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## **From Secrecy to Pride** **Negotiating the Kink Identity, Normativity, and Stigma**

### **Abstract**

In this article, I discuss how the kink identity is constructed in a society where kink is defined as non-normative and stigmatised. I do this through an affective reading of my research material: autobiographical writings by kinky identified individuals. By looking at the affects, I have been able to recognize those elements that are integral to the kink experience. Affective states, such as fear of being found out, frustration, loneliness, hope, and excitement were expressed in the writings. Kink is negotiated with regard to normativity and stigma through mechanisms which may produce behaviour such as staying in the closet and secrecy about the individual's kinky desires. Due to the stigma, people may even denounce their own preferences as wrong and unacceptable, and accepting one's kinkiness may be described as a journey requiring courage. Kink communities function as safer spaces for the kinky, where the negative experiences and affects may even turn into kinky pride. Furthermore, the secrecy and the fear of being found out may also function as the very fascinations of kink. To further highlight the affective states regarding kink, I employ a method of ethnographic fiction that is based on my own embodied and affective knowledge of kink.

Keywords: identity, kink, community, sexuality, affect, stigma, normativity, shame, autobiographical writing, ethnographic fiction

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## Introduction

*“How did your weekend go?” Sarah asks in the coffee room on Monday morning. Helen is squirming, she needs to say something casual, quick. “Oh, nothing that special, the usual,” she finally blurts out. It is the safe thing to say. “You went out clubbing?” Sarah asks and points at the blue messy remnants of a stamp on Helen’s hand. “Haha, yeah...” Helen says, trying to think of another topic, coming up with nothing, because in her mind she is at the event she went to on Saturday with her Master. Helen as His slave for the evening. They went to a fetish club, He told Helen what to wear (next-to-nothing and extremely high heels), He had her on a leash (a dainty chain), it was wonderful! The most exciting part of the evening was when He tied Helen to an x-shaped cross and spanked her with Helen’s favourite riding crop. Helen can still feel it in her bottom when she sits. Helen feels the tingling in her mind, the excitement of having a Master that only a handful of people know of. But this is something her co-workers at the kindergarten must not find out about. She is a professional, in a position where she is the head of the team, well-liked by the children and their parents, and respected. They must not know her secret. They would not understand.*

The scene above is fiction that I created to convey a situation that could be part of everyday life for someone whose sexuality differs from the rules of what is considered the norm. As is discernible in the conversation between Helen and Sarah, the fear connected to kinky sexuality relates to being discovered by outsiders, which is due to the stigma that may be associated with non-normative sexualities, and here, kink (Harviainen 2015b; Kulick 2005; Rubin 1984). A stigma is a feature that differentiates a person from others in a discrediting manner (Goffman 1963, 3). In the context of sexuality, stigma relates to the value system of “good sex”, where certain types of sexual behaviours are regarded as more acceptable than others, kink being at the bottom of this hierarchy and hence often stigmatised (Kulick 2005; Rubin 1984).

*Kinky* can be described as a set of non-normative sexual preferences, which in the case of Helen and her Master include, for instance, consensual dominance and submission, as well as giving and receiving pain (e.g. Pohtinen 2017). This type of relationship often involves a consensually agreed hierarchy, or power play, between participants, which can be indicated for example through the use of a collar and a leash. In texts, this can be marked by using capital letters to denote the dominant individual and lowercase letters for the submissive (ibid.). The hierarchical relationship lasts for an agreed period of time, which may fluctuate from one spanking session to a (less common) constant lifestyle (Harviainen 2015a).

The concepts of *kinky* or *kink* are often used synonymously with BDSM or sadomasochism. Psychologist Niklas Nordling (2009) decodes the acronym

BDSM as bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism, and masochism. However, I concur with the sociologist and sexuality studies scholar Brandy L. Simula (2015) and her argument that kinky is a much broader concept consisting of multiple kinks, also including those outside the acronym BDSM. Thus, I use kinky as an umbrella concept, which encompasses BDSM and other non-normative forms of sexuality such as fetishism, voyeurism, exhibitionism, age- or gender play, and so forth. Furthermore, different kinks may or may not have to do with sex, yet they are always characterised by consensuality and mutual agreement. I have refrained from creating an unnecessarily narrow definition of kinky and allowed it to remain a fluctuating concept of self-identification. As a contrast to kinky, the concept of *vanilla* is often used as a definition for non-kinky behaviour or non-kinky sex. Vanilla can be seen as the boring and flavourless backdrop against which the exciting and fun kink is constructed (Pääkkölä 2016, 13), that is, vanilla is normative sexual behaviour, whereas kink is a deviation from it.

Generally, kinky may not always have been understood as an identity signifier. However, even though kink often has erotic qualities, kinky does not merely mean sex with additional spice (Newmahr 2010). For example, BDSM roles, such as those of a masochist or a submissive, can be experienced as identities that go deeper than temporary roles assumed during sex. Moreover, for many, the BDSM identity is more important than gender identity when choosing a partner, i.e. it is more important for a partner to be a certain kind of kinky than of a certain gender (Simula 2015). Kinky is, thus, not merely an adjective to describe a certain kind of sex, or a prelude to having sex, but is rather more nuanced and profound than that, in addition to not necessarily even being considered as a sexual act (Simula 2015).

The Finnish kink community is special in that it seeks to cater for a variety of kinks instead of having separate communities for specific kinks (e.g. for Dominant men and their submissives, or for latex fetishists). Therefore, in the same online forums, associations, and events there are sadomasochists and fetishists who may have nothing in common in terms of sexual preferences. Similarly, in Finland there are no separate associations for *queer* kinkys, apart from the gay leather scene that has a long history of its own (Nordling 2009). The Finnish kink community is largely centred around registered kink associations that organise events on a regular basis and collect membership fees. In addition, there are some commercial actors, as well as more private communities, and smaller communities formed by groups of friends. In Finland, a discussion forum, *BDSMbaari.net*, functions as a local social media among

the Finnish kinksters<sup>1</sup>. The kink community is relevant for the construction of the kink identity and personal empowerment of kinky individuals (see e.g. Pohtinen 2017). Furthermore, cultural anthropologist Margot Weiss suggests, that the kink identity is highly intertwined with practice and the community as it is social in nature (Weiss 2011, 10–12).

