefs, and normative assumptions—that complemented interpersonal coercion. Hence, normalisation and therefore mainstreaming of heterosexual anal sex allowed men—if they wanted to—to coerce women to receive anal sex with more ease. As Faustino and Gavey (2021) stated, men’s coercion tactics often involved pre-existing traditional heteronormative scripts dominated by male entitlement and female obligation. Mainstreaming of heterosexual anal sex strengthened coercion tactics based on those existing traditional heteronormative scripts because anal sex was already perceived as part of the norm.

Similarly, normalising the act of men sending unsolicited ‘dick pics’ to women can work to pressure women to respond by sharing their own intimate images (Thorburn, 2018; Thorburn et al., 2021). Thorburn (2018) held focus groups with men in Aotearoa, New Zealand, to talk about the act of men sending ‘dick pics’ to women. Men in the study generally agreed that the act of sending ‘dick pics’ was unwanted and unsolicited, and some reported that the act of sending is often in anticipation of receiving women’s intimate images. Also, Thorburn (2018) stated that some men talked about the difference in the weight an intimate picture carries for men and women. For example, women, when they are sent an unsolicited ‘dick pic,’ can find themselves being stuck in a lose-lose situation. If women respond by sending their intimate images, it damages their reputation; if they do not, they risk being exposed to hostility. On the other hand, men can appear more

masculine to male peers when they send ‘dick pics’, and their actions are often dismissed as silly behaviours (Thorburn, 2018).

In another study, they carried out focus groups with teenage women in Aotearoa, New Zealand, talking about sending ‘nudes’ in general (Thorburn et al., 2021). Women in the study talked about ‘dick pics’ being unwanted, unsolicited, and annoying to receive but did not connect it to sexual harassment. Even if some women reported enjoying getting attention from men through receiving unsolicited ‘dick pics’, women’s experiences should not be trivialised (Thorburn et al., 2021). As Keddie (2009) suggested, women are socialised to attend to their appearances and can feel like their femininity is being validated when they receive attention. In trying to understand men’s actions, some women drew on the dominant discourse of male sexual drive—that males naturally have a high sexual drive (Hollway, 1989). Despite unsolicited sending of ‘dick pics’ pressuring women to reciprocate with their own intimate images and exposing women to the risk of either reputational damage or men’s hostility (Thorburn, 2018), by drawing on male sexual drive discourse, men’s unwanted sexual advances can be treated as inevitable (Thorburn et al., 2021). In relation to more general sexual harassment, Conroy (2013) argued that it is important to recognise the performative function of sexual harassment in its role of perpetuating the conceptions like hegemonic masculinity and femininity. Therefore, online sexual harassment, like sending unsolicited ‘dick pics’, is influenced by gender norms while concurrently maintaining the current gendered status quo.

Overall, the consequence of normalising heterosexual anal sex and sending unsolicited ‘dick pics’ was subtle yet identifiable harm to women. In both cases, the seriousness of men’s sexual coercion was minimised because both acts were considered common and part of normal sexual behaviours. If ‘rough sex’ becomes a norm in Aotearoa, New Zealand, it can follow the pattern of trivialising the seriousness of aggression and/or

violence during sex. As a result, the normalisation of ‘rough sex’ might obscure the distinction between sexual violence and ‘just sex’ (Gavey, 2019).

A recent finding is that choking is a relatively common ‘rough sex’ practice and the widely researched risk of the act highlights the danger of normalising this particular ‘rough sex’ act. Herbenick et al.’s (2021a) study with undergraduate students in the United States found that their participants most commonly referred to choking as ‘rough sex’. When their research team examined specific ways that men and women engage in choking during sex, some concerns were raised. For example, men in the study were more likely to be choking women during sex (Herbenick et al., 2021b; Herbenick et al., 2022), exposing women to higher risks of facing lasting consequences. These studies found that personal experiences of incorporating choking during sex were generally perceived as safe by both men and women despite observing physical reactions like gagging, coughing, blurry vision, face changing colours, difficulty breathing and swallowing, and tearing up as the result of being choked (Herbenick et al., 2021b; Herbenick et al., 2022). When examined further, most in both studies did not make any effort to learn about the risks of choking. However, being choked can also result in lasting neuropsychological consequences, such as stroke, loss of consciousness, seizure, motor and speech disorders, paralysis, memory loss, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicidality, traumatic brain injury, and dissociation (Bichard et al., 2020).

Romanticising choking during sex sits paradoxically with the seriousness of non-fatal strangulation in the context of heterosexual intimate partner violence. Strangulation during a sexual assault is most often carried out by an intimate partner, compared to an acquaintance or stranger (Zilkens et al., 2016). Choking is noted as a tactic of coercive control to restrict and control a partner’s liberty (Stark, 2009) and is associated with a higher risk of homicide in intimate partner relationships (Edwards, 2020). These risks are

formally recognised in the Crimes Act 1961 in Aotearoa, New Zealand, as strangulation is considered a more serious crime than other forms of assault (Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2016). Given the serious health risks and dangers of strangulation in the context of heterosexual intimate partner violence, mainstreaming choking in sex raises particular concern for women.

In this section, I demonstrated the dangers of normalising ‘rough sex.’ Much like the previous section, there is a consistent overarching pattern of disproportionate danger to women compared to men. The gendered difference in the existing literature calls for a close examination of gender dynamics in heterosexual in general and ‘rough sex.’

Gender in Sex and ‘Rough Sex’

Feminist scholars have well established that heteronormative rhetoric simultaneously constructs and maintains a disproportionately gendered status quo in heterosexual (see Edwards, 1987; Gavey, 2005). As Jackson (1995) argued, heterosexual activities occur within the wider society where gender hierarchy in heterosexual exists (see also Edwards, 1987). Scholars argue that there is a social expectation for men to be active or in charge, whereas women are seen as passive actors in sex (Edwards, 1987; Downing, 2013; Potts, 1998; Torenz, 2021), and vulnerable to objectification (Edwards, 1987). Many studies also suggest that heteronormative rhetoric underlies unethical sexual practices, too—heterosexism is embedded in sexual harassment (Conroy, 2013), and sexual violence (see Gavey & Senn, 2014).

To outline some of the specific ways that heteronormative rhetoric impacts gender dynamics in heterosexual, I will discuss examples from two studies in more detail—one is on women, and the other is on men. Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) suggested that gendered sexual norms lay the foundation for unwanted sex and in-the-moment

negotiations for women. In their study, the dominant heteronormative discourses like ‘good girlfriends say yes’ and ‘once yes, always yes’ aligned with women’s reasoning for partaking in unwanted sex. These discourses each set the expectation for women to be responsive to men’s sexual needs all the time, and that previous sexual experiences provide grounds for assuming extended consent to future sexual encounters, respectively. Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras (2008) also reported that men attempted to convince women using manipulation and pseudo-logic. In relation to men, Jeffrey and Barata (2020) found that three dominant heteronormative discourses were used by heterosexual men attending university to talk about sexual violence. They reported that heterosexual drive discourse was associated with the rhetoric of biological essentialism like hormones and human biology, which supported men claiming uncontrollable sexual drive (see also Gavey, 2005). Another discourse was the heterosexual initiation and progression discourse, based on an underlying assumption that the natural progression of heterosexual sex ends with intercourse, dismissing the need for verbal communication leading up to it (Jeffrey & Barata, 2020). The last discourse they identified was the heterosexual (mis)communication discourse that men used to frame sexual violence as a result of men’s misinterpretation of ineffective communication. All the discourses discussed above functioned to privilege men’s desires over women’s, reinforcing gendered power imbalances and justifying violent and coercive practices.

Many studies found that gendered power imbalances differentially impact how men and women experience heterosexual encounters. As Gavey (2005) conceptualised, heteronormative sex exists in a continuum between what society accepts as ‘just sex’ and sexual assault. Due to the heteronormative constructions of sex, even when women ‘give’ consent, it can be a result of sexual coercion (Gavey, 2019)—which is what Waldner-Haugrud (1999) conceptualises as pressuring one to be involved in unwanted sexual

activities. Therefore, in the grey area between ‘just sex’ and sexual assault lies unwanted sexual experiences that do not quite fit into what society accepts as sexual assault, including coerced but consensual sex. Metz (2021) suggests that the grey area is broader than originally conceptualised as men in her study, with university students reporting deliberately avoiding asking for explicit consent, stopping then trying again after non-consent, and pressuring until getting a ‘yes’. Men in her study reported feeling entitled to sex, especially after investing time, money, and attention or simply being in a relationship.

Women in Metz’s (2021) study, on the other hand, reported struggling to be assertive, postponing saying no, and downplaying conflicts felt under pressure. It was found that women tended to prepare for this kind of sexual pressure and made strategies to protect each other in male-dominated spaces like dating apps or parties. Some of the strategies they used were learning self-defence tactics, avoiding going out, having a buddy system, and monitoring each other’s drinks. As such, vigilance against sexual pressure or unwanted sexual encounters was normalised for women, aligning with Hlavka’s (2014) claim that women expect to experience a certain level of unwanted sexual attention. Societal norms are especially detrimental because they can foster gendered power imbalances in subtle ways. For example, women in Metz’s (2021) study also reported consenting to unwanted sex in the absence of direct coercion or pressure as they felt like they owed male partners sex, wanted to avoid conflict or earn their partner’s affection.

Other studies also found that women consent to unwanted choking during sex (Herbenick et al., 2022), sex in general (Gavey, 2019; Impett & Peplau, 2002), heterosexual anal sex (Faustino & Gavey, 2021), and BDSM activities (Beres & MacDonald, 2015). Such sexual compliance displayed by women shows the continued socialisation of gender norms in heterosex, including focusing on males' desires and hiding women’s desires (Fahs et al., 2015). This aligns with Cahill’s (2014) statement that when

women feel pressured, they may consider that agreeing to unwanted sexual activities can be the least bad option available for them. Cahill (2014) argued that heterosex occurs in the context of gendered power imbalances, which enables normalisation of men's use of sexual coercion against women. Fahs and Swank (2021) argue that gendered power imbalances and heteronormative rhetoric are relevant because a possible reason for why women may agree to unwanted sexual activities could be because of the emotional labour that women endure due to sociocultural obligation to fulfil men's desires.

The heteronormative rhetoric also affects the ways men attempt to justify sexual violence and rape (Jeffrey & Barata, 2019; Scully, 1990). Jeffrey and Barata (2019) suggested that male university students who reported instances of using sexual violence in their intimate relationships and convicted rapists showed similar patterns of discourse to account for their actions. The first pattern displayed was the tendency not to deny sexual violence but normalising it using the male sexual drive and have/hold discourses. The second pattern displayed was denying and minimising their use of sexual violence by using discourse around typical rape and consent. For example, men suggested the absence of physical violence or male ejaculation as a failure to meet the 'real rape' criteria and therefore denied that it was rape. Regarding consent, men talked about the underlying assumption that anything other than explicit 'no' is negotiable. Jeffrey and Barata (2019) noted that this rhetoric mirrored the justification used by convicted rapists, which are 'admitters' and 'deniers', respectively (Scully, 1990). The similarities further support the idea that discourse around normal heterosexual practices determine which sexual acts will be socially accepted and sit between the continuum of 'just sex' and sexual violence (Gavey, 2005).

Though the above literature presented men as having greater social power in heterosex, many studies found that hegemonic masculinity can socially coerce them to opt

for harmful ways of being a man. Past literature has associated the normative conception of masculinity with power, control, and aggression (see Edwards, 1987; Gavey & Senn, 2014; Potts, 1998), which may relate to why aggression and/or violence are romanticised in ‘rough sex’. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant and normalised form of masculinity, and is characterised by dominance and control over women, toughness, and heterosexuality (Jewkes et al., 2015). Studies have shown that men’s attempts to obtain or maintain such masculinity require efforts to prove that they can dominate and control women, that they are tough, and that they are heterosexual. For example, Stark (2009) proposed that abusive men use coercive control and intimate partner violence to gain back their sense of control and masculine identity in their personal life. In Hlavka’s (2017) study, some of the boys who were raped felt that their masculine identity was threatened, and compensated for this by showing aggression and degrading homosexuality. Another example is so-called ‘hogging’, which refers to men intentionally sleeping with the fattest girl they can find to humiliate women and tell stories aggressively and regain masculinity (Prohaska & Gailey, 2010). In support of the above examples, a meta-analysis of quantitative studies about masculinity proposed that hostile masculinity and hypermasculinity are strongly associated with sexual aggression (Murnen et al., 2002). These findings suggest that the normative conception of masculinity can encourage men to act in detrimental ways in various contexts, including during sex. Rather than using the existing literature on the harmful impacts of masculinity to be prejudiced against the male participants, they should instead be used to inform the wider sociocultural context in which men live their day-to-day life.

More specifically relating to ‘rough sex’, Herbenick et al. (2022) suggested that choking is closely related to stereotypically expected and desired masculine behaviour during sex—reflecting one’s confidence and strength. Most women in their study attributed male partners’ arousal following choking women during sex to feeling powerful and

dominant. Herbenick et al. (2022) suggested that masculinity is so tightly linked with ‘rough sex’ that when roughness is exerted on men by women, they can feel emasculated. Though most women in the study reported being choked by men during sex, women stated that they rarely choked their male sexual partners. When women were asked why they had not choked their male sexual partners, some reported feeling like they would not be able to elicit the same sense of danger or excitement due to the size or strength differences, and some felt that they lacked dominance (Herbenick et al., 2022). This suggests that the appeal of choking is less to do with the simple effects of occluding blood vessels during choking, as most women can apply such force, with choking known to require less force than opening a can of drink (Herbenick et al., 2022). Therefore, social norms about gender may establish what would be a more normative or acceptable action to take or receive in a ‘rough sex’ context. As outlined in this section, sexual practices, especially ones between men and women, are inevitably impacted by heteronormative rhetoric, power imbalances, and gender norms. The next section will examine communication and consent practices, which again follows the consistent pattern in other literature of disproportionate gender dynamics.

Communication and Consent

Early research on heterosexual sexual communication argued that sexual violence occurred due to miscommunication between men and women (Tannen, 1990). More specifically, the miscommunication theory suggests that men tend to think women are interested in sex when they are not, and that women say ‘no’ to sexual activities when they actually want to say ‘yes’ (Beres, 2010). In contrast, both men and women in Beres’ (2010) study reported detailed accounts of detecting subtle cues and behaviours—such as breathing, keeping close proximity, and moaning—to gauge their sexual partners’

willingness to have sex. Currently, a lot of literature and a general understanding of ethical sexual communication is centred on the notion of consent (Beres, 2007).

Beres (2007) examined the available literature on sexual consent and found a common problem with consent. She stated that the concept is often treated as holding a commonly shared understanding in the absence of critical consideration of the historical and sociocultural contexts that it is situated in. As a consequence, Beres (2007) showed that scholars make assumptions about consent—for example, that women are supposed to ‘give’ consent to men—and use the term consent to refer to different practices—like physical or mental action—without explicitly defining the term. The ambiguity of consent in literature lies concurrently with the alleged explicit and clear advocacy for consent. Internationally, there is a tendency for legislation, policies, and educational campaigns to emphasise affirmative sexual consent—commonly known as ‘yes means yes,’ where consent is dependent on the explicit agreement as opposed to the absence of refusal (Beres, 2018; Shumlich & Fisher, 2018; Torenz, 2021).

However, there is debate regarding the value of advocating for affirmative consent. Pateman (1980) argued that historically, consent practices support existing gender dynamics—that, aligning with male sexual drive (Hollway, 1989), women are only allowed to either agree or reject the sexual terms provided by men. Shumlich and Fisher (2018) found that when they asked undergraduate students in London to describe their sexual experiences, the majority described that sexual consent was implied, ambiguous, indirect, and sometimes absent. They alluded to the possibility that people may know about affirmative consent but not enact it in practice in their interpersonal sexual interactions. Torenz (2021) warned of the risk that affirmative consent advocacy carries for women. He conceptualised that affirmative consent is simultaneously too liberal—with the assumption that individuals are ‘free’ to express what they want during sex despite gendered power

imbalances—and not liberal enough—as women need to respond to men, again reinforcing gendered power imbalances. Despite contention around consent-based sexual education, which includes educating about affirmative consent, educators and activists in Beres’ study (2020) argued that consent education may still be beneficial. Some suggested benefits of consent education include: helping victimised people and bystanders recognise harmful sexual behaviours and seek support earlier; creating an opportunity to have an open conversation and raise awareness of what ethical sexual behaviour is; and educating young people who can contribute to a wider shift in societal norms (Beres, 2020).

Though efforts have been made to advocate for affirmative consent during sex, studies suggest that this is not well-practiced. In a recent study, cis-gendered male and female university students reported that most negotiations around sexual consent were ambiguous and helped normalise sexual assault (Metz, 2021). Male university students in her study in the United States tended to rely on silence and ‘body language’ instead of affirmative consent for their sexual consent. More specifically, with choking (a ‘rough sex’ act), a study carried out with women attending a university in the United States revealed that most were choked by their partners, who were primarily male, without consent (Herbenick et al., 2022). They found that explicit verbal consent was rare, and when consent was sought, it was often through non-verbal communication, such as gestures and facial expressions. A new category of assumed consent was discussed, which composed of two parts: ‘assumed because normal’ and ‘assumed because of prior knowledge’ (Herbenick et al., 2022). The first category referred to instances of women not perceiving their experiences of being choked as non-consensual despite the absence of any communication of consent. The latter category involved the assumption of consent due to prior conversations, interest in other ‘rough sex’ activities, slow build-up of the pressure of choking, or when the couple regularly uses choking during sex and do not discuss explicitly

each time. Even the women who reported they currently enjoy being choked during sex reported that most of their initial experiences occurred without prior communication or consent and were uncomfortable, scary, or in hindsight, part of an unhealthy relationship (Herbenick et al., 2022). The lack of normative consensual practices for choking during sex is especially concerning due to the neuropsychological risks of the activity, as outlined earlier (Richard et al., 2020). Given the general lack of a detailed understanding of risks in men and women's experiences of choking during sex (Herbenick et al., 2021b; Herbenick et al., 2022), ensuring the 'ideal' form of explicit, verbal, affirmative consent may not ensure ethical sexual practices as either party may not be fully informed of the risks.

On the contrary, many aspects of 'rough sex', like aggression and violence, are part of BDSM practices, however the BDSM community is often known for their culture of requiring explicit consent. Some prominent acronyms used in the BDSM community are SSC (safe, sane, and consensual practice), and RACK (risk-aware consensual kink) (Barker, 2013; Beres & MacDonald, 2015). In Beres and MacDonald's (2015) study, women actively involved in the BDSM community reported feeling safer and more powerful in their sexual experiences within BDSM communities compared to their experiences in 'vanilla' relationships where most have had unwanted sexual experiences. They also said that it is expected that when a person is taking a dominant role, they have the duty of care for the person in a submissive role, meaning previously established boundaries and safe words need to be respected.

Nevertheless, as mentioned previously, literature suggests that the BDSM community are not immune to consent issues (Barker, 2013; Beres & MacDonald, 2015). According to Barker (2013), there is an increasing online awareness about occurrences of unwanted submissive sexual experiences for women within BDSM communities. Beres and MacDonald (2015) suggested that even within the BDSM community, consent practices

cannot be perfect because sexual consent involves nuanced and implicit communication. The ethical practice of consent would require acknowledging limits on freedom of choice and navigating power relations. In their study, some women who are a part of BDSM communities still reported consenting to unwanted sexual activities by not communicating their inclination to withdraw. As there is an overarching assumption of consent both to the activities and the risks that may follow, any adverse consequences of the sexual interaction become individual responsibility. An outsider can also be hesitant to challenge questionable behaviours. They also discussed that promoting the idea of ‘anything goes as long as it’s consensual’ in BDSM communities is problematic because it overlooks the wider context in which people are making choices. There is an assumption of free choice despite existing constraints in social structure and discourses that influence individuals. Overall, BDSM can be seen as having the potential to both act as a means to challenge existing heteropatriarchal power relations in sex by allowing women to have more power and ensuring negotiation of consent, whilst also reinforcing the existing problematic culture of violence by making it more legitimate for men to use violence against women.

The ideal method of ensuring ethical sexual practice may not be about consent at all (Barker, 2013). She argued that given force, control, pressure, persuasion, and manipulation are so prevalent in wider aspects of people’s lives, it is difficult to insist on consent in sexual contexts. Barker (2013) argued therefore that improving consent culture is a collective responsibility for making available the narratives where communication and negotiation happen, and where people tune into each other’s feelings, while recognizing the power and cultural dynamics in play. Similarly, Fredricsen’s (2018) suggested that sexual activities should be about openly communicating desire and boundaries with an underlying respect for one another.

