

SCREAMING GREEN: A TOPOGRAPHY AND BOURDIEUSIAN ANALYSIS OF
THE MODEL OF SEXUAL CONSENT UTILIZED BY BDSM COMMUNITY
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Practitioners of BDSM (bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, sadism and masochism) sexuality utilize a model of explicit sexual consent including pre-event discussion and “safe words”. This research project attempts to map that model of BDSM consent to reveal the social connections that support the creation and use of such a model. Analysis is offered from a Bourdieusian perspective, suggesting that symbolic meanings associated with sexuality and sexual consent are redefined by group consensus in a form of resistance against normalized symbolic meanings associated with gendered hegemonic hierarchy and oppression.

It is argued that BDSM symbolism reflects and exposes hidden and normalized symbolic meanings of everyday life that support gendered oppressions.

Explicit consent is not utilized due to the content of BDSM sexuality, but due to the content of sexuality in general. Participants were emphatically egalitarian; ethics, not danger, formed the base of their interest in sexual consent.

Keywords: sexual consent, bondage, bdsm

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

...to the Prettiest One

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It is simple enough- a well-lit photo, well framed. In the fore of the shot is a woman dressed as a secretary – sexy but work-appropriate – a tight skirt that ends mid thigh, hose and heels, a tight black sweater, painted nails and tasteful makeup. Her hair is blonde and well styled. Next to her, running out of shot, is a pair of legs in grey slacks.

She kneels beside the slacks (presumably a male), and from his hand runs a light chain leash to the collar around her neck.

When I share this image with people they respond to the collar and leash. “Oh my goodness!” they emote, as they fixate on this poor woman’s obvious oppression signified by the collar and leash, by the submissive positioning of her body.

...But no one points out her skirt, heels, hose, makeup, nails, shaved legs, hair – the way her body has been shaped over her lifetime to fit a certain mold – these symbols don’t signify oppression – they are taken for granted as a part of the expression of womanhood. The slacks to her left belong to an unknown body – the same that holds the leash. It is not too much of a jump of reason to assume it is a male – also dressed in the habiliments required of his gendered role.

In BDSM (a double layered acronym that stands for Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism and Masochism), collars, chains, whips, and so forth become theater props, symbols that outline temporary and consensual power exchange. In every day life however, skirts, heels, hose and their dichotomous slacks and suit jacket symbolize a static relational power situation. The symbols of every-day-oppression are not worthy of note for some reason; we have grown accustomed to them.

Pierre Bourdieu was a French sociologist, philosopher, and activist. His central question was about class distinctions, specifically how the class system seems to persist in spite of social welfare reform efforts. Bourdieu would argue we recognize and misrecognize certain oppressions as part of our internalization of our local habitus, and we allow them to be defined as natural, normal, and necessary. For instance in the case of gender, we see certain symbols as normalized, as natural extensions of biological sex. The differences in business wear between genders offers evidence of this, as a formalized-for-the-workplace expression of masculine and feminine gender roles is encouraged by dominant culture. A more thorough explanation of Bourdieu is in the following literature review chapter.

How is it that people come to recognize certain symbols as representing true oppression (such as a collar), while other people use the same symbol in play, or perhaps more radically, as a symbol of liberation?

This thesis is about sexual consent between BDSM participants. It is held that BDSM participants consent fully to sexuality – meaning that in our sexy secretary photo the woman wears the collar by choice, and she has discussed the collar with her partner before it was placed on her - and after the agreed-upon period of time it would be removed (although she had the freedom to remove it at any time).

In the analysis that follows, the secretary will serve as a backdrop of sorts, to point out that while BDSM people use clear-as-day symbols of dominance and submission, the mainstream world, what BDSM participants call “vanilla”, is left with socially imposed symbols far muddier and obscured – worse yet: normalized.



Figure 1. Image from Petgirls.com. This image illustrates symbolic power exchange.

Purpose and Research Questions

This research project is an effort to map the model of explicit sexual consent utilized by BDSM identified individuals. Within BDSM literature, the consent model, (consisting of ‘safe words’ [defined later], and pre-sexual event discussion), is often referenced, however it seems it has not been mapped out or investigated in its own right.

The purpose of this study is to analyze through a social constructivist viewpoint heavily rooted in Bourdieu, the social and symbolic meanings held by BDSM participants in regard to the model of sexual consent utilized and expected within their BDSM culture. The research of this study initially included a second phase of direct observation. It was dropped so as to make this project more reasonable given my timeframe and experience level. Herein contains phase I, direct face to face interviews with individuals and couples whom I identify as BDSM participants, interviews centered on the consent model, how and why it was learned, and how and why it is used.

To investigate these phenomena, the following research questions are addressed:

1. Why and how is the BDSM model of sexual consent constructed maintained and enforced?
2. How do BDSM participants feel about the BDSM model of sexual consent alone and in comparison with what they define as the non-BDSM (“vanilla”) model of sexual consent?
3. How do BDSM participants feel in regard to gender equality and human rights, and (how) do these influence their dedication to sexual consent?
4. What role has the Internet played for BDSM identified individuals in regard to education, growth, and community?

Research Design Overview

With the approval of IUP's Institutional Review Board, I conducted 12 interviews with individuals (9) and couples (3) to investigate their relationships with the model of BDSM sexual consent, specifically how and where they learned it, how it is important, and how it relates to personal feelings about gender equality and ethics.

Participants volunteered in response to ads placed on Fetlife.com. Each interview ran approximately 1.5 hours, with the longest being just over 2 hours long. Interviews were professionally transcribed, then printed, cut into several thousand individual quotes and coded on a wall in my garage. From this quotes were further sorted into themes for analysis, then organized so as to create a single narrative describing the consent model and its reasoning, origin, and general influence on life.

Assumptions

Based on current literature four assumptions were made. First, that the consent model does exist as described in the literature – that is to say, that BDSM individuals do use safe words and discussion as an intrinsic part of their sexuality. This assumption was made due to the prevalence of sociological research that cites such a system of sexual consent. Secondly it was assumed that anyone interviewed would be aware of the generic definition of a safe word, confirmation of which both would illustrate the wide-spread use of the concept within BDSM culture and confirming the interviewee's first hand knowledge of that culture and the sexual protocols inherent. Third it was assumed that although participants would be actively engaged in BDSM practices, they would espouse egalitarian belief and commitment to equal rights between genders. This assumption was made due to current literature and personal experience of the researcher in first hand

contact with BDSM participants exterior to this study. Finally it was assumed that the sample would largely be ethnically white, middle class, and somewhat educated. This final assumption was based on current literature that reveals BDSM to by and large be associated with Western, White culture and the middle class.

The Researcher

The researcher is an MA candidate at IUP in the department of sociology. The researcher has a background in activism and sexuality, thus bringing to this project influence and understanding from both. The researcher has a personal interest in BDSM and all forms of alternative sexuality and this personal study also influences interest in this topic. To address the subjectivity of the researcher peers were consulted in regard to analysis, and results gathered from interviews were compared to data available in current research and cited later in this thesis.

The researcher committed to periodical self-reflection as to content and direction in regard to personal bias. Contents extraneous to the thesis have been removed.

Rationale and Significance

BDSM presents its self to sociologists as an intersection of identity, embodiment, gender expression, sexuality, and power dynamics. It is a culture and phenomenon pregnant with sociology; that is to say it is a culture rife with crosscutting sociological phenomena – an intersection of gender, identity, culture, sexuality, orientation, personal agency, and expression.

Issues of sexual consent are rooted in and reflective of modern patriarchal society. BDSM participants create and participate in an explicit and verbose sexual consent ritual, and that deserves our attention as researchers.

If it were possible to define and understand the consent model at work within BDSM culture, perhaps we could borrow the logic of it, steal it, and introduce it to culture at large. Given my conclusions I am not sure it is possible to do so without massive social change, nonetheless, the potential of a normalized sexual consent narrative for mass consumption drove this research.

Definitions

Some of the language used and specific words and phrases encountered in the BDSM community and lifestyle will be new to the reader or possess a meaning new to the reader. These words and phrases are listed below.

24/7: A format of BDSM relationship in which roles and responsibilities are full time.

BDSM: An umbrella acronym meaning Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism and Masochism. The name of the community, practice, and lifestyle.

Bondage: Sexualized physical control of the body. Ropes, chains, etc. “Tied to the bed”.

CBT: Cock and Ball Torture. Common with male masochists.

Consensual Non-Consent: Pre-arranged consensual sexual contact “without consent”. Theatrical consensual “rape”.

Discipline: Sexualized punishment and reward.

Dominance: Sexualized dominance over the partner. Dominant is also a mode of being, a form of self-expression.

Equals-Now: A “super” safe-word, ending all theatrical play and role taking. Returns participants to the default state: “equals”.

Leather: A culture and mode of personal expression and embodiment aligned with but not intrinsic to BDSM culture. Leather culture values consensual hierarchy and toughness.

M/s: Shorthand for Master/slave. A form of BDSM relationship where the submissive party is considered a “slave” to their Master. The capitalization scheme is intentional and reflects power positions.

Masochism: Sexualized enjoyment of receiving pain or discomfort.

Safe-Word: A pre-determined word or action that allows a submissive party to indicate true discomfort without breaking character in the scene.

Sadism: Sexualized enjoyment of causing pain or discomfort. Even tickling.

Scene: Word used by BDSM participants to refer to quasi-scripted sexual encounters.

Stop-Light: A form of “Safe-Word” that parrots stop lights; Red for stop, Yellow for slow down / change direction, and Green for “Yes please keep going”.

Submission: Sexualized submission to the authority of the dominant party.

Trans: Gender identity in flux or decidedly not within the Masculine/Feminine dichotomy.

Vanilla: Term used by BDSM participants to refer to non-BDSM individuals, lifestyles, relationships. “My uncle is coming over and he is pretty vanilla, better hide the whips”.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is BDSM?

BDSM is a double-layered acronym meaning Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism, and Masochism. BDSM is an umbrella term that unifies a group of individuals whom identify with or practice BDSM lifestyles (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008). These lifestyles range from part-time interest in elements of BDSM (whips, chains) to full “24/7” “Master/slave” relationships (although either party can end such relationships at will) (Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2007; Williams, 2006). These distinctions are explored later in this thesis.

BDSM inclusion is similar to inclusion in the GLBTQ community, in that any one member of the group is not necessarily identified with all the letters – BDDSSM – much like one person is not likely to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (although one could be). An individual may enjoy bondage (restraint) but not like dominance, or may enjoy receiving light amounts of pain but not enjoy being submissive. BDSM is a six-set Venn diagram with overlapping populations. (Connolly, 2006; Williams, 2006)

BDSM sexuality tends to take form in loosely pre-scripted, highly fantastical events called “scenes”, BDSM participants may refer to “scene-ing” or being “in scene” when engaged in sexuality (Freeman, 2008; McClintock, 1993). BDSM sexuality is more about power than it is about giving or receiving pain, although pain play is not uncommon. (Cross & Matheson, 2006)

Many people are familiar with BDSM as a result of its representation in western popular culture. Reduced to pop-culture accessibility, BDSM has made its way into mainstream media through movies, television, news, and shock-shows such as Jerry Springer (Langdridge, 2006). The images and definitions associated with BDSM tend to change with the medium – the News Media tends to focus on normative-community outrage, Springer-esque shows focus on the sensationalization of BDSM, television and film vacillates from acceptance (such as in the film *Secretary*) to total dismissal as psychopathy and sickness (such as the film *8MM*).

BDSM participation is no longer listed in the DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual) (a formalized classification of mental disorders from the APA) as psychopathy, although it was in previous editions (Egan, 2006). Sadism and Masochism remain in the DSM although the current classifications are meant to diagnose individuals with impulse and control issues – not just general interest in consensual SM. Elements of BDSM are still listed as disorders in the International Classification of Diseases (Reiersøl & Skeid, 2006). BDSM identified individuals face discrimination due to association with violence and psychopathy (Wright, Susan, 2006). Despite growing acceptance in scholarship and the GLBT community, BDSM identified individuals face institutionalized discrimination by courts and laws, materialized directly as police raids on BDSM themed spaces (Ardill & O’Sullivan, 1986; Bibbings & Alldridge, 1993; Ridinger, 2006)

BDSM is a lifestyle choice and a community of individuals, linked by a common interest in “sexual adventure” mixed with fantasy themes and theatricalized hierarchy made real through props and costume (Richters et al., 2008). Put another way: the woman

in the photo is not sick or in need of therapy for her sexual inclinations, she just likes being on a leash occasionally.

Despite the emphasis on explicit consent prior to sexual practices such as wearing a leash, BDSM participants have regularly faced prosecution when acts have been uncovered or reported to authorities (Ridinger, 2006).

Although BDSM is more widely accepted than it once was, it is still the subject of legal proceedings regarding limits to sexuality (Bibbings & Alldridge, 1993; Langdrige, 2006; Reiersøl & Skeid, 2006; Ridinger, 2006; Taylor, 1997).

Consensual BDSM is still associated with real violence and suffering in the minds of critics whom argue that one cannot actually consent to BDSM acts, that consent cannot be given for accepting discomfort, that the oft-cited (but rarely found) “normal person” would not give such consent except under duress or illness (Ardill & O’Sullivan, 1986; Baumeister, 1988; Federoff, 2008).

The constituents of BDSM

A 2008 study done in Australia reported that BDSM interest is common and those associated with it are no more or less likely to have a history of sexual trauma or psychopathy than the general population (Richters et al., 2008). They noted that BDSM identified individuals were more likely to have college degrees than the total population. This study in particular found that 1.8% of the population reported BDSM activity in the past year. This number, small as it is, does not necessarily represent the population of seriously committed BDSM individuals – as a single BDSM related experience in the past year may be reported by even a strictly heteronormative individual (Richters et al.,

2008). In addition to this, another study published in 2006 failed to produce evidence of the psychopathy that some literature associates with BDSM (Connolly, 2006).

Mainstream media portray BDSM culture in advertising and popular film and television. In some cases this is exciting and interesting, and at other times BDSM is portrayed in a less positive light, associated with mental illness or downright evil (Weiss, 2006). Ultimately, mainstream portrayals of BDSM are contradictory and misinformed (Weiss, 2006).

What is BDSM – Summary

BDSM is a subculture and community, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and lifestyle. BDSM participants consent to the sexual acts they engage in, and are known to discuss such acts prior to engagement so as to vet them against personal limits. BDSM participants play out theatricalized sexual scripts made explicit in regard to power, dominance, and submission through role taking. Recent studies have shown that interest in BDSM is not associated with psychopathy or illness.

If we apply the above to our secretary, we can propose that she consented to wear the leash, in part because the leash outlines and delineates the balance of power between her and her partner in the photo.

Bourdieu

Bourdieu was a French Sociologist concerned with the persistence of social class. His lens of analysis centered on his concept "habitus", which he considered to be the sum of one's social and individual circumstances (2001). An individual's behavior, tastes, interests, and so on are a function of their habitus. Social classes under the lens of habitus become differences in distinction given to symbolic meanings by different individuals.

Bourdieu conceived of a marketplace of symbolic meanings, the symbolic market, in which we all participate through communication (1998). In this market we offer and evaluate points of distinction, such as a piece of cultural capital - say knowledge of a specific sport or film or political event (1991). This knowledge is evaluated by others in the market, and assigned a value based on the associated social meanings (1991). Our cultural capital is evaluated and weighed against that of other offerings in the market.

The symbolic market is dominated by the symbolic definitions that support the powerful (1991, 1998, 2001, 2003). Power, in part, according to Bourdieu is having the ability to set or change the dominant meanings of symbols (1998). The powerful use their influence to ensure their symbolic definitions, and thereby their cultural capital, is evaluated as best. Other individuals are then dominated by social meanings that trap them into certain social contexts, and the inability to redefine these symbolic meanings.

Symbolic domination is insidious in that it is not only dominates individuals and cultures by enforcing symbolic meanings that are potentially dangerous, but it goes further as to normalize and in essence hide that oppression. Bourdieu referred to this as "misrecognition", in that those under the influence of symbolic domination have been trained, along with the symbolic meanings they live by, to see these symbolic definitions as normal and natural (1998, 2001).

We can return to the secretary in our introduction. The collar and leash have a symbolic meaning for most of society that is different from the meanings they hold for BDSM individuals. Further, the symbolic meanings of her other habiliments, her feminine dress and posture, are misrecognized as normal. Not only are individuals trained

to see the collar and leash as oppressive; they are trained to see feminine (and masculine) gender chores as natural and expected.

Bourdieuian analysis was chosen for this research because of the symbolic redefinition that BDSM participants seem to engage in. BDSM involves symbols usually associated with inequality and domination; whips, chains, court rooms, police officers, maids, slavery and so on. These symbols hold definitions of oppression, power, and powerlessness to the majority of the "symbolic market".

These symbols, including the symbolic meanings associated with masculinity and femininity are redefined and changed by members of the BDSM community from static definitional hierarchy designations into temporal roles and identities.

The use of safe words illustrates this symbolic redefinition well. The term "no" is often uttered during BDSM scenes, but within the character of the scene. Often the submissive party will say "no" or "stop" because it fits the theatrics of the moment. A safe word, agreed upon by all parties, allows the submissive to communicate "no/stop" without using those specific words. The definitions change at the will of the participants.

The definitions of the power dynamic change as well, because the submissive party has been empowered to control the scene. This differs from the dominant meanings associated with gender and by extension gendered sexual negotiation, which are not fluid or agreed upon, but compulsory and ascribed based on genital content.

Bourdieuian analysis was chosen because, in the opinion of the researcher, it combines the shifting social meanings of symbolic interactionism with the market conflict analysis of Marx. Further, Bourdieu was an activist interested in creating new forms of challenging what he called the "tyranny of the market", or the tendency of the

powerful to dictate through culture what is acceptable in regard to existence and modes of being (1998). Bourdieusian analysis suggests that BDSM attempts to redefine dominant symbolic meanings associated with gender, sexual negotiation and sexuality in general.

Sexual Consent – a Framework of Oppression

Sexual consent seems a straightforward topic until scrutinized. Consent is not as simple as a subject as one might expect – even in the presence sexual consent, for instance, a person might consent to unwanted sex if there is a reward related to it (Faulkner, Kolts, & Hicks, 2008). Consent, even in normative sexual negotiation scripts, is rarely clear-cut.

As the secretary illustrates, the consent model presented as part of “normative” society is rooted in the white patriarchal gendered hierarchy ideals – females subservient to males. Sexual consent in this framework places most of the agency and control on the male. Echoing back to the secretary once more I can observe that she expresses her (patriarchal directed non-consensual) consent to be dominated through her clothing and bodily self expression. Her skirt speaks volumes. First we can consider the historical role that clothing has taken in keeping genders separate and in command of unequal amounts of agency, the symbolic meaning of the skirt as a reflection of its forebears. Second the actual pragmatic outcome of her outfit and fashion. Her high heels kick her butt up and force her to trot about, her skirt constricts her movement and accentuates her curves, and her blouse fits tightly and displays her waist. Her whole getup displays her and directly changes the way she holds her body.

Did she consent to dress as a secretary? Surely. She went through the trouble of shaving her legs herself. She clearly consents. In relation to her collar, the rest of her

outfit is more or less equal in origin: consensual role taking. The difference remains in the way these symbols are perceived.

Perhaps gender role identity affects the hierarchy of sexual consent. Some research on consent has shown that people often consent to sex due to reasons other than “wanting it”, such as social pressure, or perceived rewards (Faulkner et al., 2008). On the extreme end of the consent spectrum, rape is defined as sexual assault, or sexual contact without consent, or sexuality that is forced by violence or threat of violence (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Date rape is similar in that sexuality takes place against the will of one party, except it seems to result from miscommunication rather than blunt force or drugs/alcohol/inability to consent on their own (Beres, 2010). The role of miscommunication is important given the differential power assigned to masculine and feminine gender roles. The secretary referenced in the introduction has been yoked into her submissive feminine role – it is expected of her. Patriarchal social structures require also of her a silence – de facto participation, and submission. Miscommunication theory exposes a design flaw in the sexual negotiation script: females are taught not to resist, and thereby they allow themselves to be taken.

Date rape has been analyzed through the lens of miscommunication; it is suggested that individuals follow non-verbal cues and body language to interpret sexual interest, and those cues can be misread (Beres, 2010). Females often give what is called “token resistance” to sexuality, actual denial can be mistaken for this playful denial and lead to a negative situation (Beres, 2010; Bivona & Critelli, 2009; Humphreys & Herold, 2007; Pineau, 1989). Gender roles and the duties imposed on both sexes serve as the

foundation of what potentiates as date rape by setting relational power roles in which the male is empowered and the female removed of agency.

Gender role stereotypes in all cultures offer each gendered pre-determined scripts with which to negotiate sexual relations (Bay-Cheng & Eliseo-Arras, 2008). Sexual Script Theory suggests that males are taught to persist, to hunt (sexually), to impress with feats of physical strength or power or control of capital and finances; and to be sexually dominant. Females likewise are taught the opposing role as normal and natural. Females are encouraged to be small, frail, emotional, empathic, maternal, sexualized, objectified, and sexually submissive (Humphreys & Herold, 2007).

Females, we are told by the dominant Western narrative, should be submissive, meant to submit under males for support and the means to survive. Although women no longer must rely on men for income, the wage gap between males and females persists. This submission assumed of females extends into the sexual script (Faulkner, Kolts, et al., 2008). The prevalence of date rape, the result of non-communication or miscommunication, offers evidence of this. This analysis is limited in that I am speaking to Western, predominantly white, middle and lower class individuals. In this same structure, males are given disproportionate power and agency, and left to direct sexual encounters based on exterior directives as opposed to the wishes of those intimately involved.

