

CHAPTER 4: THE LOVE LANGUAGE OF KINK

“That means ‘I love you’ in Kink”

On a warm spring day in early May 2010, my boyfriend and I were still pretty new to the BDSM scene, and were sitting on a bench at a resort campground in Maryland at one of our first big kink events. We were enjoying the sunshine and people-watching when a couple came walking up the main pathway. As they walked, the guy was punching his wife’s upper arm hard enough to bruise as they walked along, while she protested, “Fuck, Sir!” every time he hit her. This interaction was repeated at least three times as they walked towards us. Being acquaintances of ours, when they saw us, they both smiled and waved at us, said “Hi!” and then resumed their punching/“Fuck, Sir!” routine. It was all my boyfriend and I could do to keep from laughing hysterically until they were out of earshot. When they were gone, I leaned over and told him conspiratorially, “Toto, we’re not in Kansas anymore.” He nodded sagely.

For at least a year, that woman and her husband remained my metric for what a “weird kinky” relationship looked like. They certainly had a reputation locally for being “hard players” (kinkster slang for “people who are probably kinkier than you. No, really”). Although I rarely met people I would describe as “kinkier,” I certainly met plenty of people who were *as* kinky. As my husband and I “fell down the rabbit hole” and found ourselves deeper and deeper in Kinkland, I observed and participated in many relationships where pain, control, and affection commingled in extremely complex ways. I knew my husband and I had really joined the Mad Tea Party when one day two years later, a group of our friends were all sitting at a table having lunch together at the same kinky campground; my husband punched his girlfriend (very hard) affectionately on the shoulder, and she said, “Fuck!” He smiled at her and said, “That means ‘I love you’ in Kink.” I realized at that point that I had learned to fluently speak the strange love

language that is Kink, and finally understood that my friends years ago with their punching/”fuck, Sir!” routine had just been engaging in a public display of affection.

Although my own initial response had registered a serious kinky relationship as very weird, I spent the next few years trying to figure out if kinky relationships were as weird as they seemed. As I fell down the rabbit hole, I became immersed in kink subcultural claims that “we’re different,” “vanilla people don’t understand us,” and “I barely know how to explain my relationships to outsiders.” It’s definitely a feature of the kink subculture to valorize “weirdness” and difference in general, and relationships are certainly no exception. On the whole, I think kinksters in the subculture tend to go out of their way to portray their relationships as weird. But I wanted to figure out if kinky relationships are really *that* weird? As you will see, the answer I came up with ultimately was, “Sort-of.”

Capital and lower-case people

It is impossible to discuss kinky relationships without at least providing a basic overview of the common labels that kinksters apply to themselves as identity markers. This discussion is going to be complicated by the fact that kinksters obsessively analyze and argue about the meaning of all of these titles and identities amongst themselves. The subculture is pretty conspicuously divided between people who take these labels very, very seriously, and people who think those people are very, very funny. I must acknowledge my own bias here, since I am certainly a member of the latter group. For example, I once attended a class at a kink event called “‘Dominants’ or Assholes in Leather Vests?” which discussed what it “really” meant to be a Dominant, and in which there was a lot of agreement that “Masters were born, not made.” When I mentioned this discussion to some of my friends later, there was a lot of laughter at the idea that there was a caste of “Twu Doms” (“twu” being a common subcultural derogative label for

people who believe very strongly in the authenticity of their “true” kink identities) who were born to their titles. However, despite my personal biases, I have worked hard as a sociologist to be able to sincerely represent the viewpoints of both of these groups.

Kink roles can be divided into three basic categories: Tops, bottoms, and switches. Tops are people who are basically in control of an interaction (the people who are causing sensations), while bottoms are people who are receiving sensations; switches are complicated, and I’ll get to them in a moment. Although the identity or role of Top or bottom theoretically exists, one rarely encounters people actually adopting these labels as identities. There are a whole host of related titles and roles that fall within these respective categories. The most common Top titles, which are usually gendered, include Master/Mistress, Dominant(Dom)/Domme, and Daddy/Mommy. The most common corresponding bottom titles, which are much more rarely gendered, include slave, submissive(sub), and boy/girl¹. The terms “Dom” and “sub” tend to be used most frequently to refer generically to all of these groups, and the pairings are usually just abbreviated to D/s.

Traditional subcultural orthography capitalizes the titles associated with Tops, but not the titles associated with bottoms. In extremes, people who identify as submissives and slaves will sometimes not capitalize “i” when referring to themselves in kinky writings (and occasionally capitalize pronouns when referring to their Top). Although people can theoretically also identify as Tops or bottoms, or sadists (usually not capitalized), masochists, or sadomasochists, they very rarely do. The kink subculture regards Topping/bottoming and sadism/masochism much more as activities focused on sensation than personal identities, and reasonably assumes that power dynamics are fundamental to relationships much more than pain or sensation. Consequently, it

¹ Despite the implication of youth, these roles are all assumed by consenting adults. The Scene is usually very, very careful about monitoring who gets in.

emphasizes D/s dynamics far more than Top/bottom or sadist/masochist relationships.

The kink subculture has historically been so heavily structured and centered around the idea of Dominant and submissive as being separate *identities* and qualities of individuals that at least one older person I interviewed told me that “coming out” as a switch was harder for her than “coming out” as Queer. The kink subculture has certainly grown more flexible in this regard over time (although the de-emphasis on switching varies heavily geographically). Nonetheless, I have taught several workshops on switching which rapidly turned into virtual group therapy sessions in which the switches present complained about how the subculture ignored the reality of their identities. Discussions constantly happen in the subculture about what it means “be a Dom” or “Dominate,” “be a sub” or “submit,” but one almost never hears discussions about what it means to “be a switch” or “to switch.” In very much the same way that mainstream culture doubts the existence of bisexuals, the kink subculture doubts the existence of switches. This skepticism is encouraged by the fact that “switches” and “switching” are so vaguely defined within the subculture that it is easy to define them out of existence (conversely it is easy to argue that “everyone is a switch,” but it’s not a popular argument).