Historically, non-normative sexual behaviour has most often been deemed as a sin, disease, or a crime (Sarmela 1981; Pohjola-Vilkuna 1995; Löfström 1999; Kulick 2005; Rubin 1984). Finnish ethnologists have examined non-normative sexualities, such as extramarital sex in the agrarian society through discussion of gender norms, chastity, and power structures relating to sexual behaviour (e.g. Sarmela 1981; Pohjola-Vilkuna 1995; Löfström 1999). Ethnographic studies by sociologists have analysed kink as centrally a social, ritualistic, and mental phenomenon (e.g. Weiss 2011; Mains 2002; Newmahr 2010; Brodsky 1993; Harviainen 2015b). Ethnologists have discussed the cultural categories of normativity, as well as the accepted and unaccepted forms of living. In the same vein, I would like to discuss kink as a non-normative and sometimes unaccepted form of sexuality and identity.

My aim in this article is to explore how the kink identity is constructed in autobiographical writings against normativity and stigma. Due to the stigma, there is an underlying fear of being found out which may result in hiding one's sexuality and remaining in the closet. Kink may not be acceptable in our society, although it is desirable as it allows individuals to explore the forbidden and experience strong affects (Carlström 2017). Thus, my research interest is in how stigma and normativity can be seen in the context of kink and identity formation. In this regard, I will examine how individuals construct their everyday lives in relation to their non-normative sexualities and I will attempt to answer the following questions: First, how is the kink identity constructed and negotiated with regards to normativity and stigma? Second, what kinds of affects are related to this negotiation? Through these questions, it is possible to form a greater understanding of how normativity and stigma affect the construction of identity.

### **Research material**

I entered the Finnish kink community for the first time in 2007. The event I went to, a so-called fetish club in Finland, appealed to my interest in the unusual, and as well as feeling welcoming it also presented itself as an interesting research topic. Not long before, I had begun my studies in European Ethnology, and had been searching for a research topic for my bachelor's thesis. Sub-

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1 *Kinkster* is a concept occasionally used in academic research about people involved in kinky practises or relationships (see e.g. Sheff & Hammers, 2011).

sequently, I became an active part of the community. For two or three years, I was a board member in the local kink association, I organised events, formed relationships with people in the community, and generally became invested in developing this community and its members' well-being (or fun-having). Later, as is often the case with volunteer work, I no longer felt the need to be such a dedicated member of the community and stepped aside from the associations and events. Presently, I am not a member of any kink association, nevertheless I still visit events occasionally, and obviously still have friends in the community, as well as my own kink identity.

My main research material for this article, collected in 2011 and 2017, consists of 28 autobiographical writings by people who identify as kinky<sup>2</sup>. The first twelve texts I collected in 2011 for my master's thesis through sending out a call for writings to three of the Finnish kink associations' mailing lists (*Bizarre Club* in Jyväskylä, *Rsyke* in Tampere, and *Turun Baletti* in Turku), and to online forums (*Tuntematon maa* and *Turun Baletti*). I included a list of questions, and additional instructions to the participants to help them write their kink life story. The writings I received were from people between 20–56 years of age, identifying as women (seven), men (four), and other (one). Even though I had not specifically asked, I was able to conclude from the writings that the respondents were from the whole area of Finland. Many of these writings were indeed autobiographical narratives of the writers' sexuality from their early childhood memories until the time of writing. Autobiographical narratives tend to depict struggles that are being won, and the same could be seen in my research material, as well (Kaskisaari 2000).

In 2017, I collected additional material with new research questions. This time I published the call for writings in Finnish and in English in a Google document that could easily be distributed on various online platforms. Over the period of two months of collecting these autobiographical writings, the document was clicked nearly 500 times, majority of which came through the

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2 In addition, in 2009 I conducted interviews focusing on kink events in Finland. The interviews present aspects of the kink community that many of the autobiographical writings do not and, therefore, I use the interviews alongside with the writings. However, as their information is more limited, I consider the interviews as an additional material to the autobiographical writings. As my initial interest to kink were the kink events, I have also attended these events as a participant observer. This has differed from attending an event as a guest in that I have had a certain list of research questions in mind, and I have thus looked at the event with ethnographic curiosity (Ehn & Löfgren 2012, 59, 65, 77). For example, as Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren suggest (2012), I have closed my eyes and listened and smelled the event, which is something I would not normally do at a party event. This way, however, I have tried to experience the event with all my senses and collect the building blocks of the atmosphere. In addition, I have written down field notes at the events and written about my experience afterwards.

online forum *BDSMbaari.net* and *Facebook*. In addition, I shared the link to the document on *Twitter* and on ten Finnish kink associations' mailing lists (one of which informed me that they had just ended their association, and I am not aware whether the others forwarded my message to their members). I received 16 writings in Finnish from people aged between 23–62 years old, living in all areas of Finland. The writers reported their gender as women (nine), men (four), trans man (one), trans woman (one), and gender fluid (one).

The writings from 2017 address the kink community and the writers' experiences in and with the community and are less autobiographical by nature. This may be due to the formulating of the call for writings as a long list of rather specific questions, which may have encouraged the respondents to provide the researcher with answers, rather than contemplate their relationship with their sexuality. Some were even apologetic for sharing too excessively their own reflections (e.g. T17, T23). In addition, it appeared there was a tendency to provide "correct" answers together with a feeling of responsibility or obligation to answer, which may occur when ethnographic research material is gathered through writings (Suominen 2016, 139; Olsson 2016, 171). This was illustrated in my research material in the way in which the writers did not tend to discuss themselves but rather made generalisations about the kink community, or gave short, direct answers to my questions without any information concerning their personal experiences or feelings.

