

Changes in Culture of Consent & Responsibility

We are living in a time where there is a major culture change in the scene. The essence of this paradigm shift, in this author's humble opinion, stems from a change in values and priorities. Previously, the BDSM culture possessed greater value and emphasis on longer-term commitments, pushing limits, and individual responsibility for choices (even if choices were naive). More contemporary values have shifted from the stodgy black and red dungeons of seriousness to an emphasis on fun and shorter interactions based mostly on experience seeking. This cultural change is largely due to the swinging scene & younger generations focused on fun seeking. However, with this change comes a radical redefinition of the idea as to what negotiation, consent, and personal responsibility actually means.

This post is not meant to be definitive but only expresses a perspective from a "big picture" vantage point. In no way do I condone any behavior or transgression which harms another, but rather seek to investigate how the change in culture has impacted the scene and community. For that we need to look at its values, development, and patterns of behaviors on all sides.

Tenets

Those that are closer to "old guard" methodologies had a very different purpose in mind than that of today. One of the major [tenets](#) out there, aside from SSC, was also *The Three C's* – Committed, Compassionate, and Consensual. I'm going to explore this from my understanding as I had learned it:

- **Committed** – to your choices or path; to your partners, household and leather family; and most importantly, to

the well-being of others you interact or scene with. We are humans to be valued, challenged & developed; not to quit or be discarded when things don't go as intended or get difficult.

- **Compassionate** – tops and bottoms go through many challenges in their journey, we all get tripped up by bad experiences, both make mistakes in judgment, everyone gets burned at some point. So we need to have understanding & empathy all around, foster well-being, promote healing, and recognize we all heal and overcome things in different ways.
- **Consensual** – negotiation is a careful process that requires clear thinking, significant discussion, and mutual understanding to reach a consensual agreement. Once decided upon, it's often something you are "all-in" (committed to the contract) unless you have a significant heart-to-heart and need time to re-evaluate your choices or be released from training. This is why written contracts were so important.

The values above show an emphasis on individuals taking a longer commitment to seeing benefits, and with comprehensive responsibility for their choices, even if mistakenly so

Valuing Development



Any journey is about making choices as we go

The culture within the scene tended to embrace a model of values where you owned your decision, even where those decisions led to errors through innocence or naiveté; lack of self-knowledge, or misunderstanding; etc. This was due in part values that focused more on a structured and paced involvement, formalized mentoring, and earning your stripes

before being allowed to fully participate. A critical part of that mentorship and education process was learning subtle skills such as lifestyle etiquette and how to navigate the various gray zones and in-betweens that we were often challenged by when limits were being pushed. These are spaces between the binary and delineated, the range of limits and personal tolerances both physical and psychological.

These gray zones were often learned through experiential lessons and values passed down with a given household or leather family. Of course, communities then were often more localized and differences in philosophy or approach depended on regional culture (e.g. east vs. west coast), and the philosophies of local leaders and leather houses. Being a “non-normative lifestyle” it was within the gray and in-between spaces where many people dwelt. Here it took in-depth conversation, written assignments, and structured tasks to be properly educated. It wasn't often that you went from walking in the door to a physical BDSM or sexual experience; that was the exception and usually frowned upon. First you had to be led to reach a common understanding – or at least to develop the mutual respect and tolerance to “agree-to-disagree” and go separate ways.

Taking a journey of the self required [challenging boundaries](#) and soft limits (and sometimes even the hard ones) and were part of the growth process. How can you grow and develop if we always remain in our comfort zone? We can't – we need to be pushed to limits. This was something that the armed services knew and utilized, which is why it was such an integral part of the scene. Anyone with martial arts experience, if not military service, can recognize; and it shares much with anything that demands high standards of excellence such as top-tier professional ballet or symphony, Olympic sports, etc. The thinking is simple: you don't know what you are made of until you're tested; until then it's all ego or insecurity at play. When you achieve or fail you know

where you are, not guess, not presume – it's up to you what to do with that knowledge as to press on or change direction.

At that time, BDSM scenes were often viewed as work not just play – for it wasn't always easy or fun, but there was significant value in the growth and development one might achieve

That was Then, This is Now

Looking at the present day, it seems the very notion of committing to a journey that may be potentially unpleasant is foreign if not abhorrent to people. It's hard to find those that seem to really value committing to roles, to choices, or to relationships – especially when things get difficult. The very notion of tolerating discomfort seems an affront to our sensibilities, even when it will be good for us in the end.

When things get uncomfortable or reveal our [vulnerabilities](#), such as when we are being pushed and challenged, there is a modern tendency to balk, push back, or escape the discomfort by running away. Escape tactics vary, from ghosting to fighting/confrontation to self-destruction and relationship sabotaging... but it's always about getting out and going to easier (more comfortable) pastures. The challenge of the Journey has been forsaken for the enjoyment of the Experience – much like opting out of a hike up a mountain for the ride of a roller coaster.