Overall, the literature on sexual communication and consent alludes to limitations of dichotomous consent practices, yet suggests that it is still a dominant way of distinguishing between ethical and unethical sex. The overarching theme in the literature is of a disproportionate sociocultural impact and social positioning for women compared to men.

Rationale for Thesis

Currently, though there is limited literature examining nuances in ‘rough sex’ concepts and practices, the existing literature and media stories described earlier call for a need for further research in the area. The focus of ‘rough sex’ practices in this thesis is not on the experiences that fall under rape or sexual assault. However, I am informed by the relatively parallel rise of the ‘rough sex’ defence argument in Mr Kempson’s case and other media reports of potential issues with ‘rough sex’, and the possible mainstreaming of ‘rough sex’ acts in Aotearoa, New Zealand. I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the possible implications of the current use of the concept and practice of ‘rough sex.’

In this thesis, I aim to explore nuanced insight into how men perceive, understand, and talk about ‘rough sex’ in general, as well as their own desires and/or experiences of ‘rough sex.’ The particular foci of the research are: (1) whether gender politics or gender dynamics are considered as important in ‘rough sex’ as past literature suggests and (2) how men depict communication within ‘rough sex.’ To examine my research questions, I conducted in-depth, individual, semi-structured interviews with men.

Chapter 2: Methodology

For this research, I conducted 12 semi-structured, individual interviews with men living in Aotearoa, New Zealand, about ‘rough sex.’ My interest was in identifying and examining interpretative repertoires men commonly drew on to describe and account for their views and personal experiences of engaging in ‘rough sex.’ Therefore, I only recruited men who had experiences of ‘rough sex’ with other men and/or women.

My thesis research is situated within a wider research project, ‘The RS Study’, consisting of three separate studies: an online survey, one interview study with men, and one with women. Though all participants were recruited through the online survey, the current thesis only examines data gathered from the interview study with men. The ethics approval for all the studies in the research project was granted on 24 June 2021 by the University of Auckland Ethics Committee (UAHPEC22374).

Participants and Recruitment

As discussed above, I recruited the participants via an online survey. The link to the online survey was primarily advertised through an article published by a New Zealand media outlet, Stuff NZ (Duff, 2021), based on an interview with the leading researcher of the wider research team, Professor Nicola Gavey. The article outlined the use of the ‘rough sex’ defence argument used by Jesse Kempson’s legal team and associated it with the possible normalisation of ‘rough sex’ acts like slapping and choking. The hyperlink to the survey was included in the article.

To further publicise the survey, we utilised social media and word of mouth. The research team asked the Twitter account for the School of Psychology at the University of Auckland (@PsychUoA) to post about the survey with the link (see Appendix A). We created a Facebook page where we shared a link to the article (see Appendix B). The team

reached out to friends to encourage them to share with their other social groups and post the article on their social media.

Our research team created the survey using Qualtrics, an online software suited for developing online questionnaires. Professor Nicola Gavey led the construction of the online survey, whilst myself and two other students in the research project collaborated with her. The survey consisted of 32 questions, including multiple choice questions, questions that asked respondents to choose from a scale of zero to ten, and some open-ended questions with text boxes that respondents could write into. The initial set of questions ensured only people who meet the inclusion criteria could continue—those who live in Aotearoa, New Zealand and are over 18 years old. Generally, the survey aimed to collect data from a relatively large number of people for a preliminary finding of what ‘rough sex’ entails, and what contributes to consequences of unwanted ‘rough sex.’ At the end of the survey, those who indicated that they are men and have had ‘rough sex’ experiences were invited to come in for individual interviews (see Appendix C). They had the option of making contact with our research by email or phone number themselves or leaving their contact details. The first option was put in to provide an option for their survey response to be anonymised and not identifiable by the research team. The online survey was active from 12 July 2021 to 20 August 2021. Of the 832 responses received, 464 had full responses, and 368 were blank. Within the 464 full responses, 438 met the inclusion criteria (see Kaur, 2022, for further information about the online survey).

Out of all the respondents to the survey, 118 identified as men, and 19 men provided their contact details, showing interest in being interviewed. One participant sent an email directly to the research email address instead of leaving his contact details at the end of the survey. One potential participant left comments in the survey, being hostile towards the research, and the decision was made not to reach out to that participant for

safety reasons. At the end of the survey, he said that the media release was “highly judgemental” and that the research is “but[ting] into what consenting adults do in the privacy of their own homes.” He said, “I sincerely hope this bites both the university and that professor in the ass when funding is reviewed in the future.” I contacted all other prospective participants by email or text, depending on the contact that they provided. Emails were sent to 18 men whom I had the email address for, and I asked them to read the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix D), and double-checked that they met the inclusion criteria (see the next paragraph for how the criteria were changed). Twelve of those men agreed to partake in the interview after reviewing the Participant Information Sheet. Though I aimed to recruit 20 participants initially, 12 is an adequate number of participants for this study because the qualitative data extracted from the interviews were in-depth and within the typical range of 10-20 interviews for a medium-sized project based on individual interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Initially, the inclusion criteria were men who are 18 years or over, fluent in English, living in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and have had a personal experience of having what would be included under the rubric of ‘rough sex’ with one or more women. At the end of the survey, all men were invited to an interview regardless of their sexuality—because there is still a possibility that they may have had ‘rough sex’ experiences with women. I had not considered the possibility that gay men without ‘rough sex’ experiences with women could potentially express their interest in being interviewed, too. In the end, four gay men left their contact details. I consulted with the wider research team and decided to invite them to the interviews because we did not want to disregard their expressions of interest. I informed them that the research was initially targeted towards men who had ‘rough sex’ experiences with women due to my research interest in the gender dynamics of ‘rough sex,’ but I would still appreciate an opportunity for them to talk about their

experiences and views. After the disclosure, two men who identified as gay agreed to be interviewed.

Recruitment for the interview-based study with men was solely reliant on the online survey due to a concern that spreading recruitment flyers on the university campus or wider community has the potential to contribute to the possible normalisation of ‘rough sex.’ We did not wish to use the term ‘rough sex’ in the context of natural and/or normal ways of having sex, risking perpetuating mainstreaming of ‘rough sex’ concepts and/or practices. This was contrary to the use of the term ‘rough sex’ in recruitment notices for recruiting women in the other interview-based study for ‘The RS Study’ because the notices specifically asked for women who have had unwanted experiences of ‘rough sex’ (see Kaur, 2022 for the recruitment notices for women’s study).

I gave all the participants an option to choose from either in-person or online interviews, to include those for whom it was not feasible to come to the University of Auckland. For those who opted for in-person interviews, the Consent Form (see Appendix E) was provided before the interviews for them to sign in person. Others were emailed a Consent Form for them to sign before the online interviews and sent a link to a Zoom meeting closer to the interview day. After the interviews, I offered the participants the choice between fuel, supermarket, or other online vouchers like Farmers or Bunnings Warehouse, all valued at \$20. I either sent vouchers via post or emailed online vouchers to those who could not attend in person.

Before the interview, I asked all participants to complete demographic information (see Appendix F). For those participating in a Zoom interview, I shared my screen to show the demographic questionnaire and went through each question with them as I typed the answers in the document. Those who came to the in-person interview were given the

demographic form to fill out. Participants' age ranged from 24 to 55 years old, with an average of 36 years of age. To be more specific, I will list the participants' age in numerical order—24, 25, 27, 29, 29, 32, 39, 40, 41, 44, 47, and 55. With regards to their sexuality, seven men identified as heterosexual, two as bisexual, two as gay, and one as “heteroflexible.” Only one participant was not currently in a relationship. For their highest education, one completed secondary education, and others had some level of tertiary education, four of whom had postgraduate level education. Two were unemployed, one was a full-time student, and the rest had full-time jobs. In terms of ethnicity, eight participants stated that they were New Zealand European, whereas four said that they were Māori and New Zealand European.

Interview

Semi-structured individual interviews were carried out from 24 July 2021 to 29 November 2021. I interviewed three participants in person and nine on Zoom, two of which were without the video as per the interviewees' wishes. The semi-structured interview method was chosen because it is a suitable method for encouraging rich and detailed responses of their understanding, perceptions, and construction of the topic (Smith, 1995). There were no noticeable differences between the interviews carried out in-person compared to online. Initially, I was worried that there might be other people present or that I might lose control of the data as the interview may be recorded by the interviewees. However, I did not notice any signs to indicate that there were other people present, and I am not aware of any instances where the interviewee recorded the interview. When I was doing the Zoom interviews without the video, I was wary that they could not see my facial expressions and body language like nodding, so I used more verbal acknowledgments like “Mm” to indicate that I was listening compared to the other interviews.

Online and telephone interviews are different types of interviews, not inferior substitutes (Hay-Gibson, 2009; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004). In my research, there were some benefits of doing the interviews online. An obvious benefit was the situation that Aotearoa, New Zealand, was in due to regulations imposed by the government and the University of Auckland regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. A particularly significant regulation was the lockdown of Aotearoa, New Zealand, from 17 August 2021, which continued to 2 December for Auckland. The University of Auckland only allowed authorised personnel to enter the campus premises during these time periods, and in-person interviews were no longer feasible. Two participants were willing to wait until the lockdown finished, but the government announced the extension of the lockdown a few times per month, and there were a lot of uncertainties about when it would end. When it was close to the end of the year, due to the limited time on a one-year masters research project, we decided to ask them if their interviews could be carried out online instead. They both agreed to an online interview instead. By giving the participants the option to do the interview online, I was allowed to negotiate to conduct the interviews safely during the periods when the public's anxiety about Covid-19 was high. Some of the advantages of conducting online interviews were being able to interview those residing outside of Auckland, fostering a better environment to disclose sensitive information by letting people participate from a location of their choice where they can be more comfortable, and allowing more anonymity during the interview if they chose to not turn on the video, which all align with Braun and Clarke's (2013) overview of the advantages in conducting interviews virtually.

I conducted all in-person and five Zoom interviews in a University of Auckland interview room, and four Zoom interviews were completed in a private room in my house as I was either not allowed or not encouraged to go into the University of Auckland

premises due to Covid-19 restrictions. Carrying out in-person interviews at the University of Auckland premises ensured safety for me as a woman interviewing men individually in a private room as I could call the security guards if required. The interview duration ranged from 55 minutes to 1 hour and 54 minutes, with an average time of 1 hour and 25 minutes. The interview duration refers to the time spent asking and answering the interview questions, which was the only part recorded. Before the commencement of the interview, I thanked them for their time and introduced myself and the research. For the in-person interviews, I gave them the option to sit on different types of chairs and offered them refreshments. I engaged in small talk, encouraged all participants to ask any questions about the interview or the study, and ensured participants knew that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time during the interview. I provided them with the Participant Information Sheet in case they wanted to reread it. After checking to see if the participants were ready to start the interview, I showed them the recording device and announced the recording of the interview. After I started voice-recording, I asked them to verbally state that they had read the Consent Form and agreed to the terms.

As I started the interview, I used the interview guide (see Appendix G) as a general guideline and tailored the questions by repeating terms that the participant used, and matched the formality of the participant's speech while adding probing and follow-up questions. Generally, I positioned myself as an ignorant interviewer treating the participants. Some participants said that they were not sure if they had views typical of the men in New Zealand who have 'rough sex', so I assured them that I was interested in hearing their views and that there is no correct way to think. I encouraged participants to do most of the talking by using silence and indicating that I was actively listening by nodding and saying 'Mm.' In general, I tried to maintain the position of being interested, but not

empathetic (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Still, I sometimes made statements like ‘I get what you mean’ or ‘That’s really interesting’ or agreed with their statements in the process of building trust and rapport. At the end of the interviews, I offered a support services/resource information card (Appendix H) to men who disclosed unwanted sexual experiences and encouraged them to reach out if they needed any support after the interview.

The interview guide consisted of questions informed by the existing literature. I had four main topics that I divided the questions into—the general concept of ‘rough sex,’ personal experiences, social context and identity, and gendered aspects. I also prepared a hypothetical scenario in case the participants were not open to talking about the details of their personal experiences to make it easier for them to talk about the sensitive topic. When I used this scenario, I followed up with various questions asking their views on the characters’ behaviours. Several mock interviews were carried out with the research team and with family and friends to test the clarity and flow of the interview questions.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by me. In the transcription, I used a comma [,] for a short pause in the speech, two full stops [..] to indicate a longer pause, and I wrote ‘pause’ in the square brackets [pause] to indicate a long silence. The square bracket was also used to signify laughter, sighs, and other actions. For the purposes of this research, I did not include fine-grain details like duration of change or tonal change because my primary analytic interest was in men’s accounts, discourses, and repertoires. In the extracts, I used three full stops [...] to indicate the areas where I omitted parts of the data.

Efforts were made to keep the participants’ identities anonymous. I used index codes with M to indicate male and an interview number such as M1 to protect their anonymity. Also, I did not include other identifying features like unique combinations of experiences,

ethnicity, and membership in certain groups. To further protect participants' identities, I did not connect all demographic information to each code and only included information directly related to the analysis.

Analytic Approach

In analysing the interview transcripts, I use discourse analysis, specifically based on the approach outlined by Potter and Wetherell (1987). Discourse analysis research uses discourse as the data and thereby focuses on examining specific language's purposes and consequences (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). The basis of this analysis is the post-structural framework in the way that I understand people's knowledge and perception of their experiences to be shaped through historically and culturally specific language (Burr, 2015; Gavey, 1989). Hence language is not a neutral medium for retrieving 'true' accounts but a context-specific resource that is performative in achieving some form of function (Edley, 2001; Gavey, 1989). On the one hand, people are able to choose a different range of linguistic resources to construct a particular version of events or identity, and create particular discourse (Billig, 1991; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). On the other hand, Billig suggests particular options are more normalised and easier to access; hence the more readily available discourses carry more power to shape how people understand, perceive, and talk about the world. In other words, discourses can be both constructive and constitutive. Aligning with the post-structural perspective, I do not treat participants' talk as purely descriptive of what they 'truly' believe or think. As Weatherall et al. (2002) expressed, the aim of this kind of discourse analysis is not necessarily to 'represent' the participants but rather to focus on cultural analysis and critique.

Within the field of discursive psychology, I use the interpretative repertoire developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987). My analytic interest is the interpretative

repertoires taken up by men in their accounts of talking about ‘rough sex’. Interpretative repertoires are culturally shared linguistic building blocks that are recurrently used to construct people’s versions of events, and they are often based on specific metaphors, certain tropes, and figures of speech (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Edley (2001) describes interpretative repertoires as “books on the shelves of a public library, permanently available for borrowing” (p.198). In this sense, Edley suggests interpretative repertoires are socioculturally available resources for a particular community’s shared language, accessible by all. These repertoires can be used for different purposes suited for various contexts in combination with different repertoires to construct a particular way of communicating socially and thinking privately (Edley, 2001). This method of discourse analysis does not necessarily deny the possible existence of individual mental states but acknowledges that the material available for analysis is the language one uses (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). As Wetherell (1998) claimed, the subject positions of individuals are highly dependent on different occasions, and their accountability is what motivates them to take up that specific position. Hence, variation is expected in speakers’ talk even within an interview, and it is considered a consequence of a particular function that language serves (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). As part of my analysis, I was able to identify contradictions in the interpretative repertoires that participants drew on, and possible functions will be discussed in the following analysis chapters.

Analytic Process

Wetherell and Potter (1988) explained that the discourse analysis is “...not a matter of following rules or recipes; it often involves following hunches and the development of tentative interpretative schemes which may need to be abandoned or revised” (p.177).

Hence, initially, I focused on any “hunches” that I received from the interviews.

Subsequent to each interview, I made notes about anything that seemed potentially

important and interesting for the analysis, then wrote a summary of each interview and emailed it to my supervisor. The wider research team had weekly meetings and regular email correspondence to listen to parts of audio recordings to discuss the potential analytic significance, discuss feedback on interviewing skills and potential areas of interest, and make changes to interview questions. I transcribed the interviews as soon as I was able to, and the written transcriptions were read and re-read for familiarisation. As Edley (2001) stated, when the researchers start to sense familiarity within different participants' interviews, they are feeling the 'discursive terrain' (p.199)—the linguistic patterns of what can potentially be developed into an interpretative repertoire. After completing eight interviews, I started noticing some patterns in the participants' talk. I coded the data according to common patterns by extracting potentially relevant parts of the transcripts into a separate document, then organising them according to different patterns. As Wetherell and Potter (1988) argued, the analysis process should be inclusive of uncertain or borderline extracts, which should, in time, be pruned according to the recurring patterns. To ensure coherence of the components that construct interpretative repertoires, I organised the patterns into a visual mind map to create an overview of what the analysis might look like. As I immersed myself in the transcripts, I noticed contradictions in participants' data, both within the interview of the same participants and between different ones. Ideology and thinking are social and "reproduced as an incomplete set of contrary themes, which continually give rise to discussion, argumentation, and dilemmas" (Billig et al., 1988, p.6). I unpack these opposing themes in the form of interpretative repertoires in the analysis chapters.

Each analysis chapter addresses two relatively contradicting interpretative repertoires in relation to gender and consent, discussing possible functions at the interpersonal level and wider implications. The first chapter illustrates interpretative

repertoires participants drew on regarding the (ir)relevance of gender in sex and ‘rough sex.’ When men talked about their own relationships, experiences of ‘rough sex’, and their general views on gender, they often suggested that gender is not a relevant aspect of ‘rough sex.’ On the other hand, many of the same men who drew on the first repertoire suggested that gender was, in fact, relevant. I examine how men make sense of the relevance or irrelevance of gender and what function each repertoire serves in various contexts.

In the second chapter, I outline the repertoires of communication and consent in ‘rough sex.’ Whilst all men talked about consent and communication as a crucial part of ‘rough sex’, most men also talked about instances in their own personal experiences where consent was not obtained, or conversation was ambiguous or absent. I discuss the implication of each repertoire and its discrepancy.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an important part of qualitative research for critical thinking to map out the contexts in which the research was carried out (Lazard & McAvoy, 2017). Lazard and McAvoy stated that it involves the researchers questioning and reflecting on researchers’ assumptions and knowledge-making processes with consideration of wider contexts in which the research is conducted. I will outline some of the relevant reflections I have had as a researcher for this thesis.

I found it challenging to talk about my research topic to other people. I did not want to take the position of condemning ‘rough sex’ practices in general, nor did I want to be viewed as supporting it. Even now, after having completed the interviews and written the thesis, I still acknowledge that there would be people engaging in wanted ‘rough sex’ without causing any harm to others. However, when I was talking about my thesis topic to my friends and family, I tended to talk about the practice in a negative way. I built up the

introduction of the thesis topic with the high-profile case of Jesse Kempson, where the so-called 'rough sex' defence was used for murder, as discussed in Chapter 1. Then, I explained that is why my topic is on men's personal experiences and perspectives of 'rough sex.' Referring to a criminal case made it easier for me to talk about the thesis topic because I felt that I needed a narrative like Mr Kempson's case to undoubtedly assert the seriousness of the topic. When I was meeting new people, I found myself avoiding divulging the topic of my thesis by just saying, "I'm studying a Masters in psychology," and when they asked specifically about the topic of my thesis, I avoided using the term, 'rough sex', and chose a vague explanation like "gender psychology". This was because I was worried that people might judge me for studying a contentious topic, wary of the possibility that the topic might be trivialised by jokes.

When I started interviewing the participants and hearing their stories, I increasingly felt discomfort in presenting the accounts provided by the participants critically. I viewed them as ordinary people making sense of 'rough sex' with the language available to them. Many participants shared some of my views, like concerns about unethical 'rough sex' practices, women's unwanted experiences of 'rough sex,' and gender expectations that impact men negatively. It is my intention to treat them with respect, and I do not wish to violate their trust in me and this research. Nevertheless, informed consent in qualitative research is often open-ended consent to the broad research interests because researchers are not aware of the final form of analysis or definite research question (Weatherall et al., 2002). In other words, "...the notion of 'informed consent' is always inevitably a shorthand promise for an abridged information package" (Weatherall et al., 2002, p 534). Therefore, neither the participants nor I could have known which parts of the interviews the analysis would direct towards. I emphasise that any critical statements that I make in this thesis are towards the general linguistic patterns, not the individual participants.

The linguistic patterns people draw upon are not considered a ‘true’ or ‘real’ representation of participants’ beliefs or thoughts. As Wetherell and Potter (1988) stated, interpretative repertoires are considered social resources available for everyone who shares a culture and language. Also, they stated that, though interpretative repertoires can have wider social implications and consequences outside of the specific situations, interviews, in this case, these social implications and consequences may be unintended by the speakers. People may have drawn on the repertoires at unconscious and unintentional levels, and they could have been talking about things in ways that they feel are appropriate and natural to each situation (Burr, 2015). As for the instances where the participants used dominant discourses, it should be noted that they should be considered as a shared cultural product, rather than treating them as statements of truth (Weatherall et al., 2002).