Even though the latter 16 answers I received are not as clearly autobiographical stories as many of the first twelve, folklorist Carola Ekrem (2016, 87) points out that the narrative style of a writer may fluctuate within one text. Despite the fact that the writers are mainly answering the questions, they may occasionally have a spontaneous urge to tell more ("berättarlustan"), which may in fact, be the most interesting part of the text for the researcher (Ekrem 2016, 87). Moreover, these writings can also be viewed as what Ekrem refers to as "mini-autobiographies", as they still have a clear beginning explaining why the person is participating and they usually end in a "finale", or a conclusion, where the writer concludes their final thoughts. Consequently, in this article I will refer to my research material, the 28 texts, collectively as autobiographical writings.

The writings offer a balanced representation of the Finnish kink community in that the age, gender, and sexuality appear to be similar to the actual kink community; the ages ranged from people in their early twenties to those in their sixties and most of the respondents reported their gender as men or women, only a few as transgender. In terms of sexualities, there are perhaps more pansexuals, and bisexuals than in the general population as well as polyamorous individuals. All the writings I received are in Finnish, and I

have translated the parts in English that I quote here in this article. With the translations, I have attempted to maintain the style and vocabulary the writers have used. The names I am using when referring to the writers are my creation in order to provide a more fluent text for the reader.

The duality of situational identities in the research field, having the roles of a researcher and a community member, poses certain difficulties, however, it also has advantages (e.g. Kleinman & Copp 1993, 10–13; Vakimo 2010). Having been a kink community member for over a decade, in addition to knowledge, I have attained feelings and emotions about my research topic – which may be biased and thus result in biased interpretations. Similarly, the autobiographical writers may know me, which may have an effect on their writing: not discussing what they consider self-evident among fellow community members, or perhaps assuming what I, as a researcher, might want or need to hear. To paraphrase ethnologist Helena Ruotsala (2002, 42), as a community member and a researcher, I am also myself producing the cultural representations of my research topic. Thus, I am aware that my participation in the community may affect the writers' manner of expressing themselves as well as my own interpretations. However, I also believe that my embodied knowledge creates a fruitful basis for my research on affect.

Ethnologists Jenny Ingridsson and Kim Silow Kallenberg (2018) suggest that in ethnographic fieldwork there are also bodily sensations communicated that transform into embodied knowledge, which, however, often cannot be expressed in an academic text. Embodied knowledge with regard to the kink community is relevant because kink itself is a significantly bodily practice from impact play (e.g. spanking) to the feel of fetish clothing. In addition, there are the bodily sensations at a kink event: sounds, smell, the atmosphere; and those of everyday life such as reminiscing about the past or expectations of a future kink session, the memories that make one smile, cringe, or, generally, feel the kink experienced in or on one's body. Ingridsson and Silow Kallenberg suggest creative writing, or ethnographic fiction, as a means of expressing the researcher's embodied knowledge (2018). They also highlight that this writing method will present more explicitly the role of subjectivity and the interpretations of the researcher, thus rendering the research process more transparent (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, creative means of writing can be subtler, more precise, and more honest, than conventional ethnographic writing (Elliot 2017, 26). Similarly, I have decided to include ethnographic fiction in this research as a method of creating representations of the affective, embodied knowledge I have gathered throughout the years. This way, I attempt to create depictions of experiences with kink in a more nuanced way. Through creative writing, I can

create affect and an atmosphere can be created which might make the “messy and sensorial experience” of everyday life more relatable to the reader (Elliot 2017, 25). Thus, instead of drawing exclusively from the autobiographical writings, or relating my experiences in the community, I will use creative writing to express the silent and embodied knowledge that I have gained as an insider and a community member as well as an ethnographer conducting participant observation in the field.

### **The affective analysis**

I have approached my research material by examining affects in the autobiographical writings. The concept of affect, which was first known to be employed in the field of philosophy, and later applied in psychology has since been applied in various fields of academic research and has various definitions (Deleuze 1990, 220; Watkins 2010, 267; Tomkins 1962; 1963). In ethnology, affects are described, for instance, as having “intensity, contingency and potentiality”, in addition to being accompanied by vague expressions such as “something” (Frykman & Povrzanović Frykman 2016, 10). Thus, affects are those special somethings that escape explanations, can be experienced as fleeting sensations that flow through bodies and relations, and remain unnoticed, yet still are extremely meaningful for the experiencer (Watkins 2010, 278–279; Frykman & Povrzanović Frykman 2016, 13; Gregg & Seigworth 2010, 2).

Ethnologists Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren (2005) discuss affects through the concept of feeling, even though they mention that the concept of affect could be used synonymously. According to Frykman and Löfgren, feelings – even though people often pay no attention to them – create culture as long as there are people who can feel, and, furthermore, that an identity is created with thoughts and feelings. Jonas Frykman and Maja Povrzanović Frykman (2016), who draw from Nigel Thrift (2008), suggest that feelings, or emotions and affects are intertwined, and their boundaries are fluid. Thrift points out that emotions are the cultural representations of affects (2008), whereas Löfgren (2016, 127) further suggests that feelings and materiality are a useful application for contextualising affects. Thus, feelings, which can be seen as the representations of affects, or affective states, are involved in constructing culture and identity.