Switches include people who enjoy taking on submissive and Dominant roles in relationships, as well as people who enjoy the actual changing of roles in and of itself. Theoretically, “switching” applies to changing between topping and bottoming, sadism and masochism, and various types of power exchange; in practice, people seem to use the term to ambiguously refer to all three. To further de-legitimize the category, many of the people who identify as “switches” do not, in fact, “switch” within their relationships; they simply happen to enjoy both Dominance and submission abstractly, or with different partners. Most importantly for these purposes, there is almost no popular concept of what “switch relationships” look like in

the kink subculture. Although many people *have* switch relationships, the subculture does little to promote, explain, or encourage them.

From identities to partnerships

Many kinksters take their identities as Dominants or submissives quite seriously (although many do not), and these roles sometimes become *the* defining aspect of sexuality for a person. However my personal and sociological observations both strongly suggest that this identity construction is extremely problematic, because these roles are relational performances much more than fixed characteristics of individuals. People submit to or dominate a particular person, not the world. Consequently, these roles are constantly refined, re-shaped, and modified based on the relationship someone has with an individual. More importantly, people often find that these roles are quite malleable, and so they end up in situations where their behavior seems to contradict their identities. These contradictions include defining behavior that is normally understood to be topping or bottoming as different because of how they're doing it; defining themselves as Dominants or submissives *except* with certain partners (often their husbands and wives); and insisting that behavior that they admit to not being Dominant or not being submissive as being an irrelevant exception to their overall identity. In my studied opinion (and the opinion of many others I know—although plenty of people disagree) Dominance, submission, and switching evolve and develop between people interacting with each other, and rarely exist as independent characteristics of individuals.

Part of the reason that these identities come to be so important is because of partnership formation. The subculture assumes that people will try to find matching complementary identities in forming relationships. That is, Masters/Mistresses are supposed to find slaves; Dominants are supposed to find submissives; Daddies/Mommies are supposed to find boys/girls;

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...and subculturally speaking, no one knows what the hell switches are supposed to do. People often end up policing their own identities in these contexts (and being policed by others), such that people will often question they're "really" Dominating their partner, or whether their partner is "really" submissive to them. People frequently find that their relationship dynamics shift considerably over time, so that, for example, my husband and his girlfriend started their relationship as switches, then agreed that he would be her Dominant, then agreed to go back to being switches. Meanwhile, I had other partners who began their relationship as basically power-neutral, then evolved into a lasting Master/slave dynamic. D/s dynamics are complex and usually constantly changing, just like any other relationship dynamic.

The Fantasy: 24/7 relationships

There's no question that by the standards of mainstream society, the trappings of the kink subculture makes its members look pretty weird. At any large kink event (and sometimes at smaller ones as well), you'll usually see people in collars being led around on leashes; people being beaten with fists, floggers, and whips; and sometimes even people dressed in costumes involving gas masks, hoods, or elaborate gear to look like ponies. But I think that the defining aspect of kink subcultural weirdness to outsiders (and even some insiders) is what are generically formally referred to as "Total Power Exchange" (TPE) relationships, but which the subculture usually just calls "24/7 relationships." These are what tend to get the most representation and interest outside of the Scene (e.g. Ana and Christian in *50 Shades* or much more so Lee and Mr. Grey in *Secretary*). They undoubtedly also get a lot of interest within the Scene as well: among the folks I interviewed who were currently in relationships, more of them (27) were in some sort of 24/7 relationship than people who weren't (22). However, as I'll explain, these relationships usually bear only a passing resemblance to what you see in the movies, which are for all intents

and purposes basically just erotic fiction. And although I'm not going to say much about them in this chapter, obviously a great many partnered kinksters are *not* engaging in any dynamics that they describe in terms of some sort of Total Power Exchange.

As an outsider (or as an insider who is a sociologist and thus obsessively analyzes everything like me), trying to figure out what the hell people really mean when they talk about 24/7 relationships can be incredibly confusing. Although I've dated many people who were in 24/7 relationships with other people while they were dating me (and even dated both partners who were in a 24/7 relationship with each other for over a year), I confess that the fundamental chemistry underlying 24/7 relationships is still somewhat mysterious to me personally. To say that I've observed all of these dynamics "up close and personal" would be an understatement; I've literally had these dynamics fucking on top of me. I am enough of a switch that I have personally on many occasions and with many people enjoyed the pleasures of Dominance, switching, and submission, but I have been assured that the pleasures of doing those things for "a scene" is very different than doing them as a lifestyle. And having been around people who are doing it as a lifestyle, I certainly believe it.

