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**From “SSC” and “RACK” to the “4Cs”:
Introducing a new Framework for Negotiating
BDSM Participation**

D J Williams, PhD

**Center for Positive Sexuality (Los Angeles)
and Idaho State University**

Jeremy N. Thomas, PhD

Idaho State University

Emily E. Prior, MA

**Center for Positive Sexuality (Los Angeles) and College of
the Canyons**

M. Candace Christensen, PhD

University of Texas at San Antonio

Contact Information: Dr. D J Williams

Department of Sociology

Idaho State University

Campus Box 8114

Pocatello, ID 83209-8114

Email: willdj@isu.edu

Abstract

The BDSM (consensual sadomasochism) community has commonly utilized Safe, Sane, and Consensual (SSC), or more recently Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK) as basic frameworks to help structure the negotiation of BDSM participation. While these approaches have been useful, particularly for educating new participants concerning parameters of play, both approaches appear to have significant practical and conceptual limitations. In this paper we introduce an alternative framework for BDSM negotiation, Caring, Communication, Consent, and Caution (4Cs), and discuss its potential advantages.

Background and Introduction

From the time of Richard von Krafft-Ebing's (1886/1978) text *Psychopathia Sexualis*, BDSM has commonly been assumed to be motivated by an underlying psychopathology. Although biases and misinterpretations among professionals still remain (see Hoff & Sprott, 2009; Kolmes, Stock, & Moser, 2007; Wright, 2009), researchers have consistently shown that BDSM cannot be explained by psychopathology (i.e., Connelly, 2006; Cross & Matheson, 2006; Powls & Davies, 2012; Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008; Weinberg, 2006). Some scholars have recognized that not only is BDSM participation not associated with psychopathology, but that it may be associated with desirable psychological states that are often associated with healthy leisure experience (Newmahr, 2010; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Williams, 2006, 2009; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). Indeed, a widespread shift in understanding seems to be occurring wherein consensual BDSM participation is believed to be an acceptable expression of sexuality and/or leisure.

In light of this shift and in combination with the development of community-based research as a methodological strategy across the social sciences generally, an exciting recent development is the formal collaboration between scholars and communities of people with alternative sexual identities, including BDSM. The Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities (CARAS) was formed in 2005 and combines the knowledge and strengths of scholars and community members to produce high-quality knowledge that can directly benefit the community (Sprott & Bienvenu II, 2007). We welcome this development, and it is in the spirit of mutual benefit that we write the present paper. In fact, we are both scholars and also members of the BDSM community. Hopefully, our discussion here will generate insights among both academics and nonacademics.

In this paper, we summarize the popular BDSM community mottos of Safe, Sane, and Consensual (SSC) and Risk-Aware Consensual Kink (RACK) before proposing what we think is an improved approach, which we call the Caring, Communication, Consent, and Caution (4Cs) framework. Since each framework explicitly includes the precise concept of *consent*, we will discuss a few of the thorny issues surrounding the notion of consent within the 4Cs model a little bit later in the paper, rather than in our summary of SSC and RACK. We do this simply as a matter of retaining a consistent overall structure for readers.

Social Context for the Development of SSC and RACK

Acceptable BDSM, of course, is predicated on careful negotiation among participants. Ortmann and Sprott (2013) reminded us that the concept and practice of consent among participants is what differentiates BDSM from abuse, and they added that “similar to the terms *acquiescence* and *permission*, *consent* is the process by which approval or acceptance of what is planned (often by another) is acceptable or agreeable” (p. 75). They also discussed the development of SSC as a reaction to common beliefs that BDSM is associated with pathology around sadism and masochism. Furthermore, Tuscott (cited in Downing, 2007) suggested that the most frequent accusation toward BDSM practitioners from outsiders is that such practitioners are violent. It is important to note that explanations of violence are also primarily rooted in popular social discourses of psychopathology. Thus, it is not surprising that the starting point for negotiating BDSM possibilities has centered on discussions of psychological stability, consent and safety, hence the birth of SSC. SSC constructs have remained the focus of discussions concerning BDSM negotiation for a long time (Henkin & Holiday, 1996; Miller & Devon, 1995; Taorimino, 2012; Wiseman, 1996). According to Henkin and

Holiday (1996), the “commandments” of healthy BDSM are being truthful while playing safely, sanely, consensually, and non-exploitatively.