I will analyse the research questions by examining how the respondents construct their kink identity in the writings and what kinds of affects are present: how people describe the affective events relating to the kink identity and the kink community. Due to the evanescent nature of affects, and while a variety of definitions have been suggested, I will use the definition of “an affective state” to denote the affects that are narratively framed (Thrift 2008;



Frykman & Maja Povrzanović Frykman 2016, 15). The affective states that have been my interest, are the different and recurring affective expressions, narratives, and relations, that are related to the construction of kink identity and the individuals' relationship to kink, such as excitement, fear, or anxiety. Furthermore, from a cultural analytical point of view it is not uncommon to also discover elements that are absent and how the lack of something might be significant (Ehn & Löfgren 1982, 97). Shame is an example of an affective state that could be related to kink, yet is completely lacking in my material.

Furthermore, affect may function as an unconscious force that can give individuals the impetus to move and to function (Gregg & Seigworth 2010, 1). Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart suggests that the ordinary holds affective value and may show in "a vague but compelling sense that something is happening" and it may "morph into a cold, dark edge, or give way to something unexpectedly hopeful" (Stewart 2007, 4). In the autobiographical writings for example frustration, loneliness, and fear are described, although there is also curiosity and excitement towards the new, for instance, as Sophia writes: "First time at a kink event made me super nervous. (--) After the event I was more confident than ever that being kinky is a big part of me" (T13). The writer expresses her feelings clearly: being nervous but through entering the event gaining confidence of her own kinkiness. For feminist scholar, Sara Ahmed (2010), affects are related to objects and bodily proximity: to be affected by something is a bodily experience. However, an object does not necessarily mean a physical object, and Ahmed also mentions an "object of thought" (2010, 33). This can be illustrated by the fact that a kink event, as an affective object, may aid in creating a sense of kink identity.

However, all affective narrative is not as straightforward as Sophia's. Some writers relate extremely personal stories regarding their growth into their current sexual identity, and the whole narrative is enveloped in an atmosphere of suspense, disappointment, and hope. Here, Lily is expressing exhilaration at finally finding a suitable partner who is also sexually compatible:

With the change of scenery when attending my new school, I met the love of my life, if I may be a bit sappy. Our mindsets clicked like puzzle pieces, in all aspects! He understands my delight in pain, because he is himself a masochist. But what is best, is that he also enjoys inflicting pain, because he is also a sadist! (T4)

The affective state is composed of utterances such as "the love of my life", "sappy", "clicked like puzzle pieces", and "what is best". The use of exclamation marks underlines the joy of the writer and creates an affective state on the text. As a reader, I experienced and felt the affects as well, at times feeling joy and at other times crying from being so touched by the writers' stories.

### **Stigma and normativity**

Cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin points out in her essay that certain sexual behaviours are maintained as low status by a punitive stigma, which is derived from religious, medical, and psychiatric condemnation (Rubin 1984, 151). Sociologist Erving Goffman further suggests that we do not consider the person with the stigma quite human, which leads to discrimination (Goffman 1963, 5). When discussing unusual ways of life, or sadomasochism, stigma is often mentioned (e.g. Harviainen 2015b; Heljakka, Harviainen, Suominen 2017; Fennel 2018). The concept of stigma is also extensively applied within contemporary kink research. For example, a study examining the role and meaning of BDSM communities mentions that “stigma toward BDSM can occur in clinical, legal, media, and other contexts” (Graham, Butler, McGraw, Cannes, Smith 2015).

Stigmatisation can lead kink community members, for instance, to losing custody of their children, or being dismissed from jobs (Harrington & Williams 2012, 48), in addition to facing discrimination within the healthcare system and even facing violence (Damm, Dentato, Busch 2017, 4). In Finland, one factor that may contribute to the stigmatisation is that sadomasochism and fetishism were considered paraphilias in the Finnish classification of disease (ICD-10) until 2011; thus, some forms of kink have had the official status of illness until quite recently. This may have affected beliefs and connotations concerning kink among the medical professionals, in addition to the society’s general atmosphere considering kink.

Another factor contributing to the stigmatisation of kink, are the depictions in popular culture and media, which generally fall into one of three categories. First, kink can be depicted as violence: for example, a murderer, especially when sexually violent, may be described in a news headline as being a sadist<sup>3</sup>. Second, kink is often pictured as a joke. For instance, in a movie a straight, middle class couple is shown experimenting with something new in an attempt to enrich their sex life, such as handcuffing the other to a bed, which turns out to be a disaster, and which the viewer is intended to perceive as a funny and embarrassing incident. The third manner of depicting kinky sexuality, is through showing it as a pathology, or the result of trauma. An example of this is the character of Christian Grey in the popular novels and films

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3 The concept of *sadism* was first used as a definition of a sexual paraphilia by Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1805), who drew the concept from the name of the author Marquis De Sade, whose novels depicted inflicting pain as a pleasurable form of sexuality. Since then it has been coined in more general use to also mean non-sexual and non-consensual forms of inflicting both physical and emotional pain on others.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* (James 2011), where the character has had such a traumatic childhood that he is able to express his sexuality only through sadism.

These manifestations of the stigma in professional attitudes, in the media, and popular culture might result in feelings, on an individual level, of being labelled a freak or abnormal by the surrounding society. These attitudes may become evident on multiple occasions in the individual's everyday life. In my research material, it was mentioned how, for example, finding a partner may be filled with difficulties: how to find a partner who accepts, or even shares the kinks, or at least does not run away because of them (e.g. T6). In addition, having different experiences in a particular age group was discussed, such as dressing unlike others, or having different tastes and interests (e.g. T3, T6, T25, T26), which may cause anxiety, and which I will examine in more detail later in this article. Furthermore, there is the underlying fear of losing a job, being shunned by family, or being ridiculed (e.g. T16, T21). Consequently, as I have stated previously (Pohtinen 2017), it is apparent in the autobiographical writings that understanding and acceptance of the non-normativeness of being kinky is needed.