Despite my intimate exposure to 24/7 relationships, defining them remains challenging because no one can quite seem to agree on what they are. The consensus seems to be that 24/7 relationships are ones in which Dominance and submission play out in some way in a relationship "outside the bedroom," which is to say beyond sex and kink contexts. In essence, both partners agree that the Dominant partner is always in charge, at least when they are together. In the words of Mary, who had been married to her Dom for many years, the essence of their D/s dynamic was that, "He'll always win every argument. 24/7, I am trying to do the best that I can to make his life happy and easy. My first concern is sort of for him." The ambivalent

“sort of” there is telling, as there is a general agreement among a lot of the people who engage in these relationships that slaves and submissives should always take care of themselves first, and *whenever possible* take care of their Masters and Dominants. Natalie, one of my respondents who was a switch and had been both a “Daddy” (her word) and a slave, was adamant about this rule, saying that in a previous relationship as a slave “[I thought I] needed to be what [my Master] needed, and what he wanted, and screw my needs. And, yeah, that never goes well...” Now, she tells everyone, including her “boy” that a slave’s “prime directive” is “take care of the property [i.e. themselves] first.” She added that, “it’s kind of like the airplane mask idea. Help yourself first; then you can help everybody else.”

Trying to parse the differences between these various relationship dynamics of submission and slavery further adds to the confusion. For the people who participate in these dynamics, many insist that there are crucial differences between submissives and slaves. One of my respondents, Theresa, who regularly taught classes on 24/7 dynamics and had been a slave to her wife Thelma of 16 years, explained that the fundamental difference between a submissive and a slave is that a slave has given up the right to really say “no” (although not the right to object to a decision). She explained:

I could say, “I don’t like this, I hate this, I dislike it, no no no no no,” and she can go, “Thank you for your opinion.” And then we go. And she can also say, “This is the end result I want. Make it happen.” Whereas with a submissive you kind of have to go, “Take this step and this step and this step. And if you do, I will reward you. If you don’t, I will punish you.” Whereas a slave goes, “Uh, if I displease my master, the world is ending.” So in her capacity as Master, she can say, “I want my home to look a certain way, I want my children to be cared for in a certain manner.” And everything I do, from going to the grocery store to scrubbing the toilet, is for her. And it’s all-pervasive.

Although Theresa’s description was certainly very articulate, and there is no doubt that the distinction between these relationship types is extremely important to many of the people who engage in them, in practice, I am hard-pressed to imagine any external observer would be able to

tell the difference between Dominant/submissive versus Master/slave relationships most of the time.

The key distinguishing features of both types of relationships is that one person consistently has control and another one has willingly given up control (or, sometimes, that both people engage in an elaborate set of rituals and pretexts to preserve the illusion that one person has control over the other), and that this dynamic pervades all aspects of the relationship—not only the sexual and kink ones. Additionally, there is usually ideally a sense of belonging and ownership/being owned that comes from these dynamics. There are many symbolic markers that people use to help preserve this actuality and/or pretext of control. The most obvious of these are the verbal markers of authority. It's common to hear subs refer to their Dominants as “Sir” or “Ma’am” as a form of address (“Yes, Sir,” “Can I get anything for you, Sir?”), and even occasionally grammatically torturing it into the subjective case (“Sir told me to come find you”). Other common superordinate titles include Master/Mistress and Daddy/Mommy. Subs rarely get special forms of address from their Dominants. Of particular note here is the way that people will often (a) emphasize a sense of personal belonging by referring to the person as “my ___” (Dom, sub, slave, Mistress, etc.), and (b) prioritize the D/s relationship designation over the romantic relationship designation unless they are married (i.e. say, “My Dom” more often and much more comfortably than “My boyfriend” if they are dating, but more often “My husband” than “My Dom” if they're married). Also worthy of note is that switch relationships get no such verbal designations. I have a long-term partner who I engage in a heavy switch relationship with, but if I referred to him as “My switch” (which I occasionally do because I like to fuck with people), that doesn't really make sense by the conventions of the subculture.

Another important symbolic marker of these types of relationships is what are broadly

called “collars.” Both submissives and slaves usually wear “collars” to indicate their owned status, and these actually take a wide variety of forms. There are traditional collars, which are often leather and have a ring or lock attached to them; but since many submissives and slaves prefer to wear them at all times, those collars are extremely impractical. More frequently, people wear contemporary modifications that involve fairly subtle, nearly solid pieces of metal around their necks that can only come off with a key. However, I have also seen “collars” that were ankle bracelets with lock charms on them, or sometimes even rings or bracelets. The most important subcultural feature of collars is usually that they are supposed to be a gift from the Dominant partner to the submissive partner, and that they are only supposed to be taken off (whenever practical) by the Dominant. Some people even acquire body modifications as a symbol of their owned status, with genital piercings being extremely popular for this purpose; much more rarely, people get tattooed.

Having acknowledged that many of their participants perceive D/s and M/s relationships as being quite different from each other, for the remainder of this chapter (and indeed the rest of this book), I am going to discuss them as being basically the same. Instead of focusing on the differences between D/s and M/s relationships, I’m going to talk more about subtle variations that emerge among these relationships as a result of very different approaches to the meaning of D/s, and because of kinksters’ propensity for engaging in ethical non-monogamy (which I will explain in much greater depth in Chapter 7). For now, suffice it to say that traditionally monogamous people in the kink subculture are very rare indeed. Because people so often expect to maintain multiple relationships simultaneously, the daily realities of 24/7 D/s dynamics vary a great deal based on the seriousness and intensity of the underlying relationship between the partners. These can reasonably be divided into three categories: relationships with primary

partners, sexual/romantic relationships with secondary partners, and non-romantic/non-sexual relationships with secondary partners. As I describe these relationships, I'll explain more about what they mean and look like. Regardless of whether they're primaries or secondaries, the D/s chemistry can usually be further divided very basically into what I call "Terror D/s" versus "Affirmative D/s." I'll start by describing primary D/s relationships, and then I'll describe secondary D/s relationships.

