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Clare Kessi

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#### Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Kessi, Clare, "Roped into Intimacy" (2020). *Communication Studies Undergraduate Publications, Presentations and Projects*. 102.

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**Roped into Intimacy**

Communication Studies Capstone

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University of Portland

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Fall 2020

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### **Abstract**

The bondage community is largely stigmatized and misunderstood by normative culture (Moser & Madson, 2002). Using ethnographic fieldwork, this qualitative study explores how participants in the rope play (BDSM) community in a US west-coast city develop intimacy with their play partners through embodied communication. Research methods such as participant observation, thick description, and semi-structured interviews were employed to acknowledge, uncover, and respect the unique perspectives and experiences of members of this community. This study demonstrates how this subculture uses “hyper-communicative” behaviors such as breathwork, touch, and attuned listening breathwork to create intimacy between play partners. The study found that these forms of “hyper-communication”, along with explicit role assignments, enables partners to co-construct fantasies and create a shortcut to intimacy. The study supports and expands upon the Equilibrium Theory of intimacy and offers practical applications of hyper-communication for non-BDSM practitioners.

*Keywords:* social construction, embodied communication, intimacy, BDSM

## **Roped into Intimacy**

The “B” in BDSM stands for Bondage: In the International Encyclopedia of Human Sexuality, this practice includes, but is not limited to, Japanese rope bondage (Shibari), suspension bondage, and encasement bondage (Weiss, 2015). Members of the BDSM community are less likely to be monogamous than their “vanilla” neighbors (Richters et. al, 2008), and successful BDSM interactions are highly intimate and intense, both emotionally and physically. This study aims to research and demystify the culture of a rope play community in order to discover more about how intimacy can be emergent in a high-intensity context through embodied communication. Normative society views this counterculture as deviant, or even unsafe. This community is, instead, a rich site for learning about embodied communication and emergent intimacy. This proposal will proceed with a conceptualization of communication, a relevant literature review, and a detailed qualitative methods section.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Nature of Intimacy***

Intimacy is a broadly and deeply researched concept across the social sciences. Four commonly recognized approaches to defining intimacy emerged in my research: Motivational Approach, Equity theory, Erikson’s Identity vs Isolation Approach, and Equilibrium Theory.

McAdams, the brain behind the Motivational Approach, views intimacy as reflecting the “individual’s *preference* or *readiness* for experiences of closeness, warmth, and communication” (McAdams, 1982); “intimacy” is an individual process that affects the interpersonal realm, but is not a result of interpersonal communication. Approaching the topic of intimacy from an interpersonal communication perspective, Equity Theory shares blood with Social Exchange

Theory: the core belief is that people strive for balance in a relationship, where “benefits” outweigh “costs”. According to this theory, relationships are more likely to reach higher levels of intimacy when they are equitable; intimacy is a *product* of equity, not vice-versa (Hatfield, 1985). Alternatively, Erikson defines intimacy as a developmental stage, and posits that an individual cannot become intimate with another individual before establishing a stable sense of self. When an individual has a strong personal identity, they are able to intertwine with another and create an intimate relationship. Erikson’s theories on intimacy operate under the belief that that it is an entirely individual process, and the quality of intimacy is shared with a single romantic partner (Erikson, 1982).

These three approaches to intimacy, while compelling, assume that intimacy is something developed overtime, usually between a romantic or sexual partner. This is more clearly demonstrated in that methods for building intimacy developed from these approaches usually involve “marital” or “mate” in the title (see: Kerchhoff and Davis’s Filter Theory of Mate Selection, Lewis’s Processes in Premartial Dyadic Formation, etc.) (Perlman & Fehr, 1987).

My study will attempt to challenge this assumption, exploring how emotional and physical feelings of intimacy can emerge between two relative strangers in the right context and with certain communication practices. Equilibrium Theory scholars approach intimacy as a collection of behaviors (both verbal and nonverbal) between two interactors, and illuminate intimacy as an emergent quality within an interaction, between the two interactors (Perlman & Fehr, 1987). The Equilibrium model suggests that individuals desire a certain level of intimacy within an interaction, and are constantly changing their behaviors to attain the desired level of intimacy. While all four of the previously outlined schools of thought approach intimacy from unique directions, Equilibrium Theory scholars offer a pathway into looking at intimacy as a

process that can happen between any two people, at any point, and utilizes nonverbal communication as a primary method for building intimacy.

