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A 'Different Economy of Bodies and Pleasures'?: Gender, Power, and Sexuality in  
BDSM Interactions

By

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Doctor of Philosophy

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

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An abstract of  
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the  
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University  
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Doctor of Philosophy  
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2012

## Abstract

### A 'Different Economy of Bodies and Pleasures?': Gender, Power, and Sexuality in BDSM Interactions By Brandy L. Simula

At the conclusion of *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1990), Foucault infamously refers to the possibility of a “different economy of bodies and pleasures.” In the current economy, bodies and pleasures are regulated through social systems including gender and sexuality. Since elsewhere Foucault describes BDSM as “the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure” (Foucault, 1994: 165), some speculate that he views BDSM as creating one such different economy (Halperin, 1995; Miller, 1993). Many argue in a similar vein that BDSM creates spaces in which traditional gender norms and gender inequality can be resisted (e.g. Califia, 2000; Hale, 2003), while others argue that BDSM reifies gender inequality (e.g. Linden et al., 1982; Williams, 2002). I rely on an interdisciplinary methodological approach that uses data collected from correspondence, diaries, and memoirs available at the Leather Archives and Museum; public discussion boards at a large BDSM community website; and 32 semi-structured in-depth interviews. I draw on the feminist interactionist “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman, 1987; 2009) and social psychological “framing” (Ridgeway, 2011) approaches to gender, which emphasize that gender is something that is done or performed in interactions, rather than a fixed individual characteristic that people bring with them to interactions. I find that a strong majority of BDSM participants perceive gender as less salient for both self and others in BDSM compared with other social settings, with significant implications for how they create and interpret BDSM interactions, including that most participants do not use gender as a criterion in selecting BDSM partners. I also find that participants utilize alternative beliefs about gender and power that enable them to resist normative hegemonic cultural beliefs. Drawing on participants’ perceptions of decreased salience of gender for self and others in BDSM contexts as well as their use of alternative beliefs about gender and power, I demonstrate that participants perceive BDSM as a social context in which gender inequality is significantly reduced compared with other social settings in which they interact.

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## **Acknowledgements**

This project would not have been possible without the participation of my interview partners, to whom I am enormously grateful for sharing their time and expertise. Rick Storer of the Leather Archives and Museum helped me locate useful collections and allowed me to work with several collections that had not yet been processed. I also thank the Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities for endorsing and helping publicize this study. A research grant from the Emory Laney Graduate School and a Dissertation Completion Fellowship from the Center for Women at Emory provided partial support for this work.

I have been fortunate to have had extraordinary teachers throughout my life, each of whom has played a role in making this project possible. I thank my high school history teacher, Harold Causey, for teaching me the joys of intellectual curiosity. At Appalachian State University, I was fortunate to encounter teacher-scholars whose lives and work inspire my own and whose support has made this journey possible: Betsy Beaulieu, Sheila Phipps, Mike Wise, Kim Hall, Allie Funk, Fred Milano, Conrad Ostwalt, Rennie Brantz, Peter Petschauer, Maggie McFadden, and Michael Lane.

For their useful feedback on various aspects of this project, I thank Martine Brownley, Carla Freeman, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Dana White, Edna Bay, Tim Dowd, Lisa Knisely, Angela LaGrotteria, and colleagues at the National Sexuality Resources Center's 2008 Summer Institute. I thank my dissertation committee members, Irene Browne, Tracy Scott, and Pam Hall for their generous and constructive engagement with this project. I thank my co-advisors, Mark Jordan and Cathryn Johnson, for their extraordinary mentorship and support. Mark's insightful questions, reminders to be attentive to both the context and content of narratives, and generous intellectual engagement with my work have truly enriched my academic life. I am grateful to Cathy for helping me learn to think about the broader implications of my work, for teaching me both intellectual and professional skills, for her enthusiastic support of my work and intellectual development, and especially for sharing the joys and excitement of academic life with me. I could not have asked for better or more supportive advisors.

Berky Abreu has provided invaluable advice and support since my first day at Emory and I cannot thank her enough for the many ways in which she has contributed to the completion of this project. The fabulous Dee McGraw and Elizabeth Fricker created one of the happiest and most productive working environments imaginable, kept me in good spirits during the final year of writing, and helped me maintain my sense of humor and sanity when both were tested.

I also wish to thank my family and friends, who have been a constant source of love and support throughout this project. Thank you to the Goodriches and Calabrias for the laughter and conversation and for nourishing me in both body and spirit. Thank you to Angie LaGrotteria for your friendship and support and for being a truly effective bear repellent. Thank you to my parents, Linda and Randy Simula, for teaching me to love

reading and learning and for the many ways you have supported and encouraged me throughout my life.