The Reality of Terror D/s: "I do these things for her because she's special"

Thirteen people I interviewed were currently in what they described as 24/7 relationships with their primary romantic partners. "Primary partners" are people who are married and/or live together, or who have a very serious relationship but don't live together. (Notably, 7 of those 13 people also had 24/7 relationships with another less serious partner as well). Because primary partners usually live together, they have to constantly deal with the daily realities of life together (paying bills, cleaning house, and often raising children) while simultaneously trying to live out what is functionally an exotic fantasy of control. In particular, although the fantasy of Master/slave dynamics claims that slaves focus their whole existence on their owners, the reality is that owners still have to acknowledge and care for the personal needs of their slaves which usually do in fact exist independently of the owners. As Natalie's comment about "the prime directive" shows, most people who are in these relationships for the long haul recognize there is a fantasy of "my needs are my Master's needs" which usually is at odds with the life of a real human being (even one who has been willingly designated as "property"). Having acknowledged that conflict, much of the subsequent negotiations within the D/s dynamic become focused on trying to maintain the illusion that both people are "really" focused on the Dominant's needs.

Again and again, my observations of my fellow kinksters confirmed that the more they tried to emphasize the exotic fantasy dimension, and the less they dealt the practical realities of living a loving life together where the submissive really did have needs, the more dissatisfied they became with their relationships. Derek's relationship with his long-term live-in girlfriend, who was his slave, was a great example of this complex set of exotic and mundane contradictions. In his interview, he reiterated that he and his slave had had numerous conflicts in their relationship, and their relationship eventually explosively dissolved a few months after I spoke with him. His description of their relationship really highlighted the tensions between trying to simultaneously maintain relationship reality and kinky fantasy:

A slave really doesn't get choices. She does what I tell her to do. It's a funny thing if your slave is your girlfriend. The slave doesn't get choices, but the girlfriend does, so it's hard. It's a hard dynamic to keep because she really thrives off intensity. We've definitely had, like I said, some relationship issues through it all. But I feel like we have a lifetime commitment to each other. That's why I can call her my slave, and that's why I can say I own her. I truly believe she derives satisfaction from making me happy. How could you ask for anything more than that? When you have somebody dedicated in life to making you happy—even at their own expense. The tough part is trying not to take advantage of that, and we've had our struggles, but I don't think I could have a better partner.

She has needs even though she doesn't necessarily verbalize them. And my job is really to pay attention to those needs. Because you know, even—let's face it, it's *all kind of a fantasy so you've got to really have some balance*. So even though overtly she's good to pleasure me or make sure I'm happy: no. Suddenly I need to make sure her needs are met. If I play with [my other partners], she needs to feel special. So I make sure I make her feel special. I surprised her, like the other Sunday. So I woke her up with kind of this aggressive sex style that she loves. And then after I was done, I put her in the tub, and I pissed on her, which she kind of likes to do. But then I gave her a bath, and I washed her hair, you know. And I took her to brunch, and I spent all day with her. We went to the zoo, and we did special couple stuff that she likes to do. And then here's the fun thing. What she really appreciated was when we got home, I threw her in the basement and locked her in it at 6:00, and I kept her there pretty much all night. And I'd go downstairs and beat her every once in a while and throw her in the cage, and that's the stuff she really gets off on. In other words, I was paying attention to her. And I don't do those things with my other play partners. I do those things for her because she's special. [italics mine]

Although Derek's story illustrates many common themes among D/s relationships, it is important to emphasize that his experience was certainly not normal. His relationship dynamic was a pretty extreme example of a fantasy trope of D/s relationships that I generally refer to as "Terror D/s." Terror D/s usually involves some form of what kinksters call "consensual non-consent," which is to say the fantasy that the bottom is saying "no" to whatever is happening. This dynamic also tends to include heavy doses of humiliation and degradation (such as pissing on someone or locking them in a cage), and violence (such as beating someone). Perhaps most importantly, Terror D/s is grounded in the pretense that the submissive has been (willingly) *demoted* to "property" (often with accompanying degraded slurs such as "cunt," "bitch," "fuck-hole," "sex toy," or my personal favorite, "robot"). The pretense of the submissive's demotion in primary relationships is obviously at odds in some very complicated ways with the fact that the Dominant has agreed to be in a *romantic relationship* with "the property," which is why I carefully use the term "pretense." As Derek explained, in order to be maintained for any length of time, the Dominants in these *relationships* usually have to regularly do things to make the submissives still feel "special" even though their D/s dynamic is constructed around the idea that the submissive is basically less than human.

Despite the best efforts of the Dominants, these terror-based D/s dynamics are very difficult to maintain as primary relationships for exactly the reasons that Derek described: although both partners might really take great pleasure in their kink dynamics, those dynamics don't tend to smoothly integrate into the routine aspects of life together. Another reason they often become difficult to maintain is that in long-term dynamics of extreme consensual non-consent, the notion of consent starts to feel very blurry. I once attended an excellent workshop on "Terror Play" where a few of the bottoms explained that although they really did in fact love to

be “terrorized,” and even loved the person who was terrorizing them, over time, it became increasingly difficult to separate their “rapist²” from their “boyfriend.” These types of D/s dynamics usually become very messy at the point where there are real relationship problems (most frequently about commitment, but also more mundane concerns like money or chores as well), but the increasingly actually hostile partners try to maintain a relationship dynamic founded on a pretense of hostility... The result is acrimonious break-ups such as what ultimately happened to Derek and his girlfriend.