### ***Embodied Communication***

Our bodies hold understanding and knowledge. The idea of “embodied” communication draws upon the work of John Dewey, approaching communication as a transaction between thought, environment, *and* body (Dewey, Boydston, & Lavine, 1989). Shusterman expanded this research, creating the term *somaesthetics*, emphasizing that “soma in the form of its physical skills, senses and pleasures plays no less a part in the living of a full life than conceptual understanding and the imaginative use of language” (Shusterman, 1999). “Soma” is another word for the body – encompassing breath, tension, touch, and the millions of other ways our body interacts with itself, other bodies, and the environment. Shusterman offers a beautiful, concise statement regarding the value of somaesthetics and embodied living:

Concerned not simply with the body's external form or representation but also with its lived experience, somaesthetics works at improving awareness of our bodily states and feelings, thus providing greater insight into both our passing moods and lasting attitudes. (Shusterman, 1999)

The concepts of embodied communication and somaesthetics have been applied to studies of dance and performance art. In her study “Orientation for Communication: Embodiment, and the Language of Dance”, Akinleye proposed that “dance language could express elements of experience that a verbal language does” (Akinleye, 2012). One of her participants stated that: “The world that I and the other dancers are together exploring is inseparable from the world we are together creating” (Akinleye, 2012), hinting at the co-construction of reality.

### *Co-Construction of Reality*

Social constructionism suggests that our realities, and everything we take-for-granted or think of as knowledge, has been created and maintained through social interaction between people (Berger & Luckman, 1966). Nothing exists insularly: our sense of self, our relationships - Bakhtin even acknowledges that “A word (or in general any sign) is interindividual. Everything that is said ... is located outside the "soul" of the speaker and does not belong only to him” (Bakhtin, 1986).

Reality is maintained and transformed through social interaction, including subjective reality. Berger and Luckman define subjective reality as “reality as apprehended in individual consciousness rather than on reality as institutionally defined” (Berger & Luckman, 1966). There is the taken-for-granted reality of normative culture, but this reality can always “metamorphosize” through unusual or out-of-the-norm experiences, shaping and individual’s understanding of reality, and of self. This process is co-constructive, meaning it is built through collaborative, cooperative, and coordinated processes between individuals (Jacoby & Ochs, 1995). This co-constructive process requires not just the “implicit confirmation [of reality] that...casual everyday contacts will supply, but the explicit and emotionally charged confirmation that [their] significant others bestow on [them]” (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

Research on social constructionism relies heavily on the *words* exchanged in reality construction. Co-construction is seen as a dialogic process. Shotter and Gergen suggest that words themselves do not have meaning in social constructionism, and that words are “best thought of only as a means in the making of meanings” (Shotter & Gergen, 1994), but this still places the power of reality construction wholly on the utterance of words. Prevalent research on

social constructionism omits the power of the somatic in constructing knowledge, identity, and relationship.

### **Rationale**

Reis and Shaver distill and define intimacy as “...an interpersonal process within which two interaction partners experience and express feelings, communicate verbally and nonverbally, satisfy social motives, augment or reduce social fears, talk and learn about themselves and their unique characteristics, and become 'close' (psychologically and often physically)” (Reis & Shaver, 1988). This definition was crafted operating under the assumption that intimacy is constructed over an extended period of time between two people. My study will seek to understand how intimacy of this kind could potentially be co-constructed in a short-term, high-intensity interaction between two potential strangers. The equilibrium theory of intimacy serves as a compass to guide this research.