Ahmed (2004, 149), following the ideas of Gayle Rubin (1984), suggests that we live in a normative culture that "involves the differentiation between legitimate and illegitimate ways of living". This normative way of living is comfortable for those who engage in the "legitimate" ways of living, however, for instance, queer subjects do not experience this comfort as they do not "sink in" to these norms (Ahmed 2004, 148). Similarly, I would argue, kinky individuals feel discomfort and estrangement, which is illustrated in my research material as the *fear* of someone finding out, not being *comfortable* with telling others, or *being better off* if no one knows, as well as feelings of loneliness. Kink can be viewed as socially unacceptable, thus, a "bad" form of sex (Kulick 2005, 208).

Heteronormative hegemony is established in the ways in which we discuss sexuality, and how we do not consider heterosexual incidents as political or, for that matter, even concerning sexuality at all (Berlant & Warner 1998; Karkulehto 2011, 64). Heteronormativity carries a sense of "rightness" that encompasses a whole field of social relations and practices and renders problematic those practices, which fall outside of this righteousness (Berlant & Warner 1998, 554). Sex might not be the topic of coffee room conversations at the workplace, however, as can be seen in the example of Helen and Sarah, sexuality is intertwined in these mundane life events. Similar to heteronormativity, a non-kinky hegemony can be seen that silently assumes the non-kinky as the norm. I would like to call this *vanilla-normativity*. Similar to the heteronorm, the events and actions concerning kink are seen as problematic and political, whereas those concerning vanilla are not. For example, doing renovations in

your new home to update your kitchen is seen as “right”, whereas, if the renovations are done in order to accommodate a functional home-dungeon it is deemed problematic.

### **Navigating the vanilla-normative world as a kinky individual**

During the research process, through understanding how shame may be experienced, internalised, and embodied by queer people (Sedgwick 2003), I realised I had not considered the possible connection between kink and shame previously. I did not ask about shame (nor affects in general) in the calls for writings, and none of the writers mentioned being ashamed of being kinky. However, stories regarding staying in the closet and secrecy were prevalent. I began to consider that a connection between kink and shame might exist, as I know myself the sense of nervousness when disclosing one’s research topic – let alone the nature of the event one attended on the Saturday night – to one’s relatives or colleagues. I realised I keep my kink identity hidden in certain environments fearing people’s reactions if they were to find out. Those reactions would have the potential to cause me to feel embarrassment or even shame, even though I am not actively ashamed of my connection to kink. This ambivalent affective state initiated the need to create the story of Helen, especially as similar experiences of secrecy were also expressed in my research material. Whether these narratives convey shame or not, they most certainly pertain to vanilla-normativity.

The vanilla-normativity can be seen in my research material when people mention keeping their sexual preferences to themselves, especially in relation to work and relatives – the social environments which are assumed to hold the vanilla as the norm. It was also noted by one of the writers, Ellen, that sexuality is a sensitive matter to the individual (T22), with another, Owen, continuing with:

To be kinky is a little different for each kinky individual. To others, it is occasional spice in the private life without the slightest interest to tell about it to anyone. To others, it is an essential part of the identity, and it gives them anxiety if they cannot be out and proud about it everywhere. (T20)

There is anxiety due to hiding one’s stigmatised identity because of fear of social sanctions. Shaming through public disapproval has traditionally been a tool used to maintain the rules of normative and accepted sexuality (e.g. Sarmela 1981; Löfström 1999). Even today, especially in vanilla-normative environments, such as the workplace is often assumed to be, this shameful deviation from the norm could risk, at worst, the continuity of employment.

Extending the thought of the previous writer, Victor reflects on the position of people identifying as kinky in society, which further exemplifies the effects of the stigmatisation that I described earlier:

Kinky people are not equal with the majority. The kinky cannot, for example, in all professions or in all situations live out of the closet if they want to be treated with equal justice in the society and with other people. (T16)

More concrete examples of the day-to-day life of a kinky individual are presented by Paul:

My fear is that if the info [about me being kinky] starts spreading around, it could reach people who might change their attitudes towards me into more negative. (--) For example, on Facebook, where I use my real name, I won't 'friend' kinksters unless I know them outside the community as well. (--) I don't 'like' kink associations' Facebook pages. At home I keep the kink equipment hidden in the closet from the eyes of occasional guests. On social media profiles, such as on dating sites, where I tell about being kinky, I don't use a photograph where my face can be seen. (T19)

Social media, dating, and even non-kinky visitors to one's home may present themselves differently to a kinkster than they would to a vanilla.

Mona mentions various reasons for keeping her kinkiness a secret, one of which is her young children. She also adds other factors:

[I]t is quite contradictory to be at peace with oneself and accept one's own needs, but still decide to hide them from other people. Because of my profession, I feel that I couldn't publicly be what I am. Also, the small town where I live in has an effect on the matter. (T17)

Perhaps a cautiously hopeful insight into the kinky life is provided by Meredith, who writes reflecting on her own situation and then reminding the reader how this is not the case for everybody in the kink community:

I myself have told about my kinkiness to my family, and in those work communities where I've felt I can speak openly. But I know that for many it is impossible to 'come out of the kink closet' at work or to their families, because they don't know how people would react, and what would result from it. (T21)

It appears that how extensive the fear of being found out is and how freely people feel they can announce their kink identity to others depends on the

personality and the life situation of the individual such as the occupation they have.

In the autobiographical writings, some writers seemed to accept the situation of having to keep their kinky lifestyle in the closet, or at least did not mention it being a nuisance. However, it was generally deemed restricting and frustrating having to hide one's kink identity because of the vanilla-normative society, and more understanding and knowledge of kink was hoped for. According to Sedgwick, shame can be internalised, which then may affect people's conceptions of themselves and the world (Sedgwick 2003, 62). Similarly, if kinky individuals internalise the negative affects emanating from the vanilla-normative society, it may contribute to staying in the closet and fear of others finding out, and even make the individual denounce their own kinky desires.

