

Social Etiquette and BDSM

Introduction

Something that has come back to my attention as of late is the topic of social skills, especially in the BDSM community. To clarify, what I mean is peoples' levels of awareness in what are, generally speaking, good practice & observances in any social situation. In addition, there are also things which are observances specific to the BDSM culture and community interaction.

Standards & Context

In an increasingly diverse cultural population, more people are interacting from different perspectives. These [perspectives](#) are in essence a combination of our "cultural frameworks" by which we view the world. Sometimes referred to as our "world view", our perspective is shaped by exposure to these cultural influences and our own personal experiences.

Elements of our culture include the values, rituals, habits, and manners observed by a group of people. These are incorporated into our personal world view. Typical cultural frameworks in which we learn these elements include, but are

not restricted to:



- **Familial** – as learned from our families, parents and siblings, relatives, and close family friends
- **Regional/Geographic** – common within group of people primarily residing within a geographic region
- **Socioeconomic** – matters associated with class, caste, rank, trade/profession, and education
- **Belief** – common elements within a religion or faith based system imparting key beliefs

Everyone has their own upbringing, a unique combination of values and customs learned from Familial, Geographic, Socioeconomic, and Belief cultures. While there are broad commonalities, there is sufficient difference in how these cultural inheritances interact that we cannot assume we know the context of another person.

Essentially, while it seems there may be much in common between you and another person, chances are you are completely wrong. That is, until you get to know them well enough to establish the commonalities beyond your initial assumption. It is better to assume there is nothing standard or predictable about another person's world view and their cultural context.

Rules of Engagement

Considering we really have no idea about the other person, how can we even begin to get to know them better? That's what the collective social skills are for. Call them manners, social etiquette, politeness, courtesies... or as I call them... *Social Protocols*.

What is a protocol?? In general, it is a code of conduct or action prescribing strict adherence to correct etiquette, behavior, or procedure. Examples include diplomatic protocols, medical/health protocols, and even network communication protocols. Social protocols are therefore your rules of engagement, communication, and method of behavior.

In something like submissive or slave protocols, there are often prescribed modes of behavior dependant on the circumstances, such as how to address their Dominant or Owner in public versus in private, how to ask permission or wait for attention, etc. You can read more in my post providing an [Introduction to Protocols](#).

Etiquette and social protocols are often prescribed within a combined geographic and socioeconomic context, by which one can interact and hopefully avoid making a major mistake or public faux pas. The aim is to typically create some standard that opens communication and interaction without intruding on beliefs, values, or privacy.

Common Social Protocol (USA)

Many of the following protocols would be considered "common sense" to those that have lived in a particular place for a period of time. Typical social etiquette or manners typically assume a "first meeting", and may be slowly loosened over time as familiarity increases. Even still, observing

these social protocols are good to observe and will rarely steer you wrong. In the US, these include manners such as:

- Short greetings such as “hi”, “hello”, “nice to meet you”.
- Standing while making introductions (except for elderly, disabled, sick).
- Using a brief yet “firm” handshake where acceptable (not limp nor trying to overpower).
- Answering honestly but politely (greater offense is taken when actions and words do not agree).
- “Please” and “Thank you” are very important to show polite gratitude.
- Don’t stare or hold a gaze too long, as it can be seen as hostile or threatening.
- Keep conversation short and light, with simple questions or answers; this builds basic rapport and avoids monopolizing.
- Be judicious when sharing details about yourself, your life, and your health to avoid giving “Too Much Information” (TMI).
- >Give others a chance to participate in the conversation, actively invite them to share their thoughts or feelings.
- Do not challenge matters of religion or politics; accept their stance and appreciate their right to their beliefs.
- Avoid interrogating with rapid fire questions or probing into personal details; this can put people on the defensive.
- Don’t bring attention to a disability, disfigurement, or call attention to that which may seem uncomfortable.
- Do not ask as to a woman’s weight or age, or make comments that might make another feel self-conscious.

These are only the basics, and if you search the web on social customs or etiquette you will find much more for any variety

of regions and countries and settings (social, business, family, etc). My job isn't to substitute for finishing school or teach you basic manners. My point is that these manners DO matter if you want to interact with others and avoid making serious errors in social settings.

BDSM Social Protocols

The communities within BDSM have their own concerns beyond basic social manners and etiquette. The primary reason for this is increased sensitivity to Privacy and a value system that espouses Respect and Consent. Indeed, due to the relatively sensitive and controversial nature of "kink culture", these observances are highly valued today – especially those with formal training and the leather culture. These include, but are not limited to:

- **Honesty of the Self** – give solid thought to your desires, needs, limits – know and respect yourself
- **Honesty with Others** – give a plain truth answer with respect and courtesy; no need to elaborate if another respects you
- **Respect the Individual** – do not assume you know them, their kinks, comfort zones, or their limits
- **Respect Privacy** – do not ask intimate questions about where someone lives or works
- **Respect their Body** – do not touch unless given *explicit permission*, this does not include flirting/suggestions
- **Respect the Collar** – if a submissive is collared, ask permission to talk; NEVER hit on them
- **Respect Choices of Others** – don't challenge or judge other peoples orientation, identity, or lifestyle

Challenges

While most of these little rules of observance seem like common sense once you look at them, they tend to escape a lot of people. For example, I've seen some people at a munch run down the "Don't" list like it's a contest to score points. A new person may walk in and right away someone may start with personal questions, interrogating them for interests or kinks, getting into personal space, looking to hookup, etc. Suffice to say, this will put people off and you have just may have lost the opportunity to bring them into the community with alienating behavior.

