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Perspectives on Pleasure and Pain: Deconstructing Contemporary BDSM Theories and Developing an Interdisciplinary Framework of Empowerment

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to develop a new theoretical framework through which to understand the experiences of BDSM practitioners and communities. BDSM is an overlapping acronym for bondage/discipline, domination/submission, and sadomasochism, and functions in a broad variety of ways for individual practitioners. This paper critically examines a range of literature and key theoretical concepts related to BDSM, and identifies some key issues facing researchers. Through an interdisciplinary approach to the topic, borrowing from literature related to other marginalised and stigmatised identities and sexualities, this thesis argues for an open and affective understanding of BDSM experiences. Examining key themes of power, sexuality, and community, this paper calls for the rejections of binary and heteronormative notions, and the acceptance and celebration of subjective lived experience.

Keywords: BDSM; sexuality; theories of power; consent; violence; sexual citizenship; community; stigmatisation

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This research marks the commencement of an exciting project – my journey into academia. Working towards this dissertation has merely solidified my passion for the subject, and my determination to continue on to my PhD and forge a career within the academy. I have learnt the important lesson that we cannot achieve without self-care and support, and the importance of asking for help.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

In recent years, the phenomenon of BDSM has garnered increasing interest both in academic scholarship and in the public eye. BDSM is an overlapping acronym for bondage/discipline, domination/submission, and sadomasochism, and can refer to 'any erotic play involving force, restraint, domination or erotic pain (scratching, biting, spanking)' (Herman, 2007: 92). Those who practice BDSM have primarily been viewed – by both the medical community and the general public – as having a 'deviant'[1] and 'stigmatised sexuality' (Hoff & Sprott, 2009; Bezreh et al., 2012), leading to the misinterpretation and marginalisation of practitioners (Williams et al., 2013: 274). Whilst there has been some academic scholarship working towards the de-stigmatisation of BDSM practitioners and communities, much of this work has approached the subject from binary or essentialist perspectives. For example, authors have discussed BDSM as either therapeutic or pathological; empowering or oppressive; feminist or anti-feminist. It is important to move beyond these binaries to examine BDSM as a complex and nuanced phenomenon, and to appreciate what may be at stake for those who participate in it. Therefore, the research questions this paper will focus on are as follows:

1. How can we develop a more critical and nuanced theoretical framework for understanding the experiences of BDSM practitioners?
    a. How is BDSM perceived within the current body of literature?
    b. How can an interdisciplinary approach inform the construction of further BDSM studies?
    c. How do BDSM practitioners construct a sense of self within BDSM communities?

Since Freud's first reference to sado-masochism in his 1905 text *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, there have been numerous theoretical attempts to explain the appeal of SM sex. Psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and sexologists have struggled to make sense of 'why some individuals find pleasure in subjugation

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[1] Whilst the term 'deviant' certainly has negative and stigmatized connotations attached to it, within the context of this paper, I will use this term to refer to behavior that deviates from the norm rather than to denote any disapproval on my part.

and in the giving and receiving of pain' (Taylor & Ussher, 2001: 294). The overwhelming assumption in these discourses has been that those with BDSM desires possess an inherent psychopathological disorder (Powls & Davis, 2012; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013; Connolly, 2006). There has also been the common 'myth' (Queen, 1996: 71) that individuals, and particularly women who engage in BDSM are drawn to these practices because of past or childhood experiences of abuse (Faccio et al., 2014; Richters et al., 2008). This perspective is particularly notable within psychodynamic and psychoanalytic literature (Powls & Davis, 2012: 227; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013: 1943) and is reflected by ongoing psychiatric diagnostic practice, which pathologises BDSM in the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) as a type of paraphilic disorder (Connolly, 2006)[2].

In response to this dominant narrative, many activists and academics have worked to counter the view that BDSM is 'abnormal, dangerous, abusive... or a sign of mental illness' (Barker, 2013b: 22). Some scholars have written in explicit opposition to these traditional assumptions: 'BDSMers do not suffer from psychological disorders nor were they victims of child sex abuse' (Jozifkova, 2013: 391). There have been conflicting reports of childhood abuse within SM communities (see Breslow et al., 1985 and Nordling et al., 2000), though the consistent findings of most studies is that 'SM participants do not report earlier childhood sexual abuse' (Powls & Davies, 2012: 227) emphasizing any assumed link to be correlational rather than causational. While there might be practitioners who have experienced childhood abuse, this does not mean that their BDSM practice is necessarily pathological. On the whole, BDSM practitioners do not display any symptomatic or functional difficulties, related to their sexual practice that would place them within the diagnostic criteria for mental disorder (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006). Whilst there may be incidence of both trauma experience and psychopathology amongst BDSM practitioners, there is no evidence that this is more prevalent than in any other groups. This might suggest that BDSM practice should be viewed as a 'recreational leisure

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[2] It is important to note, though, that BDSM has recently been removed from the ICD-11 as a paraphilic disorder, released in 2018 by the World Health Organization.

activity' (Newmahr, 2010) which is 'no more inherently healthy or unhealthy than mainstream sexual practices' (Nichols, 2006: 282). Despite the research showing nothing more than a tenuous link between BDSM and psychopathology or trauma (Powls & Davies, 2012: 227), prevalent opinion still views sadomasochism as reflective of 'underlying pathology or maladjustment' (Powls & Davies, 2012: 231; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013: 1943). Research has found, however, that many BDSM practitioners feel that their practice is often 'deliberately, consciously antithetical to hegemonic, patriarchal hetero-sexuality' (Taylor & Ussher, 2001: 305). So their 'deviance' or non-normative behaviour can be seen less as a reflection of pathology, and more as active transgression.

Whilst there has been a relatively large amount of scholarly work produced on the subject of BDSM, I would argue that there are key elements missing from this body of literature. Given the complexity of the BDSM phenomenon, I would assert there is a need for much more interdisciplinary work on the topic than currently exists. By borrowing theoretical concepts from work on other marginalised and stigmatised groups, we can potentially gain greater insight into this phenomenon and the motivations and experiences of participants. While there has been research both on individual BDSM practice, and BDSM communities respectively, there has been little examination of the distinction and relationship between the two. I suggest that we can see practice/community membership as existing on a spectrum; thus we need a greater understanding of how different levels of engagement function in practitioners' lives.

This dissertation will take an interdisciplinary, critical, analytically lead approach in order to develop a theoretical bricolage for understanding the experiences of BDSM practitioners. Drawing on a wide range of literature, including queer theory, feminist theory, theories of power, theories of sexuality, and of sexual citizenship and community, I will critically apply theoretical concepts to the case of BDSM. By exploring the potential for transgression and subversive sexual behaviour, this paper will work to disrupt binary understandings of gender, sexuality, and power dynamics. The research draws upon previous empirical research from a variety of fields and sources, including

contemporary social theory, legal documents, sexual spatialities, and psychopathology. The paper seeks to create a new theoretical framework through which to conceptualise and understand the experiences of people (and particularly women) who engage in BDSM, with particular attention to themes of power, desire, consent, and relationality. These themes were identified and focused on as key areas within previous literature which have not been sufficiently examined, or have been explored within non-constructive, prescriptive frameworks. This new framework, will serve as a tool for the deconstruction of the current body of literature, and a reconstruction towards an affective understanding of BDSM practitioners and their experiences. This framework will aid and underpin future empirical research at PhD level with BDSM practitioners and community members.

In Chapter 1, I will begin by presenting some contextual information regarding the social placement of BDSM practice. I will outline the wide variety of BDSM practice and manifestation. I will offer an overview of how BDSM is viewed both in pop-culture and the public eye, exploring the reception of key literary and cinematic representations of BDSM. Through an analysis of *Story of O* (Reage, 1954), *Secretary* (Shainberg, 2002), and *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2011), I will examine the various ways that BDSM is represented and how these contribute to the stigmatisation and/or normalisation of SM practitioners. Finally, I will examine one of the most significant legal cases related to BDSM, known as The Spanner Trials (R v Brown, 1993)[3], and highlight issues relating to the legal constrictions of consent and sexuality.

Chapter 2 will critically assess theoretical concepts of power within a sexual context, drawing upon the writings of Michel Foucault and Susan Bordo, and examining both radical and pro-sex feminist perspectives of power. This chapter will explore the relationship between power and violence, and the nature of performative violence. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity (1990) will be analysed and applied to the case of BDSM. The chapter will then interrogate various conceptualisations of consent, and their limitations. I will

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[3] *R v Brown* [1993] UKHL 19

argue that a nuanced understanding of consent is key to unlocking the subversive potential of power exchange and violence. I will argue for a fluid understanding of power and power exchange, suggesting that this can be manipulated and re-claimed through active consent. This chapter will seek to complicate understandings of power, violence, and consent, presenting these concepts as complex dynamics, rather than static, binary entities in which one either 'has' power or not.

Chapter 3 will work towards a more insightful and nuanced understanding of sexuality, desire, and selfhood. I will continue to address and deconstruct binary conceptual understandings, focusing on gender, sexuality, and normativity. Through the integration of a sex positive perspective, this chapter will explore the potential for transgressive sexuality to be empowering or transformative. Drawing upon the work of Gayle Rubin, I will explore cultural hierarchies of sexual expression and thus critique binaries of normal/abnormal, arguing that these reinforce stigma and the oppression of difference. I will examine writing by Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed to explore the concept of heteronormativity and how normative expectations can be used as methods of control and social power. I will also implement the work of Jasbir Puar (among others), to explore notions of homonormativity, arguing that the constraints of these expectations can be applied to those with kinky or 'deviant' desires. The chapter will then move on the explore the notion of healing narratives found within BDSM research, and again focus on the need to reject binary understandings of what is considered healthy/unhealthy sex. I will argue that BDSM participants have the potential to challenge traditional pathologising perceptions through active empowerment.