### **The courageous journey to acceptance**

As is common in the structure of life story narratives (e.g. Hänninen 2000; Löyttyniemi 2004), many of the autobiographical writings depict a journey from experiencing difficult emotions, or even denouncing one's preferences, to acceptance and self-discovery. Lena, 43, describes her journey:

I had the courage to face my kinky side only recently, related to a mid-life crisis. (--) I noticed that being kinky is even more difficult [than being a lesbian], because knowledge and attitudes towards kink are clearly way behind from how homosexuality is being understood and accepted. Still I knew that it would be the death of me, if I wouldn't be able to fulfil my submissive and masochist desires in any ways. My contact to my own mind and body have strengthened, I have the courage to be myself in other areas of life, as well. (T11)

Lena describes the effect society has on coming to terms with one's kinkiness. She mentions needing courage to face her kinkiness, however, at the same time sees it as the only option and as something that has eventually increased her life's value.

Although some writers express their arriving at acceptance, they refrain from further details into why it has been a journey for them. For example, 40-year old Ellen writes:

I don't really like being put in a box. My sexuality has always fluctuated, and I have wanted to try many different things. The mental side is very important to me. And I've had to come a long way to be able to accept my weirdest fantasies. I identify as kinky,

a perv, someone who has come to terms with their own sexuality (but I still have my dark side, too). (T22)

She has been unwilling to “put herself in a box” with any label as she sees sexuality as a fluctuating entity. She is, nevertheless, willing to label herself kinky, which is a result of a journey of acceptance. Lily states, after describing her difficult relationships with men: “Now, as a 23-year old, I have finally come to accept my sexuality, masochism included” (T4). In my research material, it became evident that it can be a long journey to accept one’s own sexual preferences. As kink is stigmatised and sometimes thought of as not right, an individual may refuse to accept their own sexual desires or find the acceptance challenging.

Moreover, it may require courage even to create a kinky life for oneself. Ellen discusses what courage represents to her, and how she attributes courage to living the kinky life:

To me kinky represents a group of people who have the courage to go and actualise, fantasise and search their boundaries. (--) I am in the closet and sometimes I’m not, I speak openly with some people, and some might never find out. (T22)

Ellen sees the kinksters as a group of people who have courage. Courage could be viewed as an opposing force to fear of being found out; something that is needed when the stigma needs to be contested. In addition, courageousness is an aspect of the heroic narrative, where difficulties are being won (see e.g. Hänninen 2000). Courage is needed to express one’s kinky preferences, which is exposing a part of one’s identity to other people. Similarly, in the ethnographic fiction, Helen is contemplating whether to have the courage to expose herself to her colleague.

In my research material, a profound example of a courageous journey from condemnation of one’s own sexual preferences to acceptance is offered by 28-year old Matt, who discusses his teenage years:

My interest in PVC-clothes got deeper, and the final breakthrough was seeing Michelle Pfeiffer as *Catwoman* in the movie *Batman Returns*. It seemed that no one else was into this sort of thing, so I kept it to myself. (--) I was really let down that no one seemed to share this interest. Other [teenagers] wanted girlfriends with big boobs, I wanted a partner who would understand my fetish. (--) Sometimes, when I am frustrated with my desires and the fact that no one understands them, I have tried to suppress them entirely. (T6)

Matt describes his realisation about his fetish, the hardship of feeling different, and therefore not being able to disclose his interests to his peers, and even trying to renounce his kinkiness. There is also the fear of not being able to find a romantic partner. Essentially, the internalised vanilla-normativity together with the stigmatising cues from the surrounding society create these fears of not fitting in and being left alone.

As I mentioned earlier, one actualisation of the stigma in everyday life is the lack of shared experiences in an age group. One of the basic human needs, the feeling of belonging, has the ability to act as a protective buffer in life's crises and can thus have a remarkable societal importance (Hudson 2015). When the feeling of belonging does not actualise, and a person does not share the views or experiences of their peers, they might feel alienated and even condemn their own preferences as being wrong as described by Matt above, and which also shows in other writers' experiences as I have previously discussed (T3, T6).

Matt decided in his youth to keep his love of shiny clothes to himself, as he assumed his peers would not understand him being different. Philosopher Teresa Brennan (2004) argues that affects are transmitted through diverse atmospheres and that in today's society an abundance of negative affect exists, which is experienced as an emotional intrusion to an individual's identity. As people fear the emotional intrusions of the other, they begin to retreat and fortify their own surroundings (Brennan 2004). A way to survive this fear of unsolicited intrusion is, according to Brennan (2004, 15), "to secure a fortress"; perhaps here, in the context of my argument, the metaphorical fortress is, on the one hand, the keeping to oneself and, on the other hand, finding spaces with others with similar interests.

Securing a fortress is also the solution Matt arrives at, saying that now, 15 years later, as a 28-year-old he has finally had the courage to come out of the closet and to enter the kink community, and that he has considerable expectations for the first kink event he has decided to visit:

Because it has given me anxiety to feel so alone with my fetish, I have now decided to get out of the closet, and I've recently joined the kink community on an online forum. I've been able to communicate with the likeminded, which has made me feel more at ease and strengthened my self-confidence. (-- ) I'm looking forward to my first kink event where I'm hoping to make new friends to share ideas and experiences with. (T6)

Matt's narration is filled with strong affects: having anxiety and feelings of loneliness, although also courage, improved self-confidence, and thus, hope. Matt also expresses expectations of finally finding a place where one belongs and is welcomed in.