The gendered hierarchy does not start or stop with the sexual negotiation scripts made available to individuals based on the gender they were assigned at birth (itself based on their genital content). “Normal” sexuality and adherence to gender roles and the

sexual negotiation implied therein serve several ends, not just to keep males in a disproportionate level of power and influence, but to solve the issue of “who is in charge” in regard to sexuality.

In this sense I am arguing that the normative model of sexual negotiation requires no formalized consent model because preexisting patriarchal structures have determined that males are charged with sexual forwardness, and conversely females are required to be the subject of those attempts. The dominant model, presented as normative and natural by society, based on ancient traditions, requires that females remain submissive to males for the purposes of sexuality and by extension, all other aspects of life.

We can therefore break our exemplified secretary into two sets of symbols: the normative symbol set that says “secretary” and “woman”, and the BDSM symbol of the collar and leash. The secretary / woman element is normalized, and rarely does anyone ask, “Does she truly consent to this?”

In BDSM, the collar she wears symbolizes what will be a temporary exchange of power between her and a consenting associate. The collar comes off when she decides. Her role as woman, and the social pressures upon her to keep her hair, nails, makeup, and clothing appropriately presentable of womanhood, however, do not come off with so little struggle. Those symbols are normalized and misrecognized as natural and necessary, embodied as a matter of gender fact.

The study that follows will unravel these symbols.

BDSM, Feminism, and Discrimination

Among critics of BDSM, fundamentalist feminist movements and groups in the 1980’s and 1990’s are the most notable (Chancer, 2000). Feminism was and remains split

by what was called the “Sex Wars” - a period of time during which feminists and lesbians were divided between support for and support against inclusion of BDSM individuals and lifestyles in the alternative sexuality community at large (Chancer, 2000; Freeman, 2008; Hopkins, 1994).

“Radical Anti-SM Feminist” (Hopkins, 1994, p. 118) material expressed the view that BDSM participation was “dangerous, disgusting and politically incorrect” and stated further that “SM Dykes [were] the walking repositories of racism, fascism and male violence” (Ardill & O’Sullivan, 2005, p. 112). “Libertarian” feminists formed the pro-BDSM opposition, pushing for inclusion and tolerance of SM activities and lifestyle choices along with other sexual minorities (Ferguson, 1994). Anti-SM feminist groups have in the past labeled those whom support BDSM inclusion as being anti-feminist (France, 1984).

Radical feminist groups, opposed to BDSM, have been traditionally opposed due to what they see in BDSM as a direct replication and reproduction of male sexual dominance, violence, and fascism in BDSM sexual practices, even if all parties involved are female and consenting (Ardill & O’Sullivan, 2005; Wright, 2006).

BDSM participants continue to face discrimination from the public and from radical feminist sources (Wright, 2006). According to Susan Wright (2006):

Currently, adult sexual education is hampered by the continuing stigma against SM. Groups and individuals are afraid to “come out” and make their presence known because of the pervasive legal and social discrimination that can ensue. Yet the best way to change the social per-

ception of SM is for SM-identified individuals and SM groups to become more visible. (p. 230)

Feminist Critique of BDSM

A feminist critique of BDSM is not without merit, but I believe it leads us to unremarkable ends, as I will explain later. During the “sex wars”, radical feminist conceptions of BDSM stated that BDSM is not a reflection of the patriarchy, but a direct replication of it (Ardill & O’Sullivan 1986). Even if one consents to BDSM acts, that consent is not valid because the individual in question has been raised in a social context that specifically raised them to submit to masculine power (Ferguson, 1984). This same position would then argue that BDSM, even between two women replicates and fetishizes the power relations enforced by patriarchy (Ferguson, 1984; Hopkins 1994). Finally it would stand that in our patriarchal society, women are brainwashed, for lack of a better term, to be submissive the men, and this unequal relationship is recreated in BDSM (Hopkins 1994). It could also be argued that BDSM fetishizes power and control over the other, and it has been related to fascism through this analysis (Ardill & O’Sullivan 1986).

A more modern, third wave feminist analysis might look specifically to the power structures within BDSM and attempt to analyze them without relying on the assumption that masculine = dominant. In relying on a patriarchal explanation for BDSM, we lose the ability to further analyze power dynamics that are often outside gender norms. While the male dominant / female submissive relationship is prevalent, gender variance and gender play is almost as prevalent in the BDSM community in general. A feminist critique that does not acknowledge the fluidity of gender in BDSM scenes would be incomplete, as BDSM appears to be about power more than it is about gender.

Summary

In this chapter I have outlined relevant and controversial theory concerning BDSM. The goal of this research is not to uncover the latter, but to outline and explore the specifics of the consent model used by the BDSM community.

It is argued that BDSM is a community and a lifestyle, an activity that normative individuals participate in for a variety of reasons. The BDSM community borrows symbolism of power and powerlessness from dominant culture and reworks those symbols into sexualized theater. Participants who have had a chance to vet and discuss the events that are to take place, and thereby have a chance to consent to them beforehand carry out the sexualized theater of BDSM.

It is argued that the consent model exists in the BDSM community due to necessity. BDSM sexuality simulates domination and submission in theatrical context, because the participants want to remain equals outside of the sexual event.

Bourdieu was chosen for the analysis of BDSM due to his interest and focus on symbolic domination, symbolic revolution and social change. His analysis is focused on how power retains itself through domination of the meanings associated with symbols. BDSM specifically changes the definitions of some symbols from normative society.

The objectives of this research are to map, explore, and perhaps understand the relationship between the BDSM consent model and individual conceptions of equality and egalitarianism. To this end the research questions were written to explore the following:

1. BDSM individual's conception of equality and ethics in regard to gender and sexual orientation.

2. BDSM individual's conception of the normative, "vanilla" (explained further on) system of sexual consent, sexual negotiation, and intimate relationship power dynamics.

3. BDSM individual's conception of BDSM consent in relationship to the prior two points.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative design was chosen due to the nature of that being studied - gender, sexuality, and issues of consent within the BDSM scene are largely communicated through symbolic means and are prone to nuance I believe quantitative methods cannot effectively tap. The guiding theorist for this thesis is Bourdieu, an author prolific with sociological musings that are quite abstract. Qualitative methods are better suited to exploring abstract concepts.

This thesis was originally of a two-phase design, phase I being contained herein, and phase II to have been completed after proper connections had been established. The latter part was shelved at the behest of the IRB so as to ease the workload and reduce potential for IRB violations.

In order to tap thoughts of BDSM participants in regard to BDSM and sexual consent, a purposeful sample was strategically sought and chosen. BDSM participants are not usually publicly expressive of their BDSM identities in obvious ways. Most BDSM communities, including that in Pittsburgh, regularly have “Munch” meetings in public locations, where they dress down and do not display their BDSM lifestyles, but meet in neutral space. It was felt that attending a Munch to solicit interview participants was akin to invading a private space. A strategic purposeful sampling method, relying on initial participants to encourage others to volunteer, was chosen due to the reclusive and in some cases anti-research attitudes held by the BDSM community. A sort of two-way vetting took place, where gatekeepers of the BDSM community were testing me as the researcher while I vetted them as members of the BDSM community. Once I had established myself as legitimate, initial participants spoke in my favor and this

encouraged others to reply to my query. In order to bridge the gap between a reclusive and self-protective subculture and myself the Internet was used to find individuals.

Fetlife.com (essentially Facebook for kinky people, ‘fet’ being short for “fetish”) is a popular website that the researcher was referred to in the past in discussions with associates concerning the topic of this research. Fetlife.com has personal pages including photos and listings of sexual interests. Fetlife.com claims to have around 40,000 groups associated with geographically linked communities, sexual fetishes, and any other number of interests related to fetish lifestyles - or unrelated, such as the “Cooking and Baking” group, or the “Hiking” group. Fetlife.com has a reputation not as a dating or “hook-up” site, but a site of genuine community.

In addition to Fetlife, the site Craigslist.com has a popular and nationally trafficked bondage-themed board that the researcher was previously aware of from previous use of Craigslist.com proper.

The below posting was submitted to three Pittsburgh-specific pages on www.fetlife.com as well as the Pittsburgh “kink” community page on www.craigslist.org. All of the completed interviews were garnered from the fetlife pages, while Craigslist produced no viable leads. For cause of the potential for unrelated unsolicited contact a research-specific email address was established for the purposes of scheduling and communication.

Subject: Masters Sociology Student Seeking BDSM Participants for
Interview Study

My name is October and I am a graduate student pursuing a Masters
degree in Sociology at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (iup.edu).

My emphasis is sexuality and gender and I am conducting research regarding BDSM participants and the BDSM community in Pittsburgh. If you would like more information or if you think you would like to contribute to this study, please respond to pghbdsmstudy@gmail.com. If you choose to participate, we will set up an appointment for an interview in a mutually agreeable location and time. Interviews are expected to take approximately 90 minutes. There will be no financial compensation for the interview and you will remain completely anonymous whether or not you agree to participate. If at any time you wish to stop participation, you can contact me or my thesis chair and I will destroy all data related to you.

Thanks for your time, and I look forward to exploring the BDSM community with you.

October

pghbdsmstudy@gmail.com

From this posting 12 interviews were scheduled and completed: 9 individuals and three couples. All participants were White, native speakers of English, and this was not unexpected. BDSM, from exterior its ranks, seems to be associated with a fantasy version of Western European and American (U.S.) opulence. As one somewhat intimate with the BDSM community, I would argue this is due to dominant messages about what power and nobility look like – BDSM symbolism matches symbols pulled from dominant White culture, and by virtue of that these symbols reflect Whiteness and attract a White

demographic. Because of this association it was not surprising that the racial content turned out to be white. The relationship between Black identity, slavery, and “whips and chains” is far too complex to be investigated within the scope of this research, needless to say it may explain some of the Whiteness of the group discovered.

I posted the ad calling for participants shortly after receiving IRB approval. My first interview took place in early July 2011 and ran until mid August of the same year. Roughly two or three interviews were completed per week for this period. It was attempted (but did not always work out) to schedule multiple interviews per day, to cut down on the commuting necessary to get from Indiana to Pittsburgh.

Earlier I referred to the sort of two-way vetting that was taking place. The community as I found it was very concerned with the intentions behind my research, and displayed a distrust of researchers based on previous experience and community bias. It seemed that the BDSM community assumed that researchers want to medicalize and pathologize the community. After my first interview, the participant went to the thread where I posted the initial ad and vouched for my methods and my intent. After this initial vouching, I met with my second interview, a couple, which as leaders of their sub-community used their clout also to vouch for me.

During this period, I received a single email that did not match the energy and tenor of the others. Most emails I received wanted more information, were warm, or hesitant but curious. The outlier went as such (typos left in):

I highly doubt that you would find My insights of over 20 yrs either supportive nor positive. I hold the position that highly emotionally

& psychologically dysfunctional individuals are incapable of legally acceptable "consent" nor can abuse of any kind be justified by sticking a label on it such as "BDSM" , "Community" nor "Lifestyle". It is a cesspool created by the exploitation of self-loathing, low self-esteem, worthlessness, guilt, shame, sexual repression, a longing for love, acceptance, attention, & approval at ANY cost. I have witnessed unimaginably horrific acts of degradation, debasement, and torture. "Sadism" is a mental illness, nothing to be proud of nor applauded. "Masochism" is nothing more than acting out self-destructiveness, very a kin to "cutters".

People ARE dying from "Feeders", "Breeders" are bearing children that are raised as subs & or slaves. How much do you REALLY know about the "Scene" & it's darkness? Very little or as an aspiring sociologist you couldn't possibly condon it's practice. It is a symptom of a society that is slowly going insane. Perhaps instead of defending it you might consider trying to uncover what is the causation factors.

This note came from a person who on their page on their fetlife.com page made clear that they are active in the BDSM lifestyle.

As a researcher I am not sure what to make of this note, nor have I made up my mind. It appears like the person speaking against the BDSM culture is also an adherent. In my review of BDSM related literature, I did not find evidence of a BDSM lovechild sex trade, although a lack of evidence does not dismiss the allegation. I do not mean to deny the existence of an illegal sex trade, just to argue that it is something separate and

distinct from the community I sought to investigate. I believe the most likely situation is that this note was an extension of the vetting I received from the BDSM community – I think the sender was trying to scare me off. Seeing as BDSM explores themes including fantasy identities, it is also possible that the sender of this note was intent on portraying the BDSM scene as being as “evil” as possible, due to the nature of the fantasy.

On the reverse side of the coin, the note asks questions relevant to other parts of this document, regarding the nature of consent and the interplay between society and the individual in regards to sexuality. I did not complete an interview with this person as they struck me, frankly, as imbalanced and potentially dangerous, so this mystery will likely remain unsolved.

After and during the interview phase, interview tapes were uploaded to an online transcription service (verbalink.com). This service typically took 2 – 3 days to turn around. Once they were returned, they were printed, sorted, and organized into themes and concepts. This process took about a month in it’s own right. In October of 2011, I moved from Indiana to Olympia, WA, to settle and finish my writing and analysis. Since that time I have been writing and revising.

All three couples were male/female, six individuals were male, two individuals were female, and one was a male-to-female transsexual. Two of the couples fell into the Dominant Male / Submissive Female paradigm, while the third was a “toppy switch” female (switch meaning either/or in regard to submissive/dominant BDSM identity) and submissive “switch” male. Of the males interviewed, two identified as submissive, and four identified as dominant. One of the individually interviewed females identified as

submissive, and the other as a dominant. Half of those interviewed were between 30 and 40 years of age, while one male was 19 and two other males were slightly over sixty.

I expected my sample to be about a dozen, which would then grow to 20 – 30 as I worked toward the goals set for phase II of the study. As phase II was canceled I stopped interviews at 12. I feel I reached saturation far below a dozen, but I wanted to keep recording data to probe for difference and bolster my data. Halfway through the interviews I started to notice repetitive patterns of answers and a community voice emerging. After the latter half of the interviews produced similar results, I decided to discontinue interviews. At the time I also felt I had exhausted my supply of eager individuals interested in being interviewed. Member checks were performed by including a question in the interview concerning safe-words, it was assumed that any random BDSM participant would have knowledge of BDSM consent rituals.

Using the Internet to find my sample had several advantages and a few limitations. The greatest advantage offered by the Internet was the ready access to a community structure that the researcher had no intimate knowledge of (the Pittsburgh BDSM community specifically). Using the Internet as a tool to communicate also enabled potential participants to vet my intentions and direction as a researcher before they agreed to be studied. As mentioned elsewhere in this document, the BDSM community is hesitant to cooperate with any researcher due to preconceptions of all research being aimed at medicalizing or pathologizing BDSM and BDSM participants. The Internet offers a medium in which individuals can maintain degrees of anonymity, and this medium was crucial in the discovery of participants. The way the research and researcher

were presented to potential and actual participants was very specifically constructed so as to assuage any worries of ill directed research.

Fetlife.com proved to offer candidates for all of the eventuated interviews. This was of great advantage to the researcher because as it was discovered, the Pittsburgh BDSM community associated with these boards serve as one of a number of gatekeeping methods that keep psychologically unsound individuals, or individuals deemed unfit for membership in the BDSM community for ethical reasons out of the local BDSM community. These gatekeepers worked both ways, introducing the researcher to new potential interviewees, and offering a certain amount of shielding for the researcher from charlatans or abusive individuals.

The greatest limitation of using the Internet was the potential for individuals to be “flakey”. Using the Internet as a medium offers a buffer between “real life” identity and the BDSM identity expressed online by participants. It would seem that this buffer is sometimes hard to overcome, as the researcher was stood-up twice. One of these potential interviewees canceled and rescheduled, then cancelled again (both times at the last minute). A second participant rescheduled politely through email, then again, and upon a final attempt at contact the researcher found that the email address the potential interviewee used had been deleted completely. Overcoming the buffer between online and real life identities proved again too difficult for the potential participant.

Information Needed to Conduct the Study

This study focused on a sample of BDSM participants from the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area. Nine individuals and three couples were interviewed in order to

explore the relationship between BDSM sexual consent, conceptions of normative “vanilla” consent, and personal feelings of egalitarianism and equality.

A conceptual framework that linked BDSM identification with strong belief in egalitarianism and equality determined the information needed to conduct this study. This framework, based on relevant literature suggested distaste for the “vanilla” version of sexual negotiation and consent, followed by a rejection of that system and attraction to a more explicit system of power exchange. Therefore questions were tailored to explore the following three relationships:

1. BDSM individual’s conception of equality and ethics in regard to gender and sexual orientation.
2. BDSM individual’s conception of the normative, “vanilla” system of sexual consent, sexual negotiation, and intimate relationship power dynamics.
3. BDSM individual’s conception of BDSM consent in relationship to the prior two points.

Researcher’s Social Context

Speaking informally, I am an early 30’s white male graduate student. I was born and raised in Alaska, which I believe is relevant in setting the backdrop of my social position. The Pacific Northwest does not shy away from sexuality in much the same way as the more socially conservative areas of the country in which I have personally lived. During the interview phase of this research I was living in Indiana, PA, off campus, and commuting into Pittsburgh for interviews. After the interviews and initial document creation, I moved to Olympia, WA to complete my work electronically. One of the factors in choosing this destination was the sex positive culture in the Pacific Northwest.

As a sexual being, I have extensive experience with BDSM and BDSM practices, as a participant but more so as a researcher of esoteric practices. I approach BDSM participants as logical, healthy, analytical individuals who practice an alternative sexuality based on explicit power dynamics.

Biases encountered due to my social position are discussed further below.

Overview of Research Design

The list below details the steps taken to conduct this research. Each step is explained in turn.

Prior to any data collection, an extensive literature review was completed, revised, and cut down for the purposes of this study. This literature review explored the oft-cited nature of the BDSM consent model and the absence of an in-depth analysis of its origins or use.

After proposal defense the researcher gained IRB approval for this research. The original proposal contained a second phase, removed at the suggestion of the IRB. Minor changes to language were made in response to IRB suggestion ('anonymous' changed to 'confidential' and so on). The IRB process although arduous further ensured an effective and safe research process.

Possible candidates for interviews were discovered via Internet sites related to BDSM community. Specifically Fetlife.com and the BDSM themed message board on Craigslist.com. Of the two, only Fetlife yielded positive contacts.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in public locations chosen in most cases by the participants. City parks, restaurants and bars were chosen meeting spots in and around the Pittsburgh area. Twelve interviews were conducted.

Interviews were transcribed by a professional service, then outlined for relevant content, physically cut up and stapled to a wall in order to draw out themes and connections.

Themes and connections discovered through coding were analyzed against standing symbolic interactionism paradigms with an emphasis on the work of Pierre Bourdieu.

IRB Approval

After the literature review IRB approval was gained through defense of a single-phase research project consisting of a series of hit-and-run interviews designed to draw out the previously mentioned connections between sexual consent and feelings of equality.

Data-Collection Methods

For purposes of brevity and ease this study has been limited to its initial phase. Phase II was to consist of real world observation in order to bolster or question the claims of those interviewed. It was assumed that it might be that while BDSM individuals speak with one voice in regard to consent they behave differently in the moment. This limitation leaves this study without its greatest check to validity. The data collection methods used attempted to compensate for this imbalance, but it should be noted that future research is required.

Phase I: Interview

Dressed casually in black shorts and a button-down short sleeve shirt, the researcher met with interviewees in public locations. The conversations were recorded on a small digital recorder as well as directly to digital audio on a laptop computer. The

laptop was also used to keep track of interview questions and for jotting notes about the appearance of the participants and interview setting.

Interviews ranged from one to two hours, the shortest being roughly 45 minutes, and the longest running just over two hours.

Interview Process

A list of approximately a dozen questions guided the conversation and was used to maintain focus on the issues under investigation. Interviewees were allowed to wander off-topic under the assumption that such tangents might prove useful, in general this was the indeed the case. At the end of the interview the researcher asked if the interviewee had anything else they wanted to add to the data collected. This was done to allow individuals to expand into areas untouched by my research questions that may have proved instructive of issues with the framework. Warren and Karner (2010) state that information gained from interviews comes from talking and listening, and thus this interview process was designed.

The questions asked in the interviews were designed to pick out the respondents conceptions of consent and equality within BDSM and the rest of Western society. While a more critical set of questions focused on uncovering evidence of inequality and abuse may have added analytical depth, these types of questions were avoided first because they would likely not garner accurate answers, and secondly these types of questions are likely to scare off potential participants. As an insider/outsider, I perceive the perceived bias against scientific research that the BDSM community tends to hold. This research, including the questions, has been designed specifically to not provoke withdrawal, but to encourage an open and “judgment-free” discourse, so far as the researcher is concerned

regarding those under study. It was important to me that I approach the interviews as a trustworthy ally first and foremost. The questions, although meant to probe, were also the result of the desire to illicit more intimate, open discussion from a group traditionally marginalized by social researchers. It can be argued that my questions were “fluffy”, however I believe this fluffiness was necessary for the sake of comfort and sense of safety the participants needed to feel in order to be open.

That being said there is obvious potential for bias in this research. This research is interested in mapping and understanding the BDSM consent model, and comparing it to the conceptions BDSM individuals hold concerning normative sexuality. It is not an exploration of the domination of the feminine, or of potential abuses within the BDSM communities. Interview questions regarding abuse, such as “tell me of a time when someone did not listen to the safe word”, or similar queries to past abuse or sexual dysfunction were outside the goal of this research, further it was felt that to ask them would potentially alienate participants from an already research-hesitant population.

Research Interview Questions

1. In regard to BDSM, how do you identify yourself?

2. Are you a BDSM participant, a domme, a sub, a switch, etc?

How has BDSM affected your identity, personality, self expression?

Is it a permanent part of your life, or something you slip into and out of?

3. How did you first discover an interest in BDSM?

Was it a friend, a feeling, a film, etc?

4. Can you tell me in your own words what a “safe-word” is?

What other forms of BDSM sexual consent are there or have you used?