Chapter 4 will expand upon the suggested potential within BDSM for benefit and transformation, focusing on the relational and communal aspects of BDSM practice. I will examine the varying functions of BDSM for its practitioners, challenging the conception of BDSM as simply a sexual category and exploring its position as 'lifestyle', and 'serious leisure'. I will challenging the lack of existing literature on levels of BDSM engagement, and explore the spectrum from occasional kinky sex, to full time community member. The chapter will then

consider notions of sexual citizenship (Roseneil, 2013; Richardson, 2017), arguing that sexual 'deviants' are denied this in a meaningful way. The development of BDSM communities then, can be seen as a means of seeking a sense of belonging and reclaiming citizenship. Borrowing from pedagogic and queer literatures, I will examine concepts of 'safe spaces', arguing that BDSM communities serve to create these spaces in which participants can find acceptance and safely explore their desires. This chapter will deconstruct the meaning of 'community', referring to 'its ambiguous, postmodern sense to denote people who may never meet, physically or otherwise, but who may nonetheless be identified collectively through ascription to something shared' (Herman, 2007: 91). I will discuss the concept of community as a connecting ethos or sensibility, rather than a necessarily physical or geographical community. I will explore the ways this sense of connectedness might affect community members.

Finally, my concluding chapter will consolidate the key arguments of each core chapter, and how they contribute to my critical framework. I will highlight the ways in which this framework can enable researchers to approach the subject of BDSM with a more inclusive and constructive perspective than previous frameworks have allowed. I will argue that this open and interdisciplinary approach is necessary for understanding the complex and nuanced experiences of BDSM practitioners. Ultimately, I will suggest that the subversive and exploratory nature of the BDSM ethos potentially allows for the self-exploration, actualisation, and development of identity for practitioners.

Chapter 1:

BDSM: A Critical Overview

BDSM is an increasingly fashionable yet misunderstood sexuality and set of sexual practices. As such, there is 'no universally accepted definition of sadomasochism' (Powls & Davies, 2012: 223). Even BDSM community members describe very varied understandings of their own practice (Graham et al., 2016, 895), so whist the true 'meaning' of BDSM is individual and interpretive, the most commonly cited themes include pushing the boundaries of power dynamics and control, intense stimuli (rather than explicit pain) (Jozifkova, 2013: 391), bondage, restraint, and fantasy (Dancer et al., 2006). It therefore becomes important to examine the varying ways that BDSM practice manifests, as well as the language and monikers used within the community. In this short chapter, I will outline some key terms and practices of BDSM, and examine the history of pathologisation of BDSM practitioners. I will then analyse key literary and cinematic representations of BDSM relationships, and examine the ways that violence and consent are presented. Finally, I will explore the UK legal context of BDSM, analysing a key legal case and the moralistic and stigmatising issues within this case.

1.1. Kinky Terminology: Outlining Key Practices and the History of Pathologisation

BDSM, referring to bondage/discipline, domination/submission, and sadomasochism, can be broken down further to better understand these components. Bondage and Discipline 'refers to two separate but often related practices: scenes that involve physical restraints to heighten the intensity of the experience (bondage), and scenes that involve disciplinary punishment-and-reward scenarios' (Herman, 2007: 91). Domination and Submission refers to 'the psychological and sexual power transfer, which can exist without bondage, physical pain, or humiliation' (ibid). It is important to note that BDSM practices

11

may not necessarily be explicitly sexual in nature, and 'BDSM 'scenes' may involve little or nothing that would be defined as sexual activity' (ibid: 92). While from an outside perspective, BDSM might be viewed as violent, or even conflated with 'violent, non-consensual sex crimes', many of those who practice BDSM focus 'strongly on consensuality, care and mutual commitment between partners' (ibid: 91). We can see then, that BDSM can encompass a wide variety of sexual, erotic, or relational behaviour, which may generally be referred to as 'kink'.

There is a variety of terminology used within BDSM communities, with the practice itself often referred to as 'SM', 'kink', 'scenes', or 'play; the term 'vanilla' is used to denote conventional or normative sex and relationships with no kinky element. Similarly, practitioners are referred to by a number of monikers – which I will make use of throughout this paper – including 'SMers', 'kinksters', or 'players'. Some members of the BDSM community choose to actively reclaim seemingly pathologising terms placed upon them, referring to themselves as 'deviants', or 'perverts'. Organised SM communities practice primarily within three key contexts – liminal explicitly sexual spaces such as fetish clubs or play parties; non-sexual community based physical events such as 'munches' or meet ups; and digital spaces and online forums, e.g. fetlife.com.

1.2. Consent Within Pop-Culture: Issues of Representation

These negative views have long been reflected within popular opinion of BDSM communities (Rye et al., 2015); however, there has been arguably been some recent shift in popular discourse as BDSM practices become more visible within the zeitgeist (Weiss, 2006). This is reflected in the popularity and controversy attached to literary representations of BDSM, most notably the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series (James, 2011). The first significantly popular literary representation of a BDSM relationship, however, was Pauline Réage's (the pen name of Anne Desclos, aka Dominique Aury) *Story of O*. Published in France in 1954 (*Histoire d'O*) and translated into English in 1965, the novel garnered immediate controversy, with the French government wanting to ban the book, declaring it

'obscene' (Musser, 2015). Its detailed descriptions of the 'sadomasochistic humiliation and abuse of its female protagonist' lead some to view the novel as a 'glorification of patriarchy and violence against women' (D'Hont, 2011: 105). For example, the radical feminists Susan Griffin and Andrea Dworkin 'both claim that the novel's sole purpose is to please the male reader' (D'Hont, 2011: 106; see Dworkin, 1981; Griffin, 1981). Coco D'Hont argues, however, that when read 'with a background knowledge of sadomasochism in mind', *Story of O* becomes a more complex representation of the power relations involved in BDSM (2011: 106). The novel offers female characters who 'turn out to be more powerful than they seem to be at first sight' (ibid), thus offering opportunity for reflection and re-conceptualisation of gender, sexuality, and power.

Before the *Fifty Shades of Grey* franchise, Steven Shainberg's *Secretary* (2002) was one of the most popular and well-known BDSM related films. The film's plot centres on a 'damaged' and naïve young women with a history of mental health difficulties and self harm, 'saved' by BDSM (Turley & Butt, 2015: 25). Upon release from a psychiatric hospital, the protagonist, Lee Holloway, is hired as the secretary to neurotic lawyer, Mr. Grey. They soon develop a relationship based on sexual discipline, power exchange, and control, though both become overwhelmed by the emotional intensity of the relationship. When the relationship ends, Lee attempts to maintain an unsatisfying and vanilla relationship, and becomes engaged. When faced with the reality of this marriage, however, Lee realises her love for Mr. Grey and becomes determined to win him back. Through a gruelling three days of submission and discipline, Lee proves her love for Mr. Grey, they marry and live happily (and kinkily) ever after in the suburbs. The film was praised by some for its mainstream representation of BDSM (Weiss, 2006: 112), its normalisation of kink and the associated potential for 'self acceptance' and happiness (Cook, 2008: 123). Some scholars, however, have criticised the film's conventional heteronormative narrative, merely peppered with 'kinky bits' (Weiss, 2006:112). Ultimately, the film is a traditional romantic love story, centred on a soul mate narrative – 'there is someone perfect for everyone' (ibid: 113). Given the fundamental marriage plot within the film's narrative, we can view kink as being 'incorporated into the heteronormative

resolution of matrimony' (Downing, 2013: 93). Whilst the film certainly raised the visibility of BDSM relationships, its narrative has potential to perpetuate the pathologisation of practitioners. Given the characterisation of Lee as damaged and troubled, she can be seen to merely replace 'a tendency towards self-injury with sexual submission to her boss' (Dymock, 2012: 60); thus maintaining the message that SMers are 'damaged' or expressing trauma in some way.

The 2011 publication of the E. L. James' first *Fifty Shades of Grey* novel began a contemporary cultural phenomenon. The novel is presented as a romantic depiction of a kinky relationship between the innocent and naïve virgin Anastasia Steele, and the charming millionaire Christian Grey. Some have praised the series for encouraging the 'liberation of female sexuality', freeing women to talk and explore openly and explicitly about their sexual desires (Musser, 2015: 122). However, the novels have also attracted much criticism, with claims that the scenes within the books lack the necessary consent to be considered BDSM, but rather represent an abusive relationship (e.g. Barker et al., 2013a; Bonomi et al., 2013). As such, BDSM communities have made efforts to distance themselves and their practices from the portrayal of SM practice in *Fifty Shades*. Lisa Downing criticises the novels for presenting a 'protagonist who expresses no degree of autonomous desire outside of conventional romantic heteronorms' (2013: 91); while others express concern that the 'Fifty Shades Effect' creates cultural conditions which normalise intimate partner violence (IPV) (Bonomi et al., 2013; Dymock, 2013).

