

Consentfulness as a facilitation tool

What is consentfulness?

Consentfulness is a tool for perceiving fluctuating dynamics of care within a group and situation, towards a consentful group field, rather than a (binary, brittle) moment of consent. It is a term to describe the mood, tone and possibilities of a group where “no” can flourish.

Sometimes “yes” or “no” are internalized as value judgements, where a “no” is a rejection and “yes” is an acceptance. But with consentfulness we experience the “no” as a shaper, a way of going deeper together, of deepening empathy and an opportunity to connect. We work towards a group state where “no,” sometimes read as boundaries, other times as preferences, instinct or intuition, can flourish and become a tool, as an artist's shaping tool.

Where does it come from?

Nadia Chaney, Emily Yee Clare, Miatta Gorvie, Sophie Le-Phat Ho and Erika Massoud started playing together with the concept of consentfulness following their meeting in a Creative Facilitation workshop led by Nadia in 2018, Tiohtia:ke (Montreal). Bringing together anti-oppression and trauma-informed work, these discussions were influenced by previous work and legacies, including but not limited to BDSM, consentful technology, Deep Democracy, Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and mindfulness. In particular, the word "consentfulness" is first used in this 2012 article, called *The Prude's Progress: Remembering Feminist Desire part IV*.

Why is it relevant?

When “no” cannot flourish, people are unable to be themselves, express themselves, develop relationship bonds, access resilience, speak truth to power, invest in their own learning, ask questions, etc. We use consentfulness as a way to speak back to the problems of “safe space” which can, inadvertently, reinforce the status quo.

The question, “safe for whom” is an important one, and can be followed up by which parts of me are safe. The answer is that it is proximity to the status quo that is safe, and that various diversities, both systemic and personal, must be carefully hidden or reframed. Consentfulness allows a multiplicity of ways of being to coexist. Consentfulness invites and celebrates complexity.

How can it be used?

Consentfulness is a transformational state. This is a group that is aware of its own psychosocial state changes. Part of making it possible for “no” to thrive is for the group to have a general field of “yes.” It is within this field of general and widespread generosity of spirit that consentfulness can thrive. Consentfulness cannot be a given, nor can it be a starting point. It is an emergent property of a group field that has certain structures and possibilities already present and developed. A group leader who expects consentfulness from the beginning of a group process will likely be disappointed, and will likely use unnecessary forcefulness or coercion of the group members.

We prime the group field with play, art, agreements and an open, thoughtful, heart-ful tone. We create the sense of “yes” in order that a “no” can come out. Even if the “no” comes out with anger, hesitation, or trepidation, the field is strong enough, each person feels seen enough, that the “no” can grow into the shaping influence it comes with. Some “no’s” will not fit in some fields. This is also part of consentfulness, that not all groups are meant to do all jobs.

The politics of care come from the disability justice movement. We have created a group sensitivity protocol, called “care mapping,” that supports a group and individual to enhance mindfulness and awareness of their own shifting state of care. We can use the practice of care mapping to orient groups and individuals towards consentfulness. By understanding and expressing our “state of caring” we are able to become aware of how a “no” might or might not thrive in a given time, and what might need to shift in order for that “no” to have a place to be.

We are always moving in our ability, desire and manner of care. The four types of care are:

- **Careless:** independence, protection, defensiveness. *“I don't care what you say, I will do what I want. I feel safe and self-sufficient.”*
- **Carefree:** open, immediate, present. *“I am in a state of flow, I don't worry about anything.”*
- **Careful:** hyper-vigilant, tentative, noticing, humble. *“I don't want to hurt anyone. I take care of others and myself.”*
- **Carefilled:** connected, loving, responsible. *“I am responsive and resilient, but I can lose track of my own needs.”*

Each one of these has costs and benefits both to the group and to the individual. The affordances and obstacles that create the conditions for each of these to arise are constantly shifting in a group. Part of developing the possibility of consentfulness is to notice and name the state of care as it changes.