This strong aversion to discomfort also impacts our ability to allow for the in-between spaces, as these grey zones are not certain, and thus uncomfortable. Uncertainty has become an affront to our sensibilities – so instead of looking at the ill-defined or uncertain as a potential for opportunity, it's looked at with abject fear and hatred. There is an increasingly louder cry for there to be some standard within The Community (capital letters intended) because people no

longer understand or comprehend something not uniform – something that lives in the in-between and grey zones.

Increasingly there is the insistence in more binary definitions – *please hear me out before you trigger and start flaming...*

When I write that there's increasing tendency to binarism, it means we are seeing an increased insistence on reducing all matters into definitive judgments of good or bad. That is binarism: when any matter is reduced to two and often diametrically opposed absolutes. For example, the belief that any degree of gender binarism is Bad, and that any such distinguishment must be obliterated to be Good. This ignores that there are valid distinctions regarding gender identity, expression, body/form, and those of internal physiology (genetic and the musculoskeletal structure).



*There is likely more than just
2 choices*

Another way of looking at this is through *False Dichotomy*, where a given situation or idea is represented only one of two options, where many others are possible. Making the assumption that there can be only two positions is often a tactic employed to force an ideological opponent into an extreme position, often resulting in a highly charged emotional response (i.e. manipulation). However, false dichotomies can form due to misunderstanding or misinformation, zero-sum competition, adversarialism, and pre-existing hostilities. When everything seemingly needs to be viewed as something that must be applied to everyone everywhere, or it's somehow an affront to us personally, we are on a very dangerous road indeed.

Binarism is the result of losing our ability to tolerate discomfort and thus devalues the benefits from challenge,

growth, and cooperative negotiation.

How Did We Get Here?

There are several factors that led to this change from applying more personal discernment and critical thinking within the grey and in-between spaces to more clear binary discernment. Most of these transpired during the “Era of Self” championed by the cults of Ayn Rand, Ronald Reagan in what I refer to as the transitional period between then and now. It’s not any one thing, but a series of interrelated shift in beliefs and priorities accelerated by new enabling technologies.

The key changes which occurred over the next several decade, which I believe were major impacts to the current state, include but are not necessarily limited to:

- **Helicopter Parenting:** shielding a child from all discomforts, disappointments, and dangers
 - Frequently In Hover Mode (always near, watching for danger, sheltering, expecting disaster on their behalf)
 - Keep Them From Pain (discomfort, disappointment, mistakes, tumbles)
 - Overly Helping (jumping in, removing tasks, always easing frustrations, bailing out)
 - Don’t Use The Word “No” (placation, acquiescence, bargaining, immediate gratification)
 - Child Doesn’t Have Personal Space (self-initiated exploration, making own mistakes, reflection)
 - Battle for Them (running to their defense, always taking their side, making excuses)
 - See Danger Everywhere (paranoid, us vs them, friend or enemy, safe or dangerous)
 - Throwing Shade (vocally judging, bad-mouthing, back-handed compliments)

- **Educational:** academic systems geared to developing binary systems
 - memorization & fact testing over critical thinking skills and challenging assumptions
 - equal reward without value of *actual* effort, skill, ability, or even participation
 - all-inclusiveness to the extent of abolishing the allowance for differences, preferences, etc

- **Short-Term Oriented:** a general move away from delayed gratification or measures
 - No patience to earn or demonstrate skills, abilities, and overcome weaknesses/challenges
 - Formalized mentorships viewed as too ridged, exclusive, judgmental, clique-ish

- **Tech & Media:** from the web and all the tech that immediately glorifies the Me
 - Internet access & availability of personal web pages and blogs, making self-education feasible
 - Immediacy of unmoderated and uncensored commentary, binary reactions Like/Dislike, and reinforcement of comparative thinking/dwelling
 - Celebrity Democratization via reality TV, YouTube stars, and the growing pastimes contributing to self-stardom, drama, and facilitating the state of National Narcissism

- **Frivolity & Feels:**
 - Favoring personal indulgences over interpersonal & community commitment
 - Perspective as playing with toys versus scenes as working with tools
 - Tinderization: disposable self-oriented experiences, and working people through a checklist

False Equality



*experiential joy in the roller
coaster ride*

Today's "culture of tolerance" has become a method for insisting on Uniformity and Total Inclusion instead of Live and let Live. This insistence for absolute tolerance is exactly what makes the idea ridiculous, because it is by its nature the perfect example of intolerance. This is essentially an intolerance for any lack of total acceptance, complete with all the warm fuzzies to make you feel comfortable and safe. The forced push for tolerance for all is not a "live and let live" philosophy, but rather more of a totalitarian demand. Tolerance as taught today is not about learning to live with the discomfort of difference, of the unknown or the undefined. Rather it's an intolerance for any difference, where everyone must be equalized and all are winners and participate despite your efforts, talents, skills, or the trials of pushing oneself.