An examination of *Fifty Shades* reveals that 'emotional abuse is present in nearly every interaction' (Bonomi et al., 2013: 733) between Christian and Anastasia in a variety of forms, including stalking, intimidation, and isolation, as well as sexual violence which, whilst not explicitly resisted, is also not explicitly consented to. Anastasia clearly and repeatedly expresses discomfort with Christian's behaviour: 'I felt demeaned, debased, and abused' (James, 2011: 292); 'Please don't hit me. I don't want you to... Please don't' (James, 2011: 347). Despite this, Christian uses a variety of threatening behaviour to manipulate Anastasia: breaking into her home, plying her with alcohol, and dismissing her

boundaries: 'I need you to behave in a certain way, and if you don't, I shall punish you, and you will learn to behave in the way I desire' (James, 2011: 287). Thus, any consent given within their relationship is arguably coerced and manipulated, rather than an expression of true consent. I will explore these problematic forms of (non)consent further in Chapter 2; and discuss the reception of media representation of BDSM in Chapter 3.

1.3. Consensual Complexities: Legal Context

Whilst clear regulations and consent are paramount within the practice of BDSMers, it is important to note that concepts of consent, sexuality, and violence are irrevocably entwined with both moralistic and legal constraints. Arguably the most prominent and influential case in the UK in terms of the legal classification of sadomasochistic behaviours (which I will refer to throughout this paper) is R v Brown[4], or The Spanner Trial, as it came to be known. In 1990, sixteen men were prosecuted under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act for participation in sadomasochistic sexual acts, having been denied a defence of consent. When a videotape of their activities (made for their private use) fell into the hands of the police, the men were investigated as part of a murder enquiry, 'because the videotape had convinced them [the police] that gay men were being killed during perverted, violent sex' (White, 2006: 169). When found, however, it became clear that none of the men had been killed or even seriously harmed (White, 2006: 169), and that all participants were fully consenting adults, who had willingly engaged in these private practices. Despite this, the Crown independently prosecuted the 'Spannnermen' on the grounds that their behaviours were a danger to 'public interest'. Given the consensual and ultimately safe nature of these practices, the Spannermen appealed their convictions. The Appeal Court, followed by the House of Lords, denied these appeals, declaring that it 'was not in the public interest to allow engagement in sadomasochistic activities' (White, 2006: 170). This case is a significant example of the ways in which people with non-normative sexualities cannot access either

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[4] *R v Brown* [1993] UKHL 19

'true publicity nor privacy' and as such are denied a sense of full sexual citizenship (Herman, 2007: 93). This will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

By examining the various forms of BDSM practice, as well as an overview of representations of BDSM, both legal and media based, we can gain a greater understanding of the ways that kink is practiced, interpreted, and considered. These examples will be referred to throughout this paper and serve to contextually situate the phenomenon of BDSM.

Chapter 2:

Power and/or Play: Deconstructing Violence and Consent in Sexual Dynamics

Throughout this chapter, I will seek to disrupt and complicate binary conceptions of power, violence, and consent. This chapter offers a critical analysis of theories relating to these concepts, with a focus on the works of Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Susan Bordo, Patrick Hopkins, and Melanie Beres. By tracing the genealogy of thought related to sex and power, with a particular overview of the feminist sex wars, I hope to re-conceptualise normative understandings of power and violence through the lens of BDSM practices. I will explore the fluid relationships linking these concepts, and highlight the potentially subversive nature of BDSM practices. The key point I will be addressing in this chapter is the need to move away from binary views of power and gender, focusing instead on the dynamic and complex natures of these concepts. This chapter positions itself as a starting point for developing the broader critical and interdisciplinary theoretical framework I am seeking to create throughout this thesis through which we might gain a more complex understanding of women's engagement in, and experiences of BDSM practices.

2.1. Conceptualising Sexual Power

The exploration, manipulation, and subversion of power roles are undoubtedly central to BDSM practice. As such, it is important to critically assess our understandings of 'power', and what role this plays within BDSM communities and BDSM practices. Whilst traditional theories tended to understand power as held by individuals or groups in a top-down structure, Michel Foucault opposes this understanding and conceptualises power as having three key elements: 1. Power flows and circulates through layers of society rather than being singularly directional as previously conceptualised: 'power is everywhere... comes from everywhere' (Foucault, 1998: 63); 2. Power is productive, that it creates

productive response which enables people to challenge (or reinforce) their position within the power structure; 3. 'Where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault, 1998: 95), there cannot be absolute control or power as this incites cracks of opposition. Foucault, then, understands power not as a possession or something an individual 'has' but as a dynamic that is mobile and flowing, within which individuals and groups are positioned unequally, but which can be appropriated and utilised.

Conceptualising power as this dynamic allows us to theorise and understand the 'power exchange' (Langdridge & Butt, 2005) within BDSM practice in a more expansive way than has been typical to date. There has been the view within radical feminist thought that BDSM is inherently anti-feminist. Radical Feminist scholars such as Andrea Dworkin and Susan Griffin perceive sadomasochism as a form of female oppression and violence against women (e.g. Dworkin, 1974; Griffin, 1982). Along with other radical feminist authors, they asserted that sadomasochistic practices act as a reinforcement and perpetuation of 'patriarchal hierarchies based on relations of dominance and subordination' (Chancer, 2000: 79). Dworkin takes this framework further, to argue that any 'male-over-female' relationship is inherently sadomasochistic within our patriarchal society. She contended that sex, and particularly sadomasochistic sex, is an extension of society's 'violent and sexualized structure' in which 'men, masculinity, and the male systematically occupy the position of the sadist, while women, femininity, and the female are in the structural position of the masochist' (Grant, 2006: 970 on Dworkin). Considering this structure, Dworkin argued that lust, and the erotic is 'inherently about the power of men over women' (Grant, 2006: 982) and that within this system, women are unable to give free and 'meaningful' consent to any sexual activity (Dworkin, 2007).

This perspective has been highly criticised, however, by third wave and more "sex-positive" feminists, who claim that Dworkin and colleagues' view is too rigid and limiting, resulting in a 'feminist superego' which works to 'intimidate women whose experiences of sexuality [do] not conform to a sanitized and idealized version' (Chancer, 2000: 83). Lynn Chancer argues that this prescriptive version

of feminism may result in the repression of the 'verity of many women's psychic and sexual realities', furthering the female oppression they aim to challenge (Chancer, 2000: 83). This critique has been particularly pertinent within the writing of queer feminist theorists who address the fact that queer sexual practices do not produce heteronormative binaries and norms in the same ways as heterosexual sexual practice (Raab, 2013: 7). In this case, the power dynamics within 'male-over-female' relationships that radical feminists position as reflective of violence towards women not only becomes irrelevant, but also dismisses and erases queer identities. Writing more recently, Meg-John Barker reiterates this concern, criticising radical and 'anti-porn' feminism for perpetuating disempowering binaries of sexuality and 'setting up new sex hierarchies which were as oppressive as the ones they were fighting against' (Barker, 2013b: 21). Similarly, sex-positive feminists have been critical of radical feminism's representation of women as 'disempowered actors', and its failure to acknowledge female autonomy and women as 'sexual subjects in their own right' (Glick, 2000: 20).

This discussion is reflective of a wider debate regarding sex and sexuality which emerged in the late 1970s and continued through the 1980s and 1990s (and to some extent, is continuing today) within feminist theory, commonly known as the 'sex wars'. Within these debates, anti-porn (radical) feminists and sex-positive (pro-sex/libertarian) feminists (Ferguson, 1984) were positioned in opposition. The sex wars addressed a number of issues but one of the central and most controversial debates centred on pornography, though many of the same arguments were applied to discussions on sadomasochism. The sex wars can be seen to be reflective of the transition from the second-wave feminist era to the third-wave (Duggan & Hunter, 2006). Anti-pornography feminists such as Andrea Dworkin, Susan Griffin, and Catharine MacKinnon asserted that sexual practice is reflective of patriarchal violence against women and pornography is a vehicle for male dominance and the oppression of women (e.g. Dworkin, 1981; Griffin, 1982; MacKinnon, 1987; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988). Meanwhile, sex-positive feminists such as Gayle Rubin, Pat Califia and Ellen Willis promote sexual practice as a means to free female desire and pleasure, expressing

concern regarding the stigmatisation of sexual minorities. These theorists were critical of the anti-pornography movement for what they viewed as sexual censorship and moral authoritarianism (e.g. Califia, 1983; Rubin, 1984; Willis 2012).

Whilst both broad perspectives have some merit, it is important to move beyond oppositional understandings of such complex topics, particularly as we can consider the pertinence of these perspectives theoretically and practically, respectively. Whilst the radical feminist perspective is important for its critical deconstruction of the patriarchal status quo, the sex-positive perspective has a greater focus on lived experience, the real life experiences of women, and freedom of desire. As such, some authors argue for the rejection of both the radical view that patriarchy disallows female freedom, and the libertarian view that the repression of sexual practice denies female pleasure, claiming both these views as 'essentialist' and restrictive (Ferguson, 1984: 110). Ferguson argues that both these paradigms fail to sufficiently consider the complexities of social power and the meaning of consent (1984: 110). It is this view that radical feminism in particular is limited and oversimplified in its understandings of gender and power, that I believe problematizes the radical perspective on BDSM. Dworkin and Griffin's view that sadomasochism is necessarily 'dehumanizing' and places women as 'instruments for the satisfaction of male lust' (D'Hont, 2011: 106) assumes a heteronormative exchange that fails to acknowledge that women can hold dominant roles within sexual practice and relations. This position also fails to recognise that SM does not reflect a simple top-down power transaction, but rather offers a complex and mutual oscillation of power and control between dominant and submissive. It is appropriate, then, to use a Foucauldian understanding of power – as something which is fluid and flowing, coming from all directions – to gain a more complex understanding of power exchange within BDSM practices.