Finally, I thank Michael Martin and Molly Simula/ Martin for their love, support, patience, companionship, and good humor throughout this process. They have encouraged and supported me tirelessly. Words cannot adequately express my gratitude for the immense joy they bring to my work and life.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In June 2011, NPR.org ran an article titled, “The End of Gender?” that asked, “Does gender matter? In a country with the ideal of treating everyone fairly and equitably, do we really need to know if someone is a boy or a girl? These questions are driving decisions and actions around the country.” The article begins, “Look closely and you may see signposts” indicating that American culture may be “heading toward the end of gender” (Weeks 2011). It cites as examples of these signposts such things as: an androgynous runway model who worked both male and female runways in 2011, a J. Crew catalog that featured a young boy with his toenails painted pink, a Michigan high school’s decision to create a gender-neutral prom court, the increasing number of colleges and universities offering gender-neutral housing options, and the State Department’s recent decision to use gender-neutral language on passports. Yet the sidebar to the article, “Why Gender Still Matters,” which contains an interview with psychologist and executive director of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education, Leonard Sax, identifies the increase in public single-sex schools as a signpost pointing to a different direction for gender in the contemporary U.S. Sax argues, “Ignoring gender won’t make it go away. On the contrary: Ignoring gender has the ironic consequence of exacerbating gender stereotypes.” Whether we are heading toward the “end of gender” and how and why gender “still matters” remain central questions for feminist scholars and others interested in the present and future of gender. In this dissertation I engage these questions, focusing particularly on whether and how gender “matters” in relation to experiences of sexuality and power. How and when does gender matter in social interactions? Does gender matter more in some interactional settings than

others? To explore whether and how gender matters in relation to sexuality and power, I focus on the experiences of BDSM participants, who explicitly negotiate gender, power, and sexuality in the context of BDSM interactions. I explore how BDSM participants perceive gender as “mattering” in BDSM settings and examine whether they experience gender as mattering similarly and/or differently in BDSM compared with other social settings.

### **WHY STUDY GENDER, POWER, AND SEXUALITY?**

In the contemporary U.S., gender, is one of the three primary person categories (along with race and age) that people consistently and continually rely on to interpret the bodies of others and guide interactions with one another (e.g. Brewer and Lui 1989; Fiske 1998; Ridgeway 1991; Ridgeway 2009). Ridgeway (2009, 2011) explains that sex category and gender work together as a primary frame for interaction through which people make themselves intelligible to others. As a primary person category and primary frame for interaction, gender is a social system that all individuals in the contemporary U.S. must negotiate on a daily basis. Gender influences our perceptions of ourselves and others and the kinds of interactions we have with others because we must negotiate gender to make ourselves intelligible to others and to interact with others (Butler 1999 [1990]; Carli 1999; West and Zimmerman 2002 [1987]). Our daily lives are filled with instances of making gender-related choices: which restroom to use, which pronouns to use to refer to ourselves and others, which clothing stores or sections of stores to shop in, which products we use to care for our bodies... the list is nearly endless. Gender directly or indirectly influences virtually every choice we make and impacts every aspect of our lives, from our educations (e.g. Buchmann, DiPrete, and McDaniel 2008; Fuller 2011;

Jacobs 1996) and careers (Browne and Misra 2003; Padavic and Reskin 2002; Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999; Ridgeway and England 2007) to our families (e.g. Coltrane and Adams 2008; McLanahan and Percheski 2008; Risman 1998b) and social networks (e.g. Benenson 1990; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Thelwall 2008).

Gender is not just a source of social *differences* between men and women, however. These differences also contribute to *inequalities* between men and women. Men, as a group, have greater access to valuable resources, power, and prestige compared with women (e.g. Carli 1999; Frye 2007; Ridgeway 1991; Ridgeway and Diekema 1992; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 2006). Men hold the majority of leadership positions in American society and the higher the prestige of the position, the more likely it is to be held by a man (e.g. Carli 2001; Eagly and Carli 2003; Ridgeway 2001; The White House Project 2009). In 2011, for example, women headed only 12 Fortune 500 companies and held only 17 U.S. Senate seats. Men control the majority of wealth in our society (Deere and Doss 2007) and men as a group earn significantly more than women (e.g. England, Thompson, and Aman 2001; Lorber 1995; Reskin 2000). Women also perform the majority of unpaid labor in the U.S., especially domestic work and dependent care (e.g. England 2011; Hirschfeld 1989). Gender significantly influences all of our life experiences.

These gender-based inequalities that influence each of our life experiences are based in part on men's and women's unequal access to social power. As Carli (1999) explains:

Many researchers have acknowledged that men have greater access to social or interpersonal power than women do (e.g. Dépret and Fiske, 1993; Johnson, 1976; Kanter, 1977; Lips, 1991; Lorber, 1998). In general, interpersonal or social power (i.e., power over) has been defined as having the potential to influence or control

others (French and Raven, 1959; Henley, 1977; Johnson, 1976) or having control over valued resources or outcomes (Dépret and Fiske; Kanter)... Men generally have more power than women do because men generally are more likely to possess those advantages than women are. (p. 82)

As a result, women are generally presumed to be less competent than men (Carli 1999). In turn, because women are perceived as less competent than men, in group interactions they are given fewer opportunities to speak, their contributions are less valued, and people less often defer to their opinions (Berger et al. 1977; Carli 1990; Carli 1991; Carli 1995; Zelditch 2001). Additionally, gender and power are related through the cultural association of masculinity with power and femininity with powerlessness (e.g. Carli 1999; Connell 1987; Johnson 2005; MacKinnon 1987; MacKinnon 1989b). As Radtke and Stam (1994) explain, “that which is considered to be female and male reflects the subordinate-dominant relationship of female and male, and when we ‘do’ our gender appropriately, we act to maintain that relationship” (p. 9-10). Power is thus both a source of gender inequality and a way of doing gender (Fenstermaker and West 2002b; West and Fenstermaker 2002 [1993]; West and Fenstermaker 2002 [1995]). At the macro level, unequal access to social power and resources influences gender inequalities across virtually all social institutions, as described above. At the micro level, power and powerlessness shape the ways in which we perform gender and interpret the performances of others.