As an interviewer, I was an outsider in the way that men talk about personal experiences and perspectives on ‘rough sex,’ which may have influenced what interviewees chose to include in their accounts. As Braun and Clarke (2013) outlined, outsider status refers to when the researcher does not share a specific group identity with the participants, and the most distinctively different group identity would be gender in this case. Most of the participants conveyed general comfort throughout the interviews, especially when I made a comment acknowledging that it would have been difficult to disclose experiences that are largely considered private. At the start of the interview, I reminded interviewees that they did not have to answer the questions if they did not feel comfortable and at the end of the interview, I asked if there was anything uncomfortable in the interview. However, I noticed some moments of hesitance in providing more details or using specific terms that they may consider obscene. For example, while describing his personal experience of having ‘rough sex’, one participant said, “I – basically we were in a – we are having sex.. and – how much detail do you want?” When I assured him that he could say whatever he was comfortable

with, he said, “Ok, look, just stop me if it’s going a little bit too far.” He then provided more details of the encounter—instances like this show that I would have affected participants’ language choices. However, I did not view this as a potential ‘bias’ in the research. This concept is considered a problem in positivist research because they believe that if the researcher influences the results, the validity of the data is questioned. Instead, I took on the social constructionist point of view on language and knowledge, where knowledge is constructed through daily interactions between people who share a culture and a language (Burr, 2015). Hence, the very act of using language serves functions and constructs different versions of ‘real’ experiences (Edley, 2001), and people use various interpretative repertoires differently depending on the purpose of each moment (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Therefore, in dyadic conversations, influence on each other’s use of language is inevitable and normative in day-to-day conversations (Edley, 2001).

Looking back now, I suspect that my urge to stay neutral on the topic of ‘rough sex’ is to do with numerous ideological dilemmas that exists in the concept and acts. I wanted to support people to explore their sexual desires freely, yet I was worried that the normalisation of ‘rough sex’ could coerce people, especially women, to take part in it regardless of their comfort level or desire. Also, I wanted people to communicate more openly about sex beyond the restrictive dichotomous consent practices, but at the same time, I was concerned about its implication on how ethical ‘rough sex’ practices would be determined in social and legal settings—whether more ambiguous forms of communication could be interpreted as women expressing consent when they did not. Through this research, I hope to outline some of the complexities and dilemmas in ‘rough sex’ to contribute to an improved nuanced understanding of ‘rough sex’ as a concept and practice.

Preface to Analytic Chapters

Prior to introducing the interpretative repertoires, I will briefly outline two important contexts to better inform how participants' accounts are situated. Firstly, I summarise what participants said 'rough sex' is for them. Then, I illustrate the participants' talk on their affiliation with the BDSM community.

What is 'Rough Sex?'

Generally, most participants agreed that 'rough sex' entails "imposition of some kind of physical force" (M1) or "a degree of some violence" (M4). Many suggested that there is an "element of more aggression" (M3), "performance of or an aspect of aggression" (M9), "anything hard or aggressive" (M7), and being "more forceful" (M2). Others suggested that there is also "more element of pain" (M3), describing 'rough sex' acts as "painful" (M7), though one participant said 'rough sex' "wouldn't necessarily have to cause pain... or dis, discomfort" (M1). Two participants who stated that they are active members of the BDSM community talked about control in 'rough sex'. They said there is "an element of the physical or mental control" (M8), and in 'rough sex' "somebody gives up control of something" (M12).

Yet, many found it difficult to pinpoint exactly what 'rough sex' is. The difficulty was often characterised by the length of their talk when trying to conceptualise 'rough sex,' many times exceeding a standard page in their interview script, or specific statements to indicate the difficulties. For example, M3 said, "Um.. so I think, um.. maybe the trouble is trying to define it is it can be quite different between different people." Some men mentioned the ambiguity of the term 'rough sex'. M9 said, "It is, it is kind of a fuzzy term," and M10 said, "it's quite a broad term. Uh, and it's been identified as having different connotations to different people." Similarly, M11 stated, "Oh, I don't know that there is

actually an easy definition. I don't know that I've got one... I've actually always, I've questioned it myself. I don't know what it qualifies as.”

Despite some confusion around the definition of ‘rough sex,’ all participants suggested that there is a boundary between what constitutes ‘rough sex’ and what would cross the boundary into either extreme sex or unethical sex. Often ethical and unethical ‘rough sex’ was distinguished by communication and consent practice (see Chapter 4). Other boundaries that participants drew were centred around related aspects like “safety” (M3), “risk” (M8), “intent” to pleasure (M11), and not drawing “blood” (M3, M11).

When the participants were asked to provide examples of specific ‘rough sex’ acts, they spoke about a variety of sexual acts. Some of the most common ones were spanking and/or slapping and choking. There were differences within the same ‘rough sex’ act. For spanking and/or slapping, participants referred to different parts of the body like “face” (M8), “face, breasts, buttocks, thighs” (M9), and “arse” (M12). Participants specified the appropriate intensity of the force for the act to be considered ‘rough sex’: which was not a “soft hit... a bit more force” (M4), harder than “light to moderate spanking” (M1), or “heavy impact” (M10). Also, the presence or absence of implements was discussed—M1 and M10 suggested it should involve implements like “paddle” or “whip,” whereas M9 suggested ‘rough sex’ would be “mostly associated with using hands rather than um, implements or tools or toys.” For the sexual act of choking, different terms were used to describe the action of putting pressure on the neck, though choking was the most common term. For example, M4 used the terms “strangulation um.. asphyxiation,” M9 said, “breath restriction,” and M11 described it as “holding of the throats.” Similar to spanking and/or slapping, participants described the different perceptions of appropriate intensity for the sexual act to fall under ‘rough sex.’ M3 suggested choking in ‘rough sex’ would be “squeezing” as opposed to “gently caressing the neck,” and likewise, M1 said “light

choking, by which I mean pressure but not impact on airway or blood flow” would “just be sex,” not ‘rough sex’.

Some of the other specific ‘rough sex’ acts participants commonly referred to were “hair pulling,” “thrusting really hard,” some form of more aggressive “blowjob,” “holding someone down,” “role-playing consensual non-consent activities,” and some form of “humiliation or degradation.” Rarer forms of ‘rough sex’ were “punching,” “flicking the nipple,” “anal sex,” and “psychological pain.”

In conceptualising ‘rough sex,’ many compared what ‘rough sex’ is not. Many commonly drew on the words “vanilla” and “missionary style” to refer to sexual activities that would not be part of ‘rough sex’. Many also differentiated ‘rough sex’ from BDSM activities. Some said the distinction would be that BDSM activities do not need to “include sex” (M7), that it does not need to involve “sexual or erogenous zones” (M2), or that it can be a “lifestyle choice,” (M12) referring to dominance and submission positions being applied to everyday aspects of intimate relationships such as picking what to wear each day. M1 suggested that “power exchange, um bondage” would not be part of ‘rough sex.’ For M9, it was whether sex is “structured” or “more fast-paced... spontaneous, more in the moment,” describing BDSM activities and ‘rough sex’ respectively. However, many still acknowledged some similarities between them. For example, M7 stated, “rough sex will probably be part of BDSM,” or that more extreme intensities of ‘rough sex’ activities, or what M12 calls “the hard end” would fall under BDSM.

Affiliation to BDSM Community

Before I started interviewing for this study, I anticipated that men would say that they are either part of or not part of the BDSM community based on whether they incorporate BDSM into their sexual activities or on their awareness of the ideas that are

well known in BDSM, like aftercare or safe word. However, when I started talking to men, I realised that neither was the case. Those who said that they consider themselves to be part of the BDSM community were certain and clear about their membership. When I asked whether they consider themselves part of the BDSM community, they responded with simple affirmations like “Yes” and “Yep. Love it.”

On the other hand, those who did not consider themselves as being the part of the BDSM community explained where they stood with the subject matter and provided reasoning. Four men stated they are not part of the BDSM community because they are not active members, regardless of practicing BDSM themselves. According to M4, the BDSM community appears ‘to have like a particular community.’ M1 claimed that to be part of the community, one needs to be actively participating “like going to munches, being active on my social media sites like Fetlife” despite describing himself as “I am on the kinky side of the spectrum.” For M1, he said he is not in the BDSM community “because I’m in a committed monogamous relationship,” suggesting that to be in the BDSM community, one needs to be either single or in a polyamorous relationship. Similarly, M10 stated, “Yeah, so it’s like if there’s a community, then no, I’m not inside it. (MK: Mm) Do I do BDSM? Yes. (MK: Mm, mm.) Do I read about it? Yes.” Also, M3 said that he “explore.. the.. BDSM” but has never “been to a convention.”

Another point of view was to do with specific aspects of what some of the participants perceive BDSM communities to entail. Though M9 had “been to a few events” and “keep light tabs on through Fetlife,” he was reluctant to say that he was part of the BDSM community because he did not like “community politics” and because he was raised by a parent who was an active member of the community, and they “had a fairly contentious relationship around that.” Alternatively, for M2, it was about having different beliefs from the BDSM community. He identified himself as not being part of the BDSM

community because he believed the dominant and submissive elements of the relationship should stay “strictly in the bedroom.” He referred to the “twenty-four seven constant (MK: Mm) domination, constant submission” as “a really fucking unhealthy relationship.” For M5, he stated that he engages in sexual activities that “would be considered [BDSM activities],” but does not affiliate with the term BDSM. Throughout the analytic chapters, when relevant, I generally refer to whether or not participants said they are part of the BDSM community.

Chapter 3: Is Gender Relevant for ‘Rough Sex’?

All participants referred to gender at different parts of the interview—both when they were questioned directly or as a response to other questions. Towards the end of the interviews, I also specifically asked a series of questions on gender: whether they thought men and women have different experiences of ‘rough sex’; whether their female sexual partners had ever tried ‘rough sex’ acts on them; their thoughts on traditional gender roles; and whether having ‘rough sex’ influenced how they saw themselves as a man. Men’s accounts of gender consisted of personal experiences (predominantly ‘rough sex’ experiences with women), second-hand stories, and general views. The majority of the extracts discussed in this chapter are excerpts from the participants’ responses to one of my direct questions on gender, and a few are from their accounts in other parts of the interview. While many of the accounts I examine directly refer to ‘rough sex’ contexts, some are in the context of sex or gender in general. However, I argue they are still relevant because all participants had had experiences of ‘rough sex,’ and the majority stated that ‘rough sex’ is a regular part of their sex life.

Upon examining the transcripts, I identified two contradictory interpretative repertoires in participants’ accounts. Interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), as explained in Chapter 2, are “relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events” (Edley, 2001, p.198), identified through patterns and repetitions across participants’ talk. A discursive approach theorises that interpretative repertoires are important because they are culturally shared linguistic resources that people can draw on to construct their thinking and understanding of world views (Edley, 2001). In this chapter, I will introduce and examine the two competing interpretative repertoires concerning gender: “gender is irrelevant” and “gender is relevant.”

Gender is Irrelevant

To begin with, I will unpack the interpretative repertoire of “*gender is irrelevant.*” This repertoire is constructed by claims of gender equality at the interpersonal and/or societal level. Suggesting that gender equality has been achieved in a specific context—at micro and macro levels, or for sex, ‘rough sex’ and wider relationships—renders gender as an irrelevant factor in relation to men’s ‘rough sex’ encounters with women. All participants drew on the repertoire either explicitly or implicitly.

An example of this interpretative repertoire can be seen in the extract below. I asked M3 if the dominant and submissive dynamics he described in his sexual relationship with a woman—who tends to be submissive—applied to his intimate relationships outside of sex. He responded to my question:

1. Right. Um.. in my.. relationships, I’ve always.. seen.. myself, and my partner as equals (MK: Mm) and I think that’s quite important in having a successful (MK: Right) well, you know, a good relationship. (MK: Yeah) Um.. and.. yeah, I, yeah, it’s never been part of the relationship outside of sex. (MK: Yeah, yep.) It’s.. we’re.. equals, outside of.. well, in sex, but also outside of sex regardless of the dom, sub role, (MK: Right) we are equals, when it comes to yeah, all aspects of life in the relationship.

The emphasis in this extract is on equality, as the word “equal” is repeated three times to describe his intimate relationships with women. Though gender equality is explicitly discussed, it remains an abstract concept, lacking specific details of how men and women might be treated equally in a relationship.

The majority of the time, when participants drew on the repertoire of “*gender is irrelevant,*” they made more subtle claims of gender equality. This is comprised of

three components, which are: opposing traditional gender roles; gender equality; and gender neutrality in dominance and submission. For the purposes of this thesis, I use the terms, components and sub-repertoires interchangeably.

Opposing Traditional Gender Roles

Everyone interviewed rejected traditional gender roles to varying degrees, which enabled them to endorse a version of gender equality. I asked most of the participants to share their thoughts on traditional gender roles. The question was not asked to two participants who implicitly talked about their views opposing them at other parts of the interview. For example, M1 called himself ‘liberal, sex positive’ and a ‘feminist’, and M3 said he is not a ‘traditional male’ and spoke about the harmful portrayal of ‘what men traditionally want’, referring to normalising aggression during sex. Despite not outlining what traditional gender roles are, the majority of the participants referred to various aspects of traditional gender roles such as employment; household chores; parenting; intimate relationships between men and women; male dominance, and female submission in ‘rough sex’; and gender identity. I will only discuss the extracts relevant to how the participants positioned men and women in their talk because the focus of this component of the repertoire, “gender is irrelevant,” is to outline the ways participants claimed gender equality.

Common answers included the ways in which traditional gender roles do not apply to participants’ relationships with women. One participant made a specific reference to his ‘rough sex’ arrangement in his relationship. M7, who considers himself to be part of the BDSM community, talked about his female partner being dominant during sex at times, which is contrary to traditional gender expectations. He said, “Um.. for.. um.. in the bedroom, um.. you know, I liked to play submissive with her.. so, she, she’s got lots of

power in the bedroom.” Others mostly talked about their relationships in general, but they all previously stated that ‘rough sex’ is a regular part of their sex life, and therefore, the relationships they described are likely to be with those with who they have had ‘rough sex’ acts with. The extracts below outline the instances where men referred to sharing household responsibilities with women partners.

2. In, in a lot of the relationships um, the traditional gender role has been inverted in a sense that. With um.. my first partner (MK: Mm) um, she managed to get a job quite easily. I struggled.. (MK: Mm) and so, and I kind of – she kind of became the breadwinner and I was the (MK: Mm) house husband. And it worked. (M2)
3. Um, well um, in my life, in our household um, we try and have a collaborative relationship with consensus decision making. (MK: Mm) Um, and we don’t have too strong of a split as between gender roles stuff like earning money, and parenting and household chores. (M10)
4. I know people who believe in it. I can’t understand that. It doesn’t work in my head... I’m more than happy to do my washing and clean up after myself, and I’m house proud, and house trained, and my mama was a good lady, and she got me sorted pretty fast. (M11)

These three extracts all constructed the position of opposing traditional gender roles based on the division of housework, but they each discussed examples of carrying out household duties —traditionally thought of as a woman’s role—to a different extent. According to the extracts, the degree of sharing the housework—to reasonably condemn traditional gender roles—varies from being a “house husband”, being “collaborative”, and doing “washing and clean[ing] up” after oneself (see Extract 2, 3, 4 respectively).

In the context of working with female co-workers, M7 commented, “I really enjoy working with women. I get on really well with them at work – better than men often. Um, because there’s no competitiveness, I think.” His initial statement about how he ‘enjoy[s] working with women’ implies that he is endorsing females in the workplace: which opposes the traditional norms about gender roles, positioning women in the house. Yet, M7’s final statement about ‘no competitiveness’ implicitly reinstates other parts of traditional gender roles—that possibly position women as less threatening compared to male co-workers.

Some of the men extended their rejection of traditional gender roles in the wider context beyond the interpersonal level. M4 said, “I don’t see a future in which we have such, such a, such a way, such a style... men trying to have a, a better deal.” M4 reasoned, “Um, but I wouldn’t want to be the one who gets the raw end of the deal um, and that’s in part why I don’t like them.” Similarly, M9 said, “I also don’t think it’s at all fair to try and impose them on other people. I don’t think it’s at all fair to judge or uh, oppress anyone who does not conform to those things.” Both accounts refer to the fundamentally unjust foundations of traditional gender roles.

Gender Equality

In this section, I will outline extracts in which men spoke about personal experiences and views on ‘rough sex’ with women as they drew on an underlying (sub)repertoire of gender equality. In various parts of the interview, M1 suggested that men and women are equally free in the context of ‘rough sex’. He is a heterosexual man who enjoys doing ‘rough sex’ acts on women as well as being on the receiving end. I asked M1 if he ever gets worried that he “might go too far,” to which he responded,

5. I don't think so... if you're experiencing and you're trying new things, accidents happen. Things don't.. work. (MK: Mm) And I wouldn't say that's a bad thing ...The whole point of giving it a go is do you like it or not. (MK: Right, yeah.) And like some stuff, either you or your partner isn't going to like it (MK: yeah) and so that particular thing isn't particularly enjoyable. But that's fine. I wouldn't say that's sort of risk of going too far... I'm trying to think of like.. an obvious example of going too far and not coming back is causing sort of permanent harm (MK: Mm) long lasting harm. (MK: Mm hmm) Breath play is a prime example of something that's very dangerous (MK: Mm) so I don't think I'd be trying it to that extent. (M1)

With the exception of 'rough sex' acts that can cause "permanent harm" like "breath play,"—referring to restricting airway during sex—M1 says there is minimal risk in trying new 'rough sex' acts because the worst-case scenario is that either party might not "like it." The possibility of the sexual partner not liking a new 'rough sex' act does not warrant a "sense of risk." Absent in the extract is the discussion of what falls between not liking and "permanent" or "long-lasting harm". Even with the "very dangerous" consequence of "breath play," he is free from the burden of potential risk because he will simply not explore "to that extent." The gender-neutral language used throughout the Extract 5 suggests that men and women are equally free in trying and expressing dislike when trying a new 'rough sex' act since there is generally no or low risk.

In another part of the interview, M1 referred to the concept of "sex positive" to suggest that people are free to choose "different kinks" regardless of their gender. He talked about him and his friends being "a very sex positive group of people." He explained that sex positive means "...acknowledging that everyone's got different kinks and that's fine, and just because you might not be into something, (MK: Mm) doesn't mean it's like

wrong.” He continued to explain that it is about being “accepting of other people and what they’re into” if ‘rough sex’ and/or “kink” is practiced “safely and consensually.” M1’s claims about sex positivity and how everyone’s “kinks” should be validated suggest that what is acceptable during sex has no limits, provided that it is done “safely and consensually.” Similar to extract 5, he continues to use individualising gender-neutral language to suggest that men and women are equally ‘free’ to choose in ‘rough sex’.

Conversely, M7 drew on the sub-repertoire of gender equality by implying that men and women are in an equal position in the context of ‘rough sex’ encounters that were not previously communicated. As discussed in the methodology section, the wider research team carried out a separate interview-based study asking women about their unwanted experiences of ‘rough sex.’ During a research team meeting, the wider team shared one woman’s unwanted experience of being choked during casual sex without prior discussion. Based on this woman’s account, I told M7 about the woman’s account and how she “just went, went along with it just because she didn’t want to seem boring” but realised retrospectively that it was unwanted. When I asked what he thought about this woman’s account, he said,

6. It doesn’t surprise me in the slightest... I think if I was putting it into the perspective for myself (MK: Mm) I think that.. it.. [sighs] like I’ve definitely done stuff and just rolled with it without being asked. Like, like, as in you know they’ve done stuff to me. Like putting myself in the same situation... Um, I think if it’s [pause] not harmful, as in if it’s not making me feel bad, then she’s – and I can see she’s enjoying it, then that’s okay. (MK: Mm) If it was harmful or if she’s doing it for the wrong reason, then I don’t think that’s okay. (MK: Mm) I think that it reverses back the same way for the female person... Um, I wouldn’t really.. do something like that personally I don’t think... I mean, one

of my exes is a sexual assault um, survivor and another woman I've been with was.. has, has as well. So I know (MK: Mm) that shits are going down. (M7)

Like M1, M7 identified as a heterosexual man who enjoys both doing 'rough sex' acts on women, as well as being on the receiving end. Prefacing this statement with his personal experience of being in a similar situation possibly acts as a disclaimer to his following statement about the experience being "not harmful, as in if it's not making me [him] feel bad." By describing his personal experience of uncommunicated sex, his statement about harmlessness becomes more difficult to dispute. Comparing the woman's experience with his own experiences and imagining himself in her position both function to situate men and women in an equal position of power. When he imagines himself being the man in the scenario, his claim that he would not 'do something like that' distances M7 from such men and, therefore possibly relieves him of the need to reflect more deeply about the ethics of uncommunicated choking during casual sex, or possible gender differences in 'same' experience.

