

# Consent & Internalized Oppression + Questions for Self-Reflection

Katharina Debus, 2020

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The question of internalized oppression is one aspect that I think could bear more of a focus in the discussion around e.g. sex work or BDSM between people who call themselves radical feminists (to me, this term is much broader and doesn't only belong to them) and people who might call themselves sex positive feminists or sex work positive feminists, kinky feminists, third wave feminists etc.

Also, this isn't an all-encompassing discussion on these terms. It came from a discussion with a friend and then I was encouraged to make it publicly available. So it is very much a spontaneous essay and not an in-depth academic or conceptual article.

So, this friend, Sofia Porfiri, wrote the following status: *It makes me uncomfortable when people mix sex work with trafficking or BDSM with domestic violence and abuse. It feels like you don't get the idea of consent, and that, I think, it's something really disturbing.*

And I answered (slightly edited to make it more understandable to a broader public):

I agree, although I think, at least with some radical feminists, the logic is a different one: It is a critique of the liberal idea of free will, taking into account internalized oppression, and I think taking this into account is actually right. The issue I have with them is that they, in the next step, presume that they know better than the women\* (since it is women they are concerned with) involved.

I think it is more difficult: I do not assume anything such as a 100% free will and I am pretty sure that internalized oppression will play into a lot of our life decisions (including the ones that are closer to the norm and pursue more 'normalized' professions and relationships).

To make this more clear: I think internalized oppression, internalized privilege and learned norms play a role in all our life decisions, no matter if we opt for heterosexual marriage, non-married serial monogamy, polyamory, staying single, searching for a partner even if it is difficult to find one, if we opt to follow or suppress our desire, if we participate in kinky activities, such as BDSM, or live a vanilla life (vanilla = the opposite of kinky/BDSM/fetish etc.<sup>1</sup>), if we don't have sex, if we have sex only in loving relationships, if we have sex whenever the chance arises, if we choose or stumble into sex as a profession or if our professions are unsexual or have a sexual subtext that we are expected to be silent about. And I also think we aren't exclusively a sum of our societal experiences, I think that there is some individual part about us, too, in German I would call it 'Eigensinn', and that the mix of the two is complex.

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<sup>1</sup> People who read German can find a glossary at <https://interventionen.dissens.de/materialien/glossar>.

What I definitely do think is that there isn't a way for me to know better than the people involved. All I can do is maybe ask some critical questions. And it is important to me to ask these in all directions, not just questioning the margin from a position within the norm.

I am deeply convinced that there isn't any kind of better alternative to people making their own decisions about their own lives. And that in the mean time it is important to engage in changing societal structures as much as we can so that there is more choice and less oppression to influence this choice. Still, I do think it helps in dealing with the controversy around sex work, BDSM, etc. to understand that the underlying disagreement is a different one than just consent – it is the question if consent is enough of a solution in a society where there is internalized oppression.<sup>2</sup> It is a question worth asking. I just very much disagree with the answer of presuming some people shouldn't take their own decisions e.g. regarding sex work or BDSM or whatever else (as long as their decisions don't impact another person's liberty to take their own decisions regarding their own lives). And I also don't agree with questioning decisions in these fields more than decisions that are closer to societal norms – either we critically reflect on all decisions that are connected to gender, etc., or we respect all of them.

## Questions for self-reflection

*The questions asked in the following section can be painful as well as enlightening or enriching. Also, you might already be aware of all of these or you might not agree with my analysis. Take your pick if you are interested in reading them at this very moment or at all.*

*Also: I am focusing on sex life here since the original exchange concerned that. The question to some of these questions could very validly be that sex in the narrow or broader sense just isn't a part of your life, currently or at all, and that this is good for you. Or your answer could be that it would be good for you to get rid of norms that having sex is good, etc. This just isn't the focus of this text since the original post was about BDSM and sex work.*

In the discussion that lead to this essay, we then talked about those questions I thought might be helpful, and to me it was important to make absolutely clear that this wasn't about asking *othering* questions (as in: making some people into the 'other' where they then have to defend themselves for living a different life). Rather it is important to me to offer interesting questions for everyone, since if there is internalized oppression (and I assume there is) it involves all of us, not just those who lead lives which are marginalized by general norms or by norms posited by some (never: all, since we will never all agree) feminists. So, I wrote the following and was encouraged to share it more publicly, which I now do in an edited and extended version.

But before I start with those questions, let me mention that the asking of questions can take different forms. It can be a personal(ized) offer of reflection, and in this case I also would only do it with people I am close to and to whom I feel such questions are welcome. Or we can ask generalized questions in public, such as:

- Which norms have I learned about sexuality?
- Have I learned sexuality has to be symmetrical and synchronous?

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<sup>2</sup> Robin Bauer has written about concepts of consent that take into account (internalized) oppression: German version: Bauer, Robin (2016): Vom liberalen zum kritischen Konsens. Ein empirischer Blick auf Praxen der Aushandlung von Konsens in queeren BDSM-Kontexten. In: Borkenhagen, Ada & Brähler, Elmar (Hrsg.), *Wer liebt, der straft?* Gießen: Psychosozial. (S. 129–142). English version: Bauer, Robin (forthcoming): Queering Consent: Negotiating Critical Consent in les-bi-trans-queer BDSM Contexts. The article will appear in the journal *Sexualities*, I don't know the issue number, yet.