Additionally, because gender and sexuality intersect significantly in contemporary American culture, understanding how gender influences our lives requires understanding the ways in which the social system of gender is shaped in relation to sexuality (e.g. Ingraham 2005; Kimmel and Plante 2004; Rich 1993 [1980]; Schwartz and Rutter 1998). Heterosexuality, the current normative system of sexuality, depends on gender categories

for its logic and organization. At the same time the gender system also relies on heterosexuality for part of its content (e.g. Ingraham 1994; Jackson 2006; Pereira 2009; Rich 1993 [1980]; Richardson 1996; Schwartz 2007; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1994). Doing normative masculinity and femininity, for instance, can be accomplished in part through appropriate performances of heterosexuality (Schilt and Westbrook 2009; Schwartz 2007; Schwartz and Rutter 1998). Yet while sexuality and gender intersect and overlap significantly, they are not synonymous and thus necessitate distinct analytical concepts (Butler 1999 [1990]; Jackson 2006; Rubin 1984).

### **WHY STUDY BDSM PARTICIPANTS?**

Why study the experiences of BDSM participants? First, according to previous estimates, up to a quarter of the U.S. population participates in some form of BDSM (Janus and Janus 1993; Michael et al. 1994; Rubin 1994; Scott 1993). Yet the size of the BDSM population does not alone merit attention to BDSM, as I discuss later in this section. Given the exponential increase in references to BDSM in the popular media, the rising availability of BDSM guides and erotica in mainstream bookstores such as Barnes & Noble, and the growing variety of BDSM paraphernalia at adult stores such as Adam and Eve, it is likely that the population estimates developed two decades ago now significantly underestimate the number of people who currently participate in some form of BDSM. Not only is it likely that more people now participate in BDSM than did twenty years ago, the popularization of BDSM by the mainstream media also suggests that people who do not themselves participate in BDSM are now more likely to be aware of BDSM than in previous decades. References to BDSM now appear frequently on sitcoms and dramas, for example. In the late 1980s and early 1990s references to BDSM

on TV shows were limited to a rare reference on crime shows such as *Law and Order*. Crime shows framed BDSM as a dangerous and often lethal sexual fetish found primarily among individuals with severe psychological disorders. Today, however, references to BDSM on television shows such as *Will and Grace*, *Sex and the City*, *Weeds*, *the Surreal Life*, *House*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Family Guy*, *Nip/Tuck* and others frame BDSM in a much less negative light. And while BDSM continues to appear on crime shows, many shows, such as *CSI* and *Law and Order: SVU* have moved away from framing BDSM as (only) a dangerous disorder and instead most often portray BDSM as a benign—if unusual—sexual interest. BDSM imagery, terminology, and activities are also becoming more widely known through their representation in music videos by well-known artists such as Christina Aguilera, Madonna, Rihanna, Lady Gaga, and others. Additionally, while BDSM novels, erotica, and guides have long been available through informal networks in BDSM communities, in the past two decades, a variety of publishing houses dedicated to BDSM have been established, such as Greenery Press and Daedulus Publishing.

Second, BDSM has long been the subject of intense theoretical debate among feminist and queer theorists and has been—along with sex work and pornography—one of the most divisive sexual issues of the feminist “sex wars.” The relationship of the power inequalities structured into BDSM interactions to those generated and sustained by the larger society, especially those related to gender and sexuality, continue to be the subject of theoretical interest among scholars of gender and sexuality. Some take the position that BDSM replicates normative structures of social inequality in ways that reproduce and support gender inequality (e.g. Linden et al. 1982; Reti and Parker 1993),

while others argue that BDSM subverts those structures in ways that potentially undermine the social system upon which gender inequalities are based (e.g. Califia 2000; Deckha 2011; Hale 1997). Yet despite generating a significant body of scholarship, these debates continue to lack empirical grounding. Understanding how social inequalities influence and are influenced by BDSM participation, I argue, requires a consideration of how participants themselves perceive the social systems upon which those inequalities are based as well as how participants negotiate those social systems in the context of BDSM interactions.

Third, and most importantly, because BDSM involves explicit negotiation, discussion, and reflection on power exchange, BDSM interactions can illuminate the processes through which individuals negotiate power, which is an essential component of inequality. The study of BDSM interactions can also illuminate broader social processes related to sexuality, gender, and power. As Weinberg and Kamel (1983a) explain:

In a subculture involving S&M, where behavior often takes “extreme” forms, the cultural assumptions underlying human action should be more visible and explicit than is the case in the larger society... Hence, the microcosm of interrelationships and social meanings surrounding, for example, dominance and submission, aggression and passivity, and masculinity and femininity should be more amenable to study than they usually are within the larger culture. (p. 21)

BDSM participants’ explicit interactional negotiation of and reflection on the social meanings of gender, power, and sexuality can therefore contribute to our understanding of the ways in which these social systems influence other interactions in which they are less explicitly negotiated and/or in which individuals are less conscious of their influence.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In this study, my primary question is: How do BDSM participants experience gender, power, and sexuality in BDSM and other social interactions? Scholars suggest



that gender, power, and sexuality are pervasive, multi-level features of contemporary social life with both micro/interactional and macro/structural facets (e.g. Butler 1999 [1990]; Carli 1999; Foucault 1990 [1978]; Lorber 1995; Rich 1993 [1980]; Rubin 1984). In this study, I explore in-depth how individuals negotiate these social systems and experiences in the context of BDSM and other social interactions. I investigate whether and how participants perceive their experiences of gender and sexuality in BDSM contexts as similar to and/or different from their experiences of those social systems in other interactional contexts.