5. How did you first learn the definition of “safe-word”

6. Do you attend BDSM events?

Can you describe the events?

Is there a dress code?

7. Are you a part of a BDSM community?

How were you introduced to the BDSM community?

8. How has the BDSM community influenced your understanding of sexual consent, such as the use of safe-words?

9. I am going to use the term “vanilla” to refer to non-BDSM relationships, communities, lifestyles and sexuality - are there any other terms you would use to describe non-BDSM people?

10. If you have a preference between “vanilla” relationships and sexuality or BDSM relationships and sexuality, what is it about either that draws you in or repels you?

11. Have you felt more comfortable in your BDSM relationships or your “vanilla” relationships? What is different between the two that creates this feeling?

12. How do you feel about gender equality, equal rights, egalitarianism, etc.

How do you feel about equal pay for men and women?

13. Do you see a relationship between your BDSM interest and your thoughts about gender equality?

Can you tell me how the two might have influenced each other?

14. Is there anything you think “vanilla” relationships, sexuality, and people could learn from the BDSM community?

Phase II: Field Study (Cancelled)

Phase II was to include on-site observation at a BDSM themed location to be discovered during phase I. For the sake of scope, time, and ethical unknowns, phase II was suggested cancelled by the IRB. This was done without reservation or ill feelings.

Methods for Data Analysis and Synthesis

Interviews were transcribed and printed, then highlighted for applicable content. That content was then organized into about a dozen themes. These themes were developed by physically printing and outlining interview transcripts. These outlined passages were then cut into slips of paper and stapled to a large wall in my garage. As the quotes were gone through and stapled up, they were organized by content into the themes extracted. The themed quotes were then taken down into individual pockets of a file folder. These themes were in turn organized into a logical series, such that theme A seemed an introduction to, interrelated with theme B, and so on. This current study began life as a set of 1500 quotes organized in such a fashion. These quotes were cut down and surrounded with analysis; finally this version was created to tie everything together.

Ethical Considerations

Of largest ethical concern was the potential to accidentally reveal the identity of a participant. As phase II was to include a more public space this potential threat was in large eliminated with phase II itself. Phase I still presented an ethical concern regarding identity. Pseudonyms have been used in interviews, quotes, and analysis. These pseudonyms were chosen by the participants, and in some cases reflect pre-existing secret identities.

Age was deemed by all involved (from board to IRB to researcher) to be of utmost import. Age was not verified via state ID so as to allow a barrier of confidentiality. In all but one interview the subject was clearly of adult age. The youngest participant was a 19-year-old male.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The researcher has a bias of being sex positive and intimately familiar with BDSM practices. This bias was kept conscious as data was collected and analyzed. This bias proved essential in securing and conducting as many interviews as were completed, as the BDSM community is wary of researchers interested in cataloging BDSM as an illness or disease.

I approached this research with preconceptions regarding the population to be studied. In addition to the assumptions I list below, I was positive that this community, at least those who would step forward to be interviewed, were going to be normal, nice people and not sociopaths or serial killers. This preconception was challenged when I received the email speaking about a secret underground sex trade, and there were times during the research that I was actually, as a researcher, freaked out. The individuals interviewed all turned out to be the nice people I expected, but sometimes travelling to meet them was nerve wracking.

Credibility

Issues of credibility should be assuaged by the researcher's personal experience with the BDSM community ranging back 15 years. Those interviewed were not acquaintances of the researcher, but the researcher's background and ongoing literature review offered insight in what might be expected from BDSM participants.

As a researcher I have a pro-sex bias, meaning that I believe sexuality is a natural and normal part of humanity. I am an outsider to the specific group under study, but I have insider status as a person with intimate experience with the BDSM lifestyle. In order to keep my bias in check, I discussed findings and theory with fellow students from outside the BDSM community.

My pro-sex bias and my familiarity with BDSM are at odds with my identity as a feminist. The central questions that first arose out of this research were personal questions about how BDSM and feminism integrate on a personal level. My integration of these identities is the root of my BDSM bias, I do believe that BDSM practice is a response to patriarchal social structures, and while it may not be true freedom or equality, I do believe that BDSM consent scripts are attempts at something better than the silent domination of the dominant gender structure. To this extent my bias may prevent me from seeing evidence of inequality in the relationships I have studied. The goal of this research, however, is not to illustrate that BDSM is a utopic means to peace and equality, but to suggest that BDSM is the result of backlash against patriarchal sexual negotiation scripts and practices.

Based on my personal experience with the BDSM community, I made a number of assumptions about the community that guided my research. I assumed I would find a mostly White, somewhat heteronormative community composed primarily of middle class 20 – 60 year olds. I assumed that members of this community would actively participate in the community through social events and meet ups.

Although I knew of safe words, and the idea of levels of safe words meaning various discrete directions such as stop, more, less, and so on, I was surprised to find the

prevalence of the “stoplight system”: the assignment of red for stop, yellow for slow down, and green for keep going. I was surprised by the strong relationship between the “Leather” community and the BDSM community. The two communities have much in common, but also are distinct groups.

Finally, I assumed that the majority of those interviewed would not identify as feminist. I was somewhat surprised by the strong negative reaction to feminism a few participants displayed. I believe the strong reactions were due to internalization of conceptions of feminism that equate it with misandry and further inequality. A feminist perspective in this case might offer that these individuals are protecting their male privilege, however one non-feminist participant was female. It is likely that these individuals have different reasons for identifying specifically as non-feminist, but they reinforce misconceptions about the thrust of modern feminism, as being about “man-hating” as one respondent put it. As a sociology graduate student, I live in a world where feminism and related social justice are facts of life. I am routinely surprised when I encounter beliefs about feminism that differ so drastically from the feminism I know.

A few of those interviewed did identify themselves as feminists, and a few of them spoke about feminism with the same understanding and aplomb as a typical graduate student activist. It seemed that overall some BDSM participants had internalized feminist identity into their BDSM identities, while others shunned everything feminist. To this I suggest that feminism asks questions that are difficult for anyone, but especially for the BDSM practitioner; questions about the nature of gender roles and their relationship to sexual and social negotiation.

Dependability

The analysis garnered from this research was reached by physically coding similar sentiment in regard to the topics at hand into themes and concepts on a wall in my garage. The quotes used for this purpose were chosen from raw transcript in a manner that highlighted those passages that were directly reflective or indicative of the interview and research questions. Another pass through the interviews might yield a slightly different set of quotes or a different ordering of themes and concepts, however the overall contents chosen are representative of the entirety of the interviews.

Confirmability

The researcher has a bias toward positive sexuality and that should be noted. The contents of this thesis are as often as appropriate presented in the words of those interviewed and quotes from relevant literature. The concepts being explored are large, broad topics and easily stitched together from common experiences and attitudes expressed by those interviewed. These attitudes and common experiences cannot be said to speak to all similar experiences or attitudes, but as a single snapshot of these individuals, whom we can hope represent the population under study.

Transferability

The individuals interviewed implied that there are subtle differences between BDSM communities in various areas, however the totality of the BDSM communities reflects the same usage of symbols. While most interviewees were from Pittsburgh, one was from Philadelphia, and one had experience in Chicago and Greece. Another had experience with a community in California. In each of these communities the stoplight system (defined above) was referenced being used or taught. I believe that themes and

concepts drawn out in this study would be found in most active BDSM communities in the US and Western Europe. That being said, this specific study focused on an area in the Eastern U.S., and there may be substantial differences in communities that cannot be discovered without geography specific research. Deeper details such as how roles actually play out, how abusive persons are handled, and other questions must be explored. I am not intimately familiar with the Pittsburgh BDSM scene, so I cannot speak to how representative my sample truly was. My results were consistent with what I expected to find based on non-regional specifics of previous research.

Pittsburgh has its own personality, but in spite of this it is similar to other metropolitan population centers of similar size, roughly 300,000. About half of those interviewed live in the rural communities outside of Pittsburgh and travel into the city center for BDSM community events. Some participants reported working with groups from Ohio and Philadelphia, furthermore many participants reported doing a great deal of their BDSM networking online. I believe that the Pittsburgh BDSM scene is roughly representative of the BDSM scene in the United States in general. I predict that each BDSM community would be imbued with local flavor and cultural history, however the tools and techniques used within BDSM sexual encounters appear to be universal to the BDSM community in the United States. Similarities exist between what was reported to be the contents of elements of the European BDSM community, but this research cannot be extended so far as to speak to that culture, however similar they appear. Within BDSM many kinks are embraced, and exhibitionism is one of them. It is likely that those who stepped forward to interview are of this predilection. The more closeted, esoteric BDSM people, or perhaps high profile public individuals who also maintain connections with

BDSM were unlikely to step forward; this research does not penetrate the more hidden levels of the BDSM community. This research was focused on studying the BDSM community; some of the people who stepped forward to be interviewed should be understood as an outer layer of individuals who take it upon themselves to speak for the BDSM community. There are surely less public areas of the BDSM community, sub communities and so on, which this research cannot speak to.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited in a number of ways. First it is centered on a specific territory of the Eastern United States and does not express the uses of consent in BDSM community's exterior the scope of this research. Secondly this research consisted solely of interview data, and is thereby prone to embellishment or heavy pre-speech editing on the part of the interviewee. Without the ability to observe BDSM participants in their habitat, at play, the statements herein are subject to future scrutiny. It is possible that all of the participants interviewed expressed a fully developed monologue concerning equal rights and sexual consent, and that in fact when they engage in BDSM activities they do not adhere to their own stated rules. Although this is not the most likely scenario it illustrates the limitations of a study of this nature.

This study refers often to the “vanilla” format of sexual relations and negotiation. Vanilla is more an ideal-type than a single attainable mode of being. When BDSM participants speak about the vanilla system, I believe they are describing symptoms of patriarchy. This study is limited in comparison to the vanilla world because no research concerning a specific vanilla model of sexual consent negotiation has been, to my knowledge, completed.

That is not to say no research has been done concerning vanilla consent. When BDSM participants speak about the vanilla system, they are speaking to the normative system: the dominant culture. Although no research directly indicts the vanilla consent model, for the purposes of this research it was assumed that the vanilla consent model is an extension and reflection of dominant culture, and dominant culture has been studied. The existence of feminism, of studies regarding gendered inequality and sexual consent have in essence, been explorations of the vanilla system. The vanilla system, being more ideal-type than reality, really also cannot be investigated because it only exists as a conception in the heads of BDSM participants. While there is certainly a culture of normative sexuality, “vanilla” is a symbolic extreme mostly defined by and within the BDSM community.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the methodology chosen to conduct this study and I have presented reasoning as to why those choices were made. In addition, this chapter has outlined the process of selection, interview, and analysis of data garnered. Finally this chapter has attempted to outline and mitigate the potential biases and assumptions that were made along the way. This research is not without bias, and was designed so as to focus on the phenomenon at hand, and specifically avoided looking for evidence of abuse or misuse of the consent model.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The BDSM participants interviewed explain that they create and share a community-specific format of sexual negotiation. The onus of such seems to be rooted in the ethical standards and egalitarian ideals of BDSM participants and the BDSM community. BDSM participants interviewed sought to abandon the normative, dominant format of sexual negotiation (found by BDSM participants to be obfuscated, confusing, and potentially oppressive) to create a new explicit hierarchy based on reworked and reframed normative and dominant symbolism, within a context of interpersonal sexual consent and agency. Our secretary, for instance, retains her feminine postures, yet makes her hierarchal position explicit and obvious for the duration of a pre-arranged and consented-to time. The potential for injury does not drive the reported consent model, although such danger exists and is attended to – it seems instead that according to BDSM participants, the BDSM consent model is used due to the absence of a similarly explicit model of sexual consent presented in dominant culture.

Finding 1: Topography of BDSM Consent

What does BDSM look like?

According to those interviewed, BDSM participants talk about sexual content before it is executed. A common set of factors drive the manifestation of sexual negotiation utilized by the BDSM community. It was stated that BDSM participants discuss sexual interest, desire, limits, and boundaries as a matter of common discourse. In addition to the specifics of sexual events, roles are often defined. Terms such as Master or Mistress, slave and sub illustrate the role determinations of the participants. Participants freely enter into the roles that they feel fit. A submissive and even a ‘slave’

should not be confused with a real-life product of human sex trafficking. BDSM is theater.

Those interviewed informed me that the players in submissive roles are most often given a safe word. Using the safe word communicates to the players in dominant roles that the submissive has reached a point of discomfort. There are types and levels of safe words that communicate different things. It is the responsibility of the dominant players to heed the needs of the submissives. When the safe word is used, play stops and the participants return to their non-character roles.

What is a safe word?

Understanding how BDSM adherents conceptualize the safe word is most clearly illustrated by Michael, a Male Dominant, or “Dom” (abbreviated MD from here forward), mid thirties:

A safe word is an agreed-upon phrase or word, action or sound that the bottom makes to let the top know that something isn’t quite right.

It seems implied that safe words do not always mean “stop”, generally it is about direction, not an ending. Russ, another middle-aged male Dom offers:

Well, a safe word is something that a sub will use in order to let the dominant know that he or she is experiencing some sort of distress. And that the scene needs to stop or at least be altered in order, you know – because there’s a problem.

The safe word is the most commonly understood element of BDSM consent that has bled into mainstream consciousness. Safe words are used to slow, direct, stop, or otherwise change the tenor or destination of a BDSM sexual event.

Safe words can take non-verbal forms. Jessi, a transgender switch (‘switch’ meaning identification with both dominant and submissive elements and roles, abbreviated SW) explains:

I know several couples to use signals. The most often used signal I’ve seen is a feather in the sub’s hand. And if at any time that feather is let go, that means stop.

Non-verbal safe cues are used when the bottom participant is gagged or otherwise incapable of vocalizations. Mark, a late-50s-aged male “Master” (abbreviated MM from here forward) in a full time M/s (Master/slave, a form of ‘total power exchange’) relationship explains:

...where you could have somebody gagged, where they can’t talk or whatever, they’ll actually give them something to hold. That way, if it gets to the point where they can’t handle it or they want you to stop, they can drop it.

Non-verbal safe cues are not as common as their verbal counterparts. Scarlet, a middle aged Female Dom (FM) explains her misgivings concerning the limitations of such a system of non-verbal cues:

Mm-hmm. And I am of the mindset I don’t use gags with new people. I would rather them be able to verbally communicate with me. It’s just one of my comfort items.

Scarlet is expressing her own comfort as well as concern for the comfort of her play partner. The BDSM community and individuals use safe words to help ensure events remain “safe, sane, and consensual” (a mantra of sorts, encountered in many interviews).

The comfort of both partners, itself rooted in an embrace of equality, dictates use of safe words and forms of communication in the sexual event.

The words usually associated with “stop” and “no” have been redefined into theatrical constructs; that is to say a participant may say “stop” for the sake of the role or character they play in a BDSM scene, while they continue to consent and desire the scene to go forward. Theatrical redefinition of words and symbols is endemic to BDSM. Bourdieu’s ideas are apparent here as they relate to symbols of oppression and agency in normative, “real life” because words, as symbols, gain new and often-antithetical meanings. “No” becomes part of the theater and hence changes meaning; “no” becomes a powerless word, chains become freedom, and so on. In such a situation, other words and cues must be developed to protect each partner.

Russ (MD) does his best to explain the changes to language:

And for the most part, you can say – you can scream no, no, no, whatever, but typically, that’s part of the scene or that’s – you know, that’s just the words that escape. A safe word is more of no, I actually mean no. No, this actually hurts too much or this – I can’t do this anymore. It is like the off switch.

Safe words are given great importance by those who employ them. Jen (Fs) tells the story of her first safe word and the priority placed on its creation:

I learned that from my first master and mistress. That was one of the first discussions that we had.

According to those interviewed, BDSM sexuality relies on a constant sort of checking-in between players. Safe words are used to communicate limits and interests;

they serve as a rudder by which the submissive party can maintain control over the direction of the event.

Limits reached might be tolerance of physical, mental, or emotional elements, and use of a safe word is expected to end or change that discomfort.

Markw (MD) explains what happens when a safe word is used, from the perspective of a sub:

This is too much for me, and I need to stop all play, and I need you to comfort me, and I need everything to be okay again because I am just out of my comfort zone.

The safe word puts control into the hands of the submissive or bottom. Unlike the simplistic version of a safe word found in some mainstream media sources, the safe word does not necessarily mean “stop”, safe words can have a variety. Cameron, a male sub in his 60’s:

A safe word, to me, defines where it is going and giving the bottom or the passive person a little bit of control so that it doesn’t become too uncomfortable. It also allows for more comfort ‘cause if you really enjoy it – I always go with the stoplight colors.

The stop light colors referred to in this case are Red, Yellow, and Green.

Jessi (TSSW) puts it in other words:

A safe word – well, there are degrees of safe words.

The most often used safe words would be red for full stop and yellow meaning you’re getting to the edge there.

Screaming green just means oh, let’s have fun now.

The stop light system was cited by almost all of my participants. Most cited learning about the stop light metaphor from other members of the BDSM community, or at community events. This is one of many instances in which the BDSM community creates, distributes and enforces mechanics of sexual consent.

The stop light system appears to be an international phenomenon. Here Cameron (Ms) talks of when he learned the system while overseas:

Probably when I was in Greece. But they have a blue light instead of a green light.

The concept of a stoplight, and the meanings associated with its colors, in the normal sense, is pervasive in western society. Most adults in the west are already familiar with the idea due to experience navigating streets and roads. This is an instance of pre-existing symbols that have been re-encoded with meaning and reworked by the BDSM community.

The mechanics of safe words are worth investigation. BDSM participants interviewed stated that safe words are decided upon at the onset of a relationship or play date. As we have seen above, there is a community standard that is culturally transmitted among BDSM participants, but how such terms/symbols are used may vary based on the individuals and situations in question.

Long-standing couples may abandon safe words when a certain level of comfort and familiarity is reached, Mark, a Male Master, explains:

Anybody that says they don't play with safe words, it's just plain insane.

There – I mean, there are a lot of people – I mean, we don't really have a safe word.

I mean, we did [have a safeword] when we first started out, but we're so comfortable with – I mean, I can take her to a certain place, and if I can't hear her or understand where she's going, I know mentally where I can go with her because we've had this rapport for years.

How is this different from or similar to vanilla relationships?

In addition to safe words, other forms of consent are discussed prior to BDSM sexual relations. Chris (MD) explains his system:

Well, what I've learned is the best thing is to just sit down and ask the personal questions. And speak directly about it. And say well, what do you enjoy? Now, let's say that you have something you enjoy that they didn't mention. You say well, you know, I'm comfortable with what you said. Have you also – have you ever considered trying this or this or this or this?

And so there's that open discussion on activity. Then within the rest of the consent model, you also have to agree on either the verbal or nonverbal safe words. And you need to know about the person's physical and emotional status.

Pre-event discussion is reportedly paramount to choosing safe words and giving sexual consent. Discussion before an event does more than allow BDSM participants to craft the scene or event, it allows a formalized moment to out other issues, such as STDs, or health concerns such as heart problems, or anything else that should be considered important prior to sexual contact.

Consent and limits can take a very formal, pseudo-legal tone. Even so, the ability of the submissive person to end the relationship or scene is untouched. Russ (MD) talks about the formality and legal impotence of written consent forms:

Some people use these written consents, and I have been in chat rooms where I've heard people who seem to be of the opinion that these written consent are somehow legally binding. And, of course, I can tell you, as an attorney, on this I am a professional, that's bullshit because consent can be withdrawn at any time, including up to and during the act.

The ability to say no at any time (and the control of the scene) is ever present. Kashmira, an “owned” female submissive explains:

Yeah. I mean, but for me, it's just at any point, I could say no. At any point, I could just say you know what? I don't want to be beat today or I don't want to do this today or I need to take a break.

BDSM participants explained that safe words are intrinsic to BDSM consent to illustrate limits while sexual action takes place, and help keep the power dynamic consensual and safe. Safe words can take a variety of forms that are created by participants or learned from the community. Even in situations of “total power exchange” (explored below) either person can end the scene or relationship at any time. There is no “real” legally binding role set or document; even the most formal contracts are theater.

Finding 2: Consensual Power Exchange

BDSM relationships and scenes consist of consensual exchanges of power, of which safe words are “get out of jail free” cards; cues that end the exchange of power and return the players to their neutral positions. Often power exchange does not include sex,

or “play” as Jen (Fs) explains the dynamic of her 24/7, M/s relationship (meaning their roles are constant, embodied):

I’m a slave to master. And [I’m] in a power-exchange relationship, meaning that I follow his lead, his direction and serve him. I obey him. And in exchange, he gives me guidance, direction, safety. And all of that. It’s more of a lifestyle and the way we relate to one another than – I mean, play is a part of it, but it’s very much how we’re comfortable relating to each other.

Mark (MM), Jen’s Master, explains some of the non-sexual expectations he has of her:

Well, another part of it, I mean, like the simple thing, I put her in charge of the house. I mean, I told her, you know, if you’re – the way you eat and your health – I mean, she always complained to me about the way I eat and, you know, I don’t eat healthy enough food and stuff. Like it’s your job to put healthy food on and do whatever, you know. I leave all that – those decisions up to [her] to do that, which she’s okay with that.

Of course their relationship does involve sexuality, although like any romantic relationship it is but one of many elements. The Total-Power-Exchange, or TPE, model is one in which each partner takes on a sexualized role in a sense of permanency, “24/7”. In the above quote Jen is a full time slave to Mark, these are roles they have chosen for themselves. The roles and power dynamic they embrace make explicit the relationship dynamics that they feel couples in ordinary relationships disregard or dance around. This is part of the intrigue of BDSM consent; it makes corporeal the oft-unspoken power

dynamic in relationships. Once made explicit through power exchange, roles and rules can be openly discussed, negotiated and changed to the will of the participants.