Both accounts discussed in this section suggest that the main consideration in evaluating the ethics of 'rough sex' experiences is the seriousness of harm caused. M1 suggests in Extract 5 that as long as there is no "permanent harm" done to people involved, not enjoying the new 'rough sex' act is "fine." In Extract 6, M7's last remarks about his "exes" refer to unwanted sexual experiences that would be considered "harmful." To describe those experiences, he used words conveying the seriousness of the consequences like "sexual assault", "survivor", and "that shit". The juxtaposition of his account about the harmlessness of the woman's experience of being choked without prior discussion and other women's "sexual assault" experiences contrasts the perceived seriousness of the unwanted experiences of 'rough sex'. Though lack of consent is commonly perceived as what distinguishes 'just sex' from sexual assaults in general (Gavey, 2005), such a

connection is not made in this instance. Making sense of ‘rough sex’ that does not result in enjoyment from both parties in relation to harm can be explained by Gavey and Schmidt’s (2011) trauma of rape discourse identified from women’s talk about rape. They suggested trauma of rape discourse imposes a particular, inflexible type of trauma for rape—one that is severe and long-lasting—which determines what people perceive as rape and how they view those who are victimised. Though the experiences described in Extracts 5 and 6 may not fall into the commonly accepted conception of rape, the perceived difference in the seriousness of harm or ‘trauma’ caused to women factored into the ethics of ‘rough sex’ encounters: ones that are “okay” versus ones that result in “survivor[s]” (see Extract 6).

There are important contexts to consider in these accounts of the gender equality component. Both M1 and M7 indicated that they enjoy doing and receiving ‘rough sex.’ Such desire and experiences of being recipients of ‘rough sex’ acts could make them susceptible to imagine themselves being in a woman’s position in a ‘rough sex’ context with more ease. Many participants in this study suggested that there is a gender stereotype of male domination and female submission in ‘rough sex,’ and therefore, enjoying women doing ‘rough sex’ on men can potentially create discomfort for men (discussed in further detail in the second part of the chapter). The commonly recognised contradictory male gender identities of a ‘macho’ and a ‘wimp’ (Edley & Wetherell, 1997) likely create tension for men to negotiate their gender identity following gender nonconforming behaviour or desire to receive aggression during sex. Implying that men and women are equally free to try new ‘rough sex’ acts and be subjected to have ‘rough sex’ acts done on them without prior discussion both removes the necessity to talk about gendered differences or how they are situated in it.

Nevertheless, the assumption of gender equality has the rhetorical consequence of making it difficult to discuss the relevance of gender. If there are no gender dynamics or differences, there is no necessity to talk about it.

Gender Neutrality in Dominance and Submission

I noticed a pattern amongst participants describing ‘rough sex’ experiences in relation to dominance (dom) and submission (sub): referring to the person who enacts a ‘rough sex’ act on a partner and the person on the receiving end of the ‘rough sex’ act, respectively. This aligns with how women in Herbenick et al.’s (2022) study described their experiences of incorporating choking during sex, using the terms dominant and submissive, despite not being part of the BDSM communities. Many men spoke about dominant and submissive dynamics in a gender-neutral way—that dominance and submission are not necessarily related to gender. I asked all participants whether they think men and women have similar experiences of ‘rough sex’. As a response, some men brought up the topic of dominance and submission.

7. I’d say each individual experiences it differently, and that’s not related to gender... I, I’d say that that’s more the person in the submissive position (MK: Mm) experiences it differently (MK: Mm) because they’re experiencing powerlessness, (MK: Mm) and being led those sorts of things. I wouldn’t say that it’s male, female thing. (M10)
8. Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Uh [pause] yeah, yeah. I, I do. Um, I think [inaudible] the way that dominant experiences rough sex versus the way that submissive experiences rough sex. (M2)

In both extracts, participants acknowledged that there would be differences in ‘rough sex’ experiences for men and women but attributed it to individuals’ dominance and submissive

positions. M10 identified as a heterosexual man, and M2 identified as a bisexual man, but during the interview, he primarily discussed his ‘rough sex’ experiences with women. One participant explicitly nullified the possibility of gendered differences in ‘rough sex’.

9. Um, I think men and women probably have the same experiences... there would be as many male submissives out there as much as female submissives, the gay community is actually quite active in this area [BDSM community]. (M12)

Though it was not a response to the question about gender differences, M8 also made a similar statement to M12.

10. In the kink world, there’s vast array (MK: Mm) very common to have submissive men, um and um dominant woman and non-binary and everything else in between um and there’s not – there’s not the genderised roles in terms of the activities.

Both M12 and M8 identified as being part of the BDSM community and are exclusively dominant. In Extracts 10 and 11, the “kink community”—the BDSM community—is portrayed as a realm of freedom. Individuals are supposed to be free to identify with any gender, including queer identities and take on dominant and submissive positions during sex, including ‘rough sex.’ The claim of gender neutrality in dominance and submission interacts with statements of support for queer identities like “non-binary” and “gay” in the BDSM community to create the sense of a liberal group with more equality. Similarly, M9 also referred to the possibility of men being submissive and women being dominant during sex. He said he is interested in BDSM communities and has been to their workshops before, but for personal reasons, he did not consider himself to be part of the BDSM community. He stated that he enjoys being both a dominant and submissive person during ‘rough sex.’

11. I don't think it [dominance] has any intrinsic relation to masculinity or femininity. (MK: Mm) Someone can be a dominant woman. Someone could be a dominant man. Someone could be a submissive woman. Someone can be a submissive man.

(M9)

Here, M9 suggests that the existence of dominant women and submissive men confirms that not all women are submissive or all men are dominant, and therefore the gender neutrality of dominance in sex.

Extracts 9, 10 and 11 are told by participants who either consider themselves to be part of the BDSM community or have a lot of interest in the community. Given the BDSM affiliation, their pattern of claiming gender neutrality in dominance and submission positions the BDSM community as the space where there is more gender equality.

The first part of this chapter outlined accounts where men drew on the repertoire "*gender is not relevant*" by drawing on the three main components of the repertoire: opposing traditional gender roles; gender equality; and gender neutrality in dominance and submission. Overall, this repertoire was constructed by the claims of endorsing gender equality and assumptions of having achieved it. The rhetoric consequence of the repertoire was achieving the subject position of the egalitarian man. This positioning may appear harmless and even favourable as they appear to advocate for gender equality in 'rough sex' contexts. However, under close examination, the assumption of gender equality dismisses the possibility of gendered issues in the 'rough sex' context and, therefore, deems it unnecessary to explore nuances of how gender influences people's perceptions and experiences.

Gender is Relevant

In the second part of the chapter, I will examine how men drew on the second interpretative repertoire, “*gender is relevant.*” This second repertoire is based on the suggestion that men's and women's experiences and perceptions of ‘rough sex’ are affected by gender, and consequently, gender is relevant in understanding ‘rough sex’. The accounts of gender relevance include a talk on men's views and experiences on ‘rough sex’—largely with women—and the wider society. Most participants who drew on the first interpretative repertoire also drew on this second one at different parts of their interviews.

The extracts below demonstrate examples of how men drew on the repertoire of “*gender is relevant.*”

12. When you say rough sex, the first thing that springs into my mind is the man being rough (MK: Mm) and the woman receiving the rough sex. (M10)

13. Society is not always a safe one for women... Woman is unnecessarily um, taking a bigger risk heading into, into an encounter where, where rough sex is. (MK: Mm) Even if it's negotiated beforehand. (M9)

These accounts use the repertoire in different ways. M10 refers to the existing gender stereotype on which gender tends to perform ‘rough sex’ acts on which gender, whereas M9 makes a claim about the gendered imbalance in safety for women in wider “society,” which is transferred onto the “risk” for a ‘rough sex’ setting. These extracts are examples of two main components that together construct the repertoire of “*gender is relevant.*” The first component is characterised by the statement of male dominance and female submission—which is the way men often described doing and receiving ‘rough sex’ acts as discussed earlier—either from perceived societal stereotypes or personal experiences, as demonstrated in Extract 12. The second component involves accounts of gendered power imbalances, as in Extract 13 but with the majority of participants' talk centred on physical strength differences.

Male Domination and Female Submission

Directly opposing the gender-neutral accounts of domination and submission discussed earlier as a component of the first repertoire, many men talked about gendered expectations and stereotypes of male dominance and female submission that prevail in the ‘rough sex’ concept and practices. Many participants specifically talked about expectations for men to be dominant and “be the driving force in sex” when having sex with women.

14. I think.. a lot of other.. kind of those relationship, the difficulty there is.. there is.. a lot of.. stuff surrounding masculinity, and I think that aggressive rough sex.. in that.. particularly in that dom versus sub role, that traditionally, the male.. is the dominant one. (MK: Yeah) And I think some people’s masculinity is tied into that. (M3)

15. I guess in sexual encounters I imagine in, in many parts, there’s a male someone in the driver’s seat, or at least I think that’s, I think that’s an expectation of, in, in, (MK: Right) in New Zealand sex culture. (M4)

16. There’s certainly I think the societal view that um, it’s an awful term like the alpha male (MK: Slight laugh) is dominant in the bedroom, (MK: Mm) enjoys rough sex (MK: Mm) you know that, that side of it. (M1)

17. I think male dominance is the default, right? (MK: Mm) Like, men, men are generally expected to be the active partner in sex. (MK: Mm hm) Men are still considered to be the driving force in sex. (M9)

In all four accounts, participants talked about the implicit expectation of male dominance being present for all “men” or “male[s],” as opposed to discussing it as a personal experience

Framing it in such a way acknowledges gendered expectations at the societal level, which then also pressures men at the interpersonal level. For example, prior to M4's account in Extract 15, he talked about personal instances of being told about the expectation on men. Extract 15 was M4's response to my question asking him whether he thinks men and women have similar or different experiences of 'rough sex.' He answered, "Oh, um.. yeah, I imagine so." Then he commented about his female friends having "not enjoyable sexual encounters" because of "underperformance of males' part." After that, he gave the account outlined in Extract 15. In his answer, M4, a heterosexual man, indicates that female sexual pleasure is associated with whether men can perform their part: which is to be "in the driver's seat." Introducing this association in the third person point of view of his female friends adds credibility—because it provides women's opinions on their own sexual experiences—while keeping a certain distance—because he is reciting what other people have said. The rhetorical consequence is a reliable statement of greater sexual pleasure when the male is dominating during 'rough sex,' which then interacts with his following statement about the societal expectation for men to reiterate that pressure for male dominance existing at interpersonal and societal levels. Much like how Potts (1998) described, female sexual pleasure has been framed as dependent on a male's action or inaction.

The first two accounts (Extracts 14 and 15) were told by men who are either only interested in or experienced being dominant during 'rough sex' with women. The other accounts (Extracts 16 and 17) were told by M1 and M9, who both said they enjoy both being dominant and submissive during 'rough sex.' Men's sexual preference for dominance or submission is important in these extracts because some men talked about internal and external tension between the societal norm of male dominance and their interest in being submissive during 'rough sex' with women. For instance, M1 said, "Um, I think I certainly

put quite a lot of time to recognise and accept that I was a man who enjoyed being submissive quite a lot more.” Similarly, when I asked M9 whether ‘rough sex’ experiences changed how he sees himself as a man, with regards to his “submissive streak,” he said, “it’s definitely something that, I, I’ve capitals of opinions about.” He then talked about people who associate submissiveness with being “less of a man,” but that “there is a huge socially constructed aspect to what we think of as masculinity”, which he said is “not healthy.” These accounts demonstrate how the common component, male domination and female submission, functions to create internal and external conflict for men when their sexual interests do not neatly align with societal expectations. As Edley (2001) claimed, interpretative repertoire operates as a language resource that people can draw on in social settings as well as for private introspection.

With regards to the second part of the component, male domination and female submission, many participants talked about female submission being the norm in ‘rough sex’ between men and women. For example, M7 said, “I think women tend to be more submissive.” Some men offered some explanations to account for why women tend to be submissive in ‘rough sex’. I asked M1 why he thinks women get interested in ‘rough sex’. He suggested a few reasons, like “I think they find it fun” and “women watch porn.” Then he said,

18. I think it’s less societally accepted for them [women] to explore them [sexual fantasies and kinks] in the same way [as men] (MK: Mm) that doesn’t mean that they shouldn’t. (MK: Mm) And I think it’s becoming increasingly, acceptable for women to explore that... I think the dominant woman is more likely to experience stigma from the sexual partners than the submissive one. (M1)

Within Extract 18, M1 makes several different but related claims: that there is a social stigma around women's sexuality, which restricts the 'freedom' in choices available for them; but that individuals can still make choices; and that society is shifting towards gender equality. In the last sentence, he suggests that despite his claim about the progressive move towards acceptance of female sexuality, to be submissive during 'rough sex' is the path of least resistance and culturally commonplace for women.

The extracts below also show how some men accounted for female submission in 'rough sex.'

19. Some of the women do it [be submissive] because they think that's what they have to do to make a man happy, and some of them do it to – because they don't have self-esteem or shit like that as well probably. (M7)

20. Women uh, whether that's through socialisation (MK: Mm) or what have you are typically viewed as the, the receiving party, or the passive (MK: Mm) um yeah, partner. Um, but within that, there's definitely some stigma... around male sexuality generally. (MK: Mm) And there would one hundred, like people would one hundred percent dirty looks if they just casually mention "Oh yeah, I was just choking the wife last night. It was awesome." (M9)

Extract 19 consists of more individual-level reasons, whereas Extract 20 refers to how "socialisation" would influence individual women. In M7's account of individualistic reasons, he used dominant discourses of heterosexuality; the male sexual drive and have/hold discourses. As Hollway (1989) stated, male sexual drive discourse has an underlying assumption that men need sex because they naturally have a high sexual drive and have/hold discourse assumes that women desire commitment in a heterosexual relationship. Using both of the dominant discourses of heterosexuality, some women are

portrayed to be complying with what men want, because men have strong sexual desires and women need to fulfil them to maintain a heterosexual relationship. His alternative reasoning for female submissiveness is the lack of “self-esteem” for some women. The reference to ‘self-esteem’ is likely to align with neoliberal ideas of individual responsibilities for their choices. Juxtaposing the influence of dominant discourse and neoliberal ideas of freedom of choice suggests that though social coercion may exist, it can be overcome by one’s willpower.

In Extract 20, the account of “socialisation” and female submission is immediately followed up with “stigma” for “male sexuality.” The rhetoric significance of the account lies in the difference between the way M9 presents female submission in comparison to male dominance. The example that he provided for “stigma” on “male sexuality” is getting “dirty looks” for saying a man choked his wife—presumably during sex, given the context and the setting, “last night.” Descriptive words like “stigma” and “dirty looks” have stronger negative connotations compared to “socialisation,” used to describe female passivity. Using such language makes it clear that he is condemning the “stigma” of men performing a ‘rough sex’ act like choking on women. On the other hand, the description of female sexuality is relatively neutral. Overall, the rhetoric consequence is the acknowledgement of prevailing societal expectations around male dominance and female submission in ‘rough sex’, yet portraying men as having a greater impact than women.

Gendered Power Imbalances

The second component of the interpretative repertoire, “gender is relevant,” is constructed most commonly by describing the difference in physical strength between men and women. Though I did not ask a specific question about gendered power imbalances or differences in physical strengths, men drew on the component at different parts of their

interviews. The extracts sometimes refer to ‘rough sex’ experiences or concepts, but at other times, they concern sex with women in general. Some men talked about body measurements to emphasise their physical strength.

21. I’m 6’4”, 196 cm, 194 cm, uh, I’m 105, 110 kg. (MK: Mm.) Um, I go to the gym. I’m a big unit. (MK: Mm.) If I hit someone properly...I can knock people out. (M11)

22. I’ve always been a lot bigger than.. [female partners] I’m 6’1”. (MK: Mm) I’ve always been like quite a bit more [strong] strength wise than my exes. (M7)

Both extracts highlighted that they would be bigger and have more physical strength than most, if not all, female partners. Since both M11 and M7 identified as heterosexual men, the physical strength difference is relevant in ‘rough sex’ experiences with women.

Many men talked about the significance of having greater strength in the context of relative ease in getting control of unwanted ‘rough sex’ experiences. Some talked about hypothetical situations. For instance, I asked M1 for his thoughts on a study where they found that choking was one of the most common scary experiences for women. He answered, “I’m certainly not surprised.” Then he said it would be “absolutely terrifying” having “someone much larger and stronger on top of you with hand on their neck.” While making sense of the study finding, M1 assumed that the woman’s sexual partner would be “much larger and stronger” and that it would be a heteronormative ‘rough sex’ act with a man. The underlying assumption indicates that the difference in physical strength between men and women is part of the cultural common-place and shared sense-making resources.

Similarly, M9 also talked about gendered physical strength differences. I asked M9 whether men and women have different experiences of ‘rough sex.’ As part of the response, he said,

23. ...So, if I get into a rough sex encounter as a submissive and things went pear shaped, I, I just have that much more muscle mass than a statistically average woman... It's, it's, it's, it's a different thing for me to attempt to fight back than someone who is just physically smaller and statistically has, has less muscle mass than I would. Yeah. (M9)

M9's account consists of the relative ease for men to "fight back" against a woman when they wish to stop the 'rough sex' act, even if they were in a submissive position. One of the main rhetoric strengths in Extract 23 lies in the scientific explanation for physical differences in gender. Using scientific terminologies such as "statistical average" and "muscle mass" simultaneously add rhetoric strength to the claim of gendered (physical) power imbalance, and constructs it as an inevitable difference.

Aligning with Extract 23, M4 talked about gendered physical strength differences in relation to his unwanted 'rough sex' experience of being choked by a female partner. I asked M4 whether a woman partner has ever tried doing 'rough sex' on him. As part of the response, he talked about some instances of female sexual partners choking him during sex. Though M4 expressed clear discomfort in being choked, he expressed that he would be able to physically stop the situation if he wanted to. He described, "I'd go along with it for a while (MK: Mm hm) and maybe if they try to grip my throat stronger I'd lean back (MK: Mm) or, or move their arm." Later in the interview, when asked if he was interested in women doing 'rough sex' acts on him in general, he said, "It's something that I'm open to." He then talked about another instance of unwanted sexual experience with a woman who "tried to gain entry" to his "butthole." When I asked if he felt like he could say no, he said,

24. Oh, yeah... she's a much smaller lady than me. She'd be half my weight. (MK: Mm) You know, so you know, I can say no and I can just move. She can't stop

me from moving. So that's another big dynamic in sexual encounters. That ensures that I always feel safe. (MK: Mm, yeah. Yeah.) Yeah. Which I think sadly that, that same luxury is not afforded to women. (M4)

A crucial context in understanding the importance of physical strength and feeling of safety for M4 is that he disclosed having had several unwanted experiences of 'rough sex' with men, which is why he said he now has sex with women exclusively. Given the context, M4 claims that being able to choose to have 'rough sex' with the gender that has weaker physical strength is a "luxury" and that having a physical strength advantage during sex fosters feelings of safety.

The above accounts in this component of gendered power imbalances were focused on statements around physical strength differences. The overall rhetoric power comes from attributing physical dissimilarity to biology, framing them as inevitable. When the rhetoric is applied to explain women's unequal access to power, control and sense of safety during 'rough sex' with men, striving for equality in 'rough sex' becomes an unreasonable and impossible task. On the other hand, forming the gendered power imbalance component outside of physical strength differences can help attribute the inequity to sociocultural norms. Notably, participants often use greater physical strength to make light of their unwanted experiences of 'rough sex,' which aligns with the discourses used to stigmatise male sexual victimisation—that it is impossible and its seriousness minimised (Javaid, 2017). This way, women's unethical sexual behaviour is not adequately addressed.

Interestingly, when the two participants who identified as gay talked about hypothetical or personal experiences of unwanted 'rough sex,' they made sense of it using physical power differences. I asked M5 if the non-consensual experience of sex would be different for heterosexual women or gay men. He responded, "I would say.. no. If it's non-consensual, then you know assault is assault. Sexual assault is assault, and maybe it'd make

a power dynamic. Men could physically overpower women, but also plenty of men could overpower me.” This way, the physical power imbalance is presented as gender-neutral and more associated with individual differences in capacities. When M6 described his unwanted ‘rough sex’ experience with another man, he also talked about relative physical strength to determine whether it was sexual “assault” or not. He talked about an experience where he was “fucked much harder than I would have liked,” which resulted in “tearing my anal sphincter.” Then he said, “[he] wouldn’t have called that sort of rough or assault in any way because I knew that I could withdraw at any time, um and more importantly, I knew I had the physical strength to withdraw at any time.” These accounts open up the possibility that referring to physical strength differences would, in fact, mirror a gender-neutral way of perceiving power dynamics in relationships in general. However, in the scope of this thesis, there were only two accounts of such reference in the participants’ descriptions of men’s ‘rough sex’ experiences with other men.