2.2. Performative Play

In addition to developing a complex understanding of the power dynamics within BDSM practices, it is important to note the key characterisation of BDSM practice as a 'game', a performance which is different from actual violence. BDSM players often refer to their practice as "scenes". The use of this term is important for the understanding of SM 'as a performance, as a staging, a production, a simulation in which participants are writers, producers, directors, actors, and audience' (Hopkins, 1994: 123). In this vein, Coco D'Hont argues that the radical feminist perspective overlooks this integral aspect of sadomasochism as a 'game' (2011: 107; also see Faccio et al., 2014; Ritchie & Barker, 2005). D'Hont highlights the playful nature of BDSM and iterates the importance of separating fantasy from reality in sexual practice: 'The fact that some people enjoy the simulation of violence does not necessarily mean that they enjoy real violence or sexism' (2011: 107). Thomas Weinberg also focuses on this distinction, highlighting the differentiation between 'pretend play' and 'actual violence or domination' (1987). In the words of the lesbian-feminist BDSM organisation, Samois: 'Calling an SM person sexist is like calling someone who plays Monopoly a capitalist' (quoted in Hopkins, 1994: 126).

Extending these arguments, Patrick Hopkins highlights the important distinctions between actual violence and its simulation within BDSM practice:

> In real slavery, the slave is commodity and possession; the master may need fear, but not approval. The slave is capital resource, and often a threat – to be purchased, or bred, and acted upon. In SM "slave" and "master" scenes, however, the "slave" may reject the "master" (or "mistress") because she is not dominant enough, not experienced enough, not skillful enough to satisfy the "slave's" desires. The "slave" may establish a time limit on her "slavery" because she has to get up and go to work at six o'clock the next morning. The "slave" may compliment (or criticize) the "master's" whipping technique and set up a time to meet her again next weekend. (Hopkins, 1994: 124)

We can see then, that inherent to the distinction between violence and the performance of violence, is active and informed consent, as will be discussed later in this chapter. As well as this distinction between actual and simulated violence, we can argue sadomasochism is not about violence at all. Rather than violence or pain, central to sadomasochistic practice is control and the dynamics of dominance and submission (Weinberg & Kamel, 1983: 20). Rather than viewing BDSM as violent or oppressive, we can understand it as fantasy in which power relations are being 'played with' (D'Hont, 2011: 107). It is this 'playing', manipulation or subversion of power, control, and boundaries that are not only central to the SM practices, but can contribute to an empowering experience for the 'players'. Thus BDSM can perhaps be viewed as the manifestation of the eroticisation of power (Plant, 2007). Bill Thompson further argues this point, asserting that 'Given that all sexual fantasies involve some form of roleplay, the only real difference between SM devotees and the rest of the population is that the formers' fantasies involve overt elements of power relationships' (1994: 178). Through this perspective, we can see that BDSM actively and deliberately disrupts and subverts existing norms: 'S&M is a deliberate, premeditated, erotic blasphemy' (Califia: 1983: 130).

Whilst we can view the violence expressed within BDSM practices as 'simulation' rather than 'replication' (Hopkins, 1994: 123), this distinction is not necessarily easy to see from an outside perspective. As sadomasochistic activities are commonly viewed, by both mainstream medical and psychological communities as well as the general public, as "violent", it becomes important to examine how violence is perceived across different contexts. Violence is often understood as 'any form of behaviour… that intentionally threatens to or does cause… harm' (Stanko, 2001 in Ray, 2011: 7); though as Allan Bäck asserts: 'To call something "violent" is often to give at least a *prima facie* reason why it is morally wrong' (2004: 223). This moralistic judgement is certainly true of the "violence" label attached to BDSM, with the enjoyment of, or pleasure gained from violence deemed taboo (Marvin & Ingle, 1999 in Ray, 2011: 7). Given the established differentiation between violence and the performance or simulation of violence

in BDSM, Ferrell et al.'s (2008) description of violent acts as 'performances of power and domination' (cited in Ray, 2011: 7) is particularly useful when considering BDSM practice. Like Nafsika Athanassoulis, my view is that sadomasochistic sex has been 'misclassified as a violent' act (2002: 152), that 'rape should not be understood as a sexual act, but as an act of violence which happens to be expressed through sex… Similarly, sadomasochism should be understood as a sexual act which happens to be expressed through violence' (2002: 152).

This discussion of misclassification highlights the subversive nature of SM practice and relates to Judith Butler's ideas of gender and sexuality as performative – and performativity as potentially subversive (Butler, 1990). We can apply Butler's discussion of drag as reflecting 'the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced' (Butler, 1993: 125) to the concept of SM sexualities. Through this lens, we can see that BDSM offers opportunity to subvert normative gender roles, complicating and challenging heteronormative assumptions regarding gender and sexuality (Raab, 2013: 14). Butler views the performativity of sexuality as not homogenous, but about restaging and challenging norms. This re-writing of the rules, and subversion of norms, is certainly true of the manifestation of violence within BDSM practice. As Ray points out, violence is 'intimately bound up with pain, security, transgression and concepts of the body and its placing in the social order' (2011: 6); it is this manifestation of "violence" – as a means of productive opposition, and deviation from norm – that highlights the potentially transgressive nature of BDSM practice. By subverting and pushing the dynamics of power and control, BDSM challenges normative structures of power and dominance, particularly in relation to normative gender dynamics. As Susan Bordo writes, this is especially relevant in relation to femininity, 'where so much depends on the seemingly willing acceptance of various norms and practices' (2003: 167), and in understandings of pleasure and desire.

Expanding on Foucault's conceptualisation of power, Bordo argues for an analysis of power which accounts for its productive nature, its ability to 'shape

and proliferate – rather than repress – desire, generate and focus our energies, construct our conceptions of normalcy and deviance' (2003: 167). Further to the development of desire and conception, dynamics of power can be seen to be inherently entwined with pain and pleasure, with Fiske arguing that 'pleasure results from a particular relationship between meanings and power… pleasure results from the production of meanings of the world and of self' (in Bordo, 2003: 261). So when viewed through a Foucauldian understanding of power, SM relationships can be seen to interact with power as a complex dynamic of dominance and subordination. Power is not a static entity, but shifts and flows not only within the relationship, but through the very act of being transgressive and deviant.

> The subordinate may be disempowered, but they are not powerless. There is a power in resisting power, there is a power in maintaining one's social identity in opposition to that proposed by the dominant ideology, there is a power in asserting one's own subcultural values against dominant ones. There is, in short, a power in being different. (Fiske in Bordo, 2003: 261)

2.3. Consensual Em-Power-ment

This power, or empowerment, which emerges from the act of transgression, as well as the distinction between violence and the simulation thereof, seems to hinge on consent. Consent is a key central tenet of BDSM, with one of the community mantras being 'Safe, Sane, and Consensual' (SSC) (Langridge & Barker, 2007; Bezreh et al., 2012: 38; Dymock, 2012). So whilst manifestations and definitions of BDSM vary, the common theme found at the heart of all BDSM definitions is one of trust and consent: 'SM is about consent…if there's no consent it's not SM… it's sexual violence… it's as simple as that' (Taylor & Ussher, 2001: 297). Having said this, consent, and particularly consensual "violence" remains a complex concept which is difficult to define, both morally and, as seen in the case of the convictions in the Spanner Trials, legally (Athanassoulis, 2002: White, 2006). Much of the literature on sexual behaviour and sexual violence shows complex and varied definitions of consent, whilst some literature fails to

explicitly define or address the meaning of consent at all (Beres, 2007). This lack of complex conceptualisation of consent becomes problematic, particularly when it leads to the supposition that consent is indicated through behaviour (and the legal implications of this). Melanie Beres (2007) criticises these conceptualisations of consent, arguing that they are reflective of what Bourdieu et al. refer to as 'spontaneous sociology' (Bourdieu et al., 1991: 20), 'the adoption of the common sense meanings of concepts without critically reflecting on the cultural, historical, and social forces that produced those meanings' (Beres, 2007: 95). For example, Ostler (2003) argues that women's behaviours can be indicative of sexual consent, regardless of whether they intend to consent to sex; he writes: 'often times the complainant's specific behavior, whether it is sexual or not during the date often reflects sexual consent' (in Beres, 2007: 95).

This concept of implied consent fails to consider the complex relationship between power and consent. From a feminist perspective, consent must be informed and given freely, ruling out 'cases of duress, intimidation, blackmail, exploitation and lack of other options' (Athanassoulis, 2002: 144). The difficulty of determining whether consent is given freely or is coerced in some way has been discussed by a number of radical feminist authors who assert that 'in our patriarchal culture women can never truly consent to sex… even if women desire sex, this desire is likely to have been constructed by the patriarchal culture' (Muehlenhard et al., 1996: 125; also see Bonomi et al., 2013). Whilst the radical feminist perspective certainly complicates the understanding of free consent; as discussed previously, this perspective may be better understood as useful within a theoretical exploration of patriarchal societies, rather than the true lived experience of women's agency.