Despite the popularity of SSC, some BDSM practitioners eventually began to realize that SSC may exclude edgier forms of play that involve higher physical and/or psychological risk, which may be part of the motivation for participation. Risk, of course, is relative and can vary tremendously across individuals. While Danica Patrick or Jimmy Johnson can easily handle driving a car at triple-digit speeds, most of the rest of us cannot do so nearly as safely. Similarly, BDSM participants vary extensively in their physical and psychological capacities and preferences. According to Downing (2007), such a realization shifted a move from SSC to RACK, coined by Gary Switch. Indeed, it is noteworthy that not only was the term *safe* replaced with *risk-aware*, but that the term *sane* (or a similar term) was omitted. In BDSM communities, the term *sane* seems to assume some standard of psychological health. However, *sane* (versus insane) is technically a forensics designation, rather than a psychological term, that is applied in assessing causality of a severe mental disorder to the commission of a crime (see Roesch, Viljoen, & Hui, 2003), thus its applicability to BDSM negotiation is of little practical use.

Introducing the 4Cs Framework

While SSC and RACK focus on two shared, essential, concepts (consent and safety/risk awareness), the 4Cs approach retains these general concepts and adds the interrelated dimensions of caring and communication. Of course, any BDSM negotiation framework, which can then be represented as a motto, should be brief and easy for new participants to remember. Like SSC and RACK, the 4Cs of caring, communication, consent, and caution are brief and very easy to memorize. We now provide a brief overview of the 4Cs framework before examining each component in more depth later in the paper. Because consent is emphasized and commonly discussed in both SSC and RACK, we will not address it here in the overview, but will devote some in-depth conversation to it as an essential dimension of the 4Cs.

While there seem to be different levels and intensities of caring that vary between people across their various social relationships, we can commonly acknowledge a basic and inherent caring of people simply for being fellow human beings. Indeed, (alternative) communities often form because of a basic caring, personal identification with, and place to support its members.

The inclusion of caring in a BDSM negotiation motto reflects an ethical stance while acknowledging individuals as unique human beings. The form of caring (i.e., level of trust and intimacy of relationships among participants in a scene) also shapes the qualitative experiences of BDSM. Communication, while often rightly discussed by BDSM authors under consent, is also strongly connected to caring and caution. Although presented separately, these concepts in BDSM are all tightly interwoven. Emphasizing communication should lead to a better understanding among participants regarding individuals’ unique identities, needs, and motivations, and thus more fulfilling BDSM experiences. In short, communication as its own entity allows for participants to better understand the subjective realities of those with whom they play.

The reframing of safety/risk awareness to caution appears to be somewhat subtle, but perhaps carries less discursive baggage. We think that this possibility is important because it may be more inclusive of people who embrace a broader range of social discourses concerning how they utilize different forms of knowledge. Currently, we have observed that many BDSM participants seem to defer, knowingly or not, to somewhat strict medical discourses concerning discussions of risk and

safety. In this sense, RACK seems preferable to SSC, yet we still realize that SSC has become more restrictive and perhaps codified than was originally intended (see Downing, 2007). We agree with Ortmann and Sprott (2013) that specific BDSM activities may not necessarily be commonly perceived to be safe, yet people may be aware of the risks and consensually engage in such activities. However, the word *risk* remains somewhat situated within powerful restrictive discourses of medicine and public health, whereas caution seems to be broader, still relevant, yet it is perhaps less embedded in such discourses. We are by no means advocating that BDSM participants simplistically discard important medical knowledge. Such knowledge should be appreciated and carefully considered side-by-side with a variety of other discourses and perspectives.