Dewey offers a counterpoint to many social-constructionist beliefs that words construct interaction and reality. Dewey suggests that *embodiment* is the interaction; that “the embodied being is not separate from its environment but instead is defined by interaction with it and likewise” (Akinleye, 2012). In the rope community, communication is constantly flowing between members of a scene, but the use of words is not the most abundant form of communication. This research will build on Dewey’s work with embodiment, specifically seeking to understand the following research question.

**RQ #1:** How is intimacy co-constructed through embodied communication within the rope play community?



## Methods

### Conceptualization of Communication

This study is situated within the postmodern paradigm. Postmodernism approaches reality and knowledge as unique to every individual (Westgate, 2009). This paradigm acknowledges that there is no one true reality and emphasizes the individual layers and perspectives that construct knowledge. Conceptualization of reality emerges from language, by individuals creating and sharing their reality through speaking, listening, reading, and writing. This reality is nebulous and influx. This study extends further into the theory of social-constructionism, explained further in the preceding literature review.

While realities emerge from interactions and are plural, human beings are semi-bound by certain power structures that are learned and reinforced throughout growing up in a culture, and these power structures do limit created realities (Westgate, 2009). For example, capitalism and consumerism are incredibly salient structures in United States culture. Creating a reality outside of these structures if you grew up in the United States would be nearly impossible. Awareness of these power structures is essential, and to resist them, we must become conscious to their “internal paradoxes, silences, absences, and tensions” (Westgate, 2009). Research from the postmodern paradigm, then, aims to liberate identity politics and subvert the power structures that be by raising awareness of the paradoxes, tensions, and absences present in interaction. Scholarship within this paradigm create space for minority and subculture/counterculture groups to share their realities. In other words, this is a people-facing paradigm. Knowledge and reality do not exist outside of individual experience: “The world cannot always be understood, but when it can, understanding, however partial, will depend on the minds and bodies of those who directly

experience it” (Westgate, 2009). Postmodernist researchers acknowledge that there are multiple layers of reality, and any collected data cannot or does not tell the whole story.

I engage the postmodern perspective because I believe intimacy and sexuality are emergent and individualized, but implicated in societal infrastructures. Sexuality and intimacy are incredibly individualized experiences, both psychologically and physiologically. It is necessary to conduct research about this topic from a standpoint that recognizes participants’ unique stories and experiences. Additionally, Rope Art and Bondage play fall outside of normative culture. As this is a study of a subculture, it makes sense to use the illuminating postmodern paradigm because it validates and accepts realities and lifestyles that go against the norm. Finally, the postmodern perspective respects the body’s role in communication and knowledge-creation.

### **Defining Terms**

In this literature review, intimacy was defined in all sorts of ways, from a variety of phenomenological perspectives. However, according to a study done by Waring et al., “lay people’s” definitions of intimacy can be sorted into four themes: sharing private thoughts, dreams, and beliefs, sexuality is an important component, anger, resentment, and criticism are antithetical to intimacy, and having a strong sense of self is necessary for healthy intimate relationship (Waring et al., 1980). These are the qualities I will be looking for in the interactions between members of the rope community, and this is how I choose to define intimacy for the sake of this research.

### **Data Collection**

This is a naturalistic longitudinal qualitative study using ethnographic methods. Data collection includes participant observation and field noting (using thick description) at an

established and open-to-the-public bondage class in an urban west-coast city. The project includes two semi-structured and conversational interviews, gathered using the snowball method and later transcribed. Artifacts include document analysis of personal written accounts from members of the community.

### **Data Analysis**

Data will be analyzed using grounded analysis: primary coding, axial coding, and hierarchical coding. All data will be de-identified and pseudonyms will be used for the events and interviewees. The researcher will maintain self-reflexivity; that is, I will be conscientious of my own “conceptual baggage” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989) and the effects it has on the research.

### **Findings**

In the rope community, intimacy is continually constructed between participants in a scene, but the use of words is not the most abundant form of communication. How is intimacy co-constructed through embodied communication within the rope play community? Intimacy within this community is constructed through defined role-enactment, and maintained through embodied communication practices like breathwork, attuned listening, and physical touch. The following section of the paper will explicate these themes in more depth.