Like the concept of power, in the case of BDSM, it is appropriate to understand consent as a complex entity which is not static but an ongoing practice which is constantly negotiated within the SM relationship. As Margot Weiss argues, 'community pressure to be safe, sane, and consensual does not ask practitioners to blindly follow the rules but rather to negotiate their own relationship to these rules, to define safety and risk for themselves' (2011: 83). This negotiation offers

the opportunity to subvert norms of gender, pleasure, and power structures as discussed above. At the centre of this transgression, though, lies consent. Of course, this necessity for consent in BDSM does not mean there are not abuses of power or sexual violence within BDSM communities (Barker, 2013a; Barker, 2013b), though what appears to be abuse is not always so. Whilst the submissive practitioners might appear to be disempowered, as Barker argues, the submissive holds power 'through actively consenting' to the SM act (2013b: 21). This perspective is reiterated in D'Hont's analysis of Pauline Réage's 1954 controversial erotic novel *Story of O* (Originally *Histoire d'O*). D'Hont argues that despite the apparent passivity of the titular character, who is erotically tortured and humiliated, seemingly without resistance, 'O consciously chooses to be submissive; and as a result she is active and powerful in her passivity' (2011: 109).

Similar to the performative element of SM practice and its potential to disrupt heteronormative gender roles, consent can also act to transgress and empower. Darren Langdridge argues that 'SM has the potential to reveal or even subvert traditional gender dynamics with women themselves able to work with consent in a way that recognizes the influence of hetero-patriarchy and the potential impact this may have on their identities and practices' (2006: 378). Thus we can see the potentially transformative nature of BDSM, as practices and communities that allow women to explore their desires, free from restricting and oppressive norms. Whilst the act of consenting to violence or harm is complex, I am inclined to agree with Athanassoulis's view that 'If the result of sado-masochism is… gratification, then presumably it leads to happier individuals, greater enjoyment of ones life and general welfare' (2002: 154).

2.4. Conclusions

This perspective highlights the importance of the sex positive approach I have outlined in this chapter. Through an examination of the genealogy of theories of power and control, I have argued for a less binary approach to the understanding of power, gender, and sexuality. In order to gain a complex and insightful

understanding of SM practices, we must do away with the moralistic judgements attached to the seemingly violent acts. Instead, we should understand BDSM as a game, which simulates rather than recreates violence and oppression, and allows its participants to subvert and challenge heteronormative structures of power. By developing a nuanced understanding of the concept of consent and its relationship to violence and power, we can begin to see that these dynamics can be appropriated as malleable and fluid. This chapter has outlined the importance of conceptualising power as a complex dynamic to be exchanged and toyed with, rather than a static, top-down possession. Through this conceptualisation, BDSM practitioners, and particularly women, are able to transgress norms of behaviour and gender dynamic, potentially having a transformative effect on their subjectivities. This potential for transgression and self-actualisation, will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 3:

Transgressive Sexual Identities: Unpacking the Narrative of Opposing Perspectives.

> Desire is a fluid, multiple and dynamic force that is transformative, destructive and life-changing (Gorton, 2008: 1)

This chapter will further develop the discussion of sexuality as transgressive, and transgression as potentially empowering and transformative. I will reiterate the importance of deconstructing binaries of gender, sexuality, and normativity; I will advocate for more complex and fluid understandings of desire and sexuality. Through an examination of society's institutional control and condemnation of particular bodies and sexualities, with a focus on Gayle Rubin's concept of the sexual hierarchy, I will argue that it is necessary to move beyond binary understandings of what is normal/abnormal, healthy/unhealthy when it comes to sexual practice. Expanding upon previous discussions of heteronormativity, I will explore the concept of homonormativity, and apply this to the case of BDSM, to argue that our societal acceptance of deviant sexualities is often conditional. That is, popular acceptance of these sexualities is dependent on their adherence to particular social norms. By integrating a sex positive perspective, which recognises sexuality and desire as central to human development and subjectivity, however, it may be possible to develop a theory of desire that is inclusive of a much broader range of sexual practice and identification. I will then examine discussions regarding the nature of BDSM as either 'therapeutic' or 'pathological', and argue for the rejection of this dichotomous debate. This chapter will argue that these sexualities can be both an expression of trauma *and* an expression of healthy self-development.

3.1. The Cultural Hierarchy of Sexual Expression

Given the considerable debates regarding BDSM and its position as either oppressive or empowering, it is important to explore theories of desire, sexuality, and the erotic from a more expansive and nuanced perspective. Western cultures have an extensive history of policing and controlling bodies and sexualities (Berkowitz, 2012), generally considering 'sex to be a dangerous, destructive, negative force' (Rubin, 2011: 148). This 'sex-negative' perspective (Glick, 2000) frames sex, and particularly non-normative sex as taboo, creating an environment in which it may only be discussed 'in whispers or hushed tones' (Williams et al., 2013: 273). Sex positive authors argue that this negative approach leads to the restriction of 'the range of human diversity' (ibid), and call for theories of sexuality which are more affirmative in embracing the individual and diverse nature of sexuality (Barker, 2013b; Williams et al., 2013). Beyond the argument for mere acceptance of sexual diversity, is the belief that 'desire and sexuality are central to women's subjectivity', particularly for those who are queer or deviant in some way (Ussher, & Mooney-Somers, 2000: 183). If we believe that sexuality plays a significant role in our identity formation, it becomes paramount to promote free exploration and expression of desire. As Coco D'Hont argues, 'eroticism can tell us something about human behavior, and may even function as a space to (re)think existing ideas about it' (2011: 112).

Within our current cultural climate, however, sadomasochism can be viewed as a 'stigmatised sexuality' (Hoff & Sprott, 2009). In her discussion of the sexual value system, Gayle Rubin asserts that within this system, sexuality that is 'normal' should be 'heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive… coupled, relational… vanilla… it should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female' (Rubin, 2011: 151). Rubin refers to this type of sex as existing within 'The Charmed Circle' of sexual behaviour that is considered 'good, normal, natural, blessed' (ibid: 152). She also asserts that within this hierarchy, any sex that exists outside of these rules is 'abnormal': 'bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, nonprocreative… masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual… it may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys, or unusual roles' (Rubin, 2011: 151). This

type of sex exists at the 'Outer Limits' of the sex hierarchy and is considered 'bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned' (ibid: 152). This hierarchy firmly identifies BDSM sex as 'abnormal' and 'deviant'.

The very binary of 'normal' and 'abnormal' though, is complex and vulnerable to critique. This dichotomy between what is normative and non-normative is a problematic binary perspective that works to reinforce stigmatising views of 'acceptable' and 'deviant' sexualities. The legalisation and normalisation of 'acceptable' behaviours, while 'deviant' behaviours are vilified and criminalised supports the regulation and policing of human behaviour; 'The binary system of regulation functions to fetishize and target specific institutional forms for regulation leaving the larger structures of power to circulate and proliferate' (Singer, 1993: 42). Viewing sexuality through this binary offers a 'narrow picture… that doesn't describe the great range of human sexual expression' (Moser & Madeson, 1998: 21), and negates the possibility of fluid or non-static sexualities (Diamond, 2008). For example, Judith Butler discusses the concept of 'the heterosexual matrix' or 'heteronormativity' as 'the institutions, modes of understanding, norms and discourses that treat heterosexuality as natural to humanity' (Lloyd, 2007: 27), and the rejection or othering of any sexual difference (Butler, 1990: 47). She argues that the normative presumption of heterosexuality serves to oppress, delegitimise and control minority sexual and gendered practices (Lloyd, 2007: 33). This matrix is just one aspect of a long history of control and moral judgement over sexual desire and the body (Berkowitz, 2012), which serves to stigmatise and oppress those who do not fit within the confines of 'acceptable' identification.

Within a feminist narrative, patriarchal society works to marginalise and control the free expression of women's bodies and desires. From a radical feminist perspective, eroticism and sexuality cannot exist outside of the patriarchal power imbalance which places men over women (Grant, 2006; Dworkin, 2007). Patriarchal relations, though, can be viewed as exemplative of Foucault's concept of institutional power (Foucault, 2002: 82). Through this view, we can see that the normalisation or ab-normalisation of particular bodies and sexualities

contributes to the acceptance or othering within Rubin's sexual hierarchy. Those bodies and desires which exist within the 'outer limits' become marginalised and treated with disgust, which is, itself, a mechanism of power.

3.2. Sexual Morality: The Binaries of Acceptance and Rejection

In the previously discussed 'Spanner trials', there was a clear moralistic motive for upholding the convictions for engaging in SM activity, with Lord Lowry, who was involved in the House of Lords appeal stating that '"perverted and depraved sexual desire" is not conducive to the enhancement or enjoyment of family life or to the welfare of society' (Lord Templeman, 1993 in Athanassoulis, 2002: 154). Athanassoulis criticises Lord Lowry's assertion that perverted and depraved sexual desires threaten the fabric of society, likening this idea to continuing claims that homosexuality threatens family and social values. We can therefore examine the rejection of sadomasochistic behaviour within the context of the "ick factor" (Rofes, 1998; Smith et al, 2009), that people are swayed by their personal distaste or feelings of revulsion or disgust. Within this concept is the idea that by consenting to an act that others consider perverse of deviant, one must be 'insane' and therefore incapable of rational decision.