Our preference of the word *caution* is an acknowledgement of longstanding politics concerning bodies and sexuality (Foucault, 1977, 1978), and allows for a wide range of meanings and motivations for engaging in various possible forms of BDSM. At the same time, people who espouse a positivist epistemological perspective can certainly interpret “caution” from medical and scientific discourses. The point here is not simply one of changing words, but to create more discursive space to allow for differing epistemological perspectives. Given this overview, we will now further discuss each component of the 4Cs and the underlying importance of each for consideration in a BDSM negotiation framework.

Taking a Closer Look at Each Dimension

Because *consent* is essential in SSC, RACK, and the 4Cs, we will focus on it first in this section. We will then move to explorations of *communication*, *caring*, and *caution*.

Consent

The notion of consent has almost always been a core consideration at the heart of both popular (e.g., Miller & Devon, 1995; Taorimino, 2012; Wiseman, 1996) and more academic discussions of BDSM (e.g., Baldwin 2003; Langdridge & Barker, 2007; Weiss, 2011). Whether utilized as a kind of defense of BDSM or whether simply being beat into the heads (or preferably other body parts) of newbie practitioners, consent has often been thought of as a key element that distinguishes BDSM from violence and other types of abuse (Newmahr, 2011; Ortmann & Sprott, 2013). Yet, in spite of this central role of consent—a role that is clearly articulated within the acronyms of both SSC as well as RACK—we suggest that the notion of consent suffers from considerable ambiguity and deserves some much-needed clarity. Although others have certainly pointed out some of these same ambiguities (e.g., Barker, 2013; Newmahr, 2011; Tsaros, 2013), we propose that as part of our new acronym of the 4Cs, the BDSM community would do well to strive for a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of consent.

The problem as we see it, is that when many people talk about consent, they do it so flippantly and easily that it obscures the complications implicit to the notion. This is especially the case in the vanilla world, where, for example, much of the advocacy surrounding sexual violence prevention regularly proclaims simplistic slogans such as “no means no” and “yes means yes.” Corresponding to this, and seemingly impeding any further conversation, it seems like there is an almost immediate pushback against anyone who dares to question the supposedly-obvious nature of the distinction between yes and no. One has only to look as far as popular music and Robin Thicke’s recent hit single, “Blurred Lines,” and the repetition of its controversial chorus, “I know you want it.” The popular backlash was quick and unwavering in its portrayal of this song as epitomizing an assumedly-ubiquitous “rape culture.”

We suggest, however, that one of the complications here is that while perhaps it might be helpful if people said exactly what they wanted—if they were direct, clear, and obvious all the time and in every way—this is just not the nature of reality. While frequent and direct communication is desired, there is always more that is left unsaid. This is especially the case with BDSM, where much of the eroticism and allure of BDSM hinges on blatantly playing with and often purposefully obscuring consent. Whether that's the explicit specifications of consensual non-consent, or whether it's the use of even the most minimal type of bondage, or whether it's merely the top telling the bottom what to do—in all of these scenarios, BDSM is clearly blanketed in the trappings of non-consent. Experienced BDSM practitioners know this, and they know that navigating this tricky edge of consent is the balancing act that brings BDSM alive.

Yet, that being said, we recognize that most BDSM practitioners have little interest in their consent actually being violated. But this, of course, raises all kinds of questions regarding what exactly is consent and how do I know if my consent has been violated? For example, is consent a verbal agreement? Is it a body posture? A knowing look? A written out contract? In response, then, to these kinds of ambiguities, we suggest that one of the ways to move beyond such questions is to take a step back from the mechanics of consent and instead consider a broader approach. In particular, we propose that BDSM practitioners—both new and experienced alike—might benefit from learning to conceptualize consent according to three distinct levels.

The first of these is what we might call *surface consent*. In many ways, surface consent mirrors the kind of consent that is exemplified in the phrases “no means no” and “yes means yes.” When you are at a play party and someone asks you whether you would be interested in participating in some kind of scene, you might answer according to this kind of surface consent: “yes, I’m interested” or “no, I’m not.”