### **Intimacy**

Rope play is an intimate act, emotionally and physically, but the degree of intimacy experienced between partners can vary. I interviewed and observed people who only tie with close sexual partners, people who teach classes and tie with strangers, and a woman who does Shibari modeling and ties primarily with experienced professionals and photographers. They all

spoke to the possibility of experiencing a moment of intimate connection with their partner, no matter the circumstances. Jaden, a Shibari model who also ties in her personal life, said:

[Rope] can create an unforgettable moment of union between people, between bodies, between hearts... It definitely creates a space for an intimate moment. But in my professional world, there are more boundaries around that for me. And when I tie in my personal life, there's a space held that's created for the potential to hold a much deeper intimacy... The more I am comfortable with and know somebody, the deeper I can go. And at the same time, because it's such an intimate act, it definitely paves the way for those [intimate] moments to emerge... I have had intimate, sweet moments with riggers who I'm not [sexually] intimate with and who I've only met for the first time.

Phil, a Dom who ties primarily with people whom he shares a close relationship with, said:

The reason that I bring rope into it [is that] it's as a tool to facilitate the intimate connection, so that's my primary focus... It's never like "let's get through this part", and the rope's just one part of it. It's not the end point, it's not the goal, it's just... one part of developing intimate connection with someone.

Witnessing the pairings at the research site, it was clear that intimate moments were taking place, from the expressions of bliss and trust during scenes to the way people embraced or held each other in aftercare. One woman, a newcomer to the site, expressed to me that her partner and her had just introduced rope into the bedroom and that it had, "helped with lovemaking" because she had to have "complete trust in him".

Evidently, varying levels of intimacy are attainable between participants in a scene. The quality of the relationship outside of the scene impacts intimacy, but there is something about the act itself that, as Jaden put it, "creates a space for an intimate moment".

### **Role Enactment**

In a rope "scene", there are normally two participants. One does the tying and is usually referred to as the "Dom" (short for "dominant"), the "top", or, more formally, "the rigger". The other is the one being tied; they are commonly named the "Sub" (submissive) or "bottom".

While these common terms come with prescribed behaviors in the community, the behaviors and labels are not set in stone. One interviewee, Jaden, says:

I've been told I "top from the bottom", which makes me not a true bottom. But I also hate those fucking labels and I hate that you have to be...that you can be boxed into them. But I think as a top or bottom, your number one priority is knowing yourself and trusting yourself enough to know what's best for you.

Some members of the community choose to interpret these roles in another way. Another interviewee, Phil, explains his more cyclical outlook:

I like to use the terms "initiator" and "participator"...[in] every interaction, someone has to be the original initiator. But after that initiation, you choose how you wanna participate. That choice of how you want to participate with my initiation becomes an initiation of its own. And then I choose how I wanna participate with that. And then it's just this feedback of constant initiation and participation happening...it's a conversation that's happening the whole time.

The terms "dominant" and "submissive" structure power dynamics between the two parties, giving each participant a pre-determined, known role at the start of the scene. One will be tying, the other will be being tied. The one being tied is generally expected to submit to the fantasy the dominant one leads them into, though to what degree and how they submitting varies from person to person. These roles offer a shortcut to the co-construction of intimacy, as clear roles help in the construction of a coordinated fantasy.

### ***Dom/Top***

The responsibility of a Dom goes beyond tying knots. It involves deep care, flexibility, and preparation. Self-labeled "Dom", Phil, speaks to these responsibilities:

It's a very spiritual practice, that Sub/Dom play. I feel like I'm taking on a very...taking on some responsibility to be supportive, caring...nurturing for someone. It's a spiritual commitment.

In rope play, Sub-Dom play, it's edge play. I get to know you, I learn what your boundaries are, and we explore trust. Are you allowing me to push and to play along those edges and boundaries? Where is your comfort zone? Where are your boundaries?

Where are the places for you to grow? And how can I very consciously and carefully and artfully push you against those boundaries and help you to grow?