> The focal point of arguments against sado-masochistic practices is that there is something objectionable about consenting to harm for the purposes of sexual gratification… understanding sado-masochism involves making sense of the idea that one can get pleasure from pain (Athanassoulis, 2002: 150-1)

Sara Ahmed argues that when considering the reason and mechanism through which bodies or sexualities become objects of disgust, we must situate disgust within structures of power relations. From her perspective, the manifestation of sexual morality and attribution of disgust to bodies and behaviours that are considered 'other' or 'less than' perpetuates the existing 'power relations between above and below' (Ahmed, 2004: 88). This mechanism of placing particular sexual conduct as 'less than' has 'more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics' (Rubin, 2011: 145). Rubin argues that the sexual

hierarchy which 'grants virtue to the dominant groups, and relegates vice to the underprivileged' (ibid) mirrors the discrimination seen within racism and other prejudiced ideologies. Similarly, Lauren Berlant suggests that maintaining this status quo works to the benefit of those who hold institutional privilege and fear difference; to 'those who fear instabilities of privilege and embrace the social as a site of sameness, non normative sexualities threaten fantasies of the good life that are anchored to images of racial, religious, class, and national mono-culture' (Berlant, 2012: 21-2). Considering those sexual practices which are othered or considered 'abnormal' can be 'vilified as mental diseases or symptoms of defective personality integration' (Rubin, 2011: 150), this can have a damaging and marginalising effect on those who practice these sexualities. Butler reiterated this potentially damaging effect of existing within a strict heteronormative paradigm, writing that 'sometimes a normative conception of gender [or sexuality] can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life' (Butler, 2004: 1).

Beyond the question of how we conceptualise what is 'normal' and 'normative', we must also question where we draw the line between which behaviours are 'normalised' and which are 'deviant' (Rubin, 2011; Barker, 2013a). As previously mentioned, Rubin and later Weiss (2006) argue that heteronormative sex and relationships that fit within The Charmed Circle are granted privilege over deviant sexualities on the Outer Limits, which are pathologised and criminalised (Rubin, 2011: 149). What is considered 'normal' though is culturally, spatially, and temporally dependent, with continuing debates over "where to draw the line" and whether any activities 'may be permitted to cross over into acceptability' (Rubin, 2011: 151). The culturally fluctuating assignment of erotic behaviours within the sexual hierarchy is irrevocably entwined with moralistic ideals as can be seen in this extract from a fictional 1950s discussion:

> Suppose I granted your first point that homosexuality is justifiable in certain instances and under certain controls. Then there is the catch: where does justification end and degeneracy begin? Society must condemn to protect. Permit even the intellectual homosexual a place of respect and the first bar is down. Then comes the next

and the next until the sadist, the flagellist, the criminally insane demand their place, and society ceases to exist. So I ask again: where is the line drawn? (James Barr cited in Rubin, 2011: 145)

As discussed, homosexuality was historically (and in some cases still is) considered abnormal, morally wrong, and illegal. Whilst most western societies have become more accepting of homosexuality, both legally and socially, some theorists argue this acceptance is limited. Authors such as Lisa Duggan, Jasbir Puar, and Catherine Connell write about 'homonormativity' – the acceptance of queer and homosexual behaviour providing it fits within a normative monogamous framework. Homonormativity assumes the desire of the queer community to assimilate and emulate heteronormative ideals such as marriage and traditional family values (e.g. see Warner, 2000). As Connell asserts, homonormativity 'emphasizes commonality with the norms of heterosexual culture, including marriage, monogamy, procreation, and productivity' (2014: 145). These theorists argue that in order to be accepted, queerness must be 'assimilated into the homonormative' (Puar, 2006: 80).

3.3. Transgressive Aggression or Impactful Empowerment?

This conditional acceptance can arguably be applied to BDSM and kinky sexualities. Whilst we have seen some increased visibility and acceptance of BDSM communities with the publication and popularity of media representations such as the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series (James, 2011; Taylor-Johnson, 2015), this acceptance can be seen as conditional. Margot Weiss argues that the increased popularity of SM communities can be viewed as 'acceptance via normalisation, and understanding via pathologising' rather than a true shift towards sexual freedom (2006: 103). Weiss argues that in the mechanism of 'acceptance via normalisation', 'SM is only acceptable when it falls under the rubric of normative American sexuality' (2006: 103), and as such is placed under the same conditions as queerness within homonormativity. Within the mechanism of 'understanding via pathologizing', Weiss asserts, 'SM is understandable only when it is the symptom of a deviant type of person with a

sick, damaged core' (ibid). Both of these mechanisms can be seen in some of the most popular literary and cinematic representations of SM sexualities – *Fifty Shades of Grey* (James, 2011; Taylor-Johnson, 2015), and *Secretary* (Shainberg, 2002). Both examples present a 'very conventional love story with some kinky bits' (Weiss, 2006: 113). These films present the young, damaged, ingénue who is ultimately saved from an empty life by a passionate, kinky (and in the case of *Fifty Shades*, abusive) relationship. Ultimately though, they enter into heteronormative marital relationships, thereby 'curing' the characters of their damaged and pathological desires. These representations, then, can be seen to 'reinforce boundaries between normal and not normal by allowing the viewer to consume a bit of kinky other while buttressing the privilege, authority, and essential normalcy of the self' (Weiss, 2006: 114).

A more complex understanding of sadomasochistic desires, however, shows that BDSMers, and particularly female practitioners challenge traditional negative or pathologising perceptions of these communities through the active empowerment of dominant women who cannot be placed within the 'heteronormative [or homonormative] sexual script' (Barker, 2013b: 21). Given that 'the negotiation of sexual desire is central to the development of young women's sense of personal empowerment and entitlement' (Ussher & Mooney-Somers, 2000: 194), those who transgress normative desires have the unique potential to explore and develop their subjectivities by politicising desire through subversive practices. By 'transgressing socially respectable categories of sexuality and refusing to draw the line on what counts as politically correct sexuality' (Ferguson, 1984: 109), kinksters have access to a sexual freedom that heteronormative vanilla individuals don't. It has even been suggested that sexuality can act as 'a mechanism for resistance, transgression, opposition… [an] emblem… of freedom' (Singer, 1993: 36-7). So if sex and sexuality are inherently developmental and political, then transgressive sex can be used as both a mode of self-exploration, and political statement. 'The very desire for SM as transgression produces the fantasy of sex as outside of or in opposition to economic and hierarchical social relations' (Weiss, 2011: 144-5). This is, again, reminiscent of Butler's concept of performativity as potentially subversive

(Butler, 1990). Through the act of performing sex and gender differently, SM players can actively subvert and complicate the heteronormative assumptions attached to these roles.

In addition to potential to be transgressive and empowering, many BDSM practitioners, and particularly women, find their practice to be a therapeutic and cathartic experience (see e.g. Lindemann, 2011; Faccio et al., 2014; Graham et al., 2016). Much of the early psychological research on BDSM has focused on pathologising these desires (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013) and relating them to trauma (Faccio et al., 2014); while more recent research has worked to counter these stereotypes, claiming 'BDSMers do not suffer from psychological disorders nor were the victims of child sex abuse' (Jozifkova, 2013: 391). Some more complex narratives, however, reject this binary understanding, acknowledging that '*some* people used BDSM to revisit abusive or oppressive situations of the past in order to gain power over those situations and their impact' (Barker, 2013b: 22) [italics added by me]. As such, some theorists have written about the 'healing narratives' found within their research. Through this frame, trauma or challenging experiences are universal and need not be pathologised or problematized. Rather, the focus is on privileging the 'subjective experience of the individual above the assessment of 'experts'' (Dymock, 2012: 60). Alex Dymock argues that 'previously self-destructive behaviours or traumatic events can be set to rest through BDSM's redemptive, healing power' (2012: 60).

This idea of the healing element of BDSM is particularly seen in research which explores the perspective of professional dominatrices, who describe their work as a form of 'self-help' or 'therapy' for the client (Lindemann, 2011; Barker, 2013b; Williams et al., 2017). Seemingly, pro-dommes tend to frame their own work less within the field of sex work or 'erotic labour' (Chapkis, 1997), and more as a 'therapeutic pursuit' (Lindemann, 2011: 155). So while some kinksters feel that their BDSM practice acts as a healthy therapeutic mechanism for processing negative experience, theorising BDSM within this framework may pose the risk of perpetuating problematic assumptions about practitioners. The very notion of 'healing narratives' might serve to reinforce images of BDSMers as

mentally disordered: 'if BDSM was healing, didn't that suggest that BDSMers *required* healing?' (Barker, 2013b: 22). However, if we understand the complex nature of trauma, suffering, or distress as a universal element of the human condition, this 'healing' or cathartic element is arguably beneficial to anyone, regardless of clinically traumatic experience – perhaps everyone requires healing.

3.4. Conclusions

By taking an open and accepting perspective of desire, which questions notions of normativity and recognises fluidity, we can develop a more insightful and expansive understanding of sexuality and selfhood. The ethos of BDSM communities promotes a more nuanced view of sex and deviance as neither 'good' or 'bad', 'normal' or 'abnormal', thus offering a space of acceptance and exploration. If we consider human sexuality to be an importance element of development and the subjective experience, we can see how engaging in transgressive behaviours might support identity development. It is important to note that 'identity', subjectivity, and selfhood are non-static, fluctuating concepts and we are not defined by our practice. However, practice that is inherently exploratory can help us to inform and develop our sense of self. By advocating an open, non-binary view of sexuality, desire, and what is 'healthy' or 'healing', we can seek to understand the lived experiences of SM players as complex and nuanced. Community based research shows that BDSMers experience their practice as empowering and cathartic, highlighting the importance of spaces and communities which allow for these experiences.