“24/7” is a term used loosely to describe power exchange models in which roles are full time, integrated into every element of the relationship. “24/7” BDSM or Master/slave relationships may seem off-putting to the uninitiated, given the implications for the submissive party. Michael, a Male Dom in a 24/7 relationship ponders this perceived attitude:

I always find it amusing when people get hooked and stuck on the 24/7
[thing] because any relationship you have with anyone is 24/7.

This research revealed that not all BDSM relationships are this explicitly continuous. There is great variance to the exchange of power and the temporality involved depending on the individuals in the relationship. Individuals in the BDSM community are allowed opportunity, through explicit emphasis on openness, communication, and discourse, to create their own version of each of these elements. If Jen identifies as a “slave”, one could just as easily identify as “the pool boy” or “the maid” or any other myriad theatrical role set. In the case of Jen and Mark, they are cohabitants. This is not always the case. “24/7” may not look 24/7 at all. A person may consider themselves in a “24/7” relationship and yet only see that relationship partner rarely, or perhaps even only online. The title “24/7” describes a power exchange model where roles are constant, but these roles may be slight or subtle, indeed BDSM participants tend to be discreet except in similar company.

Relationships may not take a 24/7 approach at all. Chris, a Male “light” dominant [his language] (abbreviated Md from here forward) defines limited power exchange:

In a relationship, something other than just a casual, one-time scene, in a dominant-submissive role, ... by definition, you're in a limited power exchange.

And so the two parties negotiate the scope of activities and the duration, but it's something other than 24/7. What that means is that when you're in the scene, I'm in a dominant mode, the other person's in a submissive mode. When the scene is over, it's purely vanilla this is only the second place you mention "vanilla"- it would be useful to set up this word usage in a paragraph earlier. I know you do so below—but as a reader, I think it will help to know it in advance and we're equal.

Chris explains how his version of dominance is different than others:

My screen name [online] is [**redacted**], and the reason for that is that although I have a dominant personality, I don't project it. I don't feel a need to do that. I tend to be more reserved, I think, than a lot of dominants.

It is of note that after the interview Chris shared that he had just received his new vanity license plates for his car. The plate read "[**redacted**]", the same as his screen-name. Although he claims to not project his dominance, he is definitely projecting his version of dominance. It seems to be part of his identity in a very significant way.

In the quote above, Chris uses the term vanilla; we will see this term more and more as we move forward. Vanilla, in the BDSM sense, refers to normative power relations, normal non-BDSM relationships and individuals; normalcy. It also represents a sort of unattainable goal. Vanilla is a catchall phrase used by BDSM participants that does not necessarily refer to any specific act or individual or couple. It is more of a

yardstick to judge oneself against, in a way. Vanilla is not just boring or without adventure, but it lacks the intimacy that BDSM allows; or so my participants would state.

Total power exchange may seem like a full dismissal of personal agency, however it is not this simple. Erin (FTSW), argues that total power exchange is not actually possible, but perhaps only accessible through theater:

That's why I don't, you know, believe that TPE [total power exchange] ... you can't really. I mean, it can. But it can't really. I don't wanna dismiss someone, their relationship.

Brent, a male submissive switch (MsSW) discusses the same, emphasizing the theatrical nature of role-play in BDSM:

So it is a contradiction. It's not really true. I mean the terms that we use aren't really; They aren't really total. People like to call it total, but it's not.

BDSM participants are aware of the theater involved, of the temporary nature of the roles they take and perform. The result of taking on such roles, the symptom and the cause, is explicit discussion of power and agency in regard to sexuality and relationship standards. This is a very important contrast to normative pairings where power is unseen or unspoken.

Markw (MD) explains the benefits of candid acknowledgement of power dynamics:

When you start actively playing with power structure and acknowledging it; so saying, "Okay, well, this is our relationship, and there is this power structure in it, and we can understand it and talk about it and engage in it

and play with it and change it and tweak it and know that it's there," then it becomes a lot more intentional than [a vanilla] relationship.

Markw's sentiment is a departure from Bourdieu's conception of traditional gendered social dynamics. Part of the power of unequal gender roles is the silence regarding the doxa [essential social rule set, literally: common belief], the lack of open discussion, or of open recognition that the system we live as part of is unequal or oppressive. Markw has a relationship that has thrown these rules away in preference of a new rule set.

The benefits of frank discussion and acknowledgment go beyond sexual tastes. Mark (MM) explains:

The thing of it is, in this lifestyle, if you find a partner that has the same interests and desires and drives that you do and whether or not it's the same kink or the same ideas or things, because of the way that you have your relationship structured, the way you communicate with each other, you're not really hiding anything from anybody. I mean, you know, we all know what our; what I call our sicknesses are, perversions are, what our interests in things are. We discuss it between each other. So it's not as if somebody's sneaking around behind your back doing things.

It can be conceived of as an admittance of reality, or acceptance of the rules-on-the-ground, as it were. Cameron (Ms) argues that submissive and dominant roles are inherent to nature, and that explicit acknowledgement and discussion of power exchange is healthy, even necessary within a relationship:

And if we're animals, we're nature. I would say anything beyond that has got to be contractual. So if you want an equal sexual relationship, then you contract to be equal members. And that's gonna be a whole lot of work on both of your parts. More so, I think than one where you decide to be well, you be dominant and I'll be recessive or passive because gee, I'm comfortable with this role, you're comfortable with that role.

BDSM makes the case that power dynamics between individuals are ever present, not just sexual in nature. Social actors constantly jockey for position in a hierarchy. The utopian ideal of total equality is handled by BDSM as a goal to build at, instead of a de-facto mode of existence to be striven for. Instead of destroying hierarchy, BDSM takes ownership of that hierarchy by naming it.

Markw (MD) evokes power dynamics within the interview process:

So every relationship, every interaction between two people really has some sort of power structure. Right? So I'm talking to you, and you're the interviewer, and I'm the interviewee, so you have a place of power here. You're guiding the conversation, and you're leading things on, and we both know it, and it's cool, and it's fine.

Markw punctuates his statement:

And I even signed a consent form!

I mean you didn't ask for my hard limits, bad boy, but we both know that it's happening, and it's cool, and it's beneficial. I think that power structures exist in most every relationship. I hate absolutes, but I have trouble thinking of a relationship that no power structure exists.

Regardless of the true nature of relationships, BDSM individuals believe that power structures exist and are unavoidable.

Explicit consent in BDSM is intrinsic to the acknowledgement of power exchange and roles. Chris (MD) speaks to the structure of BDSM scenes, and the level of direction given to all parties:

The BDSM scenes are structured, but not scripted. You have your parameters of activities that are allowable in; that you've negotiated. You talked with the other person about what would you like right now? And they give you a general idea. And then as the top or dominant, it's up to you to craft the rest of the scene.

Before just jumping in there and doing something, you know, my suggestion to people is to sit down and talk through interests and the broad design of the scene.

In fact Chris has a series of check lists:

And I have, actually, three lists, and I wrote them just so I can keep it in my head. But one is the activities, one deals with learning about the person, as far as the physical and emotional matters, and then the third is the actual scene.

The emphasis on explicit sexual consent serves to keep power and agency within reach of all participants. Many of those interviewed explained the level of control that the submissive has. At any time during the scene the submissive person can stop or redirect the action. Russ (MD) sums it up:

If the sub says no, that's it, I'm done, this ain't working, that's it. It's over.

All done. Bye. So that's the best way I can explain it. The consent is always revocable.

Even in a “24/7” BDSM relationship the power and agency awarded individuals under equal circumstances remains with each party, the dominant, and counter-intuitively, the submissive. The submissive can end a scene or relationship just as a “normal” person might. Kashmira (Fs) explains a similar dynamic in her relationship:

In the end, although I'm submissive to him and I'll do things for him, I'm not his slave.

This is a departure from her actual life background, from which she had no escape:

And in; when I was under my parents' thumb or under my ex-fiancé's thumb or under the cult's thumb, I was a slave to them, and I wasn't making choices because I wanted to do that. I was making choices because I had to.

Kashmira explicitly has sought out a form of sexuality that replicates, evokes, and perverts the dominant system. Her background has become the LEGO blocks with which she has built her sexual dynamic. In her previous life situation, she stated, there was no escape; both her parents and her religion required her submission. In her BDSM relationship, she still takes the submissive role, but with a known associate who will allow her escape, as she wills it.

Normative forms of gender hierarchy are inverted and lampooned in the BDSM community. Cartoonification of the dominant gender scheme emerges in various ways.

Above I outlined how Kashmira has disempowered her past and the oppressive elements within it by acknowledging power dynamics and reducing power to a plaything. Gender identity and the signifiers of such are also thrown into the mix, re-examined, redefined, and taken ownership of.

Erin (FTSW) speaks to gender equality in regard to BDSM scenes that incorporate gender reversal:

There's something enticing about having control over a man. So, I would say, I appreciate that because we're in this society that says women aren't equal, so it's nice to kind of have that kind of semblance of control.

Open discussion and frank acknowledgement of sexuality break the normative script, which itself is rooted in patriarchy and masculinist crypto-fascist symbolic domination - meaning that there is a fascism of gendered power, with males and the symbolism of the masculine placed in the dominant position, all the while the inequality that results from this is hidden from view, normalized, or understood as natural.

Discussion and communication are intrinsic to the BDSM power dynamic, and by extension the consent model, Cameron (Ms) states:

I think it's easier for someone who's into BDSM to talk about things like safe sex because safety is required in your relationships. So although I'm a passive person, I do have the ability to dialogue freely without discomfort about anything that I feel is safe or unsafe.

Where does the self begin and the community end, in regard to feelings of sexual consent? Cameron understands his emphasis on consent as intrinsic to his personal identity:

I think that they're somewhat interwoven, the passive part of me and setting up safe words. In any relationship that I get into, when I'm gonna scene, I want to make sure there are safe words. If it's gonna include sexual penetration, then I want to make sure that this is what I'm doing. And, you know, if you can't follow the agenda, then there's no consent.

Cameron continues, stating that dialogue is needed for fulfilling play, that respect is the locus of sexualized role-play:

If you're a dom or you're a sub, you can be very selfless because if you're passive partner really enjoys CBT [cock and ball torture] and you go oh, God, I really hate doing that, but I do it because I really respect this person I'm playing with.

BDSM participants explained it is a single machination; the BDSM identified self reflects an identity rooted in ethical commitment to equality and egalitarianism. The BDSM community reflects the same. Questioning of gender identity, sexual negotiation scripts, and power in general arrive collectively; they could perhaps be understood as parts of the same edifice. The rebellious attitude, the tearing down and rebuilding of walls, extends to all elements of the BDSM participant.

In what is understood to be the standard, normal system of sexual hierarchy, masculinity is aligned with control, and femininity aligned with a lack thereof. What I am describing is a mechanical system in which each part connects to and reflects the meaning of the other parts. Emphasis on communication comes from this same machine; communication is required by individual sense of equality, individual sense of equality

breaks socially assigned hierarchy and builds a new device to replace it, also rooted in individual equality.

Participants stated that communication is part and parcel to the BDSM conception of sexual consent and power exchange, inseparable - and appears to be absent from the normative model. Markw (MD) rants about the differences between BDSM negotiation and what he interprets as the dominant model of negotiation:

I think that the BDSM community does consent in a really, really positive way as compared to the way that I've seen many people outside of the BDSM community do consent, and I don't at all want to paint a picture of, "Well, this is how my people do it and this is how other people do it, and other people suck". But I think that from working with fraternities and sports teams at [college] and things like that that there's a very different standard of what consent means in terms of the idea of the hookup culture in college.

So like we go out to a bar and we get kind of drunk, and I think you're kind of pretty, so maybe we should just go home, and we'll figure it out in the morning maybe when things have already happened. Versus in the BDSM community, there is very active negotiation of things before they happen. So if I'm interested in playing with you, we'll talk about, okay, well, what's interesting? What are you into?

Markw's statements seem to be at odds with what gets defined as the vanilla system of sexuality, in which there is little discussion, little communication, and a lack of

emphasis on discovering what an individual's personal interests are in regard to the sexuality to take place.

Communication was cited by all of my participants as the main source of sexual functioning in BDSM and sexual dysfunction in their conceptions of the vanilla world. Ability to communicate between partners extends beyond sexuality to general relationship health; the vanilla lack of communication extends likewise to non-sexual elements of the relationship.

Communication, acknowledgement of sexual and gendered hierarchy and emphasis on sexual consent are all reflections of a system of explicit sexual consent and power dynamics. Power exchange between partners is the fuel of a BDSM scene or event, and this exchange of power requires the communication mentioned, including safewords and other scene directing tools. Meanwhile the BDSM scene inverts the normative script and replaces it with a similar version, louder, perhaps, but capable of being owned and controlled by those who are within it, instead of the normalized opposite.

These findings suggest an interpretation of the photograph of the secretary in the prologue - we can assume that she consented to wearing a leash and having her photo taken. At the same time, this image captures only a moment in time and a singular aspect of her life. No doubt, this woman has a far more complex life than a single image implies. In that life, she is unlikely to be wearing a leash, pumps or A-line skirt at all times, in all places. She is however, almost without a doubt, embodying and expressing her femininity and womanhood. The prior, the leash, is temporary, consensual, perhaps even fun, the latter, womanhood, is assumed, applied, attached, unavoidable, and most horrifically, normalized to the point of seeming natural. This is not to say that womanhood is bad or

devoid of meaning, purpose, and enjoyment. It is, however, to say that womanhood is presumed of all human females, and that is oppression - power exchange without the net of a safe-word, without the requirement that one consent to it, devoid of acknowledgment thereof.

Finding 3: Equal Rights and Ethical Standards

This research hoped to explore and understand the consent model utilized by BDSM participants in contrast to the conventional consent model used by normative sex participants, above I have outlined the topography of BDSM consent as I found it. I argue that the emphasis placed on consent by BDSM individuals is an expression of egalitarian ideals and an attempt at an egalitarian sexuality, or at least an attempt at a sexuality not based on the dominant, oppressive model which is largely unspoken and positioned in a male dominant/female subordinate norm. Imagine that the above map of BDSM consent is a house; we go now into the basement to understand the foundation of the model.

I predicted that BDSM participants would express interest in and support for egalitarianism, but most would not self-apply the label of feminist, due to the political baggage (and misconceptions) associated with the word in mainstream media. In my sample, this proved an accurate prediction. All participants voiced interest in equality and egalitarianism: these are the classic goals of feminism. However overwhelmingly the individuals interviewed did not identify as feminist, often citing second-wave definitions as reasoning.

Some spoke with absolute ease about feminism and could articulate their positions; others danced around the topic, finding other sources of egalitarian idealism. Speaking about feminism, RussK (MD) sounds like a graduate student:

And so I'm just like no, I don't like feminism just because of the word. I like equality. And it seems like most of the feminists that I encounter are kind of the second-wave feminists where it's like no, we need to be on top. And I'm like no, we all just need to be equal.

By contrast, Michael (MD) and academic feminism seem to have different understandings of the term:

Michael: Oh, I'm definitely not a feminist.

Interviewer: Not a feminist. But –

Michael: No. But, you know, I'm a strict constitutionalist. The Constitution, you know, says that women have the same rights as men. In fact, if you read The Constitution, it doesn't say men. So if you go off of the original Constitution, in nowhere does it separate men, women, African – Blacks, purples, whatever.

This following quote is worthy of critique. When asked how she felt about equal rights, Erin (FTSW) reveals her definition of its antithesis:

Erin: I mean, I'm obviously for them [equal rights].

Interviewer: You're for them?

Erin: I'm not a man hater.

I am choosing to interpret “man hater” as a reflection of societal definitions about feminism that assume it to have non-egalitarian, anti-equality goals. The evidence here is that BDSM identified individuals misunderstand feminism, or have only internalized limited, frankly damaging definitions.

Markw offers a long-winded and educated-sounding explanation of the situation as he finds it:

I think that there's a lot of stigma around BDSM from some people who identify themselves as feminists or pro-equal women's rights who are displeased with the idea of the term feminism who would say, "Well, BDSM is just a new way to oppress women," or, "BDSM is these power structures are what we're fighting against, and the fact that you guys are doing this just sets us back, and I really wish that you all would just stop it, and this is just a masked form of abuse. If you're in this master/slave relationship, can this person really leave? And I think it's abusive from my egalitarian standpoint, and you're doing your relationship wrong and you need to stop".

Which is obviously my very one-sided charged way of explaining their stance. And I think that there's also a very strong argument that I would side with that says if we're going to do this, if we're going to say, okay, everyone should have equal choice to do what they want and equal rights, that we should all be able to do what we're into without worrying about how other people view that.

The BDSM community is doing consent in a way that necessitates a great deal more investigation, beyond the meager scratching of the surface I offer here. Furthermore, some of these individuals have limited, and counter-productive understandings of feminism. Potential allies lost due to misrepresentation of the movement and the stigma

associated with the label—which is entirely about keeping the present system in place and debunking the positive ideals of feminism

The evidence points to a foundation of egalitarianism and equal rights that underlies and drives the model of sexual consent in the BDSM community. Michael denies being a feminist: ‘definitely not a feminist’, and RussK explains that the second wave turns him off. Yet both men are grasping for a version of society in which there is some semblance of gender equality.

Some in the BDSM community have a more sophisticated understanding of feminism. Amy (Fs) self-identified as feminist, and sums up a modern, radical position about the meaning of feminism:

Feminism is – means the freedom, there’s that word – the freedom to choose what you do with your body and with your life.

The choice to submit [is] a very feminist thing because I am taking my lifestyle and my sexuality into my own hands and with – it was very empowering to be able to express that facet of my being.

The collision between feminism and BDSM results in a kind of cognitive dissonance. Markw (MD) speaks to the struggle of being a feminist interested in alternative sexuality:

That was something I initially struggled with. Like, “Oh my God, can I be a feminist and kinky?” And yes, I can. And I’m doing it right now.

Markw explains how he integrates social change into his life and career path:

I actively work towards more egalitarian [lifestyles].

And I see my position as white guy in a field that's dominated by women as, "Well, this is an opportunity for me to use the privilege that I have in the position now that I have to do things that are beneficial to all of us". So I'm going to be working with guys this Fall who, as a clinician, who have a history of domestic and sexual violence offenses. I think that the power and privilege that I have as a male who presents as fairly heterosexual allows me to do that in a unique way, that it would be a lot harder for a gay woman to do.

Others interviewed offered stark acceptance of equality, of legal support for equality between sexes. The emphasis on equality was itself rooted in acceptance of modern ideals of equality and tolerance. There is a kind of cognitive dissonance between two sets of directives: equality, and the rule of masculinity.

Emphasis on equality ran through every interview. BDSM participants are trying to create an egalitarian system of sexual negotiation. Feminism, as it has been simplified and internalized by the mainstream, has been rejected as a form of protest or system of emancipation. This rejection is due to misunderstanding – a failure of social activists to overcome media interpretations of their movements.

Tolerance

The sense of equality, the importance of the freedom of others, was also reflected in a tolerance of others by those interviewed in this research. When I use the word tolerance I mean to reference an individual's sense of acceptance and support for those who are different in being or action.

Mark (MM), who is self-employed as an auto-mechanic (a masculine dominated trade) explains his position on sexuality:

I mean, like a lot of the friends that we have that are either gay or lesbian or consider themselves queer, I mean, it's anything other than vanilla. So whether we buy into what they do, I mean, either – I mean, I'm not gay, I'm not interested in anything gay, but I do have gay friends.

The sense of inclusion expressed toward other sexual minority groups. Cameron (Ms) was by far the most politically activist of my research participants. He was covered in anti-war pins and patches, and projected his alternative lifestyle openly by dressing brightly with political slogans on almost every inch of his person. He also spoke at length about attending various anti-war, anti-discrimination rallies and protests. He expressed dismay regarding legal regulation of consensual sexuality:

If you're two consenting adults, if you want to have sex with an artichoke together, have fun. I mean, my God, it's your bedroom. Why does the law have to get into your bedroom? It makes no sense to me at all.

Cameron's personal experience shaped his radical position. He mentioned being in Civil Rights marches:

We marched on Selma. I saw water hoses shoot people off a bridge at Selma. I saw people use sticks to hit people because all they wanted to do was be equal. They didn't ask for anything, other than to be equal. It's sad.

Cameron's activist identity comes through loud and clear in the following statement:

It's like I'm in there for the rights of everything. The rights of our planet, the rights of people, the rights of children, the rights of free labor.

Cameron has a history of political activism and anti-war movement involvement, which has in turn affected the tenor of his sexuality, and bolstered his emphasis on sexual consent.

Of course the other side of the "war" coin exists as well, and cannot be ignored. Chris (MD) explains his value of equality and inclusion through his military experience:

So from age eighteen to twenty-two, I was a soldier. And I did two tours in Vietnam. And it made me feel comfortable standing up for the – for democracy and willing to fight for that. So I'm pro-military, but I'm – my heart bleeds in all other regards for people who are oppressed.

Unlike Cameron, Chris has a sense of equality and justice rooted in military experience, in the right of might to restore and create justice imbued into the US Military ideology. The importance that Chris places on individual liberty informs his feelings on consent and gender relations.

Finding 4: Gendered Roles

Cameron (Ms) believes society imposes gendered behavior into individuals, stating as much in regard to emotional response allowed females vs. males:

[In a more open society] children would be picked up and carried when they're six years old and they have a bloody knee. Maybe not told oh, it's all right, baby, don't cry, but they'd go, go ahead and cry it out. You deserve it.

“You deserve it”; Cameron is speaking to the masculine regiment of being that demands males abandon tears, and suggesting that in a better society humans would be encouraged to cry for the cathartic emotion resultant, regardless of sex or gender assignment.