To better understand the ways in which participants' experiences both influence and are influenced by broader social structures as well as the other social interactions in which they participate, I began with three questions regarding interactional experiences. First, how do broader social norms and structures related to gender, power, and sexuality influence participants' experiences of BDSM? In this study, I explore how BDSM participants negotiate normative cultural beliefs and meaning systems in the context of interactions with other participants. Foucault and other scholars of sexuality demonstrate that sexuality is a system through which social experiences, identities, and lives are created and regulated (e.g. Foucault 1990 [1978]; Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]; Rubin 1984). Drawing on this work, I examine whether and how participants use the social meaning systems associated with "sex" and "sexuality" to define BDSM interactions. I also investigate the extent to which participants support or reject hegemonic cultural beliefs that link gender and power by normatively associating masculinity with power and dominance and femininity with powerlessness and submission (Carli 1999).

Additionally, I analyze whether and how participants view their BDSM experiences as impacting their general perceptions of gender, power, and sexuality.

Second, do the processes of meaning-making participants use to negotiate gender, sexuality, and power in BDSM interactions differ from those they use in non-BDSM interactions? The symbolic interactionist framework demonstrates that meanings do not inhere in particular objects or actions, but are instead created through interactions with others (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1967; Goffman 1974; Mead 1934). Do the strategies participants use to negotiate social meanings differ across BDSM and non-BDSM interactions? Are there meaning-making processes unique to BDSM settings?

Third, do participants have different experiences of the relationships among gender, sexuality, and power in BDSM and non-BDSM contexts? Social psychologists and others (e.g. Brewer and Lui 1989; Carli 1999; West and Zimmerman 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987) demonstrate that gender is a primary person category in the contemporary U.S.—a category which individuals instantaneously and automatically rely on to define others. Because some scholars suggest that BDSM is a unique social setting in which participants may experience gender differently than in other settings (Bauer 2007; Bauer 2008; Califia 2000; Hale 1997; Ritchie and Barker 2005), I investigate whether participants perceive the salience of gender as similar across BDSM and other social settings. I also explore whether participants perceive differences in the extent to which other actors support hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power in BDSM compared with non-BDSM settings.

While collecting and analyzing data, I began to realize that some of these questions would be more central to the dissertation than others. For example, while

participants talked about how social norms shape their experiences of BDSM and how their BDSM experiences differ from their non-BDSM experiences (Questions 1 and 2), participants did not describe different interactional processes in BDSM and other interactions (Question 3). Instead, participants described using interactional processes in BDSM settings that are similar to those they use in other interactional settings, such as at work and with family. Rather than describing different *processes* of meaning-making across BDSM and other social interactions, participants described different *meanings* created in BDSM as compared with other interactions. By exploring the meanings of gender and sexuality participants experience in BDSM contexts and whether and how they perceive those meanings as different from those experience in other social settings, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of the situationally-variable meanings of gender and sexuality in people's everyday experiences. Specifically, it contributes to our understanding of whether and how gender "matters" in social settings in which participants rely on alternative rather than hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender.

### **ORGANIZATION OF THE DISSERTATION**

In the next chapter, I present a summary of the activities, roles, identities, and terminology involved in BDSM and provide an overview of previous theoretical and empirical approaches to BDSM. I focus particularly on feminist and queer theoretical approaches to BDSM as well as symbolic interactionist and social constructionist empirical work. In Chapter 3, I discuss the queer feminist interactionist conceptual framework that grounds this study. I focus on several key concepts drawn from these perspectives: interactions, selves, meanings, gender, power, and sexuality. In Chapter 4, I discuss my research methods, which include semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 32

BDSM participants, archival data collected from the personal papers of BDSM participants held by the Leather Archives and Museum, and data collected from community discussion boards at one of the largest and oldest BDSM community websites in the world. Qualitative research combined with an interdisciplinary conceptual framework allowed me to examine the processes through which participants negotiate gender, power, and sexuality in BDSM and other social settings. I also define who is a BDSM participant, explain the sampling and recruitment strategies I utilized, describe the sample population, provide a summary of my data analysis procedures, and reflect on my own positionality and ethical issues raised in conjunction with this research. I conclude this chapter by providing a profile of the research sample.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 consist of the findings chapters of this dissertation. In Chapter 5 I explore participants' perceptions of the relationship of BDSM to sex and sexuality. Because sexuality is a social system that intersects significantly with gender in the contemporary U.S. (Ingraham 1994; Jackson 2006; Rich 1993 [1980]; Schwartz and Rutter 1998), whether participants perceive BDSM as a form of sexuality may influence their experiences of gender in BDSM interactions. The extent to which participants define BDSM as sexual may also influence the meanings BDSM interactions have for participants. Thus, I explore how participants perceive BDSM in relation to sex and sexuality, focusing on whether and how they distinguish BDSM from non-BDSM sexual interactions.