Chapter 4:

Communities of Deviancy: Understanding Belonging and Safety in BDSM Spaces

Expanding upon discussions concerning the potential benefits gained from sadomasochistic practice, this chapter will explore the distinction between 'practitioner' and 'community member' with respect to BDSM, questioning the source and pathway of these benefits. By conceptualising BDSM as a complex phenomenon, which functions as sexuality, identity, and 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 1982), we can see that SM communities centre on a sensibility of openness and acceptance. I will outline the importance of 'safe' community spaces for SM practitioners to explore and develop their sense of belonging and identity and forge a sense of citizenship. Whilst my previous chapters have focused primarily on the effects of individual practices and subjectivities for SMers, this chapter explores the more relational, spatial and collective elements of BDSM practice. Drawing upon literature relating to community belonging, 'safe spaces' and sexual citizenship, I will consider the significance of community 'spaces' and ethos and the potential implications these have for members' sense of selfhood.

4.1. (Deviant) Sexual Citizenship: Building BDSM Communities

As I have outlined in previous chapters, people who practice BDSM or other so-called deviant or transgressive sexual practices or performativities, are routinely positioned outside of a normative and accepted social sphere. As such, 'sexual dissidents enjoy neither true publicity nor privacy and are thus denied full sexual citizenship' (Herman, 2007: 93). This lack of publicity and privacy can be seen in the simultaneous lack of social acceptance, along with the legal intervention in private behaviours (e.g. The Spanner Trials) (Binnie, 2007: 31). Whilst 'sexual citizenship' is a broad and multifaceted concept, I will refer to this as a way of 'theorising access to rights granted or denied to... social groups on the basis of

sexuality' (Richardson, 2017: 211), sexual expression, or an individual's intimate life (e.g. Roseneil, 2013). Access to sexual citizenship can be affected by the presence or lack of public representation, as well as social and state recognition. Many traditional frameworks of citizenship have been 'grounded in normative assumptions about sexuality' (Richardson, 2017: 211; also see Bell & Binnie, 2000). As such, full sexual citizenship is only afforded to those who adhere to heteronormative expectations of intimate life such as 'hegemonic married heterosexual practices' (ibid). Those who engage in queer, non-normative, or 'deviant' sexual practices are thus denied access to full sexual citizenship.

This denial of meaningful citizenship highlights the importance of developing spaces and communities in which these individuals feel safe and accepted[5]. In this vein, Lauren Berlant argues that 'non-normative sexualities have, during the twentieth century, mainly represented negative forms of social value' (2012: 22), and that in order to build a less normative and phobic world, we must create spaces of relative queer or non-normative saturation. Citizenship and 'public spaces are constructed around particular notions of appropriate sexual comportment' (Hubbard, 2001: 51) to the exclusion of those who do not adhere to these normative notions. In response to this, sexual 'deviants' such as SMers can be seen to build communities and spatialities as an 'attempt to constitute different understandings' (Browne et al., 2007: 2) of what is deemed acceptable sexual identity, and as such, negotiate a sense of citizenship or belonging together with others.

Within literature regarding non-normative sexualities, such as queer theories, there is a strong focus on the importance of 'safe spaces'. While the notion of safe spaces has fluctuated over time, its grounding lies in inclusivity and maintaining the safety of those with marginalised identities (The Roestone Collective, 2014). The concept of safe space 'implies a certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance' (Kenney, 2001: 24)

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[5] I acknowledge that no space is truly safe for all, and that 'safer space' might be a more accurate description. However, as it is the more commonly used and understood terminology, I will use 'safe space' in this paper.

Having evolved within pedagogic movements, there has been a focus on the ways in which space and the ethos of those environments can impact our ability to learn and grow. Referring to a pedagogic context, Stengel and Weems discuss the importance of breaking down normative perceptions and having the opportunity to 'unravel, build and rebuild knowledge' (2010: 507), asserting that the creation of 'safe space' can encourage this. Similarly, The Roestone Collective discuss the use of 'safe spaces' within women's movements, arguing the role of 'unity', 'empowerment' and 'challenging oppressive constructions of safety and gender' (2014: 1352). Despite these clearly parallel themes found in discourse surrounding BDSM and the safety of marginalised groups, there has been a marked lack of literature produced which relates the two. Arguably, it is the community, inclusivity, and ethos of BDSM in addition to the practice itself that can lead to therapeutic benefit for its participants (Graham et al., 2016).

Whilst there has been some growth in scholarly interest in BDSM, most of this work focuses on the individual experiences or 'pathologies' of practitioners. Little work has been done on SM communities – 'empirical work on SM has focused on self-reported psychological profiles which approach SM from a very different paradigm than one that would explore people in places' (Newmahr, 2010: 317). Margot Weiss suggests that 'there might be several "levels" of BDSM involvement' (2006: 118), highlighting the distinction between an individual practitioner with a preference for SM sex, and a community member, who organises their social world around the SM scene and views SM 'as a lifestyle, identity, a natural disposition, or sexual orientation, like being gay' (ibid; see also Faccio, et al., 2014: 754). The research that has focused on SM communities has tended to focus on insular, full time community members, and has not explored the experiences of those who engage part time or are on the fringes of this wider community. As such, the potential benefits and rewards observed within a community setting 'cannot be assumed to be relevant for people who practice SM privately' (Newmahr, 2010: 316). However, if we conceptualise the SM 'community' not as a homogenous group, but as the ethos or sensibility which connects those who engage with the exploration and openness of this

phenomenon, perhaps we can understand these benefits as a spiritual and subjective experience, not just an embodied one.

4.2. Finding Your Tribe: Spaces of Belonging

We can therefore view BDSM communities as serving as 'spaces' for practitioners to explore and develop their sense of identity in a safe environment in which they 'belong'. Given the broad variety of BDSM-related practices, and the subjective experiences of players, it is important to note that this is not a homogenous group in which 'one size fits all' (Turley et al., 2011: 123). Despite this, many SMers identify strongly with a 'community', and feel their SM practice is reflective of a social and individual identity, as well as a sexual preference. The actualisation of kink communities often 'translates into the spatiality of BDSM: where to meet, where to play, and issues of being 'outed' (Herman, 2007: 94). Some participants feel that 'secrecy is part of the package' of a BDSM lifestyle, and find relief in spaces and communities which do not require secrecy (ibid). Kinky spaces such as play parties or fetish clubs act as 'liminal spaces that disrupt geographies of heterosexuality by creating transitory sites for sexual freedom and pleasure where the immoral is moral and the perverse is normal' (Hubbard, 2001: 68).

David McMillan and David Chavis highlighted the importance of collective sensibility when defining 'sense of community' as 'a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together' (1986: 9). This 'being together', though, does not necessarily refer to physical space, but rather 'the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness' (ibid); this is particularly true for marginal groups, for whom non-physical communities (e.g. online) are particularly effective means of communication and relational connection (Herman, 2007: 98). BDSM communities, then, 'bring people together with a shared common interest' (Graham et al., 2016: 896) much like any other groups based on specific interest areas. The effect of these communities can be complex and meaningful, with

members citing feelings of belonging, self-exploration and self-actualisation, 'shared emotional connection', and sense of 'family/tribe' as being directly influential in the development of other identity elements and experiences (Graham et al., 2016: 896). Framing community in this way allows us to think beyond the individual subject and embodied experience, and consider the bonds created through relational collectivities.

4.3. BDSM as a Non-Sexual Practice

BDSM has generally been 'cast as a [sexual] practice rather than an identity' and a 'lifestyle choice' distinct from identity categories such as gay, lesbian, and transgender (Herman, 2007: 89). However, there has been a recent increase in discussions of BDSM which 'minimize the sexual and instead focus on identities and practices that are more relational' (Landridge, 2006: 380). Whilst it seems clear that BDSM can function as both a casual sexual preference *and* a full time identity, it becomes difficult to measure the distinction between these functions. By understanding SM as not simply about sex, but also as an expression of marginal identity, the need for inclusive and 'safe' communities becomes clear. Events within BDSM communities can be 'divided into play parties that involve overt BDSM play and 'vanilla' events in which no BDSM [or sexual] activity takes place' (Herman, 2007: 95). A number of researchers have explored the non-sexual elements of the SM community, finding that 'the SM community is a place to get together and feel a sense of belonging, even when there is no sex involved' (Weiss, 2011: 56-7), with participants stating that '[w]hat's so funny is how frequently you will get a group of perverts and you will talk about almost everything except it [SM]' (Weiss, 2011: 56). This is certainly true of the explicitly non-sexual community activities such as 'munches' – casual, public events for people who are interested in SM; 'This is not a play party. It's a get-together for folks who share a common interest in BDSM. If you're shy or unsure of yourself, this is the perfect place to be... everyone is friendly and non-judgemental' (Weiss, 2011: 57). For members who feel a lack of acceptance and belonging in their wider social community because of their sexual identity, organised BDSM communities 'can play a vital role, forming a support network

that helps members realise they are not alone, and providing an environment where one does not feel 'freaky' or perverted' (Herman, 2007: 93). These communities can offer members the sexual citizenship they are denied within the wider normative society by creating new norms that 'fit BDSM players into a society with its own rules and expectations, aesthetics and protocols' (ibid).