As the dom, obviously I have an idea like where the play could go. That's the role of the dom, is to set up the scenario, right? But I have to stay open, I have to stay flexible, so that if we do reach that boundary, if a trigger does happen, I have to be ready to let go of whatever ideas I might have had and be ready to shift and change...[Checking in] depends on the individual needs of the person I'm playing with. If I'm doing my work as a Dom, I have learned those prior to being in any sort of triggering situation. Known what comforts that individual, what do they need in those moments, when they're feeling pushed to their edge...

While many Doms are cis-male, there are also female Doms in the community. At the fieldnote site, about half of the Doms were female. I was told by another participant that one woman "would probably tie you if you asked, she prefers to top for women, and she's very good." It was common to see male Doms with female Subs and female Doms with female Subs. Jaden explained the role in terms of "masculine" energy:

"It's not like man and woman, it's more like masculine feminine energy. In this case, the rigger holds the masculine role because you're giving up all your control and trust to that person...your literal physical safety is in their hands, and mental and emotional as well."

### ***Sub/Bottom.***

The role of a Sub is deceptively complex, and takes more emotional and physical strength than it might seem. Jaden, a self-identifying Sub, writes in a journal entry:

I put my trust in my Rope Top and let them and the ropes hold me. They're always painfully tight, cutting deep into the tissues. Not soft and sweet. More often than not, I begin to lose circulation pretty quickly, but if I'm in a good head and emotional space, and my breathing is on point, I turn into pliable flesh with no other option but letting go. And that's when the full surrender and deep catharsis begins...

The same author, Jaden, addresses this idea of pain and submission in our interview:

I think where it gets hairy and unhealthy is when someone leaves themselves, wanting to be "the good bottom". I don't think that's being a good bottom and I don't think that's a healthy practice... you have to be so goddamn in tune with yourself and also strong enough in yourself to speak up, which is always a challenge because so often bottoms want to bypass their own well-being to be a good bottom or make it through or be strong enough or make their rigger happy.

At the research site, I saw many Subs “speaking up” and giving their Doms feedback, even within experienced couples. I overheard the Sub hosting the event tell her Dom, “See, right here, I think that’s when you need to roll the muscle back in my arm before tightening...”, going right back into her blissed-out state of submission after he fixed the accused loops on her arm.

Two Doms at the research site responded to my inquiries about what they wanted their subs to do in distinct ways. One took the question literally, jumping straight to safety: he wanted his Sub to remember to do the “fingertip test” because, “Numbness is normal, but it should happen consistently across all of your fingers. If only a few of them are numb or tingly at one time, tell me immediately. That means we’ve pinched a nerve, and we don’t want to damage anything”. The other took the question more generally: the best practice is to stretch beforehand and “know your own boundaries”.

In terms of coordinating fantasy, Jaden defines the role of a Sub as: “surrendering your entire self to this experience and to this person”:

I mean, how many places in your life can you truly surrender in? By surrender, I mean lose your mind. Let go of the reins. When you truly let go, you slip into an altered state of ecstasy and sometimes agony and the mind goes quiet. Void. Neutrality. Still point. Nervous System Reset. Healing.

### **Embodied Communication**

Role enactment can create a shortcut to a co-constructed intimate reality, but it seems that what holds people in that space is the communication that happens within and between the physical bodies. Verbal communication is used for maintaining safety, but it is through embodied communication practices like breathwork, physical touch, and attuned listening, that participants are able to go on “somatic journeys” together. Jaden:

When we create with rope, I love asking the question, "How can we shape it to express what’s inside? To create a safe opening. How do specific body positions reflect, shape, or

open up our state of mind, or old wounding within the system?" I enjoy becoming aware of the changes in breath as the cords tighten. Experiencing my eyes heat or slide out of focus as they slip into another frame of mind, set free by their bonds. Always, it is a Somatic journey into the embrace of rope. I do think of it as a dance, two people following each other's impulses, in this case with very specific roles. How can we let go more? Heal more? Connect more?