In Chapter 6, I focus on individuals' perceptions of the social importance or salience of gender for self and others and how those perceptions shape BDSM interactions. Drawing on Ridgeway's (2009, 2011) "framing" approach to gender,

I examine whether and how participants' perceptions of the salience of gender in the construction of selves differs across BDSM and other social settings. I also explore whether and how participants' perceptions of the salience of gender when interacting with others influences how they select and interact with BDSM partners. Additionally, I explore how participants use gender stereotypes when creating gendered relationship structures (e.g. daddy/ little girl) and engaging in gender play (e.g. forced feminization). I examine the implications of participants' use of these stereotypes for their understandings of the normative relationship of sex category to gender that underpins gender as a primary frame.

In Chapter 7, I explore the role of hegemonic and alternative cultural beliefs about gender and power in BDSM interactions. I focus on whether and how participants support or reject normative cultural beliefs that link masculinity with power and dominance and femininity with powerlessness and submission. I analyze how participants' cultural gender beliefs influence their perceptions of specific BDSM roles constructed around power and powerlessness. I also investigate whether and how participants perceive differences in the ways in which men and women enact power and powerlessness in BDSM settings. Finally, in Chapter 8, I conclude this dissertation with a discussion of the key findings of this research, its implications for the study of gender and sexuality, the limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

BDSM has long been the subject of both academic and popular curiosity. Who participates in BDSM and why? What do people get out of BDSM? How many people are involved in BDSM? Early sexologists approached these questions through a pathologizing model, which treated BDSM as a mental illness in need of “curing.” The pathologizing model gave way to a deviance model, which continued to frame BDSM as a curious abnormality. Feminists shifted the conversation to include questions about the relationship of social inequalities, such as those grounded in gender and sexuality, to the practice of BDSM. Until relatively recently, the history of the production of knowledges about BDSM has been one of understandings that begin from the assumption that there is something “wrong” with people who participate in BDSM and that BDSM is a problem that needs solving, or, at best, explaining. Over the course of the past three decades, however, a sea change has occurred in approaches to BDSM, resulting in a significantly more nuanced understanding of BDSM as a consensual social activity.

In this chapter, I trace how various approaches to BDSM have explored the questions outlined above and summarize the knowledges that have been developed by each approach. I begin by providing a brief overview of BDSM terminology and a description of the BDSM population. Next, I review theoretical work on BDSM, focusing particularly on feminist and queer approaches. I then review the history of empirical approaches, describing how the various models of BDSM that have been developed over the past century have influenced the emerging field of BDSM studies. Next, I review recent research on BDSM, focusing particularly on sociological and symbolic interactionist approaches that have developed as part of the social constructionist

approach to sex and sexualities. Finally, I discuss the recent emergence of gender as a topic of study in the empirical literature.

### **DEFINING BDSM**

BDSM is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of terms used interchangeably both in the literature and by participants to refer to a range of consensual practices/activities, desires, communities/sub-cultures, identities/ roles, and meanings.<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that these terms often overlap in participants' everyday lives, distinctions among them are conceptually important because these terms are not simply differences in preferences for particular activities; they identify different aspects of BDSM. Leather,<sup>2</sup> for example, is primarily a personal identity and/or community affiliation, while D/s is primarily a particular style of interaction, and bondage is a subset of particular activities. Holding these terms conceptually distinct is important because knowing how someone identifies (e.g. as a leatherdyke) does not tell us what kinds of interactions that individual desires or engages in, nor, because the meanings of specific roles and identities vary significantly, does it tell us what that identification means to that individual. Several decades of sexuality research demonstrate that there are no inherent or necessary linkages between people's sexual identities, desires, and practices (e.g. Butler 1999 [1990]; DeLamater and Hasday 2007; Irvine 2005; Laumann et al. 1994; Lorber 2006). In the context of BDSM, this means that knowing how someone identifies, either on a personal or community level, does not tell us what kinds of BDSM activities and interactions that person engages in or what meanings those interactions have for that individual. Likewise,

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<sup>1</sup> Langdridge and Butt (2005) explain that in recent years, both academics and BDSM participants themselves have shifted to using the term BDSM as an attempt to "recognize the plurality of practices that make up sadomasochistic play" (p. 69).

<sup>2</sup> See Gayle Rubin's forthcoming *Valley of the Kings* for an excellent history of leather identities and community structures.

knowing that someone is in a D/s relationship does not tell us about the practices ze engages in or how ze identifies. The various categories subsumed under the umbrella term BDSM are interrelated but not synonymous.

**Kink** is a general term for non-normative sexuality. Like BDSM, it is often used as an umbrella term, but kink is a much broader category than BDSM and includes sexual interests like fetishes, cross-dressing, strap-on sex, voyeurism, etc. **Leather** is a term that originated in gay male communities in the 1960s and subsequently spread to lesbian s/m communities in the 1970s (Rubin 1994). Leather retains a strong association with gay and lesbian BDSM but is also used as a synonym for BDSM regardless of sexual orientation (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006; Rubin 1994). Leather is most often used to refer to personal identification and/or community affiliation, but is also used to refer to BDSM practices and relationships. **Dominance and submission (D/s)**<sup>3</sup> refers to practices involving exchanges of power and/or to a Dominant/submissive relationship.<sup>4</sup> **Sadomasochism (S/m, s/m, s&m, SM)** refers to practices that involve pain and/or to a Sadist/masochist relationship. **Master/ slave (M/s)** refers to a Master/slave relationship—a relationship in which the participants have agreed that one person will control the other either for a given period of time or indefinitely (for some this control is limited to BDSM interactions, while for others it includes all interactions between the participants; the latter is known as 24/7 and/or Total Power Exchange (TPE)). **Bondage, (including bondage and discipline—B&D)** refers to practices that involve physical and/or mental

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<sup>3</sup> Distinctive capitalization, particularly in names, titles, and roles, is one way that BDSM participants convey the meaning of their relationships and identities in writing (the capital letter marks the top dominant/ sadist/ master/ mistress role, while the non-capitalized letter marks the bottom/ submissive/ masochist/ slave role; BDSM participants often use differentiated capitalization in scene names to indicate role/identity and to signal the nature of their relationship—Chris and ben, for example). This distinctive capitalization is sometimes, but not always, preserved in the academic literature.