### **Empowerment, kinky pride, and the excitement of secrecy**

*Helen remembers her first time at a fetish club event. How nervous she had been, but also, how much she had felt she needed to go there. She had gone alone, as she had not dared tell any of her friends about her interest in being a submissive. She had wished to meet someone interesting, someone hot at the ball, as she usually did on a regular night-out at a pub or a night club. At the kink event, however, only a couple of the organisers had talked to her and wished her welcome. Most of the people had seemed to be gathered in groups of friends and lovers of complicated hierarchical relations. Helen had been too nervous and shy to approach anyone. Later an older man had come to candidly suggest he could tie Helen up in a nice tight bundle with the rope he was flaunting. Then a couple had asked her if she'd be interested in a threesome. Helen had been stunned. She had not expected such straightforward approaches, but rather, perhaps a bit of flirting, and getting to know people, but not this. It took her quite some time to find "her people" in the community. She had attended all sorts of pub hangouts, board game nights, and DIY whip making workshops before finally feeling at home. She was happy that she went through with all of it, however. She felt more whole, and even somehow stronger now. Proud of her community, and proud of being a submissive.*

The kink community can play a substantial role in self-acceptance and in the construction of kink identity. Perhaps the most visible form of a kink community are the events, which often are the first encounter to the face-to-face community for individuals. There may be substantial expectations of entering the kink community, especially the face-to-face community. As in the example above, the hopes of finding new friends with similar interests to one's own, of joining a play session at a kink event, or even of finding a partner, all contribute to the expectations of belonging to the community. This might, however, include a potential downfall as the high expectations of entering the community might not actualise instantaneously. An individual who has finally gathered the courage to enter and to find their kind, is faced with disappointment when the community is not what was expected; other community members might not notice them immediately, or share the same exact kinks as they do. Occasionally, the community may appear impenetrable and cliqued, and the newcomer does not have the status and reputation that are valued in the community (Pohtinen 2017). In addition, for some the existing kink community is not a place in which they would fundamentally feel comfortable (ibid.).

The presence of expectations conveys the importance of the community, and how the kink community also has a potential to function as an empowering space for individuals who have previously experienced loneliness and fear of rejection because of their kinkiness. According to Weiss, kink identities are

formed in relation to the kink community and kink identities would not exist without them (Weiss 2011, 10–12). Therefore, a *need* exists for kink communities as places, whether physical or online, where individuals can feel like they belong and that there are others with similar kink experiences or preferences (Pohtinen 2017). In my research material, Meredith mentions kink events as places where people may “fulfil themselves in ways that they desire”, for example by dressing up, or playing. Meredith continues: “At the events the participants can trust that they are not being harassed by name-calling, touching, or being photographed” (T21). This suggests that name-calling, non-consensual touching and having your picture taken without permission might occur outside kink events if one presented themselves in the same manner as at these events. The kink events might be the only places, where an individual is allowed to be in a semi-public setting open about their kink without the fear of stigma, which could function as the onset of acceptance and empowerment.

The loneliness, the fear of being found out, and feelings of being different may act as catalysts, or driving forces for individuals to seek the company of others with similar experiences, and to find a community where fear of discrimination does not occur. Jill highlights the ways kink events present only a certain aspect of kink:

Of course, the events show a different kind of kinky than what it really is in the end, but it is, after all, meant to be a party. It is nice that [the kink events] show the fun and flamboyant side of kinky and really the people-friendly side of it. (H4)

According to Jill, at the events kinkiness is celebrated and presented as more flamboyant than what being kinky is in everyday life. According to Sedgwick, shame has the ability, in correct circumstances, to “turn inside out” and become, for instance, pride, dignity, or self-display (Sedgwick 2003, 38). Similarly, at the kink events, where the more visual side of kinky is prevalent (for example fetish outfits can be quite extravagant, see e.g. Pohtinen 2017) the negative affects of loneliness, or being different are turned into a celebration and even pride. In my research material pride is mentioned in relation to being proud of one’s kinkiness (T7, T20) and being proud of carrying bruises of successful spanking sessions (H3).

In the kink community, certain affective states may be shared by many people, which are then fought against together, turning the negative affects into positive ones. Moreover, the secrecy and non-conforming to norms can even be viewed as necessary parts of the kink community. As in the fictional example at the beginning of the article, Helen feels the tingling in her behind from the BDSM session at the kink event and, in addition, she feels the

tingling in her mind because of a secret that is shared with only a few people. That “tingling” secrecy might in fact, be contributing to the appeal of kinky. BDSM educators Lee Harrington and Mollena Williams mention that in the kink community some might enjoy “the down-’n’-dirty, hot and taboo energy they experience” and that secrecy carries an appeal that can be extremely sexy (Harrington & Williams 2012, 26; 169). In the same vein, sociologist Joel I. Brodsky (1993) discusses how something that is considered a taboo, such as humiliation and fear, may be linked with erotic satisfaction. Furthermore, Brodsky mentions the feeling of excitement being evoked upon entering a somewhat hidden gay club in the 1980’s and that the physical features of the club (dark, ill-lit, maze-like) were a means of facilitating fantasy (Brodsky 1993). The atmosphere of a kink event carries the ambiance of a secret gathering, which might make it similarly alluring.

In my research material, 30-year old Mona, when she discusses the discovery of her kinky sexuality, expresses the sentiments of excitement emanating from secrecy as a positive issue:

The excitement in the beginning [when I had found the kink community] was wonderful: I somehow felt extremely alive. (--) When I got the children to bed, I would go online to chat and to read about the kink scene. It felt somehow forbidden, but on the other hand it was an escape into a world of my own away from the realities of being a single parent. I had no possibility to attend kink events, so I lived in my own secret bubble on the internet. (T17)

For Mona, the online community became her secret release from a mundane life. Mona continues that even today the secrecy of hiding her kinkiness and the form of her relationship with her partner makes life more exciting:

I am not able to curl up to my Master’s feet when my children are present, because I don’t want them having to deal with something they cannot yet understand. On the one hand, the secretiveness of the whole thing makes it somehow exciting. (T17)