The extracts below show accounts of acknowledging gendered power imbalances at the societal level, beyond the biological physical strength differences. When I asked if men and women have different experiences of ‘rough sex’, M9 claimed that the risk is higher for women in ‘rough sex’ compared to men. He said, “And like, that risk might be part of the erotic value of the [‘rough sex’] encounter, but that risk is still there. It’s still real.” I asked why he believes women are at a greater risk in a ‘rough sex’ context. He answered,

25. Um [sighs] rape culture...And rapes are hardly ever successfully prosecuted.

(MK: Mm) Yeah, so, like that’s, that’s all the fact that even with the vanilla sexual encounters and vanilla um casual sexual contacts and when you start layering in the extra factor of eroticising um, violence and power dynamics and that, that’s just a compounding factor in anything that might happen in that encounter. (M9)

In Extract 25, M9 is not only stating that there is a gendered power imbalance in wider society but also that “...eroticising um, violence and power dynamics” in ‘rough sex’ exacerbates the existing gendered social issues that already exist, further disadvantaging women.

Some participants attributed gendered power imbalances at the societal level to the normalisation of male aggression during sex.

26. ...males are more likely to push the boundaries... you don't even hear in the media or anything like that about a woman just doing rough sex on a guy. (MK: Mm) You know, you, you, you just don't hear that. You know, if a woman likes rough sex, she's a dominatrix. You don't hear – you don't hear a woman that um is just going to do a little bit of CBT [cock and ball torture, referring to restraining penis and testicles]... And I think that because it is becoming more common, people think it's more acceptable. Um, but it's not acceptable the other way around. (MK: Mm) Like, uh if a, if a woman just started slapping a guy on a date, um.. it'd probably be taken very different. (M8)

27. Interestingly, she [his partner] said that for women, there's a lot of.. she said it in a way that [pause] there's a lot more.. monsters that are romanticised for women. (MK: Right) And that's not necessarily like an actual creature like black lagoon (MK: Yeah) but more, you know that behaviour and stuff like that... it's like “Oh, it's okay if they're more aggressive”.. sort of thing.. because.. that's what's normal. (MK: Right) And that's what I see in the media. (M3)

Both extracts associate media with the normalisation of sexual aggression by men towards women. Whether or not media is at the root of creating the norm, M8 and M3 claim that the

normalisation of 'rough sex' and aggression sets the tone of what is "acceptable" for men and women. Overall, men's use of violence or aggression is normalised in the context of 'rough sex,' whereas for women, it is not. The ideological consequence of such normalisation for women is needing to tolerate male sexual aggression. The rhetoric of normalising 'rough sex' functioning to sexually coerce women aligns with Faustino and Gavey's (2021) conception of sociocultural coercion reported by women in their study.

The second part of this chapter examined how men drew on the repertoire "*gender is relevant*" by referring to two main components: the expectation of male dominance and female submission; and gendered power imbalances. Both components were constructed to minimise personal responsibility in unequal gendered issues in 'rough sex'. While the societal expectations of male dominance and female submission were acknowledged, the focus was on the detrimental impacts on men. Similarly, though a gendered power imbalance was recognised by many, the most prominent talk was based on physical strength differences between men and women, which were seen as inevitable biological differences.

Chapter 4: 'Rough Sex', Communication and Consent

During the interviews, men often used the terms, communication and consent to explain the ethics and general appropriateness of 'rough sex' at a conceptual level and for personal 'rough sex' experiences (predominantly with women). To encourage more detailed and descriptive accounts of 'rough sex,' I actively avoided using the term consent until after the participants had used the word except for one participant—whom I used the term, "consensual" sex after he spoke about verbal "negotiations," involving direct agreement of 'rough sex' acts. I did not explicitly ask direct questions about consent unless it was a follow-up question to encourage participants to provide more details on what they had already said. On the other hand, I used the term communication without restriction as it refers to general interactions between people, and, unlike the word consent, does not encourage a restrictive binary frame of sexual activities—categorising into consensual versus non-consensual acts.

The participants used different words and phrases to describe unethical 'rough sex,' such as "sexual assault or rape," "acts that go further," and "abuse." To describe ethical 'rough sex,' they sometimes used the term "consensual", but generally refer to it as "sex," "rough sex," or other terms that describe sexual activities. To minimise confusion with various terminologies, for the purposes of this chapter, I use the terms ethical or unethical 'rough sex' to refer to acts that participants portrayed as appropriate and acceptable versus inappropriate and unacceptable, respectively.

In this chapter, I examine two main interpretative repertoires taken up by men in discussing communication and consent in a 'rough sex' context. Interpretative repertoires can be identified by patterns in people's talk and are shared societal language resources available for people to access in the sense-making process in both the private and public domain (Edley, 2001; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Within the participants' accounts of

communication and consent, most men drew on both of the two conflicting interpretative repertoires: “*communication and consent is necessary*,” and “*sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary*.”

Communication and Consent is Necessary

Firstly, I will examine the interpretative repertoire of “*communication and consent is necessary*.” All participants claimed that ‘rough sex’ should be accompanied by some level of communication, with many referring to consent as the ideal form of communication. Within accounts of communication and consent, there were variations with regards to the type of communication and the differences between communication and consent in their perceived strengths for setting moral boundaries. The participants typically drew on this repertoire when they were describing ‘rough sex’ in abstract ways. In the majority of the cases, they did not draw on this repertoire when discussing details of personal experiences of ‘rough sex.’ The extracts below exemplify how the repertoire can be constructed.

1. ...in general, if it’s something that you have to kind of uh.. talk about and give a consent for and make sure you’re on the same page (MK: Yeah) then the chance is that it will be rough sex. (M2)
2. Um, essentially the kinkier, or the more risky, or rougher (MK: Yeah) the activity was, and the newer the partner (MK: Mm hmm) I would want more verbal [communication]... obviously with someone you’ve been having sex with a lot (MK: Mm hmm) or – or it’s not particularly.. rough (MK: Mm hmm) then I would be much more comfortable with non-verbal cues like moaning and things like that. (M1)

In the above extracts, both men differentiate ‘rough sex’ and sex that is not considered rough by how ‘rough sex’ requires a clearer form of communication, like “verbal” cues and consent, as opposed to “non-verbal cues.” M2 in Extract 1 even suggests that generally, sex that is not considered rough does not need to be communicated or consented. Holding a stricter standard of communication for ‘rough sex’ suggests that not only is clear communication recommended, but is a necessity in ‘rough sex.’

For the most part, participants drew on the repertoire of “*communication and consent is necessary*” to conceptualise and make sense of ethics in ‘rough sex’ contexts. The two main components that construct the repertoire are: ethical versus unethical ‘rough sex’; and making sense of unethical ‘rough sex.’

Ethical versus Unethical ‘Rough Sex’

The idea that consent and/or communication is a necessary element for ‘rough sex’ was often used to differentiate ethical and unethical ‘rough sex’ practices. Some men used the term consent to differentiate ‘rough sex’ and “acts that go further” when they were asked to explain what ‘rough sex’ is, either in comparison to other sex, or by itself.

3. ...it has to be consensual, otherwise it’s not rough sex – it’s sexual assault or rape (MK: Mm hm) there has to be informed, ongoing consent. (M1)
4. ...from um, sort of vigorous physical sex through to kind of a more extreme end um uh, sort of role playing consensual non-consent activities or um, sort of quite a heavy impact play...But if it’s truly sex without consent, then that’s sexual assault or rape. (M10)
5. And I think as well, is important to mention would be in my opinion there’s a difference between.. rough sex and maybe acts that go further. (MK: Mm) Um.. I mean first of all, there’s the element of like consent (MK: Mm) and

everything. That people are comfortable with what's happening. (MK: Mm) The communication surrounding it. (M3)

All accounts claimed that the presence or absence of consent is what differentiates ethical and unethical 'rough sex' practices, although "non-consent activities" can be part of the consensual 'rough sex' practices. There was a difference in terminology used to describe unethical 'rough sex'. Extracts 3 and 4 categorise unethical 'rough sex' practices as "sexual assault or rape," which aligns with the long-lasting societal perception that 'just sex' is consensual sex, whereas sexual assault is non-consensual (Gavey, 2005). M3 in Extract 5, on the other hand, describes unethical 'rough sex' practices more vaguely as "acts that go further," leaving space for a more flexible interpretation of what unethical 'rough sex' practices may entail. It is worth noting that M1, M10, and M3 all identified as heterosexual men who are not part of the BDSM community, and therefore when they were conceptualising 'rough sex,' they are likely to be primarily considered 'rough sex' practices between men and women outside of the BDSM community. Though participants in Extracts 3, 4 and 5 had different ideas of what constitutes unethical 'rough sex', they all portrayed that determining morality in 'rough sex' is a matter of binary categorisation: either consensual or non-consensual 'rough sex.'

On the other hand, some participants suggested that the mere presence or absence of communication and consent is insufficient to determine whether a 'rough sex' practice is ethical. For instance, M12 suggested that there are contextual factors to consider in addition to consent and communication in 'rough sex'. Earlier in the interview, he identified as a heterosexual man in the BDSM community whose interest is exclusively to dominate. After M12 said some people use BDSM and 'rough sex' as an excuse to be abusive towards their partners, I asked what differentiates 'rough sex' and abuse. He said,

6. Oh, um consent and communication. (MK: Mm, mm.) Um, is whilst there can be consent, there must also needs to be communication and that's two way communication... I've struck quite a few that are subs that go into it and they get sub frenzy and they want to try everything at once... And they are the prey to abusers that will just step in and go okay, they just, they're asking for this, therefore, I'm going to give it to them. And they don't take into account anything about the person at all. It's about them. I think that's the, maybe that's the differentiation is that when the um rough sex is for the, for the dominant person, then it's abuse. If that dominant person has uh empathy and understanding and is doing what they do for the submissive person, that's where it's BDSM. (M12)

In this extract, M12 claims that in ethical 'rough sex,' consent and communication both need to be present, but there are contextual factors to consider too. He claims that for the 'rough sex' act to be ethical, not "abuse," the person being dominant needs to ensure that they are "doing what they do for the submissive person," not themselves. In orienting 'rough sex' for the person in a submissive position, the dominant person is posed as an (s)expert (Potts, 1998) because even if the "submissive person" wants to "try everything at once" to comply is to "prey" and "abuse." (S)expert was the term Potts used to described the way heterosex was described in John Gray's book, *Mars and Venus in the bedroom*: that men are knowledgeable navigators of heterosex, whereas women are mere recipients. Therefore, consent and communication are used to differentiate between ethical and unethical 'rough sex,' but is seen as insufficient in themselves to ensure morality in 'rough sex'.

Though M12 said the communication for 'rough sex' should be "two-way communication," the following portrayal of people taking on dominant and submissive

positions is that of almost absolute possession of power compared to near complete powerlessness, respectively. After listening to M12's response in Extract 6, I recapitulated to him what I understood about his statement.

7. MK: Mm, I see. Right. So, I guess in that positioning, dominant people have a power over what goes on I guess.

M12: Well [sighs], see I always look at my submissives that I've been with, it's always been they have the control. Their shake of their heads or I'll take no, whatever it is, means things stop instantly... the person with the ultimate decision making is the submissive. It's just, it's the dominant's job to make sure that they [the submissives] are aware of um of what their wants are.

Here, M12 disagrees with my perception of his statement and elaborates in reference to the submissive and dominant power dynamics in his personal heterosexual relationships. He claimed that since it is possible for the people in submissive positions—his female sexual partners—to communicate that they want the sexual activity to stop, they have “control” in “ultimate decision making.” Hence, he suggests that being able to communicate is to have control in the sexual activities, though whether the sexual partner complies with what they communicate is not necessarily within their control. Nevertheless, he poses the possibility of communication as a medium that ensures “submissives” their control, and therefore inoculates his description of ‘rough sex’ from the question of ethics.

Another participant talked about the complexity of communication during sexual activities with his partner who he regularly has ‘rough sex’ with. The account was told by M11, who is also a heterosexual man in the BDSM community that exclusively takes on the dominant role during sex.

8. I see, quite a, quite a clear delineation between assault and consenting sex. (MK: Mm.) I think um, assault or rape is, is when it travels past that boundary that's agreed between the parties... people talk about safe words and all that thing. Yeah, I think, personally think that's crock of shits [laughs] I think anything counts as a safe word if you, if your vibe is wrong, then it's a no. (MK: Mm.) Um, and you can tell the difference quite readily. It's like with my partner. If she says no, checking in to see whether that's a solid no or maybe no or whatever no, but nothing happens at that point. (M11)

Initially, M11 suggests that there is “a clear delineation” of ethical and unethical sex, which is determined by the presence or absence of consent, or whether the agreed “boundary” is respected or not. However, as he elaborated on his view on “safe words” and interpreting when “she says no” within his current relationship, communicating and interpreting others’ communication appears more complicated. He talked about a wrong “vibe,” a subjective and ambiguous non-verbal cue as sufficient for “a safe word.” Yet, he suggests a wrong “vibe” is not ambiguous, which can be spotted “quite readily.” Discussing “vibe” as unambiguous in Extract 8 could have the effect of implying a cautious approach in communication, like “a safe word” is not necessary during BDSM activities or ‘rough sex.’ On the other hand, he described his partner saying “no” verbally—commonly considered as a clearer mode of communication—as ambiguous, stating that a “no” can be interpreted as a “maybe no,” instead. Within Extract 8, drawing on the repertoire “*communication and consent is necessary*” in the context of discussing ethical and unethical ‘rough sex’, it appears to have different rhetorical consequences for communication and consent. With regards to the consent part of the repertoire, it implies a clear boundary between ethical and unethical practices, whereas the communication part acknowledges variation in the interpretation of the same communication at an interpersonal level. The combined rhetoric

consequence is: communication and consent is needed for ‘rough sex’ to be ethical, but since a “no” can have different meanings, miscommunication can happen within ethical ‘rough sex.’

Overall, participants drew on the sub-repertoire of communication and consent to discuss the ethics of ‘rough sex’, claiming that the presence of communication and consent differentiates what makes ‘rough sex’ ethical or unethical. Yet, some suggested a simple and inflexible association between communication, consent and ethics in ‘rough sex,’ but others claimed a more complex connection. Interestingly, the accounts claiming a binary conception of morality in ‘rough sex’—either consensual or non-consensual—were told by those outside of the BDSM community, whilst the more complex explanations were told by participants part of the BDSM community.

Making Sense of Unethical ‘Rough Sex’

As established in the previous sub-repertoire of ethical versus unethical ‘rough sex’, many men used communication and consent to determine ethics in ‘rough sex’. In this section, I examine participants’ use of communication and consent while trying to make sense of why and how people or (other) men would have unethical ‘rough sex.’ Many men suggested that a lack of communication—including consent—or miscommunication are at the core of how unethical ‘rough sex’ experiences occur. One participant suggested that the reason why unethical ‘rough sex’ happens is due to communication difficulties, not necessarily due to a fault of a specific person. I asked M4 about his thoughts on the possibility of how normalising ‘rough sex’ may result in sociocultural pressure to engage in the ‘rough sex’ acts despite not enjoying it. He responded,

9. I think destigmatising sex is always good. (MK: Mm hm) Um, but creating a cultural norm, you know to the point... if something isn’t discussed, (MK:

Yeah) it might be something that neither want to do... It just creates a, creates a harmful scenario. (MK: Yeah) I don't think that's a result from the destigmatisation (MK: Mm) but you know lack of communication.. um, yeah, lack of communication which is a funny one, because I always think about oh, the idea of consent like oh, you can't just sit there and ask you know? (M4)

In this abstract, M4 claims that when a “cultural norm” exists for people to engage in ‘rough sex’ as a mainstream sexual repertoire, ‘lack of communication’ can lead to people having ‘rough sex’ when “neither want to,” which would be “harmful.” Though he conceptualises theoretically that the absence of communication is the reason why people may engage in unethical ‘rough sex’, he suggests that it is difficult to ask for “consent” in practice: that “you can’t just sit there and ask.” Since he identified as a heterosexual man, the context of difficulty in asking for consent would be with women. The rhetoric consequence is therefore suggesting communication is necessary for ethical ‘rough sex’, but at the same time, arguing that it is reasonable for people to find it socially uncomfortable to communicate openly: alluding that it would be relatively common for people to engage in unethical ‘rough sex’. Notably, M4 used gender-neutral language, as he did not include any words indicative of a particular gender.

Similarly, M5, who identified as a gay man, also suggested that an unwanted ‘rough sex’ experience is due to having “less than.. the standard for sexual consent.” When I asked him if he believes men and women have different experiences of ‘rough sex’, he began to talk about times when his female friends talked about unwanted experiences. He said, “... back when she [his female friend] was like dating, (MK: Mm hm) she would say ‘oh, this guy like randomly you know, spanked me during sex.’” He then stated, “I know some straight men who have less than.. the standard for sexual consent.” Though he specifically referred to “some straight men,” I did not consider this as a claim of moral superiority

within the gay community because the question specifically asked for differences in men and women, alluding to heterosexual encounters.

Contrary to the gender-neutral approach, some men suggested that unethical 'rough sex' happens because (other) men find it difficult "understanding consent," or "talking about" emotion or sex and associate the difficulty with masculinity. I asked M1, a heterosexual man, for his thoughts on how people in general think about 'rough sex'. He spoke about the two extremes of those who would think of it as sexual deviance versus those who would think 'rough sex' acts are "boring" and "not kinky" enough. He then said,

10. I think there is a real problem [with 'rough sex'] (MK: Mm), especially with men (MK: Mm hmm) around understanding consent and what is appropriate in that sort of situations... people who I would, we used to phrase lad culture to define um, you know men who are friends with other men who share stereotypically manly interests (MK: Right) like sports and rugby... that's sort of where you are going to get problems (MK: Mm) [pause] (MK: Mm right yeah) or makes it worse. (M1)

M1 suggests that stereotypes about men and "lad culture" are associated with why some men have a "real problem" with "understanding consent and what is appropriate." As M1 said in Extract 3, "there has to be informed, ongoing consent" for 'rough sex' to be ethical.

Similarly, M3, who is also a heterosexual man, associated masculinity with the possible discomfort for some men when talking about 'rough sex'. When I asked him whether men and women have different experiences of 'rough sex,' he stated that "most of the women I've spoken to about rough sex" experienced unethical 'rough sex', where "guy.. either pushes too far or.. goes into something that.. is not wanted." To make sense of why that happens, he said, "I think.. that, comes down to.. I think a lack of communication

in some parts.” As a follow-up question, I asked him whether a woman going “too far” with a man is different to men going “too far.” He spoke about why there might be a “lack of communication” for some men.

11. ...traditionally, the male.. is the dominant one. (MK: Yeah) And I think some people’s masculinity is tied into that (MK: Yeah) whether through the acts itself, or whether just feeling.. dominant. And.. I would imagine that.. some guys that are not as open.. uh.. emotionally (MK: Mm hm) or sexually, would not feel comfortable talking about those sorts of things (MK: Mm hm) either with their partner, or just in general. Um.. and some people may feel emasculated by that (MK: Mm hm) because for them, that [masculinity] is, something important identity (MK: Mm hm) as a male. (M3)

By linking masculinity, unethical ‘rough sex’ experiences, and difficulty in communicating, males are portrayed as the ones that usually engage in ‘rough sex’ unethically. In the above extract, M3 suggests that talking about emotion and sex is so challenging to masculinity that talking would be emasculating for some men. Despite the potential power of masculinity as a social construct impacting men, M3 claims that men can be relatively free from its impact, as masculinity may or may not be important for their “identity.”

In both Extracts 10 and 11, issues with “understanding consent” and “talking” for some men are attributed to male stereotypes to be dominant and adhere to masculinity. An ideological consequence is that the absence or difficulty of understanding communication is conceptualised as a result of the social construction of masculinity and, therefore, uncontrollable for individuals.