A second level of consent and probably the level that is most often associated with BDSM might be called *scene consent*. Here consent entails the top and bottom discussing and negotiating what is going to occur in the scene, and especially how the bottom might communicate to the top that he or she is (in the middle of the scene) withdrawing consent, typically through the use of some kind of safeword or gesture. Something to be aware of here, however, is that even though these techniques of consent may be relatively straightforward and clear, the fact that these kinds of obfuscating mechanics are used at all continues to point to the reality that BDSM largely operates on the basis of “blurred lines.”

This, in turn, takes us to a third and even more ambiguous level of consent, what we might call *deep consent*. Here we are talking about something beyond just a bottom's ability to use a safeword or gesture. For instance, when a bottom is crying and sobbing and in obvious distress and perhaps full into some kind of subspace—but hasn't yet called “red”—we might wonder to what extent the scene is affecting the thinking of the bottom and affecting the bottom's mental capacity to yell out “red” or to engage in cognitive consent at all? In addition, even if the bottom is still able to think, the bottom may not actually know whether he or she is consenting. In such cases, it seems like the question of consent is something that almost has to be considered after the fact. As the bottom plays back the scene in the hours and days and weeks that follow, he or she might come to some kind of conclusion: “I consented” or “no I didn't” or perhaps “I guess I just don't know.” In addition, it is important to be aware that aftercare and later conversations (especially between the top and bottom) may actually change the bottom's interpretation of a scene and his or her consequent view of consent.

Thus, while acknowledging that more sophisticated philosophical analyses of consent could certainly be provided, we suggest that the basic takeaway here is for BDSM practitioners to recognize and be cognizant of the fact that consent is a messy business. This, of course, is not at all to downplay the significance or importance of consent, or to make light of the potential emotional and psychic costs of having one's consent violated. Indeed, just as in every relationship people get hurt from time to time, we suspect that there are few BDSM practitioners among us who have not on occasion had our consent violated at least in part. That being said, some of us play on the safe side of consent, and some of us like to dangle over the cliff. Some of us go so far as to secretly long for our consent to be violated mid-scene in the hope that our retrospective analysis will lead us to conclude that at some deeper and more meaningful level, we really did consent. These—for better or worse—are the ambiguities of consent. Instead of denying these ambiguities, we recommend that BDSM practitioners embrace them, talk about them, negotiate with them, and continually and constantly reassess.

Communication

BDSM participants realize the obvious importance of good communication in negotiating personal limits within scenes. Scott (1997) discussed how people have different types of limits, and these limits may change depending on variables like time, current situation and mood, exposure to activities, who they are playing with, and so forth. Communication is important before, during, and after a scene. Such communication is inextricably linked to the concepts of caring, consent and caution, thus it deserves to be included in a basic framework of negotiation.

Many scholars have found that good communication is one of the most important factors for having a positive BDSM relationship (Cutler, 2003; Williams, 2012). Cutler (2003) interviewed 33 individuals that were actively participating in BDSM leisure practices and 19 of the 33 individuals identified communication as the number one most important skill for having a “good” BDSM relationship. Cutler said that his participants asserted that the need for good communication is more significant in BDSM practices (compared to “vanilla” practices) to prevent unintended physical or emotional harm. These individuals valued clarity and transparency in all BDSM exchanges. An important tenet of BDSM practice is to mutually create a power exchange. It is essential for all practitioners involved to communicate about the structures and processes involved in this exchange so that BDSM experience is mutually pleasurable and safe (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2006).

Because there is no unifying theory in understanding BDSM and people can vary tremendously in their overall physiologies, psychological make-up, past experiences, spirituality, erotic preferences, and motivations for participation; thorough communication contributes to a fuller understanding of participants, their subjective realities, and how to express care and support. Communication facilitates a richer personal knowledge, caring and intimacy, which then allows participants to explore, if they like, edgier forms of play that may complicate consent. Communication, then, is an essential bridge between caring and caution, which potentially may lead to the deep consent that we described above.