Despite the problems which often emerge from these terror-based D/s dynamics, it is abundantly clear that both the Tops and bottoms who engage in them often experience deep feelings of connection and intimacy as a result of their vicious kinks. Derek’s comment from the Top’s perspective that he does “those things for her because she’s special” complemented the comments of Grace, who was the only person I interviewed who was a bottom in this type of primary terror-based D/s dynamic. Grace explained that she and her live-in partner George had no complex D/s arrangements, but that their dynamic was simply founded on her “obedience” and his desire to be allowed to do things to her that scared her or made her angry. She said that this dynamic increased her feelings of intimacy with him:

Basically, the thing that comes to mind for me is a stun gun. I have a near phobia of electricity and before I went away for a month-long trip this summer actually, he took out a stun gun, and he said he was going to zap me with it. I was like, “No, no, I’ll do something else.” I had to go out of the house for some reason, and I was like, “I’m going to go now.” He was like, “No, you are going to stay and use the stun gun.” I wouldn’t go near him, and then when I was near him, I would cry and I kept saying, “No, just wait a minute, just wait a minute” for a long time. But then, he did it. And I was okay, and I don’t know, I felt emotionally intimate.

² “Rape play”—in which people agree to a pretend rape—is extremely popular in the Scene. As I have discussed elsewhere, despite seeming extreme, “rape play” is also essentially “vanilla” in the sense that so many people fantasize about it. *But enjoying rape play fantasies is not the same thing as wanting to actually be raped.*

Until their extremely amicable break-up, Grace and George had one of the most entertaining relationship dynamics of anyone I have ever known. George, who was more than twice Grace's size, would occasionally pick her up and use her as a "human flogger" to hit other people with. George has an incredibly dry wit, and Grace says that when she once asked him if she "had a safeword," he snarkily responded, "Well, if I was 'raping' you in the ass, and you yelled 'RED' [the conventional word in the kink subculture that means STOP], there'd be a conversation." Their vicious D/s dynamic was entirely constructed around George's utter degradation of her (he was known to regularly shake his head and say with mock-sadness, "Sometimes she forgets and thinks she's 'people'") as well as his total control over her (she was always required to ask his permission to go to the bathroom when they were together, and for months at a time was only allowed to pee if she had his cock in her mouth or stuck her finger up her own ass). And in spite of—and as Grace's account would suggest *because of*—these dynamics, their great affection for one another was always readily apparent. As strange as it might sound, it is clear from both the stories of Derek and Grace that the Terror D/s at the heart of their dynamics was central to the feelings of relationship intimacy and affection for the couple. Exactly like any other shared extreme hobby like rock-climbing or jumping from airplanes, extreme kink was a way for the couple to build trust, spend time together, and increase their feelings of intimacy.

The Reality of Affirmative D/s: "When my life is good, her life is reeeally good"

Very few people in the kink subculture enter into—and even fewer successfully maintain—Terror D/s primary relationships. Grace and Derek were the only people I interviewed who were currently in such a primary D/s dynamic. In contrast to the pornastic fantasy D/s tropes underlying so much of Terror Domination, the vast majority of long-term primary D/s

dynamics are strikingly ordinary and usually center around what I like to call Affirmative D/s. Instead of building trust and intimacy through fear and degradation, Affirmative D/s dynamics build trust and intimacy through responsibility and rules, and are founded on the idea that the submissive is now a *better person* for having become the Dominant's property; to show their appreciation for this uplift, the submissive's role is then to make the Dominant's life more pleasant in every way possible. Although people in these relationships might still occasionally play with violence, fear, and degradation, those things are definitely not the building blocks of the D/s dynamics of these relationships. Perhaps most importantly, the people in these relationships usually described them as being natural or instinctive, rather than talking about the feelings of contradiction that Derek described.

When I asked Mary if she and her husband Martin (who had been married and engaging in D/s for decades) how they negotiated their dynamic, she said it had really evolved naturally, explaining, "I would be sitting on the floor at Martin's feet any chance I could without a thought about being anywhere else. If he needed a drink, I would just go get it for him. Now [due to illness], I can't do that so much. It's sort of a treat when I get to do that, but, yeah. It was instinct." Mary's comments also subtly revealed the way she was obeying Natalie's "prime directive," quoted earlier, to "take care of the property first"; since Mary suffered from physical ailments that prevented her from being able to get up and move around easily, she had mostly stopped getting drinks for her Dom. Her D/s dynamic with her husband had clearly always been very consciously maintained, in spite of the organic way she described it developing. She explained that when their kids were young, "It was not an obvious D/s relationship between their dad and I—both of us being feminists and having to sorta temper everything with raising daughters to be feminists... I think, being a feminist, and being a submissive, I spoke up for

myself a lot. Things were pretty even in our day-to-day life.” In Mary’s description, the D/s dynamic between her and her husband was grounded in a gentle type of everyday submission, and it was simple, direct, and automatic.

Like Mary, Theresa described a dynamic with her wife and Master (her word) of 16 years Thelma as being natural and easy. Unlike Mary, Theresa and Thelma had a 23-page contract that they had written together outlining the details of their relationship. Theresa said that, “She pretty much has control over everything except my career, in which case she can advise and does advise.” She said that Thelma will often tell her what to eat or wear, or what time to go to bed, and that “usually I agree to it because it’s good for me.” She further explained:

Theresa: She can say “I want you home by X time,” or she can say “I am sending you to your lover. You will please him in this, this, and this way. You will make him smile, and I will believe you.”

Me: And I guess you have to trust her not to say things like, “You will make him mad.”

Theresa: [sounding almost shocked] Oh, gosh, no, that would not be – I do trust her not to say things like that because she wants my life to be good! And I trust her to want my life to be good. Because when my life is good, her life is reeeeeeally good.