Gender performance, identity, and expectations become expressions with BDSM. The gendered hierarchy, the absence of equality, becomes another unequal system lampooned and disempowered by BDSM.

Even outside of radical departures from assigned gender roles, other participants were less politically activist, but just as aware of their gender identities. Michael (MD) sees his sexual dominance and masculinity as being not necessarily connected. Here he argues he just has a strong ego:

I don't associate [dominance] with my manhood. I mean, I was born XY. You know, there's nothing I can do about that either way. I'm – you know, my ego's very strong.

Instead of a disconnection between gender and BDSM role, Erin (FTSW) talks about gender-play in her life; the thrill of violating a gender directive, of inverting a gendered symbol by wearing a plastic penis in a sort of mish mash of gender expression:

A ‘packer’ is like a plastic [flaccid] penis. So it's not even like a dildo. It's a plastic penis and you're really exploring, "I'm a man". And you know, I came to decide that I don't like cross-dressing as a man. I like – But I like wearing this and being a woman.

And dressing as a woman and being very fem, but having this underneath. I like that because I think so many people try to box what certain genders can and cannot do.

Erin talks about bringing gender-play into BDSM scenes, and her conception of the role of gender play in BDSM:

I've done scenes where it's a feminization thing and I see it as, you know, making someone who doesn't have to go through the motions or waxing and preening and wearing uncomfortable shoes and uncomfortable corsets, and making them feel, you know, "This is what I go through and I feel like you need to experience that".

Erin won't deride you when you are gowned in the habiliments of the gender role opposite your assignment, because she employs gender-play in a somewhat educational capacity. Her goal is to illustrate the power embedded in the conventional performance of femininity, as if to say: This is what I deal with as a human relegated and confined to femininity and I feel you need to experience that. This is not a constant theme to her BDSM play, only one facet. When violating gender directives, she is taking a static identity role and breaking it in two, and replacing it with an illegal blend of gender signs.

Awareness of gendered identities and the oppression intrinsic in their performance does not terminate with kinky deviant play; the BDSM participants interviewed were aware of the results of gender inequality. Kashmira (Fs) complains about the gendered assumptions placed upon her in her career:

Because a lot of employers will look at a woman and go oh, she's gonna be leaving us in a couple of years. Like if you're between like, say, 23

and 30-some, especially once you get married, oh, she's gonna be leaving us or she's gonna be popping out kids. And we choose not to have children, that's kind of our thing, and like I really resent the fact that because they think I'm going to have a child, immediately that's going to push down [my career].

Beyond labor and employment, patriarchy is short hand for rule of men - over other men, over women - over the rest of objective existence. Cameron (Ms) explains his misgivings with the direction of society under the stewardship of 'men':

I'm afraid that it [utopia] won't happen because, number one, looking at global warming, in the year 2050, we're gonna have an agricultural dustbowl here. So how can we have this? If men are the more aggressive species, I think, if anything, we're gonna go back to a caveman kind of thing if we exist at all, which is gonna be scary.

The sense expressed by BDSM participants is that gendered hierarchy is not just oppressive; it is destructive and damaging.

Finding 5: Definitions of Normativity

The term "vanilla" has popped up once or twice so far in our discussion. What does vanilla mean? Vanilla is the term non-pejoratively used by members of the BDSM community to describe those not involved in the BDSM community, or those not associated with alternative sexuality or lifestyles.

How do BDSM people conceive of and understand "normal" sexuality, the "vanilla" model of sexual negotiation, consent, and the gendered expressions endemic?

Markw (MD) offers a definition of normative ideals; the "vanilla" model:

We keep using the term vanilla. For now, I'll call it a white heterosexual monogamous marriage with 2.5 children and a white picket fence house between Bob and Mary.

Where does this definition of normativity originate? Chris (Md) offers his understanding of the genesis of “normal” sexuality and gender roles:

I think just it emerges as part of society. It's sort of like what – this is what couples do. You know, they make out, they sleep together, they, you know – it's just a kind of – I don't think it's expressively taught. It's just learned over the years on what the norms are.

Cameron (Ms) expresses irritation with the limitations of the normative script in regard to personal exploration:

And I think the mainstream doesn't want you to do that [experiment].

They want you to follow this oh, be a lamb. Follow a shepherd.

The dominant system is intent on replication of the normative status quo, or so BDSM participants conceive of it. BDSM participant opinions about the normative directives about sexuality run the gamut from displeasure to frustration.

According to those interviewed, at the root of the normative system are two features: first the normative system creates and reinforces inequality, secondly the normative system demands of its participants a silence in regard to questioning it, which encourages a lack of exploration and experimentation.

Where do individuals get information about sexuality other than family, school, church, and other doxa-infused institutions? Markw explains running into institutional deterrents against exploration of alternative sexualities:

Learning about my sexuality in general at that developmental period [high school] was really challenging because okay, I'm trying to find my place. I'm trying to figure out what good boundaries are for everyone involved here, and public school sure didn't teach me about this, and I might have some examples of this that are poor examples that I can pull from other places, but nothing that really gives me any meaningful information. And I can look up as much as I can manage on the library computer, but that's pretty limited, and I'm in small town Pennsylvania. Where do I go for information on health, sexuality in general?

This is not a discrete phenomenon without connection to the rest of the BDSM participants drive toward BDSM inclusion – earlier in this paper I have discussed the identification with equal rights and a distaste with the normative gendered system, or at very least with the limits placed on expression that are required within that system. There is no disconnect. Conceptions of what normativity looks like and requires are directly connected to egalitarian ideals. The normative system appears to BDSM participants as unnatural, the result of brainwashing, and potentially damaging to those who participate in concordance with the rules.

Even trying to pin down what is “normal” is difficult, as the mainstream definitions of normativity, according to some of those interviewed, are constantly changing.

Alien to the dominant narrative, discussion, acceptance, and open engagement of the sexual are the rules of BDSM inclusion. Russ (MD) explains the difference he sees between Vanilla and BDSM:

In the BDSM scene, it's more of you're taught you need to talk about things first, you need to discuss things first. It's almost the opposite where you talk about it and then do it. Whereas in the vanilla, it seems like you do it, and then you might talk about it.

Specifically about consensual activity in the vanilla model, Russ remarks:

I'd say it's more along the lines of you do it, and if they don't say no, then you know to keep going.

Jessi (TSSW) echoes a similar conception of Vanilla consent (which she feels is not really consent at all):

In the hetero vanilla world, it just was kind of like go ahead, touch it, and see if you get smacked, you know.

Our structuring institutions telegraph this version of negotiation and sexual hierarchy – a system lacking formal consent and the presumptive requirement of pre-event discussion. The BDSM participants interviewed felt that normative structure, the vanilla structure, relies then on a lack of clear sexual communication, and a great deal of guesswork on the part of the dominant class. As it was mentioned earlier in this paper, miscommunication can form the basis for unwanted sexual contact. Above we have two BDSM participants describing just that system – males are charged with attempts at sexual contact without permission, or, that permission takes the form of passivity on the part of the dominated.

BDSM participants felt that a lack of formal, open discussion concerning sexuality results from the vanilla system. Amy (Fs) speaks to the normative model of sexual negotiation:

There are things that one would think should be common sense for any new relationship, but somehow in the rest of the world, the non-BDSM world, seem to have just been ignored or people make assumptions that – people assume that there is safety, even though there isn't.

Amy continues:

Part of it is the open, honest communication thing. I really believe that that is the bedrock because you have to literally, at times, trust another person with your life. And definitely with your wellbeing. And so I think that that really does, in a lot of cases, at least, eliminate a lot of the games.

BDSM individuals explain that communication between parties is paramount to healthy sexuality, and such is missing from the normative, vanilla model of sexual negotiation. Markw (MD) expands on the importance of communication:

I think that if the relationship is more vanilla, then [frank discussion is] less acceptable because we're trying – or we're more vanilla, we're closer to that ideal, in theory. Right? And so if I say, "Hey, I'm really into electro torture," and I've got this tens unit [an electro stimulation device], and you've got this clitoris, and let's make this happen. And you say, "Dear God, that's not even the missionary position. How can you suggest that?" I think that the idea that maybe then it's okay for me to find someone else's clitoris to electro torture is probably less acceptable. So I think that the kinky relationships, for me are more open to active negotiation, what I think is a key component to, in general, a healthy relationship.

RussK (MD) also speaks to a lack of communication in the normative model:

The communication. I think that's the one area that I always see lacking in a lot of vanilla peoples' relationships is they don't all communicate the desires, the wants, the needs.

Those interviewed often cited poor communication, or an unspoken ban on communication, as the roots of dysfunction in previous vanilla-style relationships. BDSM participants believe that lack of communication leads to many issues, from unwanted sexual contact to basic relationship issues arising from a failure to communicate. Some felt bound by the vanilla system not to communicate at all.

Many participants also mentioned the idea that greater sexual communication between partners is correlated with a greater sense of self-acceptance, or vice versa.

Work toward self-acceptance is endemic to BDSM-style open sexual communication. Cameron (Ms) believes the lack of intimacy and communication native to his conceptions of the vanilla market reflects a failure in self-understanding and self-acceptance:

Sexuality is part of who you are, it's a part of human expression, It's a part of animal. And being a primate, an educated primate maybe, you can go on from there and learn to grow to love somebody else.

I don't think people who have no respect for themselves can respect others.

I don't think people who cannot love themselves can truly love another person.

Amy (Fs) shares a similar sentiment, suggesting communication is fostered by self-acceptance and open discussion in the BDSM world:

I trust that you will not cross the boundaries that we have discussed. And that if there is something that we have not discussed that either you'll check it out gradually or you'll ask me.

As opposed to being afraid to be yourself, being afraid to discuss your inner most secret desires, whatever.

Acceptance and inclusion seem to be united with - incumbent to - communication and sexual health by the BDSM community. It is also connected by BDSM participants to levels of trust between partners - BDSM people don't want to just have alternative sex, they want sex with known, trusted associates, with clear rules in place regarding safety and communication. Mark (MM) explains that failing to acknowledge natural power dynamics (the sum of open discussion) can lead to relationship failure:

It's the control that would be the biggest part of it. I mean, one person wanting to be in control and another one wanting to be controlled. I mean, when you have an equal relationship as far as sex goes, you know, you argue over who's on top, who's on the bottom, what to do, you know, or what not, that's like a whole different thing, as opposed to the way our relationship works as far as what you want to do, when you're gonna do it and how you're gonna do it.

The vanilla system is understood by the BDSM participants interviewed to be rooted in ancient gendered tradition, some of which would be considered beyond oppressive by standards today. Markw speaks to the origins of the vanilla system of sexual negotiation, and pins the current shortcomings on history:

We're not technically buying our wives anymore as men. But we are still giving them diamond rings that in the past were a promise that, "Hey, if I take your virginity, at least now you've got a couple hundred dollars if I'm leaving because you know, you're damaged goods now. I got you this rock, though. Is that cool?" And we still have that as a cultural symbol, which is hilarious to me.

In the case of our patriarchal social system, the exerciser is the masculine role played out on the flesh of those who find themselves aligned with masculinity – namely males. The one who endures, then, is the feminine role inscribed to the bodies of females. Wedding rings, and other materiel of gender and sexual hierarchy are misrecognized as legitimate – even in the face of an obviously biased historical context.

Referring back to our secretary, we can point out that while the viewer of the image may recognize the leash as a signal of oppression, the secretary doesn't. She is pretty clearly cool with what is going on. In BDSM, the secretary is a full, consensual participant. There is an undeniable replication of patriarchy in the photo – the difference here is the personal choice to partake in the system. That choice is denied females in regard to femininity in the normative system. Likewise that choice is denied males. We must play our assigned roles or face scrutiny from our peers, from society at large: the repercussions of violating the doxa.

In a sense BDSM individuals refuse to recognize certain sources of gendered oppression, symbols and meanings. The normative system – as Jessi put it, is to "reach out and see if you get smacked". This system is rejected, abandoned, or bracketed in consensual discussion, or so it seems. BDSM participants appear to take the symbolism

of normative directives and engage with them freely by choice, and in the same motion change those symbolic meanings from an unquestioned doxa into a theatrical construction – arguably lacking the power they display when unquestioned.

In spite of the rough turn the vanilla model gets from the BDSM community, the sense of inclusion and tolerance boils over even to vanilla individuals. Michael (MD) expresses the ubiquity of vanilla:

Vanilla is a very flavorful taste. It gets put in all sorts of things.

The vanilla system is understood by BDSM participants as the symbolic foundation of their own system, and in a sort of “whatever works for you” sense, they don’t take issue with individuals whom choose that lifestyle. They do however report a sense of discrimination, or a fear of it, from those who identify with the normative system.

How does vanilla hierarchy and consent compare to the models of hierarchy and power exchange found in the BDSM community?

Michael (MD) expands on his understanding of vanilla:

Vanilla is really – is a really good term, and I use it fairly often. I think it’s a fair term. I mean, it means that they like a narrow subset of the human sexuality, they’re comfortable in it, and they don’t feel a need to experiment or explore any more.

Vanilla can be considered an ideal type consisting of a narrow range of sexual and relationship format possibilities, which BDSM people see themselves as operating beyond. That narrow vision is still present in the BDSM system, buffeted on each side with further exploration and sexual adventure. Moving beyond the limits placed on society, those lines that form the vanilla versions of being, requires free communication.

There are no standard societal rules for those exploits, perhaps, so BDSM individuals must create them.

BDSM participants believe the rules of the vanilla system rely on gendered hierarchy in addition to low-communication and a lack of questioning of dominant systems. They are perhaps single views of the same device – questioning requires communication, communication requires that one violate the doxa of gender standards.

Markw (MD) offers a complete painting of “vanilla”, and the gendered inequality inherent:

So if we're going for the idealization of vanilla, in my mind, it's got a White, successful upper middle class man and woman, Bob and Mary. They've got 2.5 children. They live in a white picket fence house in the suburbs. They're probably protestant. Maybe they're Catholic, if you want to go a little extreme. And their sex is missionary, and they didn't have it before marriage, and that might lead them to post [questions to sex-related discussion sites online], but probably not because that's things that they should deal with themselves [alone] in the bedroom.

And I don't think that all people who I use the term vanilla for are that or embody that, and I certainly hope not. But I think that when I use the term vanilla, I'm thinking towards that end of if there's a spectrum, that's the end that the slider throws towards. So in that type of relationship, historically, we've got an imbalance of gender power. Right?

Non-communication and misrecognition of oppression as natural and normal work hand in hand to support the dominant system. Jessi (TSSW) associates the vanilla lifestyle with a lack of communication between partners:

In a vanilla relationship, well, there's really not much explaining to do until you – no, I don't recall ever sitting down with somebody and saying do you like, you know, oral sex? I mean, do you have a preference for doggy style or missionary?

What – I don't remember ever having that conversation. It's just that after, you know, ten times jumping in bed, you kinda learn these things of where the leg needs to go and where the knee needs to be placed. Yeah.

This stands in sharp contrast to discussions regarding position and other forms of negotiation in BDSM relationships. As Jessi puts it, she does not recall ever having a nuts-and-bolts conversation with vanilla partners in regard to the most basic elements of sexuality. A lack of communication, again, rears its head.

Extending beyond basic sexuality, relationship hierarchy issues arise from a lack of clarity over who is meant to be in charge at any given time. Michael (MD) explains his conceptions of the explicit structure of authority in BDSM relationships, and the lack of formal, consensual authority structure in vanilla relationships:

One of the primary things is it's more structured, and you have a better understanding of the roles. One of the problems that I see that a lot of vanilla folks have is they're never sure of where they are and who's supposed to take lead at any given point.

Somebody always has to take lead. And if you have a straight vanilla relationship, it's always a battle to find out who's gonna be in lead on any particular area or aspect.

Failure to acknowledge hierarchy and power roles leads to dysfunction. Chris (Md) mentions the relationship between silent vanilla hierarchy and communication:

As a hierarchy, I think that the sexual communication suffers greatly for a lack of comfort in discussing sexual matters if people aren't accustomed to it. At first, it's awkward. But also, vanilla couples seem to grow weary of each other.

Michael (MD) mentions the concept of growing weary, and the advantage of explicit communication, through which new and interesting formats of sexuality can be negotiated:

Well, it's just like in any relationship. You do the same thing over and over again, it gets boring. So after a while, it becomes a challenge to do something new and different that takes 'em to a new place.

Those interviewed mentioned boredom with the normative system, but perhaps boredom is not the exact word. It is a sense of limitations, of alienation from the possibility of a different situation. Growing weary can be understood as an extension of this boredom – finding those limits in a relationship, in the self, and then refusing to press beyond them. BDSM participants, it seems, have found a way around those limitations, and seek to explore the exciting and the dangerous outside of that which is known.

Communication, communication, communication. I repeat that word because it was repeated to me, in every interview by every participant. According to BDSM

participants, what does BDSM sexuality have that the vanilla, normative format of relationships and sexuality does not? Communication. This extends itself to trust between partners, and self-understanding and self-acceptance.

To tie this back to my earlier arguments, it seems that this emphasis on communication itself is rooted in a desire for a relationship more fulfilling than that believed to be offered by the vanilla system, deeper, or more accepting. The emphasis BDSM individuals place on equality is reflected between partners, according to BDSM individuals, requires communication, frank understanding of power dynamics, and an openness found to be lacking what BDSM participants consider the vanilla world.

Scarlet (FD) explains the differences she has noticed between vanilla and BDSM sexualities:

The major difference that I've noticed is the level of communication. You're forced to communicate here. And just you can't get away from it. Yes. A lot of vanilla relationships people end up, you know, not really knowing each other. You have to be able to tell someone your limits, and how you're going to respond to certain things.

Jen (Fs) expresses the connection between communication between partners and acceptance of self:

Yeah. Trust in yourself and really, you know, trust because that then allows you to trust other people, you know, when you find yourself, whatever that is.

Yeah. It grows your intimacy, it grows your relationship with yourself, it enriches your relationships with other people. Your life isn't as chaotic

and as fucked up and dysfunctional, you know, whenever you can like learn to accept yourself and then accept other people.

Beyond simple communication, being open to such allows a couple to better negotiate the needs and desires of either partner, perhaps this works as a safety against growing weary in the relationship. Markw (MD) speaks to the importance of communication for healthy relationships in general:

I think that the idea of being very open to negotiation is a value that I find more often in the BDSM community in terms of forging sexual relationships. Are more open to active negotiation, what I think is a key component to, in general, a healthy relationship.

Openness, communication, trust, and self-knowledge are concepts that relate to overall tolerance and acceptance, Russ (MD) believes levels of tolerance are lacking in the vanilla world when compared to the BDSM scene:

Tolerance. Most people in BDSM, I think, are more tolerant. Tolerance. Again, because we're talking about a group of people who aren't – who are in a minority, I think they tend to be a little more tolerant, in general. There's always the exceptions, of course.

I think sort of being comfortable with who and what a person is would also be – yeah, those two things. Tolerance and self-acceptance.

Again we see this emphasis on communication and self-acceptance, Scarlet (FD) remarks on what vanilla people could learn from BDSM people:

They should pull from us how not to judge. Just because it's not your thing, you don't have the right to pass judgment on someone else.

It is a mess, hard to suss out the beginning from the end. At one point we are talking about communication, about self-acceptance, at the same time we are talking about the benefits these provide relationships, and the detriment it offers relationships that lack it. And also, at the same time, BDSM individuals are suggesting that these things are connected, intrinsic to each other – greater communication requires greater self-acceptance, requires greater tolerance of the other, and greater courage to out ones desires and needs, to air grievances in a relationship. And yet even still, these are connected to a sense of equality between partners in regard to the everyday, in regard to individual path and life.

All of the above, it was stated by participants, lends itself to a greater freedom of expression in the relationship, and acknowledgement of the power dynamic native to any interpersonal interaction. Amy (Fs) states what BDSM relationships have that vanilla relationship lack:

Freedom of self-expression. Freedom from game playing, which messes up lots of relationships at different stages of relationships. Tolerance.

Amy extends this to self-acceptance:

I really do think that – you know, one of the things that I said about myself was that I feel more self-confident, and that's because not only am I accepted for who I am by my master, by my peers, whatever, I've accepted me.

Self-acceptance is linked to tolerance and openness, which in turn are linked to communication between partners. Kashmira (Fs) explains why she prefers a BDSM lifestyle:

Just simply because I don't have to be afraid as to what I say or do or who I am because I consider myself to be part of the BDSM lifestyle or the BDSM culture. And I was in a vanilla relationship, a couple of them, and I was not accepted for who I am. So to me, I just know that whatever my kink is, at any given point, it might be different, it might be odd, but it's not going to be looked down upon of like oh, my gosh, look at you. Or look how much of a freak you are.

Jessi (TSSW) expresses the same sentiment:

I see much more respect for one another's personal life choices [in BDSM].

And yet BDSM participants find a paradox of communication in the vanilla system, Jen (Fs) talks about this:

The people who are in vanilla relationships, a lot of them, you know, your typical vanilla relationship, they are kind of like bitching about their partner, I'm miserable, but then they won't talk about anything to make it better.

You know, it's very selfish. It's very, you know, bah, bah, bah, bah, bah, bah, and, you know, the communication level just doesn't seem to be as high of a standard as it is in the BDSM.

Finding 6: Disinclusion

BDSM actors tend to speak about being gently pressed out of what they consider vanilla lifestyles, or choosing to abandon it after a failure to integrate – it does not read as a formal ejection or removal, but a slow and steady set of cues that press one out of the

vanilla, normative system. Hence, exclusion is not quite the right word with which to frame expulsion from the vanilla system. Rather, a common theme found within my pool of participants is better referred to as Vanilla Disinclusion. There are forces working on both sides of the BDSM identified individual – forces that attract one to BDSM (covered later) and forces that evict one from the dominant scripting. Participants offered a variety of social and emotional reasons for leaving what they consider the vanilla script behind. The most light-hearted reasons were centered on the perceived monotonous tone to vanilla sex.