Caring

Sexuality is a complex, holistic, multi-layered phenomenon that permeates all aspects of a person's existence. We believe that engaging an *ethic of care* (caring attitudes and behaviors) is beneficial for understanding and enjoying sexuality and BDSM practices. Utilizing an ethic of care when we are intent on exploring, engaging, or understanding sexuality creates safety, trust, and respect for our

partners (Orme, 2002; Parton, 2003). This practice also conveys a level of competence that affirms the individual expressions and/or cultural mores of the people with which a person interacts (Vikan, Camino, & Biaggio, 2005).

Feminist scholars developed the philosophy and practice of an ethic of care in response to a patriarchal/positivist view of morality and justice (Beecher & Stowe, 1971; Buhle & Buhle, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Wollstonecraft, 1988). Western thought has historically posited that justice and morality should be grounded in observable, empirical truths that are applicable to all people, places, and things (Buhle & Buhle, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Wollstonecraft, 1988). A morally evolved individual is self-reliant, independent, and able to make moral judgment devoid of emotional persuasion (Kohlberg, 1971). An ethic of care asserts that morality is a subjective, relational way of making decisions (Gilligan, 1982). Decisions based upon an ethic of care explore the interpersonal and communal ramifications of a decision, rather than how the decision would impact “objective” understandings of justice.

Feminist scholars (Jaggar, 1992; Tong, 2013; Vikan, Camino, & Biaggio, 2005) assert that an ethic of care is grounded in the belief systems of many people, of all genders, throughout the world. Seeing the world through the lens of an ethic of care brings diverse voices and perspectives into the decision-making processes. “A dialogical approach to moral problems would involve discussing and observing from an attitude of caring – that includes attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, and a commitment to see issues from different perspectives” (Orme, 2002, p. 810). Conveying empathy, consent, and responsiveness when we negotiate, plan, or practice our sexuality are a few of the attitudes connected with an ethic of care.

In alignment with an ethic of care, philosophers and social scientists have developed the concept of intersubjectivity (Benjamin, 2013; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). Scholars have created multiple definitions of the term: a) an agreed upon definition created by individuals in a given situation; b) a community created definition that is reinforced through attitudes and behaviors that the community can use to understand a given phenomenon; c) a shared feeling or thought experienced by one person that influences the experiences of others, for example, a shared feeling of care and affection influences that feeling for others (Benjamin, 1995; 2013; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010).

An intersubjective perspective embraces the belief that all individuals have unique lived experiences and as a result, unique understandings about given phenomena, for example, sexuality and BDSM activity. “Broadly speaking, we take intersubjectivity to refer to the variety of possible relations between people’s perspectives” (Gillespie & Cornish, 2010, p. 19). Intersubjectivity asserts that individual understandings are fluid, relational, and ever-changing depending upon the context in which a phenomenon is experienced. This point of view is in contrast to positivist (objective) definition about social phenomenon, which asserts that scientific knowledge can only be derived from rigorous experiments that can be verified and replicated (Ponterotto, 2005). By contrast, intersubjectivity states that every individual embodies unique experiences, abilities, and identities, thus it is impossible to distill all possible understandings into an objective truth. Intersubjectivity requires us to reflect upon our individual beliefs about sexuality, communicate our beliefs, and embrace every person’s unique understandings.

Embracing our multiple understandings is in tandem with using an ethic of care within sexuality practices (Allegranti, 2013; Benjamin, 2013). If all individuals have unique desires and concerns, it takes great care to honor the diverse wishes and needs of others with the same importance we give our own. Finding the intersection between our sexual desires and another’s sexual desires can create tension because we are not sure how to judge, prioritize, and connect another person’s desires with our own. Utilizing an ethic of care allows us to honor the other as having an equivalent sexual life.