Me: So you feel like she’s a good Mistress?

Theresa: Oh my gosh, yes. I used to go around saying I’m the luckiest girl because I figure everyone can be the luckiest girl for themselves. Because she’s my puzzle piece, she fits my needs very well.

Theresa’s M/s dynamic was constructed around the idea that she and her Master were going to make each other happy by building a good life together, and this was the core of what I have come to see as Affirmative D/s. It seems to make for much less interesting erotic stories, but it seems to generally make for much happier romantic ones.

Another common theme among Affirmative D/s dynamics is the idea that both partners take care of each other. Both submissives and Dominants in these dynamics would often describe themselves as “being responsible” for the other partner in certain ways. Chloe’s description of

her role as a slave of her long-term primary partner (who she was planning to move in with soon) begins with her taking “care of him”:

I have to take care of him, and make sure he’s fed, and has clean underpants. I mean, it is very much like a vanilla relationship. We have little nuances that change it from being a vanilla relationship to a constant thing. It’s very subtle things. Like, I have instruction on where to walk when we’re in public. I’m either directly to his left or I’m two steps behind him to the right at all times. Or when we go out, he always wants to drive. If we’re shopping, he always wants to be the person to hand the money to the cashier. I have to get his approval before I order something out. Like, I don’t have to really ask him what I can eat, but I do have to get his approval over something. Sometimes we’ll discuss it, and we’ll be like, “well, maybe we’ll just share something” or whatever, which is kind of vanilla. But I do have to actually get his approval over whatever I do choose. It’s really just those little subtle things that, like, people wouldn’t notice but it adds a little bit more to our relationship.

Slaves and submissives like Chloe tended to do practical things for their Dominants like feeding them, washing their clothes, or reminding them to take medications. Although the Dominants usually maintained technical control over many aspects of the submissives’ lives (Chloe also mentioned that she sought her Master’s approval for any major body modifications, or before buying a new style of clothing), submissives frequently functionally managed the daily aspects of life for both themselves and their Dominants.

While the submissive version of “taking care of” a Dominant tended to emphasize practical tasks, for Dominants, “taking care of” a submissive tended to be more focused on emotions and security. Will explained this fairly typical division of labor in D/s relationships as he described his dynamic with his collared “little girl” (she is his legal adult wife who often interacts with him as her “Daddy”):

I take responsibility for her health, her safety, and trying to fill the needs that she needs. And she takes responsibility for keeping the house clean, because that’s mostly her role, and serving me in the ways that I need. Whether it be, “Hey, get me a glass of water,” or “I really need you to wash the dishes,” or something like that. She takes care of the household stuff, and I take care of a lot of the other stuff. Not so much right now since I don’t have a job, but a lot of it actually is me taking care of her mentally and emotionally because she has issues sometimes.

Although the majority of D/s dynamics involved female submissives partnered with male Dominants, this practical/emotional division of roles between Dominants and submissives seemed to remain fairly similar even when the gender of the partners had changed. Luther, who was the only man I interviewed who was currently in a 24/7 primary D/s relationship as a submissive explained that to serve his wife, he would “Cut her toenails, make dinner, clean the house, serve the food, go get her drinks, pick up her clothes, put away her clothes, run her errands, clean her shoes, do laundry, make the bed, change the sheets, whatever it takes, whatever she wants.” In return for his service, she put a chastity belt on him regularly to show that he was “hers” and to assert her “total control of [their] sexuality.”

What stands out in the accounts of both Terror-based and Affirmative-based D/s primary dynamics is the way that they are all first and foremost *relationships*. Despite the trappings of kink, these relationships all ended up focusing on the same thing that all romantic relationships do--love, emotional intimacy, emotional support, taking care of the other person--or they failed. However, the Dominants and submissives in these relationships choose to interpret their mutual responsibilities for each other in a particular way, emphasizing particular power inequalities and interpreting particular gestures as signs of lack of/control. Rather than looking for equality in the way that they take responsibility for one another, people in primary D/s relationships deliberately use symbols of power to encourage the sense that one partner is more in control than the other, and decide that it means something different when the Dominant takes care of the submissive than when the submissive takes care of the Dominant.

Non-primary D/s relationships: With benefits

Trying to explain all of the non-monogamous relationship types that kinksters engage in in this chapter would just get too confusing; I promise I’ll explain them later. Suffice it to say for

now that non-primary sexual D/s relationships run the gamut from intense romantic partnerships where the partners see each other a couple of times a week to what are basically friends-with-benefits that have an arranged D/s dynamic (and are often dubbed “play partners”). As mentioned earlier, 7 of the people who had a primary D/s dynamic with a partner also had at least one non-primary D/s dynamic with another partner; another 14 people had a non-primary 24/7 D/s dynamic, but no primary dynamic. As we’ll see, because some people were ambivalent about the sexual/romantic nature of their non-primary D/s dynamics, I didn’t try to count them separately. Given the wide range of relationship possibilities outside of a primary-style relationship, it’s no surprise that non-primary D/s relationships outnumber primary D/s ones considerably.