Given the complex nature of BDSM practice and community 'membership', Staci Newmahr has argued that SM is best understood as 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 1982). Newmahr defines serious leisure as 'a devotion to the pursuit of an activity that requires specialized skills and resources, and provides particular benefits' (2010: 318), and sees it as having the following general qualities:

1. The need for perseverance – in the face of resistance, participants return to their leisure pursuit.
2. The leisure pursuit as a career.
3. Effort involving the acquisition of knowledge, training, experience and /or specialised skills.
4. Durable benefits – personal and social-psychological benefits of engaging in the leisure activity.
5. Unique ethos – the spirit of the community.
6. Personal identification with the leisure activity. (Newmahr, 2010: 318)

The latter three characteristics are particularly clear within the framing of SM communities as hinging on the orientation, belonging, and growth of its members. Given the non-sexual elements of community engagement, BDSM is clearly about more than just the sexual act; it highlights the division between eroticism and sex – SM practices can elicit an erotic response without being clearly sexual in nature. In her research, Newmahr found a distinction between 'people who *love* SM, and people who *do* SM' (2010: 329). This distinction separates those who engage in SM in a devoted 'identified' way, from those who are specifically interested in sadomasochistic sex. Those who 'love SM' do not always define their practice as explicitly sexual, but as 'serious leisure' – a part of their identity, their passion, their ethos (Newmahr, 2010: 329). One element of

this ethos is a commitment to openness, acceptance, and safety; this can be seen in the community's readiness to welcome 'newbies' and share knowledge, experience, and skills, to demonstrate a 'willingness to accept difference and to make it our own' (Ahmed, 2000: 2).

4.4. Transformative Inclusivity

It is potentially this attention to acceptance of difference and diversity that makes BDSM communities act as safe spaces for participants to explore the ways in which they constitute sexuality and selfhood outside of mainstream norms. As SM communities centre around clear regulations of safety, consent, and acceptance, practitioners can assume that when they enter a community event, everyone there 'is interested in, or at least supportive of, SM, the space is private in the sense of restricted, secluded, and safe from a (hostile) public world' (Wiess, 2011: 59). As I outlined in Chapter 3, a nuanced and non-judgemental understanding of power, violence and consent is imperative for practitioners to transgress and subvert normative expectations of sexuality. The safety, 'seclusion', and supportive nature of these spaces allows players to explore, experiment, and question without fear of judgement, potentially leading to 'emotional liberation' (Newmahr, 2010: 324).

There has been some suggestion that by enabling practitioners to 'try on new roles and experiences' (Barker, 2013b: 22), BDSM can be a 'transformative' mechanism leading to self-acceptance, personal growth, and a greater sense of self-awareness (Lindemann, 2011: 154). Practitioners consistently report that their BDSM practice and community serves as a space for personal growth, allowing them to explore, develop and affirm their identities (Graham et al., 2016). Some practitioners describe their desires and practices as a form of escapism (Baumeister, 1988). This is particularly true of submissives, who feel that by relinquishing control to the dominant, they are able to become uninhibited in their sense of self and to escape the 'oppressive and stressful' nature of their social environment (Baumeister, 1988: 29). By providing an open, accepting and 'radically inclusive' (ibid: 901) environment, BDSM communities

offer access to alternative and subversive life scripts and opportunity for personal exploration (Graham et al., 2016). Practitioners have also reported that their engagement has helped them build self-confidence and apply this personal growth to contexts outside of their sexuality (Graham et al., 2016).

4.5. Conclusions

By understanding SM as a stigmatised and marginalised practice, we can see that SMers are denied full sexual citizenship within the wider society. It seems that the development of spaces and communities that allow for the rejection of the heteronormative script is imperative for the experiences of those with queer or transgressive desires to reclaim a sense of belonging and citizenship. By applying the concept of 'safe spaces', from queer and pedagogic literature to the case of BDSM, we can see that SM spaces can act as an opportunity to question, negotiate, and develop selfhood. The potentially transformative effects of this can lead to personal growth that extends well beyond the sexual act to affect all areas of life and identity. Though there is scholarly work on both private SM practice and SM communities, respectively, there is still a marked lack of literature exploring the 'in-between' – the players who are affected by their SM practice without being fully engaged in an organised 'community'. BDSM can manifest as sexual practice, sexuality, identity, or devoted hobby, with blurred and unclear lines between each function. What seems to connect all of these players, though, is a commitment to sex-positive exploration and acceptance. By understanding 'community' as the ethos and spirit of this group, it becomes less about the level or volume of literal engagement with community spaces, and more about the collective ethos and attitudes of SMers. I would suggest that it is the relatively inclusive, undiscriminating safety of the BDSM community and its associated environments which allows for 'exploring and learning', and therefore the development of identity.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation, I have utilised an interdisciplinary critical approach to analyse and apply a broad range of literature and theory to the case of BDSM. Through an examination of theories of power, desire, and community, I have developed a theoretical framework to gain a more nuanced and insightful understanding of BDSM and its practitioners' experiences. I have made use of literature from a variety of disciplines, including contemporary social theory, queer and feminist theory, and theories of sexual spatialities, in order to conceptualise BDSM from an open perspective.

I have placed focus on complicating and deconstructing binaries, arguing that concepts of power, violence, sexuality, and belonging are complex and nuanced and must be examined as such. Making use of literary, cinematic, and legal example of BDSM representation, I have shown that many perceptions of BDSM practice are essentialist and problematic. Through each chapter, I have presented key conceptual challenges to the understanding of BDSM, and contributed progressively to a critical framework that will allow for greater insight. Taking a Foucauldian perspective, I have argued that we must conceptualise power as fluid, malleable, and productive in order to understand the ways that power exchange is consensually 'played' with within BDSM practices. Previous research with BDSM practitioners has shown that they position their practice as 'play', a game in which they simulate violence and power (e.g. Hopkins, 1994) in order to subvert and challenge heteronormative structures of power. By viewing the power exchange within BDSM practice this way, we can understand the 'violent' elements of SM to be performative, subversive, and potentially transformative. Having established this element of my framework, I then explored and contested notions of sexual normativity, arguing that sexualities that are explorative and subversive can support the development of the subjective self. By examining the ways that those with non-normative desires are restricted and oppressed, I argue for the rejection of

hetero[or homo]normative expectations, and the acceptance of an open, sex positive position.

From this perspective, we can consider sexuality or sexual identity as significant elements of the development of selfhood, thus understand how transgressive and exploratory sexuality might be formative and self-actualising. Whilst some practitioners have found this to be the case, they are still positioned within society as 'deviant', and thus stigmatised. This stigmatisation can serve to deny SMers a sense of belonging, safety, and citizenship. Thus, if those with non-normative sexualities are marginalised and denied a sense of sexual citizenship within mainstream society, we can see that the development of BDSM spaces becomes imperative for reclaiming this sense of belonging. Previous research with BDSM communities have revealed that many members feel a sense of acceptance, belonging, and family within these communities that they have been unable to find elsewhere (e.g. Graham et al., 2016). What is unclear, however, is whether this sense of belonging comes from literal community engagement (i.e. time spent together in physical spaces), or from a collective sensibility. Given that there are people who practice BDSM and consider it a significant and beneficial element of their sexuality, but do not engage fully or organise their lives around a particular BDSM community; we can begin to re-theorise 'community' as representing an ethos, sensibility, or set of values which is common to this group. BDSM can manifest in a variety of ways for its practitioners, from an identity, a lifestyle, a preference, or a hobby, yet there has been little research into the distinctions and relationships between these manifestations. Further research is needed to gain greater insight into the different experiences of practitioners with different levels of community engagement. A common theme found in research into BDSM practitioners, however, is a sense of inclusivity, safety, and exploration, which allows productive self-development. It is important to note that these communities are not homogenous, nor are they immune from corruption or abuse (Barker, 2013b). No space is entirely 'safe', and despite the clear boundaries and methods set to maintain the mantra 'safe, sane, and consensual' (Langridge & Barker, 2007; Bezreh et al., 2012; Dymock, 2012), there are boundary violations within

BDSM communities (Holt, 2016). Despite this, many practitioners find belonging, safety, and a sense of self within their communities.

Much of the existing research on BDSM has approached the topic from disciplinarily limited and binary perspectives: are practitioners psychologically disordered? Is submissive behaviour oppressive? Can one consent to violence? Can BDSM be therapeutic? Given the vast variety of BDSM practices, practitioners, and communities however, it is unlikely that the experiences of SM players will manifest in binary uncomplicated ways. This theoretical framework deconstructs these binaries, and can allow researchers to approach the subject from a more broad, open, and less prescriptive perspective. The framework will be utilised in my own continuing empirical research with BDSM practitioners and community members as part of my PhD. Through the use of this framework, I hope to work collaboratively with my research participants, and explore their subjective and affective experiences. The development of this framework has revealed aspects of this phenomenon requiring further empirical exploration, such as the meaning of 'community' within this context. As such, I will use this interdisciplinary framework to explore, from an open and nuanced perspective, the experiences of BDSM practitioners and community members. Whilst it is clear that SM is a varied and subjective experience, there are commonalities found amongst SM practitioners. Ultimately, BDSM is a transgressive practice which allows its participants to actively disrupt and challenge existing norms. The 'space' (be it literal or representative) in which BDSM is practiced, allows for the subversion of traditional power structures, the safe exploration of desire, and potentially, the development of selfhood.

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