She went on to explain the concept of somatics from the Sub's viewpoint:

Our body holds all of our past traumas, our past injuries, our emotions. It's held in our tissues and our cells and our muscles. And so holding a space for your body to open up and unwind those things, for them to come to the surface and be seen and felt fully is like the healing part of that...And so in Shibari, you're being held in these ropes and you're being contorted and somatic things are happening. You're going so deep inside of yourself...If you're in tune with yourself enough and can hold space for yourself, you can take yourself on a journey and set an intention or choose to work on something in your rope session and work through it, or some riggers can hold you through a real [somatic] process,

Phil spoke to the energetic, emotional journey of tying from the Dom's viewpoint:

Anybody can work with energy...We all feel it, we all experience it. Some people choose to ignore it, but it's happening. It's all around us. There's so much energy flowing in and around us constantly, it's just a reality. So, yeah...I do I do that.

Phil also spoke to the connection between partners, citing "Do our bodies feel good together?" as the baseline for any rope play. He emphasized the physical effects tying has by relating the end of a session to "coming down from drugs! Like we were having withdrawals".

At the research site, few words were shared between partners, but the act was clearly moving to partners – people moaned, sighed, stretched and massaged. One woman told me that some people aren't safe to drive after a session because of how intense the experience can be. This physically intimate act alters minds.

### ***Breathplay***

Using breath as a form



Using breath as a form of check-in and connection came up numerous times in the study, from both the Sub and Dom perspectives. Change of rate of breath, change of tone, of force, or pattern; Phil aptly calls this type of communication “breathplay”:

I spend quite a bit of time with new play partners doing that shared breathplay. Tuning into a play partner through the breath...through toning. Verbalization, toning practices...chanting and also just shared breathing...whether breathing simultaneously or breathing cyclically...Those practices are the way that I sync up with a play partner and learn their natural rhythm of breathing. I gain a lot of information from that. When we are playing, I can notice and attend to when their breath changes, because I spent that time beforehand learning their breath and learning to breathe with them so that any small alteration to that natural breathing cycle...I can feel it.

Jaden adds to the discussion of breath as a way of connecting and deepening intimacy prior to a scene:

I like to have a moment of connection, whether it's holding hands or holding each other...Maybe breathing together, you know, syncing up and listening to each other and connecting first before anything... Cause that's what opens me and that's what gets me to surrender.

I witnessed a couple at the research site go through a breath ritual. They used more breath than rope in their connection, moving in different positions and breathing cyclically.

They were doing a lot of breathwork with each other, connecting at the hands or the forehead. She would lean her back against his chest, sitting. They would sit facing each other. Lots of holding one another. He ran his hands over her, and then would run the rope over her...He was guiding her, she looked very serene.

Of course, rope can be used to physically restrict the breath and alter its natural patterns.

This is a tool some Doms might use for more intense control of their sub, as controlling someone's breath is, in a lot of ways, controlling their lifeforce. Jaden writes in a journal, addressing the way breath becomes necessary for a Sub, and illuminating the process behind breath alterations that a Dom like Phil might be looking for.

...The pain escalates until the discomfort quiets the mind in the most nurturing way. Sometimes there is fear and the apex of passing out. But the only thing possible to do is breathe...I breathe until I reach that edge that I have loved to flirt with for so many years. I whisper in a choked voice to my Top, "I'm at my limit" with tears about to stream down my face and my chest. And then, ever so gently, they pull me down. As they pull the ropes off me, my body feels lighter and freer than it has in ages. I feel my consciousness move into every cell. I could breathe into corners where breath hadn't touched. I feel alive.

Treating breath as a highly communicative tool from which you can gain understanding, connection, and intimacy heightens the sensations of everybody involved. Recognizing breath as the essence of life and using that as the foundation for communication, especially in heightened scenarios and scenes, opens the door to know somebody at a much deeper, more intimate level.

### ***Physical Touch***

The power of touch in this activity is paramount. Partners touch each other skin-to-skin, and they use the rope as an additional tool for physical contact, an extension of their bodies. A Dom laying hands on their Sub's body can siphon a lot of information. As Phil says, it's mostly "just learning to feel and sense body tension. Contraction [and] restriction... To feel those moments when the body tightens up. If you're paying attention, you notice that. And you respond, you check in". When describing what a check-in (a necessary safety measure for intimacy maintenance), Phil says "sometimes it's just, you know, it's a hug, it's an embrace".