Practitioners, educators, and scholars that wish to embrace intersubjectivity and an ethic of care in how they navigate sexuality in their professional lives can do so through several practices (Brown, 2011). Engage in self-awareness exercises regarding your sexuality and BDSM preferences. Define your own sexual values and behaviors and within this definition, and explore any biases, prejudices, or potential discriminations you might have regarding sexual practices with which you are unfamiliar. Realize that sexuality and BDSM are social constructs on which cultural values and attitudes have been placed, which can deem some behaviors as acceptable and others as deviant. Allow the people with whom you interact to describe their own definition of “good” BDSM, and remain conscious that it is acceptable to have multiple definitions of “good” BDSM experiences. If someone discloses to you that she or he engages in edgier or unconventional BDSM practices, allow this person to explain her or his values and attitudes about why these practices are personally enjoyable. Be sure to listen with a caring attitude, try to understand how these practices fit within the person’s larger subjective reality, convey responsiveness, and allow multiple sets of values and beliefs to coexist.

Caution

For us, *caution* is tightly interconnected with caring, communication, and consent. For example, the willingness to engage in edgier BDSM activities often reflects an understanding, caring, and respect of the identities and intersubjective realities of those who may also participate. Thorough communication is an essential part of that process, not to mention an understanding of what exactly will take place in a particular scene.

As we suggested earlier, we like the term *caution* in large part because it implies a need to be aware of risk, the possibility of danger, and an admonition to proceed carefully; yet it does not seem to be quite as attached to normalizing medical and psychiatric discourses to the same degree as *safe*, or *risk*. For some, this may be trivial, but for others it may offer a better fit within their preferred lexicon. Acknowledging the historical regulatory power over bodies by the institutions of religion and medicine and psychiatry as explained by Foucault (1977, 1978) and subsequent postmodern and poststructural theorists, some participants may enjoy certain forms of BDSM as resistance to, or freedom from, such discourses. Perhaps other participants, for their own reasons, may follow various other macro or micro narratives.

It is important that a BDSM negotiation framework allows for personal variation and potential change that is an inherent part of people’s dynamic intersubjective realities. Baber and Murray (2001) discuss the importance of recognizing *personal sexual scripts* that develop from unique experiences, knowledge and education, and exposure to events. These scripts seem to be fluid and changing, and personal sexual scripts that include BDSM as an important theme undoubtedly impact desires for specific BDSM activities of various levels of risk. These personal scripts would also seem to help motivate participants to develop the skills to navigate risk to the degree to which they are comfortable. Our main point here is that risk and safety levels for specific BDSM activities; along with participants’ motivations, interpretations and subjective meanings; vary tremendously not only across participants, but also may shift substantially within individual participants. Whether *safe*, *risk-aware*, or *caution* is used to reflect this dimension of negotiation, we should be attuned to the need to accommodate considerable flexibility and variation.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have discussed important contextual issues for the development of SSC and RACK as basic frameworks for BDSM negotiation. While SSC has been, and still is, a useful approach for those wanting to participate in BDSM activities, RACK was formed in response to the recognition of a few problematic aspects of SSC, specifically the realization that BDSM participants' motivations for specific activities can vary considerably and that risk is relative among participants. At the same time, *sane*, as a forensics technical term, has little actual relevance to BDSM activity. We can understand the preference of RACK over SSC for many BDSM community members.

Despite the helpfulness of both SSC and RACK, we see some advantages in a new BDSM negotiation framework, which we have labeled the 4Cs. Each dimension (*caring, communication, consent, and caution*) warrants separate identification and emphasis, yet these constructs are all necessarily interwoven. The 4Cs framework is easy to remember and it moves beyond SSC and RACK in acknowledging the diverse ways of knowing, expressing, and relating. It provides an important negotiation structure, yet also seems to allow, and perhaps promote to some degree, flexibility for BDSM participants.

Finally, an additional valuable advantage of this new framework is that the 4Cs directly counters, via the inclusion of the dimensions of caring and communication (in addition to consent), lingering misperceptions from outsiders that BDSM participation is somehow inherently abusive, violent, or rooted in psychopathology, which directly contributed to the development of a common negotiation framework in the first place (SSC). The 4Cs, as a whole, emphasizes that BDSM participation is, or at least should be, quite the contrary. Despite progress in recent years in reducing marginalization of BDSM participation, much more improvement is needed.

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