That said, there are almost certainly other reasons why non-primary D/s relationships outnumber primary ones as well. While some people in the BDSM scene long for and passionately practice primary D/s dynamics, a substantial portion of the Scene is extremely skeptical of those relationships (either in general or for themselves). Many people argue that heavy D/s dynamics are *best* practiced outside of a primary relationship. Sofia, who was a self-identified Dominant who had been in the Scene for many years and had had several collared partners with whom she did not have primary relationships, nonetheless said quite adamantly, “I want to be in a primary partnership with someone who’s my equal. I don’t want to be making decisions for other people. I want people to have their own opinions, *oh, my God.*” Sofia clearly thrived on her D/s relationships with her non-primary partners, but she also obviously didn’t want to do it everyday, all the time. Luke, who was mostly submissive, was less adamant than Sofia about the problems with a hypothetical 24/7 relationship, but he was still very skeptical about the idea, saying, “I would be okay with like a total power exchange or something, but I

still like taking into account, like, reality of life. You have a job, you have family, you have other obligations. So you have to kind of have somebody who's sane enough to realize that.” The professed skepticism on the part of many members of the subculture towards primary D/s relationships, combined with the yearning for a D/s relationship, helped contribute to the proliferation of non-primary D/s relationships.

Because they were often so loosely defined, non-primary D/s relationships have far more leeway to be more focused on kink and less focused on emotional support. There also tends to be a lot less emphasis on the day-to-day aspects of control (non-primary Doms rarely make decisions about what their subs will eat or wear, for example). Yet despite their greater emphasis on kink, even these relationships tended to be more focused on emotional connection than kink if they lasted for more than a few “play dates.” Natalie explained in detail all the ways that she “checks up on” her “boy” (i.e. submissive), even though they are “secondaries,” and he has a primary who is not Natalie: asking for regular text messages from him, calling people to make sure he was safe when a tornado hit, paying for him to go to kink events where he serves her (which is the usual arrangement in these dynamics). She explained:

We have Monday night Skype dates, mostly because we like to watch Monday Night Football together, and it just kind of continued. And a couple of weeks ago, his primary partner was having an issue, and she just came in for a hug, and I have no issue with that. And I was, like, “You need to go take care of her.” And that amazed him, that I make him put his primary relationship first. I know I’m secondary. I’m okay with that.

Natalie’s description made clear that although D/s was heavily integrated into her relationship with her “boy,” the ultimate foundation of the relationship was the romantic connection between the partners. Even John, who glibly claimed to have had a six-month relationship with his partner “Megan’s tattoos,” quipped, “Our relationship is based on (a) Megan doing stuff for me, and (b) me hitting Megan.” When I asked if the relationship was “romantic” or “just for fun,” he said,

“Well, what could be more romantic than hitting someone and having them do stuff for you?” In the love language of Kink, it is clear that indeed, hitting someone and having them do stuff for you is often the quintessence of True Love.

As Natalie’s and John’s comments would suggest, the same dichotomy of Terror versus Affirmative-based D/s still applies to non-primary D/s dynamics just as it does to primary D/s dynamics. Owen, for example, who was married to a “vanilla” woman said that for his D/s Mistress (who his wife knew about), “What I like is to be a good whore.” Although Owen was not masochistic, he clearly enjoyed feeling degraded in the same way that many people in Terror D/s dynamics tend to enjoy. Owen specifically had explained that although he sought sexual D/s relationships with other women, because of his wife’s preferences, he was careful to try to keep those other relationships relatively un-romantic. By contrast, Vanessa, who was the Dominant of her wife, and had a Master with whom she had an intense Affirmative D/s secondary relationship, explained that, “[My Master] just said he deserves the best, and that I’m the best for him. And it’s not up to me to decide otherwise. He’s taken certain words out of my vocabulary—I’m not allowed to use the words ‘fat’ or ‘ugly’ or ‘disgusting’ or any of those terms [to describe myself].” As with primary D/s dynamics, the vast majority of non-primary D/s dynamics were grounded more in Affirmative than Terror-based D/s. However, based on my observations of kinksters, I suspect that Terror-based D/s dynamics tend to be more sustainable in more casual relationship dynamics. When people have less of a romantic relationship like Owen and his Mistress, they have less at stake in trying to maintain the illusion that one person is a “whore” or whatever other degraded label they prefer.

Non-primary D/s relationships: Just service, not sex

Because mainstream American culture expects intimate relationships to be sexual, in some sense, one of the weirdest types of intimate relationships that the Scene fosters are non-sexual ones. Submissives often engage in entirely non-sexual “service” arrangements to a Dominant, basically agreeing to work as an unpaid servant. These are basically always a form of non-primary D/s dynamic. A few people adamantly maintained a non-sexual relationship based on the preference of one of the partners (e.g. based on one partner’s asexuality, or another’s monogamy). However, the majority of these non-sexual relationships were rather ambiguous, both in terms of sex and in terms of romance. Tellingly, it was often impossible to tell from people’s descriptions if they had a sexual relationship without explicitly asking them. For example, Pat, who was very well-known presenter within the Scene, explained, “I have a slave of almost four years, and she and I do a lot of traveling together. She goes to events with me very often. And we have a non-sexual relationship, although sometimes we play and that line gets kind of blurry. But for the most part we don’t consider ourselves romantic partners... She gets the experience of being around me as I do the things that I do so that she can learn how to do them.”

Mila described a similar kind of ambiguity in her evolving relationship with her Dominant, Miles. When I asked if they had a romantic relationship, she responded ambivalently, “Nope, he’s got a girlfriend. It’s not romantic at all. It’s a little romantic. Not really. It’s not that kind of romantic. He’s had a girlfriend for four years now. She and I are friends. It’s all cool.” Miles and his girlfriend were not monogamous, and Mila did eventually begin dating him after our interview. Although Miles and Mila were not having sex at the time of our interview, she mentioned how much she enjoys being his “cup holder,” massaging his feet, as well having him single-tail her. In order for anyone else to play with her, they were required to get Miles’

permission. These service-based non-romantic (not really)/non-sexual (not really) relationships usually did not fit in very well to the Terror/Affirmative D/s dichotomy described above, since neither play nor sex was really at the heart of them. They were focused on the joy that one person received from serving another, and the gratitude the other person could bestow in reward for that service.