After Extract 11, M3 suggested that both men and women can also “feel unsafe talking” about ‘rough sex’. He said for women, there can be an “unsafe feeling... because of that, power, like that power imbalance um.. or from.. something.. turning more.. angry, or violent or upset.” On the other hand, he described that men can “feel unsafe,” too, because some men may not want to “upset” the sexual partner, or it can be “embarrassing” talking to friends, or “because of the pain emotionally and physically.” Though M3 claims that men and women can both “feel unsafe” communicating about ‘rough sex’, his reasoning suggests that there are greater risks for women. After discussing potential issues in communicating for both men and women, M3 argued that a resolution would be to have “better sex education” in order to “open up those conversations that might not happen between people surrounding things like consent, wants, dislikes, feeling safe, safe words, all those sorts of things.” He specifically suggested improving the communication and consent aspect of sex education, again reiterating that communication is at the core of unethical ‘rough sex’ practices.

Akin to M3’s recommendation, other men also suggested that “sex education” is the key to both cause and solution targeting unethical ‘rough sex’ practices. M4 stated there is a “need to have a good, clear communication” during ‘rough sex’ to avoid “negative experiences.” He then talked about the consequence of a ‘rough sex’ act like choking becoming a “cultural norm.” He said people who want to choke or be choked can be “more chill now,” whereas others who do not want it might engage in it because, “they think it’s, it’s that norm.” He claimed that “more sex education” would be beneficial for this dilemma. After this suggestion, M4, who used to work for a university in Aotearoa, New Zealand, said,

12. Yeah, I think in the university context... we’d get a lot of reports with students coming in of like not ideal sexual encounters (MK: Oh, really?) you know

border on that sort of rape line. Um, you know, severely intoxicated, coaxed or, you know, didn't, you know and always it was young kids coming into University... no idea what they can and can't do. It was, it was a, a lot of harmful, a lot of harm, it's sort of result and I think large part it was down to lack of [sex] education prior to (MK: Mm) arriving here at university. (M4)

Outlined above is M4's claim that a lack of sex education results in young people entering university without knowing what ethical sex and 'rough sex' looks like. He suggests that this is why people engage in "not ideal sexual encounters." Attributing sex education to people not being able to acquire knowledge for ethical sex or 'rough sex' frames 'not ideal sexual encounters' as something that is outside of one's control or agency.

Another participant also proposed that inadequate sexual education is why unethical 'rough sex' occurs. I asked for M2's thoughts on a study finding that women reported choking as one of the most common scary sexual experiences apart from rape and sexual assault. He stated that "unfortunately, I'm not surprised." Then he elaborated,

13. I [sighs] I think that (MK: Yeah) there is a real dearth of.. people that (MK: Mm) ask for consent and talk through it... I don't necessarily attribute that to the perpetrator being malicious. (MK: Mm, mm) I do attribute it to what I consider quite frankly appalling sexual education in this country (MK: Mm) and other Western countries... they haven't been provided fucking framework, because we're so like almost abstinence driven... idea of kink entering into the discourse is just unthinkable. (M2)

In Extract 13, M2 explicitly excludes agency in most "perpetrator[s]" and attributes the absence of consent and communication in 'rough sex' to sexual education. Contrary to the recommendation to focus sex education on communication as M3 mentioned earlier, M2

suggests the key to improving sex education is to introduce a more open framework of sex that includes “kink.” He suggests that if “kink” or ‘rough sex’ acts were a more normalised part of sex education, there would be better communication and consent practices in ‘rough sex’, encouraging ethical practices.

At another point in the interview, M2 suggested that there should be more sexual educational opportunities targeted towards men. Earlier in the interview, M2 talked about a personal ‘rough sex’ experience where he was asked by a female sexual partner to carry out rougher sex than he was comfortable with. He described an experience where he was asked to ejaculate on the floor and “force her head down to lick” it then the woman asked him to use a “contraption” to put it into her anus. He said he “did it,” but it was “too much.” To elaborate on his thoughts regarding the experience, he said,

14. I don’t think there is as many targeted campaigns towards men being like (MK: Yeah) “hey, you can say no.” Because there’s an association of you being virile and wanting up for absolutely anything... I.. never in the course of any sex education (MK: Mm) or things outside of now counselling, rape crisis [for his past experience of being sexually abused as a child] (MK: Mm) where I was taught that it’s okay to say no. (MK: Mm, mm, mm, mm) So, yeah, at the time, I thought if I say no, I would fucking disappoint her. (MK: Mm) I, I, I didn’t have the framework in my mind for it. (M2)

Within the above extract, M2 expressed frustration that, as a man, there is an expectation that he is “up for absolutely anything,” which aligns with the male sex drive discourse—that men have an uncontrollable sexual drive (Hollway, 1984). He claims that targeted sex education should be more available for men, as such expectations may compel men like himself to continue unwanted ‘rough sex’, even when direct interpersonal pressure or

coercion from the sexual partner is absent. What he described would fall under the definition of sociocultural coercion that Faustino and Gavey (2021) conceptualised in their study of women. The main rhetorical strength of Extract 14 comes from his reference to a personal experience. He suggests that being “taught that it’s okay to say no” would have helped him say “no,” and, therefore, would have prevented him from experiencing the unethical ‘rough sex’. Hence, male sex drive discourse is described as restrictive, because it impacts what kind of communication is easier or more difficult during ‘rough sex’.

Similar to the previous sub-repertoire of ethical versus unethical ‘rough sex’, the extracts outlined in this section drew on the sub-repertoire of making sense of unethical ‘rough sex’ using communication—including consent. In making sense of unethical ‘rough sex’, the participants commonly attributed male gender norms and sex education to account for why people may find communication difficult or why they would not communicate before and during ‘rough sex’. One of the main rhetoric and ideological consequences of this sub-repertoire is that it situates anyone who has not had appropriate sex education or are exposed to male gender norms as having the potential to have unethical ‘rough sex’. It provides rhetoric flexibility: to be able to claim simultaneously that communication and consent are necessary for ethical ‘rough sex’, while suggesting that there are external factors that make it possible for people—generally men—to inadvertently engage in unethical ‘rough sex’ practices.

The first part of this chapter examined the ways participants drew on the interpretative repertoire, “*communication and consent is necessary*,” through two sub-repertoires: ethical versus unethical ‘rough sex’; and making sense of unethical ‘rough sex’. The repertoire was constructed by claims that communication and consent are the main aspects that differentiate ethical and unethical ‘rough sex,’ with the majority of talk based on abstract ideas of ‘rough sex’ and second-hand stories of ‘rough sex’. One of the main

rhetoric consequences was the ‘both/and’ positioning: that ethical ‘rough sex’ is both easy and difficult to achieve, and the boundary between ethical and unethical practices being both clear and blurry. Therefore, when participants discussed unethical ‘rough sex’ practices using the repertoire, engaging in unethical ‘rough sex’ was seen as not necessarily a matter of one’s agency, but a result of external factors like masculinity and sex education. Another important rhetoric consequence was to achieve a subject position of a man who endorses and practices ethical ‘rough sex’. However, when participants described personal experiences of ‘rough sex’, they commonly suggested that sometimes, communication and consent are not needed. This pattern will be discussed in relation to the second interpretative repertoire, “*sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary.*”

Sometimes, Communication and Consent is Unnecessary

The second part of the chapter will outline the ways that men drew on the second repertoire, “*sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary.*” This is based on claims that it is reasonable to have ‘rough sex’ without clear communication or consent. Though the first and second repertoires appear to be contradictory, most participants who drew on the first repertoire also used the second repertoire. The participants commonly spoke about their personal experiences of ‘rough sex’ as they used the repertoire, “*sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary.*”

The extract below exemplifies an instance of a participant drawing on the repertoire.

15. Um, just like the questionnaire [the online survey from which participants were recruited from] that you asked you know, uh.. I think it asked you know have you been asked verbally, have you been verbally asked to do something, or have you verbally asked to do something? That’s not.. on the most part, that hasn’t been my experience. (MK: Mm) I think um.. um.. I think generally something

will happen. (MK: Mm) And then, either I will express.. you know, displeasure, or the partner, you know gauge a visual (MK: Mm) or audible feedback. (M4)

M4 suggests that generally, his experiences of ‘rough sex’ involved no prior discussion; instead, there is initiation, followed by his feedback or reliance on partners’ verbal or nonverbal cues to gauge whether it would be appropriate to continue or not. This way, communication and consent have been deemed unnecessary, at least before ‘rough sex’ acts are initiated.

In unpacking the repertoire, “*sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary*,” I introduce two sub-repertoires that are the main components of the repertoire: initiation without explicit consent; and reliance on ambiguous cues.

Initiating Without Explicit Consent

The repertoire, “*sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary*”, was commonly constructed by descriptions of personal ‘rough sex’ experiences when the participants initiated them without explicit consent. Some participants talked about non-consensual initiation in relation to choking their female sexual partners. For instance, M10, a heterosexual man, stated that he “tried choking [his female partners] a few times” but said, “It’s not something I love.” I asked him how choking was initiated, to which he responded,

16. It’s just something that happened. They didn’t ask for it, and I don’t remember being asked for it. (MK: Mm, mm, mm) I can only remember a couple of times it happened. I guess it’s something that I just kind of tried. (MK: Mm) Um, I don’t remember though. (M10)

Here, M10 illustrates an instance of initiating a ‘rough sex’ act without prior communication. Within Extract 15 and the context of M10’s choking experience, choking

has been normalised as a common part of sex. Firstly, he claimed that he choked his sexual partners “a few times” despite not desiring it himself and not being asked by the partners. Then he described the act as “just something that happened”, which implies that choking was considered so normal that he did not feel the need to discuss it beforehand. This way, the sub-repertoire, initiating without explicit consent, functioned to help normalise the ‘rough sex’ act—choking.

Similar to Extract 16, other men talked about personal experiences of choking female sexual partners without explicit consent.

17. I’ve never met a girl who doesn’t like being choked... And certainly, if I was having one-night stand with someone, I would probably like rest my hand there[on her neck] to get like a non-verbal cue of do you like that or not, (MK: Right) and then would talk to them before going further than that. (M1)

18. I’d say put my hand.. on the partner’s throat (MK: Mm hm) and uh, um.. see how that went. (MK: Mm, mm, mm. And.. you’d tell by what she says, or.. she.. her..) Yeah, visual, visual or audio [response]. (M4)

19. If like um, on the evening, we might... start making out. Uh, I might straight away [inaudible] grab her throat and (MK: Mm) um, yeah start improvising dirty talk in her ear (MK: Mm) and take things from there. (M9)

All three extracts illustrate instances of men initiating choking on women during sex without communicating to ensure that it was wanted by the women at the time. In Extracts 17 and 18, the strategy of “rest[ing]” a hand or “put[ting]” a hand on the women’s neck initially, then gauging a response to determine whether to “go further” or “see how that went.” The words “rest” and “put” both portray the action as harmless because they imply that no force is actively applied.

In Extract 18, M4 described what typically happens during sex, he disclosed that most of his sexual encounters were from “one-night stands,” like the account described by M1 in Extract 17. This context is salient because unlike M10 in Extract 16—where the relationship with the sexual partner has not been established—both M1 and M4 suggest that it is reasonable for men to initiate choking on strangers without asking whether it is wanted by them. Hence, the “one-night stands” context strengthens the rhetoric consequence: the normalisation of men choking women during sex, which is not specific to a particular relationship, but general heterosex. On the contrary, M9’s account in Extract 19 is based on his ‘rough sex’ experience with his “serious partner”, whom he said shared her sexual “fantasies,” which included being choked. Therefore, his talk does not have the same strength of rhetoric consequence in normalising choking in general heterosex practices.

Another notable factor that provides rhetoric strength in the above accounts (Extract 17 and 18) is the claim that women tend to enjoy being choked during sex. In Extract 17, M1’s description of non-consensual choking is prefaced by the disclaimer that he has “never met a girl who doesn’t like being choked.” Akin to this statement, at another part of the interview, M4 said, “It [choking] doesn’t turn me on in the slightest... Um, but I think choke, choking will you know will help the woman orgasm.” Overall, implying that women generally enjoy choking and associating it with their own act of initiating choking without prior discussion, has a few important implications. Firstly, men are positioned as (s)experts that take the lead during sex with women, while women are vicariously told how they are supposed to respond to male sexual advances (Potts, 1998). Another implication is that if a ‘rough sex’ act induces female sexual pleasure, then that sexual act is ethical. However, as Gavey (2005) stated, feeling sexual pleasure is not a definitive indication that the particular act is wanted by women. In this case, the rhetoric consequence is: if men can reasonably

predict that women enjoy a particular ‘rough sex’ act, men can initiate a ‘rough sex’ act without prior communication.

As discussed earlier, the account of non-consensual initiation in Extract 19 was based on M9’s description of ‘rough sex’ with his “serious partner,” who shared his sexual fantasies, which include choking. His account, therefore, suggests that if a ‘rough sex’ act is with someone that one is in a relationship with, and they have discussed the possibility in the past, it is unnecessary to communicate each time. Another participant also made a similar claim.

20. And in a long-term relationship, it’s more of a.. you work it out at start what you are into, where is the limit... and you can go back to that because you’ve already had the conversation. (M1)

While suggesting that what is appropriate in future ‘rough sex’ experiences would be informed by past conversations with their partner, M9 and M1 concurrently imply that it is unnecessary to communicate whether a particular ‘rough sex’ act is wanted at a specific time and to the same extent. All the accounts in this section referred to experiences of choking women, but participants also referred to other ‘rough sex’ acts too.

One participant who said he was part of the BDSM community talked about initiating using a knife without explicit consent while having sex with his current partner. Before M12 described what happened at the time, he stated that his partner had asked him whether he had “a sharp knife,” which she later revealed that it was for removing wax, but M12 said he had “taken that slightly wrong.” He said, “I cut my initial on her,” which stayed for three to four weeks. Later in the interview, M12 revisited his account of the ‘rough sex’ experience using the knife. After he claimed that he usually engages in acts that

are “generated by their [partners’] wishes,” I asked if he asks or suggests what he wants to do, too. He answered,

21. No, I don’t ask. Um, I would start something at, at a low end (MK: Mm, mm, mm.) and, and then [continue] dependent on their reaction and debrief afterward... I’d just run it [knife] down and feel it against the [partner’s] skin and then see what it was. It became very obvious that she was quite happy to progress that further... I’m not somebody that would go “Oh, do you want to try this?” I’ll just, within what we’ve already discussed, I’d know whether it’s, it’s um a likelihood or not then push down the track. (M12)

Similar to Extracts 17 and 18, in Extract 21, M12 states that it is appropriate to initiate a ‘rough sex’ act “at a low end”, and gauge the partner’s reaction to decide whether to continue or increase the intensity of the act. In the phrase, “just run it down,” the word “just” implies the harmlessness of his initial act. However, I argue that unexpectedly being faced with a knife in the context of having ‘rough sex’ could be threatening. Drawing on the sub-repertoire of initiating without explicit consent in this context has a consequence of suggesting that it is okay to initiate any ‘rough sex’ act “at a low end,”—including using a knife. Another rhetoric consequence mirrors Extract 20 in claiming that once a ‘rough sex’ act has been discussed as a possibility, it is fine to initiate without communicating each time.

Some participants discussed instances of initiating other ‘rough sex’ acts without prior discussion but condemned their actions afterwards. For example, when I asked M11 how his first ‘rough sex’ experience went, he described it as “play fighting kind of gone extreme.” Then I asked if there was a conversation beforehand. He responded, “I would say to you no. I’ve grown in experience and understanding in a dramatic way since those

times.” He then proceeded to talk about how the “kink community” has helped him become “quite informative in a lot of consent issues.” Similarly, I asked M10 how his first ‘rough sex’ experience was initiated, to which he said,

22. I don’t think I talked about it. Um, when I was first starting to have sex, I don’t think I talked about it. I would have been like um, you know, having sex doggy style and started spanking bum (MK: Mm), but you know, um, I think that’s what happened... Um, I’m sort of pretty certain that she would have said if she didn’t like it. (M10)

At the end of the interview, M10 reflected on his past ‘rough sex’ experiences and stated, “I didn’t always do it [get active consent]. In every single example I gave you I kind of relied on non-verbal cues and um that’s a shame really.” Both M11 and M10 spoke about personal instances of non-consensual initiation, but unlike other accounts, they suggested that initiating ‘rough sex’ without consent is wrong. M11 claimed that he has “grown” and now has improved his consent practices, and M10 called it a “shame” to have initiated without consent.

This section examined the ways in which the sub-repertoire of initiation without explicit consent was constructed. The overall rhetoric consequence is putting the onus on the women sexual partners to communicate whether non-consensual initiation of ‘rough sex’ or the act itself is unwanted. This way, women are held accountable if they do not communicate when the ‘rough sex’ is unwanted. Hence, the neoliberal idea of individual responsibility is enforced. Such a way of putting the responsibility on women aligns with Cahill’s (2014) statement that one of the ways that consent theory is limiting is because women are expected to be the ones to communicate non-consent.

Reliance on Ambiguous Cues

Within the previous sub-repertoire of initiation without explicit consent were some accounts of initiating 'rough sex' acts and then gauging partners' reactions to decide whether to continue the acts or increase the intensity of the acts. Related, is the current sub-repertoire of reliance on ambiguous cues, as many participants told accounts of gauging partners' nonverbal communication and "intuitive" feelings. While some participants described instances of interpreting female partners' non-verbal cues, they claimed that understanding non-verbal cues is relatively easy and clear.

23. [Described spanking his ex-girlfriend.] Um, she definitely liked it. Like we didn't talk about it I don't think. She just sort of responded well sexually I suppose. (MK: Mm, mm.) She was wet, wanted to have sex afterwards, you know that sort of thing... you know she was grinding and kind of moaning (M10)
24. [Talking about how he gauges his partners' reactions]...you're watching, eye contact, body movement, body reactions, um, that sort of stuff. (MK: Yeah) Not being asked to stop... obvious, you know, obvious movement like yeah, she's definitely enjoying it (M7)
25. [I asked how he gauges how partners feels.] Well, for me, I, I, because I do have a quite a, an emotional attachment. Generally, I can see it in their eyes. (MK: Mm.) And you can see, when people change in how they are feeling, their eyes will change ... There's a little bit of fear at the start (MK: Mm.) Um, depending on what it is, I will um and but normally once they, they see that they've gone through that fear stage, you can push it a little bit further. (M12)

All three accounts illustrated instances of relying on non-verbal cues like partners being "wet," "grinding," "moaning," changes "in their eyes," "body movements," and "not

asking to stop.” Despite the reactions that the participants described being generally implicit cues that are arguably open for different interpretations, they all claimed relative certainty in their own perceptions of those cues: in Extract 23, it was described as “definitely” indicative of sexual pleasure; in Extract 24, it was “obvious” signs of enjoyment; and in Extract 25, M12 said “generally” he “can see” how the partner is “feeling.” Expressing relative confidence in understanding ambiguous cues suggests that men are (s)experts at understanding what women want and feel during sex (Potts, 1998). It is particularly relevant in Extract 25, where the look of “fear” in a woman’s eyes is perceived as a reasonable initial reaction before proceeding to more severe intensity of the ‘rough sex’ acts. This statement raises an important question: what is the implication of dismissing the perception of “fear” as a normal “stage” in ‘rough sex’ practices?

Related to Extract 24, at another part of the interview, M7 suggested that reliance on ambiguous cues is reasonable because he is in a relationship with a woman that he is having ‘rough sex’ with. When I asked him how he would tell whether a ‘rough sex’ act has gone “too far” or “just enough,” M7 responded,

26. Have you ever had sex before? [laughs] Um.. I mean uh.. so.. again, like I’m in relationships right? It’s – I’m not – it’s not random people... You can tell it’s nice, body’s reacting, she’s moving, she’s getting wetter, she’s making noises, she’s wriggling... or um moans. (M7)

His initial response, “Have you ever had sex before?” indicates that any reasonable person with sexual experiences should be able to know when things have gone “too far” by gauging his partner’s sexual pleasure. Akin to Extracts 23 and 24, M7 has again claimed that indication of the partner’s sexual pleasure should guide whether a ‘rough sex’ act should continue or not. Absent in their talks are other possibilities like women not wanting

the sex that they feel pleasure from, that they may be misinterpreting non-verbal cues, or that women may be pretending to enjoy it. Though M7 suggests that it is easier to gauge partners' pleasure when they are in relationships, he talked about an instance when he made his partner cry during sex. As M7 talked about his 'rough sex' experiences, he said he and his partner would "push" themselves during 'rough sex' to receive rougher sex. He then said, "I made her cry once [while having 'rough sex']. I still don't know what part of it actually did it. (MK: Mm) But that's the only time." This account suggests that being in a longer-term relationship with a partner does not necessarily guarantee that everything is communicated transparently by the partner with regards to 'rough sex', nor that they will be able to pick up all ambiguous cues during sex.

Another participant also suggested that communication about sex is more implicit in his relationship with his wife of ten years whom he has regular 'rough sex' with.