Mona’s writing above could be a continuation of the story of Helen in the coffee room. In both these narratives, similar to the ideas of the excitement of a taboo subject (see Brodsky 1993), there is, on the one hand, the titillating secret that is shared by only a few, and on the other hand, the fear of outsiders discovering the secret. However, crossing the border from socially permitted forms of sexuality to forms of sexuality that are forbidden may allow for a more intense sexual experience (Pohjola-Vilkuna 1995, 106). Accordingly, both the fictional story of Helen and the autobiographical writing above, demonstrate

how it is possible that secrecy and even the fear of being found out can also function as an exciting factor that is an essential part of being kinky.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this article was to discuss the ways in which kinky identified individuals navigate the vanilla-normative world and how they reflect on this negotiation in their affective narration in my research material. Kink is stigmatised in our society, while vanilla is considered the norm. Navigating the vanilla-normative world as a kinky individual could mean debating whether to stay in the closet in a certain environment or among certain people. Additionally, factors such as having children or having an occupation in the public eye might increase the need for staying in the closet. However, the feeling of being alone emanating from the secretiveness may act as a catalyst to finding a community of the likeminded. In the kink community, the negative affective states can be turned inside out, thus transforming into an empowering and celebratory kinky pride. In this sense, affects emanating from the stigma and the vanilla-normative world are the driving forces that bring people together and facilitate the existence of the kink community.

Each time I read my research material the stories made me emotional: I experienced the frustrations, loneliness, and fear, as well as the joy, excitement and hope of the writers. They made me frustrated, annoyed, or happy, and occasionally they made me cry. Therefore, applying affect theory when reading my research material, and using affects as a method of interpretation was not entirely strange or surprising. Through this affective reading, I was able to discover the narrative structures that caused me to feel the joy, or fill my eyes with tears. In this article, I was only able to incorporate some of those affective states of the writers, and suggest that affective reading could be executed even further with this material. In the early stages of the research process, I was captivated by the affect of shame. However, as shame is not mentioned explicitly in the autobiographical writings, I can at this point, only make assumptions of its existence. Whilst this research touched upon shame as a potential affective state, further work on whether actual shame is involved in kink would be worthwhile.

My aim was to create a more nuanced and more accessible depiction of the kink experience through samples of ethnographic fiction, which I produced with the help of my own background knowledge and fieldwork, and also by drawing on my research material, and previous research conducted on the topic. In the first text, I wanted to convey some key aspects of kink: first, a glimpse of what a kink event and a kink relationship can be like; second, what the fear of being found out can feel like and how this stigma affects everyday

life; third, what being in the closet may be; and finally, how the kink experience can have dual affective characteristics being both a source of fear and excitement. In the second text, I wanted to create the affective atmosphere of entering the kink community for the first time and the difficulties it may entail. I have incorporated ethnographic fiction to provide insight into the affective states entailed in kink. However, ethnographic fiction could be further used to create syntheses of the stories of individuals from the research material to construct larger narratives. Ethnographic fiction could thus be a method of reporting results or presenting research material.

A certain amount of secretiveness seems to be essential to kink, and the feeling of being a member of a secret society might render the kink experience more exciting. The secretiveness becomes part of the excitement when the secret is a shared one. In addition, it appears that it can be satisfactory to engage in something that is considered somewhat dark and mysterious. Therefore, it may be preferable for kink to remain in the closet to a certain extent. In my research material, I could see that a constant battle occurs about whether to be closeted or out and proud. Individuals with stigmatised identities construct their lives through debating whether the spaces they occupy are safe for them or not. Furthermore, the excitement of keeping a secret together with others eventually enforces a sense of community. Secretiveness may be a heavy burden for an individual, but it may, however, act as an empowering feature of a stigmatised identity and a survival tactic in everyday life.

*“Actually, if I’m being honest with you, I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, I went to a fetish club,” Helen says somewhat hesitantly, lowering her voice. She is searching for reactions on Sarah’s face: horror, disgust, contempt. None of these are visible however. “Oh,” Sarah says, intrigue in her voice and continues: “Since we’re sharing secrets here, I must admit, I’ve read Fifty Shades of Grey and quite enjoyed it”. Even though Helen does not particularly like how kink is portrayed in the book in question, as it is far too manipulative and its consensuality is questionable, she sees the opportunity for common ground here. She grins at Sarah: “Just between us then,” and winks. Sarah nods tellingly.*

## **AUTHOR**

Johanna Pohtinen, MA, is a doctoral candidate in European Ethnology at the University of Turku. Their ongoing PhD research focuses on the Finnish kink community.

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### Research material

#### Autobiographical writings

The archives of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku

Code used in text, age, archive code, name given by author

T1, 20, TYKL/spa/1150a

T2, 22, TYKL/spa/1150b

T3, 23, TYKL/spa/1150c, Tina

T4, 23, TYKL/spa/1150d, Lily

T5, 23, TYKL/spa/1150e

T6, 28, TYKL/spa/1150f, Matt

T7, 30, TYKL/spa/1150g

T8, 38, TYKL/spa/1150h

T9, 41, TYKL/spa/1150i

T10, 43, TYKL/spa/1150j

T11, 43, TYKL/spa/1150k, Lena

T12, 56, TYKL/spa/1150l

#### Unarchived material (in author's possession)

Code used in text, age, name given by author

T13, 23, Sophia

T14, 26

T15, 27

T16, 29, Victor

T17, 30, Mona

T18, 30

T19, 36, Paul

T20, 37, Owen

T21, 37, Meredith

T22, 40, Ellen

T23, 40

T24, 43

T25, 44

T26, 50

T27, 53

T28, 62

#### Interviews

The archives of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku

Code used in text, age, archive code, name given by author

H1, 32, TYKL/aud/1150m

H2, 31, TYKL/aud/1150m

H3, 19, TYKL/aud/1150n

H4, 20, TYKL/aud/1150n, Jill

H5, 29, TYKL/aud/1150o

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