Chris (MD) sums up this sentiment:

I think it's the variety. It's the – I find the vanilla fine, but limited.

Jessi (TSSW) cites a similar source of disinterest in the vanilla world, citing elements of sexual adventure available to the non-vanilla participant:

Toys. Toys and/or positions

Jessi and Chris both sum up the lack of variety and “sexual adventure” that they themselves find important or necessary in sexuality and relationships. Perhaps it could be conceived of as the possibility of adventure, the possibility of variety that BDSM individuals do not find in the normative system. Sexual adventure, variety; these are arguably only possible in a relationship built on communication, on forthrightness – the very issues illustrated in the preceding section.

A lack of variety gets associated with closed-mindedness as well. Scarlet (FD) expresses as much:

I think the vanilla world is very closed-minded. That's the biggest thing.

You know, the first word that came to mind when you were asking that was it's boring.

The closed-mindedness perceived in the vanilla system is not always a matter of boredom, it can be debilitating to those it affects. Jessi explains how her identity was at odds with society:

You know, my kink was – really had me in a fucking bind up in my fucking head until I started going out and realizing that hey, this isn't a terrible, horrible thing.

Without frank discussion and communication, in a dearth of tacit acknowledgement of the sexual script, Jessi was relegated to a lonesome form of self-denial, unable to even articulate her identity to herself.

Jessi has her gender identity to contend with, and the lack of communication and acceptance she experienced in the normative, vanilla system aided her interest in escape from it. Mark (MM) has a far more normative background, but speaks similarly about living the vanilla system and the limitations of sexuality and communication he found within it:

Every time I tried to get a little kinky, they would like turn it off. And, I mean, a lot of the things – being the creative type that I was, it – I mean, I guess being married, having a kid, you know, you kind of do what you have to do and you keep on going, but here again, all the, I guess, things in my head that I never understood.

The vanilla system, as described by BDSM participants interviewed, in requiring silence, does not even allow a platform for individuals to discuss or out their non-normative desires. This can lead to a kind of personal cognitive dissonance, as expressed by both Jessi and Mark above.

What causes the silence? Why is it so taboo for lovers, who presumably should be sharing most everything, to discuss kink? Amy (Fs) seems to think this silent proscription against communication has to do with fear of reprisal from one's partner:

Gee, I think just like in many areas of a marriage, people find out that they're not as compatible as they once thought they were or they have an experience that opens their eyes to something that either they don't believe their partner would engage in or their partner or spouse get approached, and has said ooh, icky, no

Outside of a fear of stigma from one's partner, the vanilla system is conceived of as being rife with dysfunction. Jen (Fs) relates this back to the earlier offerings about communication and self-acceptance, about what she calls authenticity:

It's just, you know, I've tried vanilla. I'm horribly miserable. There's too many unknowns. You know, there's too many opportunities to – because it's kind of – to me, vanilla is, you know, the – looking at the divorce rates, looking at the cheating rates, looking, you know – looking at the abuse rates and things like that, like that just scares the shit out of me to like be with somebody who doesn't know how to be authentic, you know, with themselves and doesn't know themselves. It scares the crap out of me.

Scarlet (FD) thinks she knows where the fear of reprisal comes from, and she expresses the solution that the BDSM community offers:

I think we're conditioned [by society] to think of ourselves as freaks, and all of a sudden, there are all these other freaks around us, and we're not so freaky anymore.

Community inclusion leads BDSM identified individuals to a place of self-acceptance. The fear of reprisal between partners melts away when both partners enter the relationship on equal kinky ground, or so BDSM participants express.

The self-acceptance and communication between partners cited as present in the BDSM community and lacking in the normative system, we have seen, can lead to difficulty with the self in situations outside the mainstream. Erin (FTSW) explains how it has been hard to accept her own identity:

This is who I am, that I look at these patterns and I don't know. I wouldn't – When my husband and I separated for real I went to a therapist for a year. We were talking about my control issues. And I guess he made me see that it's okay to have these control issues as long as the other person is okay with it too.

For the “other person to be okay with it”, a relationship requires frank and open communication and acceptance; a fearlessness with one's partner – this fearlessness is reported by BDSM participants as nonexistent in the normative, dominant system of sexual negotiation and relationship format.

BDSM participants believe the vanilla system not only discourages communication and acknowledgement of power dynamics, it seeks to obscure that such

structures even exist. Amy (Fs) explains that a lack of clear structure in the normative world frightened her:

My parents believed in me, they – this is not in the way of bragging, but when I was in junior high school, they took me to – we lived in a tiny town of North Central Pennsylvania, and they took me to St. Bonaventure University and had me do all kinds of intelligence and other kinds of tests, and I was told that I could do anything that I wanted to do, but the only thing that would stop me would be myself. And that scared the shit out of me. Because I could do anything. That means I have to.

Amy's disagreement with vanilla (non) directives does not end with self-expression. She argues that the vanilla system is inherently dangerous:

I think it's more naïve. It's sort of like bad things can't happen. But in this subculture, I guess, it's explicit that things aren't always safe. And that you shouldn't give your trust immediately. You shouldn't – you know, that you should use common sense, that you should do your homework, check the background, do, you know, all that kind of stuff.

The normative system presses non-standardly aligned individuals out of it, and at the same time sends messages as to what is normal, what is permissible, and what violates the rules. Dominant directives assert normativity in elements seemingly outside of sexual negotiation, unless we consider gender presentation to be intrinsic to said negotiation, as we do. Jessi (TSSW) found media depictions of transgendered individuals to be misleading:

That's when I first noticed that – you know, even though I was not trans identified at the time, I thought how strange, and that that could be interpreted as all people who do that are serial killers and stuff, and that's not – that's in no way true.

Jessi expands on the representation of alternative sexuality and kink in mainstream media:

Jessi: Yeah. Because it – the bad guy's always keeping a slave chained up in the, you know – what's the SVU.

Interviewer: SVU?

Jessi: TV show. Doing, doing show, you know.

Interviewer: Doing, doing?

Jessi: Doing, doing.

Interviewer: Oh, doing, doing!

Jessi: You know, the sound they always make during the show.

Interviewer: Yes.

Jessi: During the segues, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Jessi: But yeah. They're murderers, usually have somebody tied up in the frickin' closet.

As I have illustrated: BDSM participants believe lack of communication in the vanilla system is rooted in attempts to maintain the status quo. Questioning the rules, be they rules for sexual discourse or rules pertaining to gender expression, threaten to

challenge hegemonic forms of sexual negotiation. To throw genderbending into the mix only increases the volume with which one questions the answers.

The structure of the dominant system remains unquestioned, in that it is not questioned, discussed, and certainly not acknowledged that the system exists as such. In fact, scripture, tradition, culture, and other widespread social institutions legitimate the dominant system. Any challenge to these rules is met with some form of discrimination from normative social actors who have internalized the normative ruleset. For a time, BDSM interest, along with other kinks, were medicalized as a psychological disorder. This perception is pervasive in the normative/dominant world. The system defends itself; the actions and modes of challenging the system, or of simple acknowledgement that dominance and submission are intrinsic parts of the standard system, are met with discrimination from within the very same system: actions that might reveal the oppressive nature of the normative system are met with extreme scrutiny by individuals who operate within the confines of normativity.

Markw (MD) explains the difference between BDSM participation and real psychopathy, specifically the diagnoses of sadism and masochism in the DSM-IV:

I think that the fact that those are there, and I think that they're there not to diagnose people who are into kinky stuff, ideally, but to help people who feel like they're out of control in terms of their wants and needs and desires, and that that those people definitely I think should be and are deserving of psychological help. But I think that that also generates a misunderstanding around what is this, and just because I like to spank my

girlfriend doesn't mean that I'm going to kidnap and torture someone in my evil sex dungeon.

I might kidnap and torture someone in my evil sex dungeon, and in fact have, but they were into it. So that's fine.

Bourdieu sites the family, the church, the state, and the educational system as sources of dominant normative modes of being; habitus (1991, 2001). Above I have outlined some of what my interviewees said about the role that the mass media had played in their conceptions of normative sexuality. What about the family structure? How have the specifics of family pressed or pulled on our actors?

Jen (Fs) was raised to distrust men:

I was raised by a mother who she and my father divorced when I was seven, my father passed when I was nine, she never remarried, and she had a very, very bad view of men. I was raised to be a man hater, do not trust, they are bad, you know, man, bad.

Scarlet (FD) also cites issues in the home growing up:

I've always thought [BDSM interest and a dominant role choice] came from the fact that my mother was so controlling. When I was a child, I had no control over my life whatsoever.

Mark (MM) explains how his upbringing affected his conceptions of gender and sexuality:

I – being a little older, I actually grew up in a '50s household where my dad basically ruled with an iron fist. It was just my mom, my brother, myself and my dad. But not really knowing, I mean, that's the way I grew

up. That's the way things were. And I saw it, but, you know, I'd never really thought that my dad was, you know, training my mother, getting her to do what – you know, the way things were.

And any relationship that I was in – I mean, I was married for ten years, and, you know, it just didn't work

Mark has used his background as a basis of constructing a working consensual model, based roughly on idealized “1950's” family structure. BDSM power exchange relationships can be structured any way participants wish to construct them. Mark explains:

Basically, I'm in control of anything that goes on in the household as far as who makes decisions. I mean, we do have things that we talk about or discuss or discuss and decide which direction we want to go, but basically, you know, '50s household. I have the ultimate say-so as far as, you know, what the end result is.

And we do have things in place as far as how we handle discussions, how she is to address me, or if there's something that we talk about, there are specific ways of doing it.

Experiences growing up and being raised and personal history affect those who choose a BDSM lifestyle. In some cases individuals attempt to recreate the systems that brought them up, such as Mark, above, creating a “50's household”, within the safety and consensual model of BDSM consent. Others, such as Scarlet (also above) have flipped the script the other direction, taking a feeling of being controlled and replacing it with a chosen dominant role in BDSM. The family structure one experiences growing up does

not necessarily dictate BDSM alignment, however the BDSM aligned are likely to be reworking, restructuring, or perhaps coping with the structures they experienced at home.

Erin (FTSW) explains her familial religious background and path it set her down in regard to her sexuality and BDSM identification:

I was younger I used to have fantasies about non-consent situations, because my parents were very Catholic and I don't necessarily – I didn't see it and I still kind of don't see it as BDSM, so to speak. But I saw it as, "I could have sex like this, and then I wouldn't get in trouble for it".

Because that control was taken from me and I had no power or say about it.

Erin is a “toppy switch”, but grew up with sexual fantasies rooted in non-consent, due to proscriptions against sexuality in general. Power and control became linked to sexuality for her, as she grew into her sexuality and adulthood. In a Bourdieusian sense, the symbol set of sexuality she internalized included the idea that sex was bad, to be avoided – yet it was something she wanted. It is this dissonance of symbolic meaning and personal desire that leads the BDSM individual to revolt, to attempt to redefine and rework the meanings attached to sexual symbolism.

The secretary in the opening narrative may be dealing with a similar dissonance: attempting to present femininity, to own it, in the face of a system that requires it. More than just shaving her legs and dolling herself up, she chooses, temporarily, to express her femininity through submission via clearly defined symbols. In this way, she takes the silence of the doxa and turns it up to blaring volume. It should be no wonder that critics of BDSM emote incredulity upon seeing such a scene – it makes the oppression of the everyday tacit.

BDSM individuals, once outed as such, face various forms of ridicule from dominant, “normative” actors, the aforementioned Bourdieusian doxosophers. Jen (Fs) relates a situation at work in past that shaped her expression:

I was up for a promotion, and somebody that I was – who had – I don’t even know how. This was seven years ago. She had found out somehow ‘cause we were working the same shifts, and she – you know, she was lesbian, and we were talking about different things. And I had a little handcuff keychain from the MDA lock-up things or whatever.

And she – I didn’t realize she as playing double agent and was telling my bosses and – but also trying to get me information. But I got called in and was threatened with a loss of promotion if I didn’t stop my evil and immoral ways. Yeah.

I straightened up, flew right, got myself a vanilla boyfriend and was parading him around, and like, you know, whew-hoo, I’m not – you know, I’m not kinky, and eliminated everything. And that lasted about six months, and I was just dying inside.

Kashmira (Fs) has had similar experiences negotiating her identity with vanilla individuals and the normative model of sexuality:

You spring it upon someone one day like wait. I want to do this, and they’re totally caught off guard. Like I’ve known you for twenty years, and suddenly you want to dress in women’s underwear, you know? I mean, whereas that’s like the vanilla world, oh, my God, you know, but that would just be the normal kind of like American way of looking at sex

The violation of the normative system works various machineries. The doxa, once violated, is met with sanctions and scrutiny. Even in situations where others may accept BDSM lifestyle choices, there is a perceived fear of reprisal that keeps individuals quiet and forces them to hide their kink. Markw (MD) offers us a theoretical scenario that echoes the statement above, speaking to the potential of embarrassment for those with alternative sexual lifestyles:

Well, a lot of vanillas are people who are not kinky, don't really understand what's going on, and I can't even tell my boss about this because I work for a church and I'll get fired, or if my mother knew this, or if my wife knew that I did this stuff.

Or God forbid, my kids ever see any pictures, that my life would be ruined because there is a lot of misunderstanding around that type of sexual activity.

The pressures pressing BDSM individuals are getting confusing, no? So far we have seen that misalignment with the normative system due to personal ethics, history, experience, or interests presses the BDSM aligned individual out of normativity – at the same time the inclusion and frankness and implicitness of communication and acceptance in the BDSM community invite them in – assuming they are similarly aligned in regard to ethics and equal rights.

Violation of the doxa, in addition to moving the BDSM individual out of normativity and into kink, also displays to others that such violation is possible.

Normative actors (doxosophers) respond with discrimination.

Kashmira expands on her employment situation:

Well, I mean, you know, I don't appreciate how some of the non – how the vanilla world looks upon the way he and I might be. I mean, if family found out, if job found out, something like that, that could have serious consequences for me.

I work for a publically traded company, and they're pretty strict. We get Good Friday off. Yeah. So I'm not – you know, that type of thing could – I look at them with a little suspicion, in general, you know. Like can I trust them?

Trusting vanilla-aligned actors can be dangerous, or so BDSM individuals perceive it – there is too much to lose. It may sound vitriolic, but it can be understood as a threat to livelihood – if you are outside the sexual norm, worse yet if you display as much, you can lose your access to work, and by extension food, housing, and the other necessities of life.

Scarlet (FD) reflects the above fear of vanilla reprisal:

I think it's more about a cautious attitude towards [normative people].

How they're going to perceive us and view us and, you know.

It is not always “negative” interactions that drive people out of vanilla. In the case of Cameron (Ms) he was plucked from the vanilla scene too early to fully internalize it. Here he explains how his first consensual sexual experience influenced his person:

The first time, by choice, I had penetrative sex, it was with four Hispanic men. I was in Guadalajara, Mexico. They were different from what I was. They said would you like to do this? Which was – okay, they said [speaking in Spanish]. Me and my friends, male friends.

In spite of identifying as never being normative or mainstream, Cameron has some choice statements about the role of religion in keeping the dominant normative sexual scripts dominant:

Okay. Ducks, rams, zillions of animals have homosexual relationships. Chimpanzees. Their cousins Bonobos. Yeah. They're out there, but yet, most of the church denies that homosexuality is normal, but yet, it occurs in species after species of animals. Okay. So I don't think that normal sexuality and religion necessarily walk hand in hand.

I don't think they're even wearing the same yoke. One's dragging the other one kicking and screaming behind it.

Religious institutions are one of the sources of the doxa, as defined by Bourdieu. In regard to religious interpretations of normative sexuality, Markw (MD) explains how BDSM identification might lead to greater breadth of sexual exploration:

I'm going to hell, so I can do things that would send me to hell that I might be worried would send me to hell if I was still hoping to not go there.

The reverse side of this coin exists and is in need of mention. Not only do forces press individuals out of the normative world (by attempting to corral them back in, perhaps), other forces draw individuals out, and into the BDSM world. There is a sense of belonging that some BDSM individuals felt, as if they found a place where they could be themselves, that these elements that drew them to BDSM were intrinsic parts of their being, yet only now allowed to flourish. As I have outlined, forces of discrimination and enforced silence, disagreement with the static gendered hierarchy of the normative

system pressed my participants out of the normative relationship format. At the same time, the BDSM community offers itself as an inclusive group, tolerant, accepting, and frank. Two sets of forces, pressing and pulling.

In regard to the forces that pull one into BDSM, Scarlet (FD) gives us a sense of her feelings of inclusion in BDSM and exclusion from the vanilla system:

Scarlet: I did so much of this just on my own, just whatever came naturally. And now that there's so many resources and other stuff that I never considered before.

Interviewer: Did you feel alone before?

Scarlet: Yes.

Interviewer: Do you feel alone now?

Scarlet: No.

Beyond acceptance, tolerance, and inclusion, some individuals describe feeling “at home” in the BDSM scene, as if they finally found their place, or a situation in which their sexual interests make sense. Jen (Fs) describes the moment she discovered her identity made sense in a BDSM framework:

I found the Steel Door discussion [online], which are all articles and essays on the different psychological effects and psychology of power exchange.

And that's where I started to be like holy shit. They're describing me.

Jen's path from there led her to an online group focused on BDSM:

I just started reading from there. Got myself on Alt.com. Met a few really wacky people, but then found myself in service to a dominant couple, master/mistress.

Forces push and pull BDSM individuals into the BDSM lifestyle. At the same time, fear of reprisal from normative individuals reinforce the walls built around the BDSM community – not only is one accepted in the BDSM community, but reminded that normative individuals can out you, can literally ruin your life, if they find out. This serves, arguably, to strengthen the community and keep BDSM identities esoteric and hidden. Individuals like Cameron describe going out of their way to violate the doxa in full view of normative individuals, others, like Kashmira fear for their livelihood and dare not expose their kinky sides too fully.

Inclusion

The reverse side of the vanilla disinclusion coin is inclusion in the BDSM scene. After discovering and beginning to articulate non-normative sexuality, access to a community of like-minded others completes the initiation into the BDSM community. The BDSM community appears to be open, tolerant, and accessible, as long as the axiom of “Safe, Sane, and Consensual” is maintained and respected.

From a Bourdieusian standpoint, the community offers alternative meanings of the symbols of sexual negotiation. The doxa of sexual negotiation, and the hidden arbitrary nature of our “natural” gendered sexual negotiation scripts are formally abandoned, reworked, inverted, redefined, or obliterated by new definitions and symbolic meanings.

Acceptance and tolerance are tantamount to BDSM inclusion. Required, it seems.

Amy (Fs) expresses the benefits she has discovered in the BDSM community; tolerance, acceptance:

...and that is one of the best things that I have ever experienced is the freedom to be, and be accepted.

Amy continues:

I think that, by and large, the BDSM community, because it is so varied in what fetishes are practiced that there is – it's not universal, by far, but there's a high degree of acceptance of diversity of whatever sort. You know, whether it's who – you know, whether it's male – female is the dominant one in the relationship, whether it's only play, whether it's – you know, like it's sort of like the attitude that I have run across is it might not be my thing, but if it's theirs, as long as it's safe, sane and consensual, who cares?

Chris (Md) speaks to the inclusion in the BDSM community;

I can't think of a better way to put it. The BDSM community is open to so many different activities. People interpret BDSM in their own way.

Everybody's different. And those who choose a much more conventional lifestyle there's nothing wrong with that.

There's no reason for someone in our community to complain to them and say, you know, they're wrong, you know.

Participants cited first the idea that everyone brings their own personality and interests to the table, and that those people are no more deserving of disrespect than they themselves. Everyone is different, and as long as what they enjoy fits the "Safe, Sane,

and Consensual” mantra, the BDSM community seems to support them. RussK (MsSW) sums up the limits of inclusion:

Well, yeah, in the BDSM scene, I think it’s safer in the way of you can dress how you want, you can pretty much act how you want, so long as you are not hindering someone else or getting down on someone else.

Why is inclusion important? It might seem like this paper has wandered away from the stated goal: mapping the model of sexual consent. I have argued elsewhere earlier in this text that to understand the consent model one must attempt to understand the circumstances that collude to produce it. One of these is group inclusion, further above I have outlined that one determines their sexual tastes are outside of acceptable forms, then discover the BDSM community. The process of discovery, of inclusion in the social world around BDSM, brings with it a greater sense of personal ethics, the limits of acceptable forms of alternative sexuality.

Inclusion into the BDSM community requires that one exhibit the same level of tolerance and acceptance of the other as the rest of the community. Tolerance and acceptance, in turn, are rooted in the same ethical foundation that informs desire for egalitarian lifestyles – the same ethical foundation that aids in the creation of the consent model, by placing importance on the agency of each individual, forms the rules of community inclusion. They are interconnected in a way that makes each party to the other.

BDSM identified individual seem to have felt marginalized, abnormal, and alone. The path to inclusion has been paved in various ways, yet the root of it is the same

emphasis on equality that requires the formality of the consent model. They are elements of the same device.

Finding 7: Group Maintenance

An unexpected theme was the level to which conceptions of sexual consent were built into the community identity. The BDSM community self-polices against individuals who might abuse others or break certain group-taboos. The community builds education into its events and public meetings to the point that they become endemic.

Like Inclusion, Group Maintenance is an extension, or a reflection, of the general emphasis on consent and equality that BDSM individuals seem to express. Keeping tabs on those in the community make the whole community that much stronger, and that much safer as people have a greater hand in whom they choose to spend time around. If BDSM is about replicating normative authority structures through theater with known associates, Group Maintenance is about vetting and evaluating those known associates.