27. That said, all the time, a husband and wife, or a person in a one-year relationship, doesn't always say would you like to have sex now? And receive a yes, every single time they want to have sex (MK: Mm). In fact, every couple has their own secret language... putting their hand on their lower back, or kissing the ear or whatever it is. It's saying 'I'm up for it, are you?' (M10)

In this extract, M10 suggests that people in a relationship develop a shared and nuanced understanding of non-verbal cues, which no longer makes it ambiguous. However, earlier in the interview, M10 stated that communication about sex in a long-term marriage is not always easy. When he talked about a 'rough sex' experience where he was tied up, and his wife was using a "new paddle thing" on him, M10 said, "...she asked, 'What should I do now? What do you want?'" and I could kind of tell her but um, I guess firstly, she wasn't able to say 'This is what I want'... it was quite an awkward conversation." This way, he

claims that even in a long-term relationship, it can be difficult to communicate sexual desire.

On the other hand, M10 described an instance of interpreting his wife's explicit verbal communication as ambiguous.

28. I haven't tried anal sex. I have mentioned it to her that I'd like to. She sort of said, 'It's not really something I'd like to try' ... I took from that maybe, but not really. (MK: Mm) So, that kind of goes to I'd quite like to try it but um to me I guess consent has to be enthusiastic, (MK: Mm) right?... So I kind of parked that for now. (M10)

Here, the partner's expression of not wanting a particular sexual act has been perceived as a "maybe," and something that can be revisited in the future. Overall, in both M7 and M10's accounts, non-verbal cues are treated as both ambiguous and clear as needed.

One participant talked about picking up on the "sense that something was wrong" during 'rough sex' with a woman, which he described as an ability that comes with experiences. I asked M2 whether he gets worried that he might go "a bit too far" during 'rough sex'. He answered,

29. Mm, mm... Even if you've said 'hey, just say stop at any time.' They might not, right? (MK: Mm) They might not feel comfortable (MK: Yeah) saying stop if you're having a good time or whatever. But like, I remember with one person that I was seeing casually.. like I, I don't know. I just like intuitive kind of just discomfort... I just got the sense that something was wrong. (MK: Mm) I don't, yeah, I don't know how to explain it and I just stopped. (MK: Mm) 'Hey, you okay?' (MK: Yeah) And she was like 'can we take a break?' And I was like 'yes, yes, yes. Go on.' (M2)

M2 suggests that telling the sexual partner to “say stop at any time” does not ensure that the partner would feel comfortable communicating that during ‘rough sex.’ In Extract 29, being able to notice an ambiguous cue has been described as an additional ability that would ensure ethical ‘rough sex’ practice, where the sex is wanted by everyone involved. When I asked him to elaborate on how he sensed that “something was wrong,” he said, “I suspect that it’s because I’ve had experienced rough sex before... if I haven’t had exposure and um, you know partaken in it before, (MK: Mm) you know, I might not have known to stop.”

Contrary to other accounts outlined above, M6 claimed that not clearly communicating discomfort during ‘rough sex’ would mean that the instigator of unwanted ‘rough sex’ activities would almost be relieved of accountability. He talked about his own experience of being the recipient of an unwanted ‘rough sex’ act with another man, where his “anal sphincter” was damaged. He said, “How do you determine what’s the acceptable level of thrusting during sex? Like I didn’t verbalise that I wasn’t happy with it um, how does he [sexual partner] know?” In this account, he puts the onus on himself for not communicating clearly what an acceptable level of force was. Such a description aligns with the neoliberal idea of each individual having responsibility for communicating what they want and drawing boundaries. This claim is possibly M6’s efforts to avoid victim labels like the women in Bay-Cheng and Eliseo-Arras’s (2008) study. However, putting the onus on the recipient of ‘rough sex’ to explicitly communicate without ambiguity dismisses various influences that play into why one may not feel comfortable communicating discomfort. For example, Cahill (2014) suggested that consenting to unwanted sexual experiences may be the easiest option for women at times.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The research conducted for this thesis aimed to examine the ways that men describe their perspectives and experiences of ‘rough sex’, primarily in relation to women. In my interviews with 12 men, I identified four interpretative repertoires in men’s talk about ‘rough sex’: the relevance or irrelevance of gender (discussed in Chapter 3) and the necessity or nonnecessity of communication and consent (discussed in Chapter 4).

I acknowledge that the set of repertoires I present in this research may not necessarily be typical of repertoires available for the general population, and that the language used by participants in the interviews may differ from their usual everyday talk. However, the basis of interpretative repertoire is that its use is flexible and adjustable by the speaker or writer suited to fit an immediate context (Potter et al., 1990). At the same time, people’s use of language is based on the lexicon made available in specific historical and sociocultural contexts (Wetherell, 1998). Hence, I argue that the participants’ accounts do not necessarily need to mirror their typical ways of talking about ‘rough sex’, because their talk would still be drawn from the set of interpretative repertoires made available to them.

In this chapter, I situate the interpretative repertoires I identified within the existing literature on ‘rough sex’ and general sex, and highlight potentially harmful sociocultural consequences of the repertoires. As Wetherell and Potter (1988) conceptualised, poststructuralist discourse analysis argues that there can be unintended consequences to the particular use of language—that a particular form of discourse can have its own impact that the speaker or writer may not be aware of. I discuss the potential wider consequences of the repertoires without necessarily suggesting that participants spoke with calculated malicious intent.

Before I begin the discussion, I will briefly summarise the structure of the analysis as I refer to particular repertoires and sub-repertoires throughout this chapter. In Chapter 3, I examined two interpretative repertoires focused on gender. The first repertoire was “gender is irrelevant,” composed of three sub-repertoires: opposing traditional gender roles; gender equality; and gender neutrality in dominance and submission. The second repertoire was, “gender is relevant,” consisting of two sub-repertoires: male dominance and submission; and gendered power imbalances.

In Chapter 4, I outlined two interpretative repertoires focused on communication and consent. The first repertoire was “communication and consent is necessary,” constructed of two sub-repertoires: ethical versus unethical ‘rough sex’; and making sense of unethical ‘rough sex’. The second repertoire was “sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary,” which included two sub-repertoires: initiation without explicit consent; and reliance on ambiguous cues.

In Chapter 3, the two seemingly contrasting interpretative repertoires both aligned with the postfeminist perspective on heterosex. While explaining the rise of the term postfeminism, Gill (2016) stated that there was a rise in paradoxical ideas of women, which were the declaration of gender equality, misogyny and feminism that is no longer required. She described that according to postfeminist perspectives, any gender inequalities are now viewed as results of biological differences or individual women’s choices. When the participants in this research drew on the repertoire, “*gender is irrelevant*,” they constructed egalitarian rhetoric within interpersonal interactions while talking about abstract and personal experiences. This way, the use of the repertoire implies that gender equality has been achieved. However, when the participants drew on the repertoire, “*gender is relevant*,” gendered differences were acknowledged, but they were either attributed to inevitable biological, physical strength differences, or focused primarily on how the

implicit expectation for male dominance impacts men rather than how the implicit expectation of female submission would affect women. Explaining gendered differences primarily through gendered strength differences, presents the inequalities as beyond their control, and therefore positions them as not personally responsible for a gendered power imbalance. I argue that participants' focus on talking about expectations of male dominance implies that men are even, if not more, impacted by social expectations compared to women. Overall, though Chapter 3 introduces and discusses two relatively opposing repertoires about gender, which both align with a postfeminist perspective.

One of the important consequences of postfeminist rhetoric is the muting of linguistic resources available to address structural bases of gender inequality (Gill, 2016; Kelan, 2009). A study researching gender discrimination within information communication technology workplaces, found ideological dilemmas with the interpretative repertoire of gender-neutral workplaces, and one that acknowledges gender discrimination in workplaces (Kelan, 2009). Strategies to overcome the dilemmas were to position sexism in the past or place individual blame for gender discrimination on women. Kelan argued that interviewees—both men and women—showed gender fatigue from repeatedly constructing gender-neutral rhetoric, losing the energy to address discrimination. She stated that this way, the importance of gender had been dismissed, making it almost impossible to combat. In relation to this study, a similar explanation is possible for the participants in this study. In both Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, the neoliberal rhetoric of freedom to choose and individual responsibility was evident, yet many participants also voiced their concerns about women being subjected to unethical 'rough sex' and an existing gender power imbalance—albeit often reduced to physical strength differences. However, men are potentially faced with the constant ideological dilemma of wanting to construct their sociocultural context—where they practice 'rough sex' in—as relatively egalitarian, on the

one hand, and learning about instances of women being subjected to unethical ‘rough sex’ in media or from conversations with women in social settings on the other. Due to this dilemma, men could be subjected to gender fatigue and therefore lose motivation or energy to be able to address wider gendered issues.

Within the repertoires, “*gender is irrelevant*,” and in most of Chapter 4, consisting of interpretative repertoires on consent and communication, was neoliberal rhetoric of individual freedom of choice and responsibility. As the participants used the repertoire, “*gender is irrelevant*,” they constructed their talk about past ‘rough sex’ experiences with women as shaped by gender equality. Therefore, women were depicted as equally free to express, explore and communicate their sexual desires and say no if a particular ‘rough sex’ act is unwanted. This way, if women do not communicate that they want to pause or stop during ‘rough sex’, they become solely accountable. In Chapter 4, the pervasive neoliberal rhetoric continues as, when they draw on the repertoire “*consent and communication is necessary*,” they construct consent and communication—usually the mere presence—as the key factor that ensures ethical ‘rough sex’ practice. Largely absent throughout the participants’ accounts was the consideration that the onus is often put on women to respond to the terms set out by men, the sociocultural gender expectation for women to be responsive to men’s sexual needs—aligning with the dominant heteronormative discourses of male sex drive and female have/hold discourses (Hollway, 1989). Also, as men used the repertoire, “*sometimes, consent and communication is unnecessary*,” many talked about the approach of initiating ‘rough sex’ acts without consent and then gauging partners’ reactions to decide whether to continue or increase the intensity of the ‘rough sex’ acts. Again, this approach is reliant on women communicating dislike, without consideration of wider sociocultural aspects that could potentially impede women’s ability to do so.

The neoliberal rhetoric that supposedly warrants freedom paired with individual responsibility has an advantageous sociocultural consequence. Admitting gender differences to a certain extent through the use of the “*gender is relevant*” repertoire can be beneficial in certain contexts because men can take on a subject position as pro-feminist people who are empathetic to women’s disadvantaged stances to some extent. This aligns with the current mainstream liberal tendencies that prevail in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Similarly, drawing on the sub-repertoire of opposing traditional gender roles has the same consequence. The participants typically claimed that traditional gender roles had no significant impact on their intimate relationships with women, or explicitly condemned some aspects of the traditional gender roles. The rejection of traditional gender roles is likely to be well-intended by the interviewees and would be relatively harmless in abstract conception. However, it can enable the construction of egalitarian subject positions. As Edwards (1987) conceptualised, in modern Western societies, explicit forms of patriarchy are no longer required since male dominance persists in various facets of our ‘normal’ lives like economic, sociopolitical and ideological domains. Hence, explicit support for relatively explicit traditional gender roles is unnecessary to maintain the gendered status quo. I argue that such self-presentation as an egalitarian man aids the process of keeping gender inequalities invisible in their talk, by making it more difficult for others to challenge subtle displays of inequities, that maintain the status quo.

When participants drew on the interpretative repertoire, “*communication and consent is necessary*,” they typically used the concept of consent to discuss whether ‘rough sex’ was ethical or not. A discursive psychology approach argues that people are limited by the historically available language resources, like interpretative repertoires, while constructing their talk and thoughts about a specific topic and/or event (Edley, 2001). Therefore, the repertoire reiterates the pervasiveness of consent discourse in sexual

activities (Fredricsen, 2018), and in academic literature to distinguish the morality and/or legality of sex (Beres, 2007). However, as discussed in Chapter 1, existing feminist literature indicates contention around the use of explicit consent as an ideal in sexual practices. According to Torenz (2021), the idea behind affirmative consent, that a ‘yes’ given in the absence of pressure ensures ethical sex, is problematic in relation to sex between women and men because it undermines the internalisation of the self as a heteronormative sexual subject, bound by social norms of heterosex. Beres (2007) argued that consent appears obvious, yet complex, because there are subtle ways of communication beyond verbal languages like eye contact and breathing in sexual contexts. United Kingdom undergraduate students in Schumlich and Fisher’s study (2018) reported that, in practice, explicit, unambiguous consent is not communicated or sought out during sex and therefore is incongruent with affirmative consent campaigns. This then raises a question of whether, in fact, drawing on the second repertoire, “*sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary*”, is more fitting for personal experiences of ‘rough sex’, akin to what most participants in this research did. Yet, if the relatively clearer form of communication consent is not adequate to account for the grey area between ‘just (rough) sex’ and sexual assault (Gavey, 2005), then what would be the implication for normalising more ambiguous forms of communication? Despite indications that everyday sexual communication can be more complex than verbal consent practices, I argue that normalising the use of ambiguous cues also carries a risk of further expanding the grey area. The current debate in social settings, media and the legal field about whether consent was asked or given could turn into whether particular body movements, facial expressions, ‘look’ in the eyes, and intuition were an indication that sex is enjoyed and/or wanted. Therefore, I agree with Fredricsen’s (2018) recommendation that ethical sexual practices, including ‘rough sex’, should be based on open communication with respect for one

another's desire, boundaries and comfort levels. Unfortunately though, I fear that openness in conversations and mutual respect would only be possible when the parties are relatively free of the power imbalances that exist in the current status quo.

There were some significant constructions and patterns when participants drew on the repertoire, "*sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary.*" As participants used the repertoire, they typically claimed either that it is reasonable to initiate 'rough sex' acts without explicit consent, or that it is appropriate to rely on ambiguous cues during 'rough sex'. In both components of the repertoire, men positioned perceived female sexual pleasure as a basis for determining whether they can continue the 'rough sex' acts. However, the expression of sexual pleasure should not necessarily be interpreted as the woman feeling actual sexual pleasure. A study based in Aotearoa, New Zealand, found that within men's and women's talk, there was the pervasive discourse of reciprocity, especially in the context of orgasms, which can be viewed as a more egalitarian construction of heterosex, yet put greater pressure for women to reciprocate orgasms (Braun et al., 2003). Also, another study found that many women express sexual pleasure during sex for the sake of their partners' pleasure (Nicolson & Burr, 2003). Even if women feel sexual pleasure, it is possible for women to consent to unwanted sex, or let the unwanted sexual activity continue (Dymock, 2012; Gavey, 2005).

Another pattern in men's use of the repertoire of "*sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary*" was that they were commonly accompanied with reasons why a lack of explicit communication and consent were acceptable in particular contexts. Some of the explanations that men provided resonated with the idea of men as (s)experts on female pleasure (Potts, 1998), that it is reasonable in longer-term relationships with women, that their partners were able to verbally communicate throughout 'rough sex' encounters, that they would only initiate 'rough sex' acts from the low end—hence implying harmlessness,

and that specific ‘rough sex’ acts like choking are already part of the mainstream sexual repertoire— therefore prior discussion is unnecessary. I argue that the rhetorical strength of the “*communication and consent is necessary*” creates an ideological dilemma that compelled participants to provide an explanation for circumstances in which they noticed they did not engage in communication and consent.

Moreover, when participants used the repertoire, “*sometimes, communication and consent is unnecessary,*” they often constructed men as (s)experts (Potts, 1998) in the context of ‘rough sex’ with women. While using both sub-repertoires, initiation without explicit consent and reliance on ambiguous cues, many participants associated unethical ‘rough sex’ practices with their good intentions—for their sexual partners’ enjoyment. In other words, men implied that it was appropriate to have ‘rough sex’ without clear communication because they were able to pick up on the level of their partners’ enjoyment with relative accuracy. Some suggested that doing so with a specific ‘rough sex’ act like choking is especially reasonable because, generally, women tend to enjoy choking. Hence, I argue that the use of the two sub-repertoires has the rhetorical consequence of placing men as (s)experts (Potts, 1998) on women’s pleasure, and as having ‘universal knowledge’ about female sexual pleasure in general. This way, the possibility that unwanted sex can be sexually pleasurable is overlooked.

Across the corpus, men were positioned as being both in the position of greater power and, somewhat paradoxically, socially disadvantaged. When gendered differences were discussed in the two repertoires, “*gender is relevant*” and “*communication and consent is necessary,*” women were generally positioned from a disadvantaged standpoint. They were either constructed as having less power than men—mostly physical—or being on the receiving end of unethical ‘rough sex’. Yet, participants also constructed the position of a man in the context of ‘rough sex’ as difficult in various ways. Many referred to the

implicit expectation that pressures men to be dominant, ideas based on hegemonic masculinity making it more difficult for men to communicate about ‘rough sex’, and the lack of sex education targeted at men. This aligns with Kimmel’s (2005) argument that individual men may not *feel* powerful even though men as a group may have more power in society, and that disconnect can result in frustration and anger. From a discursive psychology perspective, linguistic resources like interpretative repertoires are part of sociocultural common sense-making, and have the ideological impact of producing and maintaining the power of a specific group (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Being in a more powerful social position for men does not necessarily equate to feeling powerful as individuals, because power is rooted in the implicit making of social norms (Edley, 2001). As Antevska and Gavey (2015) expressed, the very absence of necessity to think or account for a concept is the evidence of its normalisation. Hence, I argue that unless power is explicitly exhibited—like physical strength differences or instances of sexual assault and rape for women—power is relatively difficult to detect by individuals, and one would resort to thinking and talking about experiences primarily relevant to themselves. Therefore, those in more powerful social groups would have less chance to acknowledge and think about implicit instances of power differences, such as how invasive gendered norms are for women in different aspects of ‘rough sex’. Though men as a group may hold greater power in society, I argue that it would be a difficult task, if not impossible, to challenge and make changes at individual levels. When men used the sub-repertoire, male dominance and female submission, most accounts spoke about an implicit expectation for men to be dominant during ‘rough sex’. In fact, all participants in this research indicated that they enjoy being the dominant party in ‘rough sex’ practices. Only some men reported being open to and wanting to be submissive as well. For those men who also enjoy being submissive, they talked about feeling internal and external conflict because submission

does not align with common perceptions of masculinity. From a discursive psychology perspective, masculinity is a performance, not a cause of particular behaviour (Edley, 2001). Edley (2001) argued that creating a new form of masculinity is not an easy task because it also needs to be accepted by others in the same sociocultural settings. Therefore, he suggested that to opt to act, think, and talk in adherence to hegemonic masculinity, is to take the safer pathway and do what has been proven to work the best. I argue that to be dominant in ‘rough sex’, especially with women—since the common conception of masculinity is to reject femininity (Edley, & Wetherell, 2001; Edwards, 1987)—would be the path of least resistance for men.

Within the sub-repertoire of making sense of unethical ‘rough sex’, sex education was commonly constructed as the villain and the potential saviour. Men often attributed unethical ‘rough sex’ practices to substandard communication and consent practices, and suggested that it was due to a lack of, or inadequate sex education. Recommending that the solution to many unethical ‘rough sex’ practices is developing or improving the communication aspect of sex education has several implications. First of all, it suggests that unwanted sexual experiences are the result of poor communication between men and women, implicitly holding both parties to account. Secondly, learning communication skills is portrayed as a resolution for issues in communicating. This approach dismisses the influences of the social construction of gender norms for heteronormative sex and a problematic grey area between ‘just sex’ and sexual assault that exist for sex in general (Gavey, 2005), the power imbalances in gender that exist in society, and sociocultural coercion that women may experience (Faustino & Gavey, 2021). Finally, attributing responsibility for unwanted sexual experiences primarily to an external factor disregards some level of agency and responsibility of the people initiating unethical ‘rough sex’.

However, the view that improving sex education would be beneficial for ethical sexual practices is shared by many scholars (see Gavey et al., 2021). From a discursive psychology perspective, interpretative repertoires and other linguistic resources simultaneously produce dominant societal norms, and are constructed by historically available discourses (Billig, 1991). Therefore, changing social norms becomes a matter of challenging taken-for-granted discourses, and advocating for people to communicate different narratives (Edley, 2001; Jewkes et al., 2015). In Aotearoa, New Zealand, the project ‘Shifting the Line’ with boys reported hopeful findings towards sex education targeted at men (Gavey et al., 2021). The research team stated that questioning the existing norms and encouraging discussions fostered the de-naturalising of the norms, framing them as cultural ideas with the possibility of rejecting them.