In the research site, physical contact looked like kisses before, during, or after a scene. It looked like embracing, or putting hands on each other's hearts. Alternatively, I witnessed a Dom punch his Sub in the thigh. This would normally be an alarming act to watch, but both partners were taking pleasure from it. The Sub later told me they are into very rough scenes and have to tone it down in public. The desire for extreme sensations is not uncommon in the community, as Jaden stated, "I had an affinity towards pain and for feeling things through my body".

When I was getting tied by the host of the event, he was deliberate with the physical contact we had. He would test how tight the rope was by running a finger between it and my body, and wiggle the finger to loosen the rope, if need be. There was no suggestion of sensuality in his motions. The deliberate, no-nonsense way that he made contact with my body allowed me to develop feelings of trust and security. He knew what he was doing, and he was not trying to be inappropriate in doing it. After untying me, he asked if we could hug. The hug was sturdy and solid, like hugging a male family member. The intimacy that we created in the space was an intimacy borne out of the raised stakes that necessitated trust, and the ways he demonstrated his ability to have that trust. Had he been hesitant with his hands or the rope, or had he not tested the tension and constriction of my body, I would have been unlikely to give him that trust, and no sense of intimacy would have been developed.

### *Attuned Listening*

The breath and the body express feeling, but these are subtle forms of communication that cannot be accessed without “tuning in”. Jaden and will both emphasized the importance of listening. Jaden:

For me, it's all about the listening. Like, if they're listening to my body and taking care of me and making it feel good even if it hurts. That's the juice...versus them, like just following a protocol or like practicing a tie that they have to get down or like doing it for a performance or like for the shoot. But if they're able to, like be like really be with me in that moment and hear my system, oh, my God. It's just the drool emoji.

Again, when talking about creating intimacy, she said “in terms of rope, I think it just goes more into the listening. Like, if they're listening to that energy that's coming off your system and your body”. Phil used similar language, “I'm always tuning in, I'm always listening...I don't become attached to a certain outcome. I'm always ready to listen in and see what choices [they're] making and adapt and adjust”.

Phil elaborated on the connection between trust (a cornerstone of intimacy) and listening to one another's high-frequency communication:

You know what it takes to inspire trust. Right? And it's something that generally comes up over time, shared experience...our kind of intellectual concept of trust grows in that way, but I think there's also a very...physical, felt sense of trust...that is beyond our ability to think about and conceptualize. And as human beings, somehow, we just inherently know what that feels like...You know what it feels like to be held and to trust someone. To know that you're safe. And those are the qualities of a good [Dom]. Mostly it's just listening...it's really like the simplest...it's just listening. Just paying attention.

"Paying attention" to the nonverbal communication the body sends out seems to be key in maintaining the intimate, safe, creative spaces that play partners are able to co-construct.

## DISCUSSION

### Theoretical Significance

When a dom or a sub *embody* their role, they enter a space of hyper-awareness. They either become hyper-aware of themselves (Sub) or of the other person (Dom, if they're doing a safe job). This awareness allows them to access methods of what I call "hyper-communication". They are intimately aware of their role and the role of the other person, and as their bodies move to bind or be bound, breath, touch, and listening for subtle somatic cues become essential. These Doms and Subs can share intense emotional and physical experiences together, even if the person is a near-stranger. Participants were adamant that a previous relationship with a partner allows for a greater depth of intimacy, but this does not disprove my operating assumption that intimacy can be emergent. In fact, it provides our theoretical significance. The experiences of members of the rope play community support Perlman & Fehr's Equilibrium Theory that intimacy is a quality in a relationship that emerges as a result of two people using verbal and *nonverbal* behaviors. This theory acknowledges that people come into an encounter desiring a certain level of intimacy, and will adjust their behaviors to achieve that. Using hyper-

communicative behavior allows Doms and Subs to equilibrate their level of intimacy, whether it is a deep level of intimacy between long-term romantic partners or not.