<sup>4</sup> Ernful and Innala (1995) define D/s as “a variety of sexual and recreational behaviors that involve consensual power exchange between partners” (p. 623).



restraint. **Domestic discipline** involves men “punishing” their wives or girlfriends for failing to behave appropriately and/or for failing to appropriately maintain the home and is sometimes associated with the relatively recent set of practices emerging as part of **Christian kink**.

The term “**scene**” has multiple meanings for BDSM participants, including: (a) a noun that refers to the BDSM social scene, either generally or in a specific locale (e.g. ‘The Houston scene is really happening.’); (b) a noun that refers to one or more temporally and/or spatially bounded consensual interactions (e.g. ‘We were in the middle of a cutting scene.’); and (c) a verb that refers to engaging in BDSM activities (e.g. ‘I’m going to scene with her tomorrow;’ ‘we were scening last night’). In written conversations, BDSM participants often mark these distinctions by using “Scene” to refer to the BDSM community in general (meaning a) and “scene” to refer specific interactions or the process of engaging in those interactions (meanings b and c). I preserve this use of capitalization to mark meanings of the term scene throughout the dissertation.

The variation in uses and meanings of BDSM terminology extends to the roles and/or identities participants take or identify with. Terms that are used to describe roles or identities are sometimes used synonymously, yet are often used to mark significant differences among roles and identities. Top, dominant, master, and sadist, for example, can have significantly different meanings for some participants and in some contexts, yet are often also used interchangeably, as are the corresponding terms bottom, submissive, slave, and masochist. A **top** is someone who leads in a given interaction, while a **bottom** is someone who follows in that interaction. Importantly, topping and bottoming usually but not necessarily involve power exchange. For example, many participants do not

consider rope bondage to involve power exchange; a top might be someone who enjoys putting someone else in rope bondage, while a bottom might be someone who enjoys being put into rope bondage. In comparison with other roles, top and bottom are least often understood as identities and are more frequently understood by participants as roles. Importantly, top and bottom are terms often used by people who switch (take different roles in different settings or with different partners), which also indicates their more frequent construction as roles (variable) than identities (fixed). The other terms—dominant/submissive, master/slave, and sadist/masochist, are much more often used by participants to describe a sense of an innate identity and are rarely used by people who switch. **Dominant** generally refers to someone who enjoys exercising power in BDSM contexts, while **submissive** generally refers to someone who enjoys giving up power in BDSM contexts. **Master** and **slave** generally refer to specific participants in an M/s (Master/ slave) power exchange relationship, but are also sometimes used by participants to indicate a stronger BDSM identification than is generally denoted by the terms dominant and submissive. Finally, a **sadist** is someone who enjoys inflicting pain in a BDSM context and a **masochist** is someone who enjoys receiving pain in a BDSM context. When distinctions among these roles exist in a given community or for a specific participant, they are often critically important. For example, someone might identify as a submissive (someone who enjoys consensual submission and power exchange) but not as a masochist (someone who enjoys receiving pain). Given the often important distinctions among these terms, when describing individual participants who self-identify with specific BDSM roles or identities I use the terminology each participant uses to describe zirsself. When describing multiple participants with different identifications in the same

category (e.g. bottom/ submissive/ slave/ masochist) I use the terms top and bottom, because these are the broadest, least exclusionary terms.

### **THE BDSM POPULATION**

Previous estimates of the size of the BDSM population range from 5-25% of the U.S. population (Janus and Janus 1993; Michael et al. 1994; Rubin 1994; Scott 1993).<sup>5</sup> How one defines the “BDSM population” itself factors significantly into the estimation process. Will someone be counted as a member of the population if s/he attends BDSM events? Purchases BDSM paraphernalia? Views BDSM pornography? Or only if s/he reports having BDSM experiences—and if so, which experiences will count—specific practices, specific kinds of interactions? And what about people who engage in practices or relationships that would generally be recognized as BDSM but who do not themselves identify in terms of BDSM? These questions are related to larger questions being debated in the field of sexuality studies about sexual identities and have led many sex researchers to abandon identity categories (e.g. gay) and instead focus on practices (e.g. MSM—men who have sex with men). However, as discussed above, because BDSM involves a variety of aspects of sexuality including both identities and practices that strategy is not viable for this project. For the purposes of this project, I therefore define the BDSM population as including anyone who identifies with and/or has experiences with or desires for any of the aspects of BDSM described above. Because BDSM is by definition consensual, my definition of the BDSM population is also limited only to people who desire and/or engage in consensual practices. I discuss my population parameters and sampling strategy in detail in Chapter 4.