“Leather is thicker than blood”

Another usually non-sexual dynamic that the kink culture fosters is what are sometimes called “Leather families.” This tradition is descended from the gay leather scene and made its way in a somewhat convoluted fashion to the mainstream BDSM scene. The aphorism associated with Leather family relations is, “[blood may be thicker than water, but] Leather is thicker than blood.” Like many gays and lesbians, kinky people often become very disconnected from their families of origin, and form voluntary families through the BDSM scene. These ties vary greatly in their intensity, but there is usually an assumption that people will provide assistance when needed to other members of their Leather families. Natalie explained that following the demise of her previously discussed problematic relationship as a slave that had cut her off from “outside-world contacts,” “The day I left him, I showed up at [my Leather] mom's house. And I was, like, ‘I don't know where I'm gonna go.’ And she took me in.” People who do not go so far as to form an entire “family” will nevertheless sometimes refer to fictive kin within the Scene as their “Brother” or “Sister³,” and FetLife even provides a relationship status option for this (with the assumption that it is usually not applied to blood kin). These relationships are almost never sexual and only occasionally involve BDSM play; usually they are simply very close friends who may sometimes use sexual and/or BDSM play as a form of social bonding (much in the same

³ I dated a guy who had arranged a fake incestuous relationship with a woman and who mischievously applied the label “Sister” to her. That is, she was not in any way his blood relation, but their sexual dynamic was based on a roleplay where they pretended to be brother and sister.

way that straight “vanilla” guys might watch porn together or visit strip clubs together, although sometimes more as a teaching/mentoring dynamic).

Conclusion: So how weird are these relationships, really?

My friend Alice likes to joke, “Sometimes, when a man and a woman love each other very much, she asks him to slap her in the face.” It’s a silly way to tell a true story: yes, kinksters often re-frame behaviors which, without consent, would be considered abuse and/or assault; however, they typically do so in such a way that the behaviors become interpreted as signs of love and affection by both partners. Mainstream “vanilla” culture tends to be pretty comfortable with the idea that engaging in risky behavior with other people works well to build trust; organizations spend millions of dollars to send people out to engage in “trust-building exercises” where they must fall into each other’s arms and climb complex rope courses. Mainstream culture decided that these things aren’t kinky, so it’s okay for everybody to do them. In reality, of course, there’s not a very big difference between a “rope course” and “bondage”; nor is there a very big difference between being told by a camp counselor to fall into people’s arms and many acts of Dominance/submission. In effect, BDSM is just a very powerful, very stigmatized trust-building exercise, and it’s incredibly effective for building trust and intimacy in relationships.

So to return to the question I started this chapter with: just how weird are these relationships anyway? Well, first of all, I’d be remiss if I didn’t point out again that lots of kinksters don’t engage in the types of relationships I’ve described here; plenty of very, very kinky people want nothing to do with 24/7 dynamics. Now, with that cautionary note aside, you may have noticed as you were reading that in the long run, most of the 24/7 relationships I described here are surprisingly power-equal. Indeed, I have often joked—although it isn’t really a joke—that most D/s relationships I see among kinksters are more power-equal than my

parents' (presumably vanilla...) relationship. Folks in the kink subculture tend to be pretty well-educated, extremely liberal, and rarely follow Judeo-Christian religions. The combination of these factors means that they usually start with some extremely liberal ideas about what romantic relationships and families are supposed to look like. Both Dominant men and submissive women told me they struggled with their own "feminist" beliefs as they acknowledged their desires for D/s relationships. Even Chloe, who said that her arrangement with her Master was "kind of like a 1950's household" added, "but not quite because I'm still expected to get a job and support myself and all that." Moreover, Chloe maintained her own (non-sexual) slave independent of her own relationship with her Master. On average, the power inequities that kinksters celebrated in their relationships usually really weren't that unequal by the standards of a society where married women still do an average of twice as much housework as their husbands. The thing that seems weird to the rest of society is that many kinksters—who are often very upset about this inequality on a social and political level—have nevertheless decided to personally savor it in their own lives. From a sociological perspective, the "weirdest" things about relationships in the kink Scene are that women can be the ones in charge of them, and partners actually openly negotiate their power inequalities.

You also may have noticed the way that perceptions, much more than actual behaviors, were usually the foundation of D/s relationships. The people in the relationships decided to interpret various actions as signs of Dominance or submission, but there are very few actions which are inherently Dominant or submissive. For example, Derek, a Master, washed the hair of his slave; meanwhile, Mila, a submissive, rubbed the feet of her Dominant. Depending on how these things are done, they can be *either* Dominant or submissive (or switchy, but that's kind of a different story). Most particularly, the way that people chose to engage in "taking care of each

other”—something that both Dominants and submissives obviously tried to do—was interpreted by the people in the relationships as signs of Dominance or submission. “Taking care of each other” is something that basically everybody tries to do in relationships, and there is nothing particularly kinky about it. People in kinky relationships choose to interpret it as a sign of Dominance or submission. However, as most of my respondents noted, minus the trappings of BDSM (most notably collars), outsiders observing their relationships would probably never know they were doing D/s. So let’s just say that kinky relationships tend to be pretty fucking normal romantic relationships that are sometimes (but not always) covered in the trappings of weirdness. Chances are, you could be sitting next to a D/s couple right now while you’re reading this, and you’d probably never know it.