### **Practical Significance**

We humans have lots of layers, and there are times when feeling intimately close with another person is difficult. The findings of this study offer relevant ways to short-cut into intimacy: defining roles and listening with more than our ears. Maybe “defining the relationship” is a good thing, not a scary thing, as it means a fantasy has been coordinated and an intimate reality is more readily attainable. Having clearly defined, named roles in any environment, from a workplace to a classroom to a family unit allows people to focus on their contribution and not have to worry about the rest of the system. This creates space for creativity, success, and, ultimately, pleasure.

Perhaps the more exciting of the two prescriptions is to listen with and to the body. Striving to understand the breath patterns of a partner, where they hold their tension, and treating their body as a vehicle for information their subconscious wishes to communicate – then listening to all of that and responding accordingly opens the door to deep intimacy. It is also important to know the rhythms and communication patterns of your own body, so you can share that information with your partner or lean into those sensations when they come. If you know that breathing in a certain way communicates to your brain that you are safe and calm, use that knowledge! These methods of communication can be used outside of physically intimate moments; in a moment of conflict, paying attention to your and your partner’s breath patterns could help to neutralize a situation. These methods of communication can also be used with someone other than a romantic or sexual partner, but as they generally involve either close quarters or physical contact with someone, consent may be a factor. In a world where our bodies

are ever-removed from communication in lieu of technology, recognizing, embracing, and celebrating the role our bodies have in how we relate and communicate grows ever more important.

### **Methodological Significance**

Zooming out from the findings of the study, this study also offers insight on qualitative research practice. I was able to gain access to a subculture and create a space where participants felt comfortable sharing intimate information with me in interviews. Rope art and bondage is not necessarily sexual for participants, but it is a subculture vulnerable to misinterpretation. It is not something that people casually talk about in normative culture, and sharing personal stories, desires, persuasions, and experiences required trust-in and connection-with the researcher (me).

I was able to connect with participants by disclosing personal information about myself that served to balance out the power dynamics and humanize me. I also maintained a curious, open outlook and remained unphased by unique interactions I witnessed. Before entering a research site where sexuality or kink is a factor, I recommend the researcher does two things: spend some time in a similar subculture *not* researching, and research the “scene” in your local community so you are able to chat or share information with participants. If you have learned some of the norms and can demonstrate you are comfortable and non-judgmental once you enter your research site, participants will open up more to you and you will gather richer data.

If I did not have friends in the community and was not familiar with the environment already, I think I would have seemed like a deer in headlights at the event. These hyper-communicative, highly sensitive individuals would have noticed my disconcertion right away and would have likely felt that I was either a voyeur or not a competent researcher. Familiarizing

yourself with the culture before entering the site grows your confidence and allows you to demonstrate your competence, enriching your interactions with participants and allowing for deeper self-reflexivity.

### **Limitations**

Time and COVID-19 were limitations of this study. If extending this study, I would go to more events and clubs in the area to get a fuller look at the rope community in general. It would be helpful to go to a “play party”, since I was only able to observe an educational event.

I was only able to have a personal interview with a male top and a female bottom, offering a very particular (and heteronormative) perspective. It would be beneficial to interview a female top, a male bottom, and somebody who considers themselves a “switch”. It would also be valuable to interview people who are new to the community as well as experienced people, since everyone I interviewed or talked to had at least four years of experience. This would round out the narrative and offer insight into how gender roles come into play within the environment, allowing for connection to critical theory.

### **Conclusion**

The porn industry and books like *50 Shades of Gray* have sterilized and exploited Bondage, painting it as crude, lewd, and sex-centric. This fails to acknowledge the sensitive, intimate, somatic experience crucial in what participants referred to as “suspending reality”. This ethnographic study, situated within the postmodern lens, respects the voices of Bondage participants and their rich experiences. This is a site in which to learn about hyper-communicative, embodied practices that allow for emergent intimacy between two partners. From this subculture, we obtain knowledge that applies to all culture.

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