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<sup>5</sup> In a more recent study based on community samples of participants at two large LGBT events in New York City Tomassilli et al. (2009) found that 33% of lesbian and bisexual women have engaged or currently engage in BDSM.

The increasing visibility of BDSM in American culture suggests the population may be growing. References to BDSM on popular television shows such as *Will and Grace*, *Sex and the City*, and *Weeds*, in music videos by performers such as Madonna, Britney Spears, Rihanna, and Nine Inch Nails, in advertisements for products ranging from breath mints to yogurt to deodorant, and in articles published in non-BDSM-oriented magazines ranging from *Time* (2004) to *Bitch* (2008) to *Cosmopolitan* (2011) indicate that BDSM is becoming more familiar to mainstream audiences (Langdrige and Butt 2004; Taylor and Ussher 2001; Wilkinson 2009). Additionally, the exponential growth in BDSM how-to guides (e.g. Baldwin 2002; Hardy and Easton 2001; Martin 2006; Mistress Lorelei 2000; Morpheus 2008; Rinella 2005; Varrin 2001; Warren and Warren 2008) and memoirs (e.g. Kelly 2006; Llama 2006; Puppy Sharon and Toushin 2004; Varrin 2006) in the past decade, along with the increasing availability of BDSM paraphernalia such as handcuffs, floggers, ball gags, and nipple clamps in mainstream adult stores such as Adam and Eve, the Red Door, and Good Vibrations also suggest that interest in BDSM may be increasing (Falk and Weinberg 1983; Seidman 2003a; Weinberg and Magill 1995; Weiss 2006a; Wilkinson 2009).

Currently, more than 500 groups and organizations are dedicated to BDSM in the U.S. alone and they coordinate more than 250 major (i.e., drawing attendees from outside the region they are held in) conferences, contests, and workshops every year (Wright 2006). An officer of the Society of Janus (one of the largest and oldest BDSM organizations in the U.S.) estimates that on any given evening in San Francisco, at least a dozen BDSM-related activities (ranging from private play parties to workshops to fundraisers) are taking place (personal communication) and the Society of Janus calendar

(<http://soj.org/calendar/>) shows an average of five public events a day in the Bay area alone. Most large western cities (e.g. London, Paris, Rome, Berlin, Sydney, Toronto) have active BDSM communities and host BDSM events similar to those held in the U.S. In 2009, BDSM participants from Brazil, Canada, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, and Norway reflected on the social and legal status of BDSM in their home countries as part of the special issue on BDSM in the *Journal of Homosexuality* (Kotek et al. 2006). These reflections indicate that BDSM populations around the world are experiencing increases in growth similar to those in the U.S.

Community websites dedicated to BDSM have seen significant growth in numbers of users in the past decade as well. Alt.com, for example, now has nearly 2.5 million members and bondage.com (which was founded in 1996 and had approximately a quarter of a million profiles available when I joined in 2002) now has more than a million profiles and many more members (members are not required to create profiles). Together, the increasing visibility of BDSM in the mainstream media, the significant number of BDSM organizations, the frequency of BDSM events in major urban and suburban areas, and the increase in users of BDSM-related websites suggest that the available population estimates, most of which were created in the 1990s, may underestimate the current size of the BDSM population. What makes BDSM particularly appropriate for this study, however, is not (only) that a significant and growing proportion of the American population is interested and/or experienced in BDSM, but that BDSM identities, practices, and communities are often explicitly constructed in relation to gender, power, and sexuality.

## THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO BDSM

References to BDSM practices in queer and feminist theory often frame BDSM as being either entirely bad (e.g., the claim made by some radical feminists that it reifies oppressive social structures<sup>6</sup>) or entirely good (e.g., the claim made by some queer theorists that it creates new and transformative ways of relating<sup>7</sup>). Like any other set of social practices in which large numbers of people engage, however, there is enormous diversity in how those practices are experienced and in the meanings that they have for the people who engage in them—a diversity and variation that has not yet been sufficiently reflected in either the empirical or theoretical literature. By examining this diversity, we can better understand the complex ways that social interactions can simultaneously subvert and shore up normative systems of meaning.

### Feminist Theoretical Approaches

In feminist conversations about sexualities, desires, practices, and identities are hotly contested theoretical, political, and personal issues. In the 1980s, debates concerning how feminists should understand sexualities and sexual practices in the context of a heteropatriarchal society rooted in gender inequality<sup>8</sup> became particularly heated following the 1982 Barnard Scholar and Feminist IX Conference (for a brief

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<sup>6</sup> Examples include the claims made by radical feminists that “somasochism is the basic sexual perversion of Patriarchy” (Lesh 1982, 203) and that “*even in play* to affirm that the exertion of power over powerlessness is erotic, is empowering, is to set the emotional and social stage for the continuation of that relationship, politically, socially, and economically [her italics]” (Lorde and Star 1982, 68).

<sup>7</sup> E.g. Michel Foucault’s famous claim that “S&M is...the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously... they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body ... These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations...” (Foucault 1997b, 165).