Many that I interviewed regularly attend BDSM themed events where they engage as students and teachers of obscure sexual practices and explicit consent. The nature of BDSM events seems to almost always include some facet of education and group direction – this would be the Bourdieusian redefinition of symbolism that is so important to a movement attempting to change the dominant paradigm of sexual discourse and negotiation. Again, I am describing what I find to be a rainbow, not a set of disconnected colors. It is a single machine, and group maintenance is just another part.

Individuals take it upon themselves to vet new-interested parties as they enter the community. This vetting seems to be mostly informal feeling-out of new individuals as

they enter the community. Individuals are informally vetted for mental soundness and commitment to the community.

Mark (MM) speaks to the expectations he places on new people in regard to honesty and openness:

And just the thought of that with some of these other people, no, no, you can't talk to my wife. You can't talk to my husband. They're not gonna be part of this. Well, if you can't – if they can't be a part of what's going on, then we're not gonna get involved.

Mark and his slave, Jen, both vet new members of the community and new play partners. His interest in honesty and openness between the new person and their vanilla partner appear to be an extension of the emphasis placed on frank openness and discussion, comfort and equality.

Formalized vetting of new people takes place as well, in the form of community leaders, “dungeon moderators” and bouncers at events to keep unsafe practices out. Markw (MD) shares some details about a community activity he attends that is done with serious attention to those whom attend:

At that type of private party, that venue, there's no specific rules because it's a private party. Genitals are fine. Penetration is fine, and there can be some pretty extreme play, and I think that one of the reasons that the guy who organizes it does it as a private invite only thing is to say, “All of the people that are coming here are cool, and no one is going to out you. No one is really worried, and if someone sees something that's a little too

extreme for them or that they're having trouble with, that's fine, but no one is going to try to interrupt as long as nothing needs to be interrupted".

The event is invite-only, and those whom are invited are held to a high standard. Dungeon monitors still prowl the event, and will put a stop to anything that is not "Safe, Sane, and Consensual".

The BDSM community concerns itself with education of its members. Individuals not interested in learning proper and safe technique are unwelcome. Classes generally deal with construction of equipment, use of equipment, proper safe technique in regard to everything BDSM. Classes also offer BDSM community members a chance to check out new practices and concepts in the fetish world. Mark (MM) explains his position:

So anything that we would pick up, people would discuss. I mean, a lot of the groups, when they get together, they have safety discussions. We have people that'll – say, someone will come in and do a needle demo for the night. People like to play with knives, cut people, different things.

Even though they will give their discussion on what they do and how they do it, they will also go over the safety aspects, the dos, the don'ts, the things to look out for, toys to play with, things not to use. And they will explain why.

We go over health issues as far as playing with someone that's on certain medications, people that have certain heart problems, allergies. So no matter what we've learned or picked up, it's always been an accumulative thing that we've picked up over the year with all the different events and places that we've gone to, which we do monthly.

The community pushes those uninterested in growth and learning to the periphery, or completely out of the group. The new meanings associated with symbolism are shared in these educational settings, in a Bourdieusian sense. Here Jen (Fs) explains her feelings toward those who don't want to commit themselves to understanding the community:

Because there are so many people that are kind of like weekend warriors, you know, that are really nice people, but they're just not – they're just in it just to kind of, you know, get their rocks off or, you know, they're not really interested in education and growing and building stuff. So we kind of are just like okay, you be nice, we'll be nice to you, but, you know, we'll really then believe you after two years, you know.

The Bourdieusian analysis of this point is that the community offers symbolic meanings and symbolic modes of being and expression that allow for a safe, sane, and consensual expression of BDSM identity. If one is not interested in adopting these frames – checks and balances – one is not invited to stay long.

The overall theme of this paper is that the consent model is related to an individual's sense of ethics and equality at odds with the dominant system, which is not explicit in tenor and based on inequality between individuals based on assigned gender. Formal and informal vetting of new, interested parties is an extension of this interest in forging a new system. BDSM seems to take the symbolism of the normative system, make it more obvious, and then utilize those symbolic meanings in a temporary, consensual format – with various checks against abuse (such as the safe word).

The community, in coming together to create and reinforce these new meanings, and the absolute importance of informed consent, requires new members be willing to internalize these new meanings, and most importantly have an active interest in consent.

According to those I interviewed, gatekeeping is common. Some individuals hold a vigil against those who might come into the community and make trouble, break the rules, or who otherwise “just don’t get it”. I ran into a bit of this myself when I initially reached out through Fetlife.com for potential participants. The first people I interviewed were dominant figures in the community – a recent winner of a local distinction in the BDSM community, and the founders of a local chapter of an international Master/slave enthusiast community. After meeting with them, being “checked out” as it were, they encouraged others to speak with me. The BDSM community has a history of being medicalized and discriminated against by conservatives of sexual and religious flavors, so this gatekeeping was expected and not out of place or unusual.

Introductions

The BDSM consent model is learned and shared within the BDSM community, itself a reflection of the egalitarian interest of those participating. I want to illustrate the entryways to BDSM awareness, of the community and personal interest, reported by my interviewees, as I believe it is worthy of overview in relation to other data presented.

According to those interviewed, there are two phases of BDSM introduction: the first is when an individual senses they are different from the mainstream, which in some cases happens during an informal introduction to concepts and ideas associated with BDSM, the second is actual introduction to a BDSM community of like-minded individuals.

Above I pointed to Cameron's early life experiences for an understanding of disinclusion from the normative world. Cameron is not the typical case, but worth noting, here he details his introduction, his initiation:

I went off to boarding school, and every time I got in trouble, my teacher would pull my pants down to spank me 'cause it was a boarding school, and, you know, in different countries, they have different practices.

And he would get excited while he was spanking me. So I would get in trouble as often as possible because I got turned on by the whole thing, and that's when I started.

Cameron is the outlier of this study. I do not wish to dwell on him too long, but will reinforce that he grew to be the most outspoken, most vocal political activist, living a life very integrated with progressive leftist social change and the social wellbeing.

Most of my sample discovered an interest in BDSM in youth through media exposure or personal interest, spent a period of time at odds with it, and then discovered the BDSM community – Cameron, above, was turned on and plugged in during the same set of events; unusual compared to the rest of my sample, most of whom discovered BDSM through media.

The most common avenue of discovery of BDSM interest was reported to be through various channels of the mass media. A grouping of my sample discovered BDSM themes their interest in such through fictional literature, some tame and some wild.

Kashmira (Fs) explains a general lack of information about sexuality outside of what she found hidden in her mothers' books:

I grew up in a really strict, conservative household, so we didn't read that stuff. It was whatever – like I'd sneak one of mom's like bodice rippers and read through it, you know, this heaving chest type thing.

Fictional erotic literature was cited as the source of BDSM awareness by several of my participants. Here Cameron (Ms) was given the Sleeping Beauty series, written under a pseudonym by Anne Rice (of The Vampire Lestat fame), by his mother:

Well, when I came back during the summer, she [mother] had bought for me the Cinderella books, I think the Cinderella – Sleeping Beauty books, the ones that talk about BDSM, what happened after Sleeping Beauty got there.

Brent (MsSW) mentions the same books as a source of awareness:

[In] one of my relationships actually, um – My girlfriend asked me to read the Anne Rice books, the Beauty books.

Scarlet (FD) found the same:

I was at one of my jobs, and I was having trouble with my computer, and I called the help desk, which was several states away. And the guy gets on the computer remotely, and he's fixing stuff. And he's like tell me something interesting about yourself. And I said I like vampires. And he was like really? Who's your favorite author? And I said Anne Rice. And he's like oh, do you know about her other books? Yes. And it's referring to the "Sleeping Beauty Trilogy".

The Sleeping Beauty Trilogy is an example of fictional literature opening the eyes of those who read them – introductions not to the BDSM community, but to the BDSM

lifestyle, or elements thereof. Michael (MD) also found BDSM themes first in fiction, through a series called Gor:

The Gor Series was a series of books written by an author who was writing under the pseudonym John Norman. And it dealt with a counter – or a planet that like earth, it was in direct opposition to us, and it was related to the sun. It was controlled by this group of insect aliens called the Priest Kings, and they kept the human population there down to a futile state and didn't allow the development of gunpowder 'cause they thought that was all sorts of bad.

And one of the things that was inherent in this society is most women were considered slaves of one [kind] or another, either sex slaves, galley slaves, kitchen slaves, stuff like that. And it was – yeah, as I read more of it and as I got – read more stuff and I got my own experience, it became clear he was writing about what he saw as almost the natural order compared to how if we were more analytistic [sic] and more with our more base roots.

And how it was sort of a release from how civilized we'd gotten and almost relaxing back into a natural state. And it was also a good fantasy sword-fighting series.

Although the Gor series dealt with female slaves, Michael states it was not necessarily eroticized:

It was not very erotic. He didn't dwell on the eroticism of it, though there was some of that. I would even say it got into the realm of soft porn. It

was more detailing how the different groups of people, different civilizations interacted off of that one basis that women were actually slaves, and how the different groups would develop civilization and what sort of ideals and rules they would develop amongst themselves.

The Gor series, according to Michael, was written more around the concepts of power and agency, about a world in which females are formally slaves, formally second class – this seems a bit of a departure from the normative system in which women are second class, formally even, yet not formally slaves. There is perhaps an opportunity for critical analysis of this literature in that it fictionalizes and portrays in clear terms the worst possible assessment of the normative gendered sexual hierarchy.

Some of the fiction participants reported being exposed to be not so obvious in its portrayal of BDSM. Exposure to mainstream pornography that included BDSM themes was cited by a few of my interviewees. Exposure to mainstream television with pseudo-pornographic BDSM themes was cited more often.

Jessi (TSSW) explains her moment of BDSM awareness:

Well, I don't know whether I got my first glimpse of kink from television or porn.

You know, it was the early days of HBO when I was – maybe I saw something there, but it kind of like ooh, that kind of sense like ooh, what – that's kind of like interesting.

Jessi found interest in these elements through mainstream, albeit racy media sources. HBO was one of the first cable movie channels, so perhaps we should not be

shocked that bondage themes were present as the channel fished for ratings against other channels.

BDSM themes were present in more mainstream sources; Russ (MD) discovered them through cartoons:

I think it was the Underdog cartoons. But anyhow, remember when she was frequently tied to the [railroad track]? I was just extremely fascinated with that. So there was something there from early on.

Other individuals found BDSM through interactions in youth that placed them in situations of constraint, and control, IE: bondage and dominance. One mentioned being in a situation in which a female student was wrapped up in paper as an ersatz mummy costume for Halloween.

Discovery

The second phase of BDSM introduction is actually discovering that there is a community of individuals who share similar predilections, who have found a way to incorporate them into their lives.

Participants explained that generally there are non-sexualized events called “Munches” that take place, usually at restaurants, at which individuals can meet each other and discuss future events, community politics, and other criteria associated with the BDSM community. These events offer a two way introduction in that not only do new interested parties get to meet the existing community, the existing community has a chance to vet the newly interested parties. This is part of the gatekeeping system outlined below in the group maintenance section.

Outside of “Munch” events, there are sexualized, publically-open “fetish night” events, usually held at bars or similar establishments. Jessi (TGSW) explained going to one such event:

A large trans contingent from Pittsburgh was supposed to go. They were supposed to all meet up at the Blue Moon [then go to a bar in neighboring town of Irwin], they’re gonna go out to this fetish night. I also may have got the word through the grapevine too.

But I went out there. Instead of going down and meeting the Blue Moon and then coming all the way back to Irwin, I would just go to Irwin and meet up with ‘em there, and nobody showed up.

And I’m there with all these kinky people. I’m watching ‘em get spanked and nipples tweaked, and I’m just going “I want to play”. And someone approached me.

Jessi found herself in another world of sorts, in which kinky sexuality was being played out without fear of reprisal. The person that approached Jessi was vetting her, and in their discussion informed her of events and classes related to the BDSM community in the area.

Erin words the introduction situation like this:

[A Munch] like this bridge to finding out more information and directing you where there are things, who to talk to and just like new people.

A bridge for finding more members of the community, a bridge for finding people like minded in regard to sexuality, tolerance, equality – the elements outlined above that tie this community together.

One of my participants found the community and BDSM literally through divine intervention – she spent a night in a convent, asking for guidance in her life, and the next day found herself drawn to a BDSM event, where she met her current husband and dom. BDSM introductions work in mysterious ways.

Internet

Widespread adoption and use of the Internet has had a tremendous affect on the mechanisms of BDSM introduction and inclusion. Every participant cited the Internet as the current de facto platform for BDSM community logistics, individual sexual research, and the main form of discovering the BDSM community exists.

Some participants had been online since the early iterations of the net, from dial-in bulletin board systems forward. Others only got online recently.

Many interviewees outlined the difference that access to the Internet has made. Here Russ (MD) explains this change:

In the '80s, if you wanted to meet somebody who had similar interests, you looked in, I don't know, like the – I don't know if the Pittsburgh City paper was out then or not. I don't remember. But whatever it was that was like that at the time, in the classifieds.

Or in the personals or sometimes they had, you know, meet local singles. And, you know, most of them were pretty vanilla. You would occasionally find something that was of little more interest. Word of mouth.

Secret ads, code words, esoteric meanings, and meetings with strangers without a safety net were commonplace before the Internet became ubiquitous.

The net has offered BDSM individuals a place to talk more freely, to be bolder in their approach to their own sexuality, and a platform on which to research their own alternative leanings. Younger individuals interviewed have had the benefits of the Internet for their whole introduction, whereas older individuals remember the previous system, and the dysfunction caused first by a lack of information and second by a lack of safety, now associated with the connections between community that the Internet enables.

Fetlife.com is a website that serves as an online social network for people associated with “fetish” lifestyles; grok: “fet” life. The site is worth noting in particular first because it is the site I garnered all of my interviews from, and second because it received praise from those interviewed. Of course it can be argued that they are members of this site and therefore give it praise, regardless of motive, Fetlife was mentioned and referenced as a source of greater safety and security in the BDSM scene.

The desire to explore, to research one’s own sexuality was cited by several participants. Jessi (TGSW) offers:

Anyway, once you realize that you’re having those tendencies, I think the first natural thing to do is to jump on the computer and find out more information. And when you find out more information, you find out where to go to meet such people.

Before the Internet was available, what avenues existed for research and community discovery? Jessi states as much:

Sometime in the mid to late ‘90s, I got myself a computer and actually started finding things online. And that, I think – the computer, to me, has

opened up so many different worlds to me. How – I don't know how I would have originally come out if it wasn't for the computer.

I found that there were others like me.

The Internet has served as a platform, anonymous enough one can post and research, and utilitarian enough one can reach out to others of a like mind. If I can reference the secretary at the center of my opening narrative, it is enough to note that the image is from a website online – before the net, such a photo would have been published perhaps in a book or magazine, only available in specific shops, in specific areas.

Fetlife.com is a specific website worth mention. Kashmira (Fs) explains why:

Fetlife has changed everything.

Fetlife changed everything because it's not just dating. You could just look up kinks. You could find stuff that's local. You never really had one centralized repository unless you followed a news group or you went to various websites or you were – I mean, either Collar Me or things like that, like that was more about hooking up and meeting up with people. Fetlife is more community oriented.

And to me, it's changed things because before, you could – you would have to go to Collar Me, and you'd have to go to all – you'd have to do those things.

Russ (MD) also offers thoughts about Fetlife.com:

Fetlife has provided a – right now it is the central – it's kind of the central place that seems to be working. It's free. It's more accept – a lot of people find it more accepting. There's no overt money-making goal for it.

It's more subtle, you know, advertising. Membership to view videos, things like that. So – 'cause everything in the past has always been 'we want money.'

You'd have to go to all these different separate websites. And if this group of people is on Collar Me, but this group of people is on Bondage.com or whatever, they're not gonna see each other.

So that's where I think – that's why this has really kind of changed the – it's revolutionized the way the Internet has played a role is because finally, you have one centralized spot that everybody seems to be agreeing on.

Finally, the Internet is conceived of as increasing the relative safety of those involved in the BDSM community. Michael (MD) speaks to the increased safety produced by the Internet:

With the advent of the Internet, sites came up about safety, and that's one of the primary things that is hammered in, make sure you have a safe call, make sure you have a safe call, make sure you have a safe call, and take comfortable walking shoes. Make sure you have a safe call you know.

And also, that – as it developed more, it became not necessarily for a safe call. It could be a safe IM, the whole nine yards. And people interacted more and so knew more about the person they were safe watching than normal. And, you know, it got easier to find out more about the person you were going to meet 'cause you can do a search on 'em and Google their name, and you can find out all sorts of stuff.

The vetting process for allowing people into the scene now has the Internet as a tremendous tool. The net allows people to connect, anonymously research their own circumstance, and background check individuals before they choose to be sexual with them.

BDSM introductions lead people from discovery of difference to discovery of others of a like mind, to actual inclusion in the BDSM community.

Finding 8: Identities in Context

BDSM expression becomes intrinsic to the identity of a BDSM community participant. BDSM conceptions of sexual consent are rooted in and inseparable from the mechanisms of BDSM community inclusion, themselves expressions of attempts at an egalitarian system of sexual negotiation. These mechanisms in turn lend themselves to shifts in identity, equally rooted in consent, the community, learning, tolerance, and inclusion. To conceive of BDSM consent as separate from BDSM community, BDSM identity, and from the gatekeeping and rule enforcement, is to view an incomplete picture.

Jessi (TSSW) reveals her BDSM interests are rooted in her personality:

I've been BDSM since my teen years. And, you know, at first, it was just slap me, tickle me kinda stuff. And it's always been private. But in – six, seven years ago I started seeking out some more public play and others that share that interest. And once I got to know that community, and being trans identified and just kind of a freaky person anyway, I'm usually involved with the trans community.

BDSM individuals, to different degrees, embody BDSM community membership. Some are closeted at work, or closeted to family and certain friends. Others are open and

out – one reported working for an organization that specifically takes queer individuals and places them at non-queer events to function as an emissary between the two worlds, to normalize kink and queer.

Erin (FTSW) speaks to the interplay between her BDSM identity and her “real life” identity:

Mine only carries over in the sense that this is not what I do, this is who I am.

Russ (MD) expresses the same sense of ownership of BDSM identity:

Preference isn’t the right word. It’s about who I am [emphasis mine]. It’s sort of a whole – in the 1950s – and I know I keep going back to homosexuality, but this is – there’s so much more material. In the 1950s, homosexuality was considered a psychological disorder.

And I believe while there’s certain implications, I understand why the gay community didn’t like that. That’s much closer to the truth than the whole notion of choice. Okay? I don’t do this because it’s my choice. This is who I am.

BDSM individuals, regardless of level of “out”-ness, see BDSM identification as intrinsic to their persons, not a hobby or activity. The BDSM lifestyle, because it is rooted in explicit consent and communication between actors, becomes a full investment of the individual. BDSM community members conceive of themselves as a sexual minority similar to homosexuality, and as a community look to embrace those elements of their selves. Those elements, in turn, are reflections of personal desire for the essence of oppression through consensual theatricalized means.

Consent, emphasis on safety and play with known associates, with the theater of sexuality in BDSM, are collectively keystone to the BDSM community, lifestyle, and identity. Again I want to mention I am trying to describe a rainbow – not a single color, and really the best understanding of consent in BDSM comes from an understanding of the rainbow – the myriad of ways consent is emphasized in the community.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS

I hope I haven't Bourdieu.

The basis of this paper is Sexual Consent, and so we start there. Bourdieu wrote in *Masculine Domination* (2001)

On top or underneath, active or passive - these parallel alternatives describe the sexual act as a relation of domination. To possess sexually, as in the French *baiser* or the English 'to fuck', is to dominate in the sense of subjecting to one's power, but also to deceive, mislead, or, as we say, 'to have' (whereas to resist seduction is not to be deceived, not 'to be had').

The manifestations of virility, whether legitimate or illegitimate, belong to the logic of prowess, the exploit, which confers honour. (p. 19)

Furthermore, Bourdieu states (2001):

If the sexual relation appears as a social relation of domination, this is because it is constructed through the fundamental principle of division between the active male and the passive female and because this principle creates, organizes, expresses and directs desire - male desire as the desire for possession, eroticized domination, and female desire as the desire for masculine domination, as eroticized subordination or even, in the limiting case, as the eroticized recognition of domination. (p. 21)

Bourdieu argues that masculine symbolism has been retroactively forged and imbued into gender relations of the everyday (2001). The dominant social model for sexual consent, according to Bourdieu, is rooted in what he defines as the artificial split between the symbolic meanings of masculine and feminine, and the actions of bodies

playing out this schism. Bourdieu argues that one cannot escape this system of symbolic relations; analysis of them is rooted within them – we cannot take off our gendered identities as much as we might like to.

Participant BDSM community members explained that the vanilla system, or in other words, “normative” society, the sum of dominant directives of normative sexual negotiation and gendered hierarchy, seems to have placed emphasis on non-communication. Based on an analysis of the respondents’ statements, this appears to be a result of the naturalization and somatization of a static gendered hierarchy, in which communication is first not required because one group has been crowned “in charge”, and secondly, communication is specifically avoided because it threatens to acknowledge (and thereby potentially disempower) the magic of hegemonic structures perhaps and tradition on which it is founded.

Put another way, the normative script does have a consent model: the person assigned masculinity (the person with the penis) does whatever (really) they want, and the non-masculine is obliged to stop things if they go too far.

But it is a catch-22! While traditionally men are taught to ‘reach out and try’, women are trained to be passive and not stop things if they go too far, or to respond after, rather than before, the act.

The normative system is extremely oppressive for all parties involved when thus framed. Females smack away attempts at sexual invasion – if they dare. And what about men? They are left in the horrible position, according to our framework above, of reaching without asking. An old turn of phrase says “it is better to ask forgiveness than

permission” seems to be the unspoken mantra of the masculine role in normative, “vanilla” sexual negotiation, and I would argue a portent for abuse.