As outlined in this chapter, examining men’s talk about ‘rough sex’ is not a straightforward task—it raises a combination of various dilemmas, contradictions and complexities that coexist. Therefore, an improved nuanced understanding is recommended to comprehend the implications of possibly mainstreaming ‘rough sex’. Many participants in this research suggested that their ‘rough sex’ experiences occurred in a mainstream sexual context outside of the BDSM community. This raises an important question: what is the implication of aggression and violence entering sex without the more prominent, stricter consent culture that BDSM communities tend to hold (Barker, 2013; Beres & MacDonald, 2015)? I cautiously express my concern towards the potential normalisation of ‘rough sex’ in Aotearoa, New Zealand, without a comprehensive understanding of its consequences.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Tweet from The School of Psychology, UoA

(https://twitter.com/PsychUoA/status/1414710808869695489?cxt=HHwWgsCr6Yb_h6InAA

AA)



Appendix B

Recruitment Facebook Post

(<https://www.facebook.com/The-RS-Study-102590108728549>)

The screenshot displays the Facebook profile page for 'The RS Study', an Educational Research Center. At the top, a dark blue banner features the text 'THE RS STUDY' in a gold, serif font, with a thin gold horizontal line below it. The profile picture is a dark blue circle with the text 'THE RS STUDY' in white. The page name 'The RS Study' and the category 'Educational Research Center' are visible. A 'Send message' button is present, along with a small note: 'Hi! Please let us know how we can help.' The navigation bar includes 'Home', 'Groups', 'Jobs', 'Events', and 'More'. Below the navigation bar, the 'About' section is expanded, showing a description: 'The term – rough sex – has been popping up quite a lot online and in the media over the past few years, but not much is known about what people think about it, and what their experiences are. See less'. It also lists '2 people like this', '4 people follow this', and a 'Send message' button. The 'Photos' section shows a large image of the 'THE RS STUDY' banner and a smaller profile picture.



The RS Study

July 12 · 🌐



What do you mean by 'rough sex?'

University of Auckland researchers want to find out what people mean by the term 'rough sex'. And they want to learn more about people's experiences related to 'rough sex'.

We are interested in hearing from a wide range of people – whether you have experience of 'rough sex' or not.

The survey is open to anyone over the age of 18, living in New Zealand.

https://auckland.au1.qualtrics.com/.../SV_1N9mjsFIH5IBTca

AUCKLAND.AU1.QUALTRICS.COM

The RS Survey



Like



Comment



Share

Appendix C

Invitation to Interviews in Online Survey

Before you go!

We would like to interview men who have had experiences with 'rough sex', to find out more about their views and experiences.

If you have had such experiences, and live in Auckland, and would potentially be interested in talking more, please get in touch - we will send you more information. The interviews will be held in a private room at the city campus of the University of Auckland, and will take approximately 1 to 1 1/2 hours. We can do some audio interviews by zoom if you are unable or prefer not to meet in person.

To keep your responses on this survey anonymous, you can email us on menrsstudy@auckland.ac.nz or text us on 0226145586.

Or you can give us your contact details in the space below and we will get in touch with more information.

Appendix D

Participant Information Sheet



SCIENCE
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

The RS Study Interview with Men

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

Researchers: Minha Kim and Nicola Gavey

The Wider Research Team includes Bella Qian and Damanpreet Kaur

Science Centre
23 Symonds Street, Auckland,
New Zealand
T +64 9 923 8557
W www.psych.auckland.ac.nz

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland 1142
New Zealand

What is the Study About?

Kia Ora. My name is Minha Kim, and I'm studying towards a Masters in Psychology at the University of Auckland, supervised by Professor Nicola Gavey. I am interested in exploring men's experiences of rough sex. In particular, I want to understand more about what men think about it, and how it relates to broader social dynamics. There is very limited research on this topic, and this will be the first study we know of in New Zealand.

Who Can Participate?

If you are in Auckland, a man, are 18 years of age or older, have any previous experience of 'rough sex', and are interested in discussing your views and experiences related to 'rough sex', I would like to invite you to participate in this research. We are hoping to interview around 20 people in total. In this interview, you'll be able to talk about such experiences in a non-judgemental and confidential environment.

Note: If you are a student, colleague, friend or family member of the researchers, we recommend not participating in this study. However, if you are a student of the researcher, and you do wish to participate, we give our assurance that your participation or non-participation in this study will have no effect on your grades or relationship with the University and that you may contact the Head of the School of Psychology should you feel that this assurance has not been met.

What Does the Study Involve?

Should you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an audio recorded face-to-face interview with me. The interviews will be conducted in an interview room at The University of Auckland at the time that is suitable for you. Or, if you are unable to come to the University, we could arrange to do the audio interview over zoom. The interview will focus on your personal experiences related to 'rough sex', including the context, circumstances, effects, and your related views and understandings. Interviews will take approximately one to one and a half hours, depending on your availability, and how much you have to say. I will also ask you to complete a brief form of demographic questions (e.g. age, ethnicity and so on). I would like to offer you a \$20 voucher towards covering your transport costs, so that it is easier for you to travel to and from the interview.

What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?

With your permission we would like to audio-record the interview, and to have these transcribed into a written record of what was said. The interview will be transcribed by your interviewer (Minha), or in some cases by another person employed to do this. All research members as well as the person who transcribes the audio files will sign a confidentiality agreement. Interview transcripts will be analysed, and excerpts from the interviews (and some demographic/descriptive information) will be included in my masters thesis, and in other publications and presentations. On the transcripts and in any reports about the research findings, pseudonyms will be used instead of participants' real names. I will also take great care to anonymise any potential identifiable information to keep what you say as anonymous as possible. The transcript from your interview and the demographics form that you fill out will be marked with codes (letter and numbers), which will be applied by your interviewer at the time of the interview.

Electronic data (e.g. audio recordings, written transcripts) will be stored on a password-protected computer at the University of Auckland and will be stored and backed up on the University of Auckland server. Hardcopy data (e.g. consent forms, demographic questionnaire) will be kept in the locked cabinet in the researcher's office at the University of Auckland. These data will be kept for a minimum of six years or longer if we are still doing research in this area and are in position to keep the project data secure. Beyond that time, hard copies of the interviews will be shredded, and digital files deleted. At some point in the future this may include other research assistants, but they would not have access to any documents with your name on. Consent forms and records with your name on them (i.e., a document that has your name, contact details, and interview code – kept in case we need to remove data) will be stored by the Principal Investigator in a secure manner, with access restricted to the Principal Investigator (Nicola) and myself only. This material will be kept in a

completely separate place from the interview transcripts and demographic forms.

We can also notify you when a summary of research findings is available, and you will have the opportunity to provide us with your contact details so this can be arranged.

Are There Any Risks?

I hope you will find it interesting to discuss your experiences and views in a private and non-judgemental environment. It may also be challenging in some ways given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic. Questions related to 'rough sex' may raise issues around ethics and so on, which are controversial. Please remember that you can always choose to pause or stop the interview at any time without giving reasons.

As the interviews involve personal stories, there is a slight chance that interview extracts or descriptions of your experiences included in research publications could identify you to someone who knows you and your personal story. We take your privacy very seriously, and would ask you to let us know if there's anything particular that you think would identify you that you may wish us not to include in any publications. In cases where we have our own concerns about this, we can always leave out or slightly alter details that might be identifying, without changing the main points of your story.

Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Study?

Participation in this study is voluntary and during the interview you are within your rights to stop at any point or to ask for the recording to be stopped, without needing to give a reason. You have the right to withdraw your contribution to the research at any point, up to one month after the interview. Again, you do not have to give a reason. If you were to contact us later than one month, we would still do our best to follow your wishes – although when the analysis is finalised and publications are released it is not always possible to remove data.

Is it All Confidential?

We will do everything we can to maintain participants' confidentiality, and participants would never be referred to by name within our reports, publications, presentations etc. Although it is unlikely, there is always a chance that a participant's identity might be guessed by people who know them, particularly if unique details are shared. For this reason, we would ask you to carefully consider what you feel comfortable talking about; and let us know if there is anything you would not want us to refer to in the research.

We are also asking your permission to re-contact you in the future so that we can check in with you if we are concerned about any details you have told us. For example, if we are concerned that anyone is being harmed so that we can offer assistance, or if we would like to check any details that we would like to include in our reports, if we are concerned they might be too private. While it is our duty as researchers to uphold your confidentiality at all times, in the case of disclosure of conduct that would cause harm to either yourself or to others we would be obligated to disclose this information to appropriate authorities.

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participant Ethics Committee on 24/06/2021 for three years, Reference number UAHPEC22374

If you have friends who you think might be interested in participating, please invite them to email us at menrsstudy@auckland.ac.nz or text us on 022 614 5586 so we can also provide them with this information.

Contact Information

If you would like to be involved, have any questions, or would like to know more, please contact our research team.

Email: menrsstudy@auckland.ac.nz

Alternatively, you can contact the Principal Investigator Professor Nicola Gavey, School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, phone 09-373-7599 ext 86877, email n.gavey@auckland.ac.nz; the Head of School for Psychology Professor Suzanne Purdy, School of Psychology, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, phone 09-923-8516, Email: s.purdy@auckland.ac.nz

For any concerns regarding ethical issues, you may contact the Chair, the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, Office of Strategy Research and Integrity, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142. Telephone 09 373-7599 ext. 83711. Email: humanethics@auckland.ac.nz.

Appendix E

Consent Form



SCIENCE
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Science Centre
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T +64 9 923 8557
W www.psych.auckland.ac.nz
The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland 1142 New Zealand

Consent Form

(This form will be held for a period of six years)

Project Title: The RS Study – Interviews with men

Researchers: Minha Kim, Professor Nicola Gavey

The Wider Research Team includes Bella Qian and Damanpreet Kaur

I have read the Participant Information Sheet and I understood the nature of the research I am participating in. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research, and to have them answered to my satisfaction. I understand why I have been invited to participate in this research.

- I agree to participate in this research, involving an interview of approximately one to one and a half hours.
- I understand that it may be challenging in some ways given the sensitive and potentially controversial nature of the topic.
- I understand that I have the right to stop my participation at any time, and I can withdraw part or all of the comments I have provided up to one month after the interview.
- I agree for the interview to be audio recorded.
- I understand that I have the right to ask for the audio recording to be stopped at any point.
- I understand that anonymised extracts of what I say may be used in reports and presentations about the research, including published work.
- I agree to be contacted by the researchers sometime after the interview if they would like to clarify details of what I have said, or if they are concerned about any details of what I have said.
- I understand that my demographic details (age, ethnicity, etc) may be included alongside any quotes from my interview that are used in publications and presentations arising from the research. (Please let us know if you have confidentiality concerns related to this.)
- I understand that in case of any disclosures of conduct that would cause serious harm to either myself or to others, the researchers would be obligated to disclose this information to the appropriate authorities.
- I understand that the audio file record of this interview will be transcribed (either by the researchers or someone employed to do this task) and that the transcript of the interview will be seen by other researchers working on this project. All such people will have signed a confidentiality agreement to keep what they hear or read confidential, and they will not have access to documents with my name on.
- I understand that data, the demographics forms (including details about age, ethnicity etc), and this consent form will be kept for a minimum of 6 years or longer if we are still doing research in this area and are in position to keep the project data secure, after which time they will be destroyed by deleting digital files and shredding hard copies.
- I wish/do not wish to receive a summary of findings, which can be emailed to me (at the address below):

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Phone number/email for re-contact if required:

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 24/06/2021 for three years,
Reference number UAHPEC22374

Appendix F

Participant Demographics Form



SCIENCE
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

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The RS Study

Participant Demographics Form

COMPLETED BY RESEARCHER

Participant code:	Date of Interview:
Place of Interview:	Name of Interviewer:

COMPLETED BY PARTICIPANT

If there are any of these questions you prefer not to answer, you may leave them blank:

1. Age?
2. Gender?
3. Ethnicity? *(tick as many as apply)*
 - Chinese
 - Cook Islands Maori
 - Indian
 - Māori
 - Niuean
 - Pākehā / New Zealand European
 - Samoan
 - Tongan
 - Other (such as Dutch, Japanese, Tokelauan)

Please specify: _____

4. What country do you call home?

- New Zealand
- Other country. Please specify:

5. Sexuality?

6. Are you currently in relationship?

- No
- Yes
- Other

Please specify: _____

7. What is your highest educational qualification?

8. What is your current occupation? *(tick as many as apply)*

- Not in paid employment
- In part-time employment (If yes, what kind of work?)
- In full-time employment (If yes, what kind of work?)
- In part-time university or other tertiary study
- In full-time university or other tertiary study
- Working in a voluntary, unpaid capacity (If yes, what kind of work?)
- Retired
- Other

Please specify: _____

9. Do you live with a long-term disability or health condition?

- Yes (prefer not to specify)
- Yes, please specify:
- No
- Prefer not to say

Approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 24/06/2021 for three years. Reference Number UAHPEC22374.

Appendix G

Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Study 3: RS Study – Interview with men

Researcher: Minha Kim and Professor Nicola Gavey

The interview will be in a semi-structured format using open ended questions and prompts for detail and clarity. This is a provisional guide to the structure of the interview and the domains it will cover; it may be amended as the research is underway.

Introduction

Welcome participants and introduce the study

- Hello, my name is Minha and this study is about exploring men's experiences and perspectives relating to 'rough sex' with women. There are no studies exploring men's perspectives of 'rough sex' in New Zealand to my knowledge. There are some overseas studies that suggest 'rough sex' is relatively common. However, when researchers have tried to define what it means, and what it involves, they found people have different ideas. This possibly relates to how the concept of 'rough sex' can be controversial.
- For this study, I am interested in hearing what men have to say about their experiences, and what their views are more generally about 'rough sex', and how that relates to the wider context of sexual relations between men and women, etc. In the interview, some of the questions I will ask might be encouraging you to reflect on your views and experiences in ways that you haven't before. I will also ask for your opinion on other studies, laws and other people's general views on 'rough sex' which you might not agree with.

Thank participants for coming in

Ensure that participants have read and understood PIS

Remind the participants of their right to stop recording, take a break or withdraw from the study completely at any point

Ask if participant has any questions

Give participant consent form to sign

Do demographic form

Warm up questions

- How did you find out about the study?
- What made you interested in coming in for this interview?

Framing 'rough sex'

- With the term "rough sex", what kind of sex do you think most people associate with that? Specific sexual acts?
- When you personally use the term, is that the same for you?
- *Prompt if necessary:* Some people have said that 'rough sex' includes hair pulling, spanking, slapping, scratching, pinning a woman down, tying a woman up, throwing a woman around, biting, and choking. Do you think they have captured 'rough sex' well?

Personal experiences of 'rough sex'

[For participants recruited via the survey]: In the survey, you answered yes to having participated in rough sex with one or more women.

[For all other participants]: On our advert, we were looking for men with some experience of 'rough sex', and you reached out to us.

- How did you become interested in rough sex, or how did you find out about it?
- [Prompt: pornography, peers, media]
- Is rough sex a regular part of your sexual life/activity? Can you tell me about your first time? (when was it, what did it involve, and what interested you?)
- Would you say you have a lot of experience in rough sex?

- Could you tell me about your most recent experience? What about your most memorable experience?

For both sets of experiences above, questions explore:

- Nature of experience
[Prompt: what sexual acts were involved]
- How was it initiated?
[Prompts: who initiated, recall conversation, how was the interest expressed, consent]
- Personal accounts of the experience - Using your own words, how would you describe this experience?
- [Prompts: Pleasurable, wanted, comfortable, exciting, comparing with expectation, comparing with sexual acts that are not considered 'rough sex', remained in control, Was there any use of; pressure, physical violence, deception]
- How did you know if the other person was interested?
[Prompts: did they gauge sexual partner's interest? consent? how – if at all – did they monitor ongoing consent?]
- How do you think [the woman / women, or use the language they use for their sexual partner; e.g. girls or names] found the experience(s)?
[Prompts: Pleasurable, wanted, consensual, any expression of dislike/discomfort / how could you tell?]
- Did having 'rough sex' change the way you feel about, treat, or perceive the woman/women you had 'rough sex' with?
 - Relational contexts

[Prompts: romantic relationship, casual relationship]

- Does it matter when you are deciding whether or not you will have 'rough sex' with the woman, what kind of relationship you are in with the person?
- [If the participant said he was in a romantic relationship with the sexual partner, or if the 'rough sex' was common/norm for them] Did / do you have any tensions or issues in the relationship in general?[Prompt: control, manipulation, jealousy]

Scenario

Depending on the responsiveness of the participant, and the overall flow of the interview, we may include a hypothetical scenario involving rough sex to help generate more talk around the issues.

Ben and Angela have been dating for about a year and they are in a sexual relationship. Ben has been wanting to try choking but has never talked about it with Angela. He has prepared a romantic getaway for their one-year anniversary and wants to try it there. On the day, they were having consensual sex, and he started choking Angela without asking her. Angela seemed surprised but did not say anything.

- What do you think about Ben's actions? Why do you think he might have been interested in doing this?
- How would Ben know if Angela agreed to it [Prompt: consent]
- Were Ben's actions reasonable? What makes you say that?
- If Angela disliked/liked being choked at the time, does that change anything?
- Would it make a difference if they'd talked about it previously?
- If Ben did the same thing on a one night stand, would that be okay?
- How do you think Angela (who has not invited this act) could have reacted?
- Thinking of women in general who have experienced 'rough sex' [or list the specific acts used by the interviewee] during consensual activity, what percentage do you estimate would say they've ever felt pressured, coerced, or forced?
- Why do you say that?
- Another study about scary sexual experiences for men and women found that apart from the rape and sexual assault, anal sex and choking were identified as the most common scary sexual experiences for women. What do you think about this finding?
- Were you aware that strangulation (or using descriptive words – putting your hands or other objects on someone's neck and applying pressure) is against the criminal law? (What do you think about that?) How do you think choking during sex is different from choking without sex?

Social context and identity

- Have you talked about these experiences before?
[Prompts: friends, family, other partners]
- What do you think people in general think about 'rough sex'? People of your generation? etc. [Note, will use the language that the participant uses, which may be more specific than 'rough sex' – eg, choking.]
- Did personally experiencing 'rough sex' change any of your social relationships (e.g. friends, family, or colleagues), or how you saw yourself?

[Prompts: as a ... man, occupation (e.g. as a student, manual labour worker), specific generation (e.g. millennial)]

- Do you think your cultural identity has affected how you see 'rough sex'? If so, how has it been affected? What about any other cultural contexts?
- Do you think men are judged for their interest in 'rough sex'? If the answer is yes, what do you think they would say and what type of people would they be? (e.g. friends, families, or specific groups of people like specific age groups and cultures).
- Have you ever felt judged for your interest in 'rough sex'?
- Do you ever feel ambivalent – or conflicted – about your interest in 'rough sex'? Or have you ever been concerned that it might 'go too far'? (ask to explain)

Gender

- In your experience, how do you think gender plays out in 'rough sex' (or term they use)? (i.e. Do you think men and women have similar interests or reasons for doing it?)
- Have you ever experienced sex with a woman where she has done these things [*the acts he has described doing*] to you, or tried to? How did you find that? How would you find it? [*if he hasn't had that experience*]
- How do you think 'rough sex' works when women are doing the ... [*acts discussed*] to men?
- What are your thoughts on traditional gender or sexual roles for women and men? (ie, do you think they are different? how so?)
- Do you think having rough sex has influenced your sense of yourself as a man?

Conclusion

- How is 'rough sex' different to 'sex' that is not considered 'rough sex'?
- I asked this at the beginning, but just wonder if talking about it today has given you any different thoughts about what you think made you want to try 'rough sex' in the particular way that you did? And what it is about it that you enjoy?
- [Prompt: social media, pornography, peers, media, sexual education]
- How did you find the interview today? Was there anything that you found uncomfortable?
- Were there any questions you thought I would ask that I haven't?
- Do you have any questions you would like to ask or do you want to add anything?

Appendix H

Support Services/Resource Information Card

Talking about sensitive personal issues

Sometimes talking about sensitive personal issues can bring up difficult memories and distressing feelings. You are very welcome to contact us after the interview if you would like to discuss this, and get information about a wide range of organisations that provide support and information.

- **The RS Study**

Text us on 022 165 6673 or email at womenrsstudy@auckland.ac.nz

Also, these services are free to everyone in New Zealand.

- **Need to talk? 1737** – <https://1737.org.nz/>

Call or text 1737

Provides counselling support, information or referral on the phone with a trained counsellor or peer support worker for free, 24/7.

- **Safe to Talk** – <https://safetotalk.nz/>

Call 0800 044 334 or free text 4334

Provides free, confidential and non-judgmental support from trained specialists, relating to sexual violence and abuse. Available 24/7 with interpreters for 40 languages.

For other support in relation to sexual abuse or assault:

- **ACC** – <https://www.findsupport.co.nz/>

Call 0800 101 996

Able to assist in paying for counselling and therapy sessions if support is needed after experiencing sexual abuse. ACC can help find a counsellor in your area who is equipped to support your needs.