This problem seems to be everywhere though, not just within the BDSM community. In the age of social media and an increase in narcissistic tendencies, the need for the individual to just "do what they want" without considering the others around them is a prevalent problem. In the scene, the old rules that you don't ask where people live, or where they work, because that is a violation of privacy which should be respected above all else is being forgotten.

The concept of appropriate behavior, manners, and privacy are slipping. In part, we have an entertainment industry that seems content with producing shows that glorify people behaving badly. Social media gives casual and instant ability to spout off opinions and intimate life details, and things generally held private are now being publicly broadcast.

The instant "me" culture and media bias has fostered the All & Now mentality, eroding practices regarding building trust over time, delayed gratification, self-discipline, and emotional self-regulation and control. From a social perspective, it provides the illusion that we are entitled to know the most intimate details of someone's life on day one. From a scene perspective, it has added to a trend of jumping in with both feet without building a foundation of trust, an understanding

of the other, and often ignores acknowledging risks.

These are dangerous trends that need to be managed, and it's not just within the scene... it's everywhere.

Solutions

The only thing anyone can ever really hope to know with any certainty is themselves – their views, needs, limits, etc. For the individual, this means knowing yourself well and defining/defending your boundaries. For the BDSM and kink community, we must ante up and counter the trend by educating/evangelizing the core values around respect, honesty, communication, risk awareness, and consensuality – and being consistent in that message by ensuring these are reflected in policies at events, dungeons, play spaces, and the like.

As an individual, here are a few tips for dealing with this sort of thing.

- **Define Boundaries:** it's up to you to decide what type of social boundaries YOU will define. Consider also your response to those that test them with polite, yet firm, resoluteness. As long as you know where you stand, you will have an easier time dealing with potential issues when they arise.
- **Communicate Boundaries:** speak your limits up front and set expectations. If others feel that is offensive or cold, that is a problem with their expectations and feelings, not yours. Don't be shy to tell a person or group what you will or won't discuss. Nothing wrong with saying "hey I'm just checking things out, so nothing too personal please..."
- **Defend Boundaries:** also known as sticking to your guns.

It doesn't matter if what other people do is "normal" or not (especially since "normal" is such a loaded word in this community); what matters are your own sense of values and boundaries, provided they are generally respectful. That means having consequences in mind for those who cross the line.

- **Commit when Acting:** action may be a simple "that's actually a very personal question which is inappropriate at this time", etc. Alternatively, it could be bringing up the breach of social protocol to a host or DM, who should respond quickly to such issues. Lastly, there is simply not returning to an event or occasion for a time in the hopes the natural rotation of people has changed a little or other lessons have been learned and they have matured a little; such a decision should be accompanied by a personal message to the organizer about the problem experienced at that time or later if you need to calm and cool down to avoid a regrettable incident.

NOTE: *Do not make breaches of social protocol and etiquette a public spectacle.* I can't emphasize this enough – any breach in social protocol or etiquette should not be taken to public forums and announced broadly. Folks tend to get tremendously confused about this, so let me address it directly. (1) When one person behaves poorly, that is a reflection of their lack of maturity or development. In such a scenario, you need to maintain faith in yourself that you behaved responsibly – and demonstrate that behavior consistently and respectfully with others in the future. It's hard to be slighted, and then take the honorable path, but it's worth it because your Good Example is proof enough of your character. (2) If offended and you take it to a public forum, then it shows an inability on your part to self-restrain emotions and a need for approval & validation through others, which is generally seen also as a lack of maturity and development. (3) Compare it to speaking to your boss or superior in private, versus questioning or

challenging them in a public forum. The latter will leave you in a bad position and diminish you in the eyes of others you need to work alongside.

Closing

I hope this has helped, or at least provided some food for thought. It is certainly my hope that this has largely been an exercise in the obvious. However, since we come from such diverse cultural contexts and perspectives, and technology is substantially changing how we interact, it's still worth a closer look. Reflect on the information and give it thought. Do your best to hold true to your needs and boundaries by respecting yourself, and well as being respectful to others.

Also, using web resources by searching on manners, etiquette, or "how to behave at a dinner party", will yield you plenty of results. For those with behavioral social integration challenges (such as high functioning aspergers, depression, social anxiety, etc) the wealth of information on the web may be comforting in that there are rule by which you can guide yourself and be reasonably successful. Yes, effort will be needed, but there is information and help available.

I wish you all the best of luck on your next outing!!

-Sir Vice

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