When we are all *made* equal we lose that which makes us human – individuals of diverse talents and abilities, diverging preferences and perspectives, which makes the world a far more interesting place. We lose the ability to appreciate others strengths and learn from their weaknesses. We paint the field a flat gray in order to make ourselves feel better, less ostracized, less inadequate but cheapen the human experience and our own emotional development in the process. As was written by Kurt Vonnegut in Harrison Burgeon (a favorite story of mine since I was 14)...

"He tried. That's the big thing. He tried to do the best he could with what God gave him. He should get a nice raise for trying so hard." – Kurt Vonnegut, Harrison Bergeron

Suggestions

I hate bringing up problems without offering some ideas for a solution. Therefore, presented below are some ideas that might help strike a balance. None of the below ideas are complete – that's what makes them ideas. They are the start of the thought process in terms of looking at the past, present, and trends and putting some steps towards achieving a desired or target state. None of these suggestions will be instant or easy. It's going to take a measure of mutual appreciation for the above to actually start making some changes to alter the trajectory we presently find ourselves.

- **Radical Acceptance: the change in priority and perspective HAS happened**
 - Stop trying to turn back the clock or deny the change in culture
 - D-types can't take on bottoms or subs expecting what they used to
 - S-types need to manage their risk & communicated more aggressively
 - Accept that skipping steps and rushing forward = higher risk & personal cost
 - Pace and interaction to slow down and develop more proof & trust
 - Manage risk/regret with shorter and less intense scenes
 - Self-education, safe calls, references,
 - Everyone needs to own their own parts in any given choice
 - Consider ALL the elements that went into the situation
 - Owning our part does not = taking/accepting fault
- **Realism: there is need for short-term solutions and long-term approaches**

- Don't expect it to be perfect or have a final solution to start with
 - It's going to be a bumpy road and needs to evolve as we progress
 - Cooperative negotiation towards a path and to address concerns
 - Ongoing education, training, and community leadership
- **Individuals: be responsibly honest about your needs and goals...**
 - What type of relationship do you want, if any, and under what circumstances?
 - Do you want unstructured or structured experiences, or a blend, and when?
 - Are you looking for something that is new & novel, or transformative?
 - Can you communicate the above clearly, and also stick to it?
 - Have your ideas/feelings have changed, and have you communicated it?
- **Lifestyle Events: programming to focus and clearly distinguish purpose & intent**
 - Can't please everyone all the time – look to simplify and focus
 - What is your motive: giving back to community, education, making a living?
 - Mission consistency: are you education, training, social, play-party oriented?
 - Improve policies to delineate Educators from Partiers & Predators
 - Vetting aggressiveness appropriate to event feature access/risk
 - Segment access by vendor pass, workshop/class pass, play-party pass, etc??
 - Request presenters to address topics or skills

greatest concern to your community

▪ **Skills: building the message AND body of knowledge for our communities**

- help people become aware of the issues from a variety of perspectives
- discuss yet remain factual or from within own experience (no projecting)
- look at experiences and state without damning, judging, or disrespect
- develop the coping tools to offer from the above in workshops and mentoring
- be prepared to say “no” to subs if they can’t do the prep/homework first
- be prepared to say “no” to Doms if they can’t show process, structure, references
- learning to forgive, to live and let live, and to release or unburden from hurts

There is no doubt that the above only touches on the solutions to some of the challenges we’re seeing in today’s culture change. There are plenty of other “hot button” discussions (e.g. consent violations & the definitions thereof) happening all over and is getting plenty of attention. Par for the course, our eyes and voices go right to the bright and dramatic, often bypassing the quieter and deeper issues at hand that helped bring them to pass.

I’ve a tendency to look at the big picture first, and then ask two key questions: (1) How did we get here?, and (2) Where are we heading? Once given enough time and consideration, only then will I put to mind finding potential solutions, and what role I might play. The old axiom “Think Globally, Act Locally” is brought to mind. Meaning, if it is something too big and too far for me to act upon, then I turn my attention to where I have some measure of impact or influence. Then it’s a matter of acting according to my principles, ethics, and making attempts at progress no matter how imperfect or

awkwardly it might be. This has been done in a number of fashions:

- Putting an ethics policy put into place addresses some of the above mentioned suggestions.
- Altering workshop content to include some of these needed conversations and skills
- Connect with others to socialize these ideas, or quietly support those with similar values
- As we get invited to events or groups, we ask: “what is YOUR communities challenge or concern that needs to be addressed?”

Closing

No one has to agree with all or even any of the above, and that’s fine, because we’re all responsible for the consequences of our choices. All any of us can do is ensure that we step-up and own our choices, our part of the equation. Then it’s a matter of learning from mistakes, growing, and hold to the lessons and principles to guide our choices. A huge part of making choices is seeing more than just two things in life, that there is a world of potential which you can choose from – according to what is important to you. We may not agree, actually we likely will not agree, but we can find a way if we can find common ground in some truths of the human experience. Some good ones to start with are:

“No one here gets out alive” –Jim Morrison

“Out of your vulnerabilities will come your strength.”
–Sigmund Freud

“Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.” –Khalil Gibran

“I hate “both sides” to show them that there are more than two sides.” –T.J. Kirk

-Sir Vice

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