- Have I learned that there is a 'natural' way to do sexuality?
- Have I learned sexuality is about love?
- Have I learned sexuality is about affection?
- Have I learned sexuality is about vulnerability?
- Have I learned sexuality is about physical desire?
- Have I learned sexuality is about orgasms?
- Have I learned sexuality is about power?
- Have I learned sexuality is about pain?
- Have I learned sexuality is about gender roles? About proving my masculinity or femininity?
- Have I learned sexuality is about proving my self-worth, my desirability, my loveability?
- Have I learned sexuality is about instrumental strategy (e.g. power, money, winning/keeping a good husband or partner – thus, e.g., I shouldn't be too 'available' while dating in order to gain their commitment, etc.)?
- Have I learned sexuality is about care?
- Have I learned that sex always needs to be special and make me super happy?
- Have I learned that sex isn't a big thing?
- Have I learned that sex is something that needs to be borne and/or performed in order to make others happy?
- Have I learned that sex is something I need to do (and/or be adventurous at) e.g. to show what a progressive feminist I am, or what a cool queer or some other kind of self-image I want to portray?
- What have I learned about the number, genders, and sexes of people who are supposed to be involved in sex and about how their relationships are supposed to be? (E.g.: Two people of the so-called opposite sexes who share a loving relationship, but the norms you have learned could vary from this one.)
- Or most probably: Which mix of these messages have I learned in which parts of my life?
- How are these norms that I have learned connected to societal inequality, to coping mechanisms with inequality and to efforts of change? (All of these aren't necessarily mutually exclusive – a norm can be both anchored in oppression and in resistance or connect those two – norms are complex entities.)
- Have I learned that societal norms are good or bad or both? Am I a part of social circles (family, friends, communities, social movements, professions, colleagues, etc.) who have conflicting views on this?
- Do I feel the need to perform my total independency of norms or negate their existence in order to maintain an independent, autonomous, progressive, queer or feminist self-image and/or be respected as such by others?
- Do I feel it is risky to admit to being influenced by norms because then others might feel (even more) entitled to presume they know better how I should live than I do myself?
- Have I experienced such instances of others presuming to know better how I should live my life than I do myself? Do I have allies who might support me in such situations?

- How do I feel when I acknowledge societal structures of inequality and social norms might play a role in my sexuality?
- Does it feel empowering and intriguing to be given the means to maybe discover new options?
- Does it make me feel sad for things I might have missed out on or lost?
- Does it make me feel angry at the instances that made me lose options?
- Does it make me feel angry at the people suggesting I might not be an entirely autonomous individual?
- How much is my sex life regulated by norms of sexuality that I have learned? Which patterns do I see?
- Are there parts of my sex life that make me happy most of the time?
- Are there parts that often make me unhappy?
- Are there parts that bore me?
- Are there parts that I just take as a given that don't really evoke any feelings in me?
- Are there parts that make me feel numb?
- To what extent are my sexual practices transgressive of and/or reproducing some of the norms I have learned?
- Do I feel those norms have been/are impeding me, enriching me and/or are/have been protecting me?
- Is it good for me to reproduce or transgress them?
- Do I feel *anything* is good that arouses me or do I feel there is more to consider than just arousal (such as its impact on my emotional well-being, relationships, my relation to myself, my self-worth etc.)?
- How does my sex life impact these things?
- Or to turn the question around: Is it ok to not be that aroused if my sex life is good for any of these other things or would it make me unfulfilled or sad?
- Is there a tension between e.g. what arouses me, what makes me feel good afterwards, what is good for my relationships etc.?
- In case there is: What options do I have to deal with this? Do I want to give up what arouses me? Do I want to look for new relationships and friends? Do I want to work on my self-worth in other ways (e.g. therapy)? Etc.
- Is there a way of dealing with these tensions without giving anything up, e.g. by discovering new options, reframing things, adding things or relationships without giving others up, etc.?
- Are there parts of my life that don't make me happy? E.g.:
  - My job?
  - My relationship(s)?
  - My friendships?
  - My sex life?
- Do I think I could change those if they don't make me happy?
- Are there further resources I would need in order to change them?
- Are there structural problems that are keeping me in situations I'd like to change?

- Might there be people to give solidary support to find new options?
- Is it possible to work towards changing them? Do I have the strength and the allies to do so?
- Or is it a better choice to find ways of dealing with them as good as I can?
- Which resources do I have for that?
- Are there situations I am staying in because I don't feel worthy of change or because I don't believe in my ability to change them?
- Are there situations I am staying in because I feel I would lose loved ones if I tried to change or leave those situations?
- Or because I feel it is 'cool', progressive, 'woke', whatever, to bear them?
- Or because I can't stand to disappoint people?
- Or because it would threaten my self-image to realize I have borne a violent situation for 'too long' (whatever that means) although I consider myself e.g. an independent person or a feminist?
- What might encourage me to explore possibilities of changing those?

I think these are very open-ended questions (and there are of course many more like these) that can be applied to a big variety of life situations everywhere between the norm and what is being marginalized. You don't need to judge to ask those questions if you offer them to everyone, not just to those whose lives seem to disagree with your worldview.

But they can also be very painful and disorienting to face. And the result can go in any direction: It could lead people to explore ways of life or frameworks that are either more or less normalized than their current life situation. Facing them can feel liberating from mainstream norms and/or from community norms, but it can also cause estrangement from people we are close to.

So, many people need affectionate support to actually go into a process of facing some of them (usually one by one, step by step), and since this can be very destabilizing it is a totally valid choice to leave 'good enough' alone and not face them. Facing them is not as simple as telling people they are 'doing it wrong'. I think there is a need for genuine solidarity, care, empathy, and respect. And I think it only works if you are aware that these are life-long questions we all keep facing, so as to ask them from a rather humble position instead of asking them from a high horse of presuming to already know all the answers.