Bourdieu writes in *Language and Symbolic Power* (2001):

Heretical subversion exploits the possibility of changing the social world by changing the representation of this world which contributes to its reality or, more precisely, by counterposing a paradoxical pre-vision, a utopia, a project or programme, to the ordinary vision which apprehends the social world as a natural world. (p. 128)

A “paradoxical pre-vision” in this case is an attempt at a more egalitarian sexual script. The dominant system, the doxa, is rooted in first an unwillingness to acknowledge the dominant gendered hierarchy as something worthy of question, and second, that unwillingness lends itself to non-communication of sexual desire and interest if those go against the dominant system. It is in this sense a double-whammy. The doxa demands we not question the sexual hierarchy, which in turn demands we not question our individual sexual roles and positions. To overcome such, a new system is created and offered, which violates the natural and normal qualities given to the dominant system.

Gendered power has become intrinsic to social life, to being human. Binary gendered identities are imposed upon humans from birth (Chodorow, 1978). Bourdieu, to this end, argues similarly that we internalize learned behavior from our social circumstance, taking directives first from the family structure, then school, church, and the mass media. . However I argue that BDSM individuals, perhaps unconsciously, actively reject the dominant model of sexuality and hierarchy – and replace it with something else.

Bourdieu, in *Masculine Domination* (2001) attempts to explain the socially driven creation of the socially driven creation (that is, the socially forces that create and define those very same social forces, gender defines gender):

For the paradox is that it is the visible differences between the female body and the male body which, being perceived and constructed according to the practical schemes of the androcentric worldview, become the most perfectly indisputable guarantee of meanings and values that are in harmony with the principles of that worldview: it is not the phallus (or its absence) which is the basis of that worldview, rather it is that worldview which, being organized according to the division into relational genders, male and female, can institute the phallus, constituted as the symbol of virility, of the specifically male point of honour (nif), and the difference between biological bodies as objective foundations of the difference between the sexes, in the sense of genders constructed as two hierarchized social essences. (p. 23)

In plain language, Bourdieu is suggesting that gendered division is not rooted in biology, it is rooted in the social: the symbolic meanings associated with the biology through social interactions from birth until death. Those associations and meanings are culturally based, and serve to bolster and reinforce the dominant gendered paradigm: that of the masculine over the feminine. These ideas have been reinforced by other social standards, the role of women as wives, or men as soldiers, in schools, churches, and in the home symbolic meanings are reinforced that define women as subservient and men as dominant. Bourdieu argues that these symbolic meanings are assigned not by consensus,

but rather through a sort of silent, unconscious, hidden (i.e., crypto) fascism of symbolic interpretation schemes.

Bourdieu lists educational institutions specifically as a part of the “structuring structure” that creates and recreates gendered structures. Bourdieu states in *Masculine Domination* (2001):

To point out that what appears, in history, as being eternal is merely the product of a labour of externalization performed by interconnected institutions such as the family, the church, the state, the educational system, and also, in another order of things, sport and journalism. (p. viii)

To paraphrase Bourdieu: we internalize dominant messages and symbolic meanings from dominant institutions, which in turn have internalized messages from previous iterations of dominant institutions. This seems to be an accurate description of the situation in which BDSM participants see themselves.

The powerful classes assign their native modes of being and expression as the dominant, appropriate, and “correct” vehicles (Bourdieu 1982). The powerful class, in this case, is the masculine, and the rule of males has retroactively invested into the body evidence that the body is the source of that power. It is an insidious plot: seize power, and then use that power to define your power as normal; imbued through nature.

Bourdieu speaks to the sources of class distinction in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982). Although *Language and Symbolic Power* is concerned with the transmission of hegemonic “correct” language, This study explores dominant gender and sexual practices in which the directives of sexual practice, instead of being designated by an economic or social “upper class”, follow the designs of the masculine class, who serve

as the dominant force in symbolic conflict. By default: the feminine as dominated, and hence, patriarchy.

Beyond choosing to evacuate the normative system, BDSM interest and BDSM group inclusion can lead to difficulties with “vanilla” life, and contribute further to vanilla disinclusion. Bourdieu would use the term “doxa” (literally: common belief) to reference the normative script, and those who work to enforce it unconsciously as “doxosophers”.

Bourdieu writes in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982):

Dominant individuals, in the absence of being able to restore the silence of the doxa, strive to produce, through a purely reactionary discourse, a substitute for everything that is threatened by the very existence of heretical discourse. Finding nothing for which to reproach the social world as it stands, they endeavor to impose universally, through a discourse permeated by the simplicity and transparency of common sense, the feeling of obviousness and necessity which this world imposes on them; having an interest in leaving things as they are, they attempt to undermine politics in a depoliticized political discourse, produced through a process of neutralization, or, even better, of negation, which seeks to restore the doxa to its original state of innocence and which, being oriented towards the naturalization of the social order, always borrows the language of nature. (p. 131)

According to Bourdieu, the class in power creates and enforces symbolic meanings that serve to maintain and reinforce their claims to power. It seems as if it

happens automatically; we internalize the patterns of the society that wrought us and failure to do so is met with sanctions.

BDSM participants seem to have a sense of this; they have glimpsed beyond the veil of crypto-fascist gendered hierarchy and endeavored to challenge it – likely unconsciously. This is not to say that all BDSM people are natively naturally capable of sociological critique – rather that they have had “the sociological eye” thrust upon them by their disagreements between self and societal expectations. They are able to see the machinations of society. Those oppressed by a circumstance are more likely to recognize it and BDSM participants manage to witness the normalized oppression of the gender system.

Utilizing Bourdieussian concepts of doxa, symbolic domination, symbolic violence, and habitus in general, the BDSM lifestyle is framed below as a form of resistance to symbolic domination; the BDSM model of sexual consent is an intrinsic part of this resistance.

An initial review may suggest that BDSM sexuality employs explicit consent because it is dangerous or risky sexual behavior. Through application of Bourdieu, this paper argues otherwise: explicit consent is required in BDSM due to rejection of the dominant gendered hierarchy and the crypto-fascist consent model hidden within it. To this Bourdieu speaks of misrecognition. In *Language and Symbolic Power* (1982):

Specifically symbolic violence can only be exercised by the person who exercises it, and endured by the person who endures it, in a form which results from its misrecognition as such, in other words, which results in its recognition as legitimate. (p. 139 – 140)

I argue that the normative system is the more oppressive, in which individuals are assigned genders based on their biology, and these genders in turn place them in a static hierarchy of power relations in all aspects of life, including sexuality (the act) and the (lack of) sexual negotiation prior. These assignments are reinforced as unquestionable by the social symbolic meanings associated with the source of the assignments. The hidden, esoteric and obfuscated model of normative sexual consent is rooted in male/masculine dominance and female/feminine submission. Upon rejecting the normative hierarchy, members of the BDSM community must construct a new hierarchy.

According to those interviewed, equality is the foundation of the consent model, the community, the BDSM-aligned individual, and the unconscious redefinition of symbols that takes shape as BDSM scenes and play. Acceptance, tolerance, and rights to sexual privacy find themselves happy bunkmates to equality and egalitarianism.

Drives toward equality and egalitarianism are, perhaps, the root of most social justice movements. Activism as we know it often revolves around the goal of individual liberty and freedom; real equality. Facing this movement is a menace of symbolic domination, in which those in power create and define symbolic meanings that serve to maintain the status quo.

Bourdieu writes in *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market II* (2003):

In the face of such a complex and refined mode of domination, in which symbolic power has such an important place, one must invent new forms of struggle. Given the particular role of “ideas” in this scheme, researchers have a key part to play. They have to provide political action with new ends – the demolition of the dominant beliefs – and new means – technical

weapons – based on research and a command of scientific knowledge, and symbolic weapons, capable of undermining common beliefs by putting research findings into an accessible form. (p. 36)

BDSM individuals, we have seen so far, are invested in equal rights between the sexes, and in equality in general. They symbolically redefine what is oppressive, what is liberating, what is in control of their lives, and the meaning of equality. They work to create a kinky sword that they hope might cut down the veil of gendered oppression. This is the richest soil composed of “new ends” for social change: tools to demolish dominant formats of gendered oppression (specifically: acknowledgement of power dynamics) are rife within BDSM. BDSM individuals don’t conceive of themselves as a revolutionary group but they embrace ideas and ideals that are arguably radical.

Surely BDSM is not a Band-Aid that can assuage all gendered oppression. BDSM participants come in many stripes and do not have a single ideology or political bend. Some are probably horrible people underneath the drive for sexual egalitarianism. In my research I encountered individuals that, regardless of background or difference, strive toward something they call equality.

The BDSM community redefines pre-existing elements of society in order to bolster and create safe sexual environs. Bourdieu mentions in *Acts of Resistance* (1999) that revolutionary groups often redefine words and symbols as a matter of group cohesion (ex: Queer as used by the Queer movement). BDSM is a community that rejects dominant symbolic meanings and installs their own, made from pre-existing terms and ideas. As study respondents revealed, symbolic redefinition of words meaning yes and no

is reflective of the general community emphasis on safe, sane, and consensual play. This emphasis is in turn rooted in ethics of individual equality and equal rights.

The reworking of preexisting symbolic structure into the elements of BDSM sexual negotiation are reflected not only in the definitional hijacking of the stop light, but also in the larger edifice of BDSM sexual negotiation itself. The gender system is reduced by BDSM participants to a theatrical symbolic representation, along with other recognizable symbols of domination and submission.

In *Language & Symbolic Power* (1982), *Masculine Domination* (2001), *Acts of Resistance Against the Tyranny of the Market* (1999), and *Firing Back - Against the Tyranny of the Market 2* (2001), Bourdieu offers several writ-large theoretical points that apply here: 1. There is a global gendered hierarchy in which males are assumed as dominant, which is applied to the flesh by social metaphors and meanings created and retroactively associated with biological sex. 2. Individuals participate in their own domination by misrecognizing these metaphors and meanings as intrinsic to biology and thereby natural and normal. 3. Resistance to symbolic domination takes the form of individuals conflicting against the dominant meanings associated with symbols regarding power, power dynamics, and gender expressions.

Considering Bourdieu's premises, the BDSM consent model reflects individuals abandoning, rejecting, or adapting the dominant model of gendered hierarchy and the non-consensual consent model hidden within it. In this framework, BDSM identified individuals appear to rework and remold dominant symbols of power and powerlessness into theatrical props, devoid of "real" symbolic power outside of the power consensually given to them, and imbued with temporary, fantastical, fictional power. BDSM

individuals redefine symbols of oppression in order to step through the motions of the normative system, a sort of theatrical reworking and presentation of dominant and submissive roles without violating personal ethics associated with equality.

The consent model can then be framed as part and parcel of symbolic resistance to gendered hierarchy, in which participants make explicit and consensual the domination and submission associated with sexuality and our gendered lives. It is not so much a total rejection of the normative system, but a reworking of it, a cartoon created to take the place of a real, normalized, misrecognized, invisible oppression.

In other words, our secretary, mentioned above, minus the leash, is trapped in the “normal” relational gender system. The social forces that have shaped her due to her sex have required that she dress and comport herself to certain specifics. This system of gendered hierarchy that our secretary fits into is not pretend or make-believe except, of course, for the collar. The gendered system of oppression is silent and everywhere – more total than totalitarian. In my framework, it is this system that BDSM lampoons and disempowers. Absent her collar, the secretary must maintain her feminine posture and identity – perhaps only with the collar can she express what she feels – imprisonment in gender.

Radical feminist critiques of BDSM consider BDSM to be reproduction and replication of actual oppression and gendered power inequalities (Hopkins, 1994). This research responds to that stance by suggesting that, in agreement with Hopkins, BDSM is more properly understood as *simulation* of power and powerlessness. This simulation takes a Bourdieusian tone as the symbols being simulated are pulled from reality and redefined in an unintentional act of symbolic rebellion against the dominant, dominating

system of sexual negotiation and gender hierarchy related and internalized through social symbolism.

BDSM individuals have not created a utopia, however they have taken steps toward what Bourdieu called new means of identifying and undoing the doxa of gender oppression, the doxa of a sexual negotiation system rooted in that gendered oppression, and of attacking the rule of silence that it requires.

Bourdieu informs my work in that his analysis, through his activism, was interested in creating new forms of symbolic revolution and change. BDSM is a community that is engaged with a set of symbols they have redefined to their own ends. While BDSM does not have the goal of widespread social change, the members of the BDSM community appear to be attempting to create social change for themselves; rather than change society they have created a smaller version with rules of their choosing.

Bourdieu died in 2001, so he will not be able to comment on this work. In spite of reading much of his work I do not have a sense of what he would think about BDSM. I believe my research informs his, as it illustrates that communities can create social change through symbolic revolution without necessarily attempting to. The BDSM community is not necessarily activist but exhibits evidence of the elements of social change Bourdieu spoke of: redefinition of the meanings of dominant symbols for purposes of personal freedom.

BDSM is in desperate need of a radical eye, and sociology interested in study and understanding of the mechanisms BDSM has developed to overthrow the dominant regime of masculine-led sexual and life negotiation.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

Personal ethics and egalitarian worldviews form the core of BDSM consent. Finding 1 outlined that ethics feelings of equality form the foundation of BDSM consent protocols. Finding 3, which explores these themes, also bolsters this conclusion. Personal ethics and egalitarian worldviews are found in all of the findings, pervasive and ubiquitous throughout the BDSM community – they are the locus of the BDSM lifestyle.

Findings presented in findings section 4, 5, 6, and 8 all suggest that BDSM participants view the dominant sexual negotiation scripts (vanilla) as oppressive, confusing, obfuscated, and obtuse. These scripts are based on rigid adherence to binary gender assignments based on genital content, resulting in a system of males maintaining power over females on a global scale, penetrating all cultures and all areas of life. BDSM participants collaborate to create a social environment with explicit sexual negotiation rather than what is perceived as the normative, oppressive script. Desire for an equal sexual negotiation and personal attachment to egalitarianism are the foundation of these feelings of ill fit toward the dominant, normalized sexual hierarchy.

Finding 4, concerning gendered roles, suggests that BDSM participants create new theatrical, temporary, and consensual negotiation scripts in which roles are chosen and played by consensus. The goal appears to be the disempowerment of the normative sexual negotiation gender hierarchy; such is replaced with vetted and consented-to sexual situations with known and trusted associates. Differing from the perceived directives of the normative script, ethical standards of egalitarian positioning is maintained by explicit consent to erotic submission, domination and role taking.

Consensual power exchange, roles, and identity are elements considered in findings 2, 4, and 8. BDSM scenes, props, roles and methods of symbolic power exchange are based on theatricalized re-representations of dominant cultural symbols concerning power and submission. Courtrooms, dungeons, kitchens, hospitals are populated with judges and police, mistresses and masters, mommies and daddies, nurses and doctors, and so on through role play. Traditional symbols of power including gender identity thus find ablation.

The BDSM community is a product of rejection of, and then recreation of power dynamics reflected from the normative system, except that the roles and rules have been made explicit, loud, and obvious. The community is held together by the ethical core of belief in equality and personal agency shared by community members along with a common disinclination from the dominant system.

Based on my research, I conclude finally that the BDSM model of sexual consent negotiation is the product of a communal effort by egalitarian-aligned individuals whom as BDSM participants create and share modes of vulgar reinterpretation of the dominant sexual hierarchy in such a way that they may engage in such hierarchies at will and by choice.

Equality

A deeper discussion is required here regarding the nature of “equality”, or what we want to call equality. The philosophical meaning of the word is at stake, in a sense. I have used the word extensively throughout this document without attacking its meaning. Is equality even a possibility, or just a goal to be worked for? I don’t think I can answer philosophical questions here, but I can say that equality is going to look different for

different individuals. For me, and by extension the purposes of this research “equality” means “equitable and fair partnership between associates”. An example of an equal relationship from this viewpoint would be one where both individuals are fully informed and capable of self determination, and have equal say in how their relationship functions, what their limits, goals, hopes, and desires are. An unequal relationship would be one where one of the individuals does not have personal agency, is unable to change the relationship, or assert themselves or their personal goals or needs. This is the definition of equality with which I have analyzed BDSM, but it should be noted that this is not the only definition of equality.

Does consent equal equality? In other words, if an individual consents to sexual submission, does that consent make it equal? The radical feminist perspective expressed during the “sex war” era concerning BDSM was that a sane person would not consent to be subjected to such acts, therefore SM people are insane and cannot consent. This idea was echoed in an email I received during my interview phase concerning the nature of members of the BDSM community.

“Equality” could also be taken to mean a world free from anything resembling BDSM. BDSM reflects and disempowers oppressive elements of society, so BDSM serves as a reminder of the compulsory dominance and submission that exists in the real world; submission to the courts, traffic laws, religious figures and other sources of institutional power. As long as they exist, BDSM will reflect them.

Finally one might imagine equality as being a relationship that simply does not include BDSM elements. In that point of view, consensual BDSM is not going to be accepted as a form of equal relationship. Like the argument above that a sane person

cannot consent to BDSM, nor would a sane person seek BDSM experience, this argument is rather damning of BDSM participants.

I believe that this viewpoint (that BDSM participants are crazy, damaged, or somehow mentally unfit) disempowers and devalues the individuals in question, and beyond that it closes the discussion and further research becomes unnecessary, as the phenomena is fully explained by illness or derangement.

If a sane individual would not consent to sexual submission, as the argument against consent equaling equality would argue, at what point does one draw the line of sexual submission? The modern Western marriage ritual, the associated phenomena and the gendered expectations of traditional marriage all contain elements of symbolic submission and domination. Christian conceptions of marriage, for instance, directly mention the submission of women to men. One of the participants above described his understanding of the historical meaning of the wedding ring and its roots in symbolic exchange in a strictly gendered hierarchy. Could we just as easily ask: would a sane person consent to marriage?

Limitations & Future Research

Deep ethnographic observation including visits to BDSM themed spaces was beyond the scope of this research. This research was not able to confirm or disconfirm the actual proceedings of BDSM sexual encounters. Future research concerning BDSM sexual consent should include real world observation as a parameter for study. BDSM community members reported various levels of policing and gatekeeping that exist to limit access to the community from individuals unworthy of membership. The consent model and mantra of “Safe, Sane, and Consensual” *seems* to be threaded throughout the

community. Future research can aim to illustrate how the consent model is *used*, in distinction to this research, which illustrates how BDSM participants *talk* about the consent model.

Furthermore this research avoided a more radical feminist interpretation as explained above in order to maintain cordial relations with BDSM participants and my own psychic wellbeing. A deeper investigation of the BDSM community might pose more difficult questions raised from a feminist perspective given the mentioned prevalence of male dominants and female submissives. A light application of the feminist perspective might utilize BDSM as a magnifying mirror to analyze power dynamics in society in general, assuming that BDSM lifts symbols from normative society.

If I could redo anything in this research, or go back and ask different questions, probe deeper into other areas and so forth, I would start by trying to develop a closer relationship with the BDSM community. The reality is that my main disappointments with my research could have been solved only with a long term entrenched ethnography. An insider like myself, or better yet a researcher alien to the BDSM community could develop a much closer, intimate working relationship with the BDSM community in Pittsburgh. If there are “Feeders and Breeders”, an evil BDSM sex trafficking racket and other dark elements hidden from view they would only be discovered through a more intimate understanding of the community. A researcher could seek an interested insider to guide them into the scene and into further discovery.

The largest unanswered question I am left with deals with the prevalence of the dominant male / submissive female relationships. While they are not the rule, they are more common than other formats, excluding of course male homosexual BDSM, which is

a community unto its own. A feminist analysis of this suggests that patriarchy penetrates into everything. Is this a group of people creating a new form of equality? Or are they merely building psychological and pseudo-legal language in order to justify their interests and actions? Further, if we are going to, as citizens, judge BDSM participants for reflecting patriarchy in their power relations, should we not also consider traditional marriage and courting with the same lens? I have argued that BDSM turns the volume of hierarchal symbolism up to extreme levels; it should not surprise to see “traditional” power relations within the BDSM community.

My research suggests to me that the BDSM community, in creating and sharing formats of sexual consent, are actively engaged in a form of social change and revolution. It is important to note that there may be and likely are those in the BDSM community for whom this is not at all a conscious goal, or who are really just interested in beating someone or being beaten while maintaining legal constraints. Even this, however, illustrates the collision between ethical standards and sexual desires and mating scripts that exists at the locus of BDSM phenomena.

Final Thoughts

An interesting relationship is exposed by the content of this study. It seems that BDSM, while appearing on the outside to be unsafe, politically incorrect, offensive, and oppressive to women, reportedly has at its core a model of sexual consent based on communication, openness, and explicit consent. Whereas the “normative” system of sexual consent, which is communicated through popular media and other large-scale social institutions and includes directives toward marriage and nuclear families, appears on the outside to be safe, normal, and to be desired. However at the core of this

normalized system, the participants in this study felt, is an unsafe situation. The normative system relies on gender inequality: male domination, and female submission. While on the outside it appears normative, it is in actuality harmful. BDSM participants describe BDSM sexuality as the opposite – on the outside it appears rooted in inequality, on the inside it is rooted in ethical values and personal ethics in regard to personal agency and consent.

Critics of BDSM have traditionally compared BDSM to examples of extreme power inequalities. I believe that BDSM, for the most part, rather than being an unnecessary and damaging addition of symbolic and symbolized power exchange to natural human sexuality, is more accurately a phenomenon that forces the viewer to consider the elements of power exchange that appear to be intrinsic to our cultural sexuality negotiation system. Whips and chains, it seems, only underline the already-present inequality – an inequality usually hidden, normalized, or as Bourdieu would state: misrecognized.

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APPENDIX:

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