<sup>8</sup> Sullivan (2003) asks: “are there any kinds of sexual relations that we can unambiguously claim are untainted or untouched by heteropatriarchy?” (p.164). If, as feminist and queer theorists argue, American society is structured by heteropatriarchy, then there is no possible “outside” to patriarchy. Even those practices that are attempting to subvert or resist heteropatriarchy are still responding to it— still, in other words, tainted and touched by it. So the question becomes not which practices are untainted or untouched by heteropatriarchy, but rather how are particular practices shaped by heteropatriarchy and what effects do they in turn have on it?

overview see Wilson 1983), at which BDSM became a flash point in what are now known as the “feminist sex wars” (Duggan and Hunter 1995; France 1984; Rich 1986). Divisions between feminist scholars over the issue of sexuality in general and BDSM in particular resulted in two opposing positions, with one—radical feminism—emphasizing the dangers<sup>9</sup> of sexuality for women (e.g. Dworkin 1987; Dworkin 1989; Jeffreys 1986; MacKinnon 1987; MacKinnon 1989a; MacKinnon 1989b) and the other—sex-positive feminism—emphasizing its pleasures<sup>10</sup> (e.g. Hollibaugh 1992 (1984); Rubin 1984; Vance and Snitow 1984).

Following Barnard, radical and sex positive feminists published several anthologies that articulated these opposing positions and served to frame feminist conversations about BDSM over the next two decades. The essays collected in *Against Sadomasochism* and *Unleashing Feminism* articulate the radical feminist position,<sup>11</sup> which views sexual practices such as BDSM as replicating and reinforcing structural inequalities that harm women (Linden et al. 1982; Reti and Parker 1993).<sup>12</sup> The contributions to the anthologies *Pleasure and Danger*<sup>13</sup> and *Powers of Desire* (as well as

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<sup>9</sup> Radical feminist theorists focus on dangers including exploitation, violence, objectification, harassment, dehumanization, and assault. Feminist theorists who focus on the dangers of sexuality view sexuality as something that is *done to* women.

<sup>10</sup> Sex-positive feminists focus on pleasures such as physical/sexual pleasures such as orgasms, emotional closeness, relational fulfillment, and spiritual experiences. Feminist theorists who focus on the pleasures of sexuality view it as something that women *do*.

<sup>11</sup> Williams (2002) provides a characteristic radical feminist account of BDSM: “the sadist participates... because he or she hopes to prove his or her superiority and omnipotence by dominating the other person... masochists accept this mistreatment because they consider themselves fundamentally unworthy of love and respect (they have very low self-esteem), and because they see the sadist as their only hope for redemption from their wretched condition... Sadomasochism is a form of splitting in which the partners agree that the masochist is ‘all bad’ and the sadist is ‘all good’ ” (p. 103-104).

<sup>12</sup> Sex-positive feminists argue, in contrast, that the radical feminist position itself harms women by doing precisely what it criticizes men for doing—seeking to control women’s sexual desires (Echols 1986; Wright 2006).

<sup>13</sup> *Pleasure and Danger* is a collection of the papers given at the Barnard Conference.

the specifically BDSM-related *Coming to Power*<sup>14</sup>) articulate the sex positive feminist position, arguing that women's sexual practices are bound up with power and inequality in complicated ways and that sexual practices, including BDSM, can subvert unequal social structures and create space for new possibilities of experience, particularly in relation to gender (SAMOIS 1987; Snitow, Stansell, and Thomson 1983; Vance 1984).<sup>15</sup> Radical feminist responses to the analyses published in the sex positive anthologies argue that the sex positive position trivializes women's experiences of sexual violence and forwards an irresponsible articulation of sexuality that values some women's sexual pleasure at the expense of other women's safety (e.g. Bart 1986). Saxe (1992), for example, argues, "Despite their claims to the contrary, sadomasochists are not playing with power and control in the abstract. For the purpose of fun the drama in their scenes uses (publicly, thus endorsing) the real-life horrors of oppression that real women and Lesbians have endured" (p. 65). Sex positive feminists argue that the kind of analysis forwarded by radical feminists such as Saxe incorrectly assumes a universal meaning of sexuality for all women (e.g. Dolan 1987; hooks 2000 [1984]; Vance 1992 ; Vance 1992

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<sup>14</sup> *Coming to Power's* sequel, *The Second Coming*, which was published in 1996, responds specifically to the analyses forwarded by contributors to *Against Sadomasochism* and *Unleashing Feminism* and argues that part of the reason radical feminist analyses are incorrect is because they rely on sadomasochistic pornography rather than on women's accounts of their own s/m practices for their evidence (Califia and Sweeney 1996). See O'Sullivan (1999) for a review of both volumes.

<sup>15</sup> Williams (1989) argues, for example, that "because women have so often been presumed not to have sexual agency... masochism has often been taken as the 'norm' for women under patriarchy—as if women *only* suffered the sexual pleasure of others. But we need to recognize the extent to which this 'suffering' is also a performance to both self and others; for suffering in sex has not only been the way women have often experienced sex, it has also been the way women negotiate pleasure while submitting to patriarchal law" (53). She further explains, "sadomasochistic fantasy for (and often by) women does not necessarily mean the increased domination of sadism. It more likely means an awareness of the role of power in pleasure" (56). Similarly, Califia (2000) argues, "S/M roles are not related to gender or sexual orientation or race or class... S/M recognizes the erotic underpinnings of our system and seeks to reclaim them" (p. 166) and that while "the S/M subculture is affected by sexism, racism, and other fallout from the system... the dynamic between a top and a bottom is quite different from the dynamic between men and women, whites and blacks, or upper- and working-class people. That system is unjust because it assigns privileges based on race, gender, and social class. During an S/M encounter, roles are acquired and used in very different ways" (p. 173).



[1984]). Whether BDSM practices replicate heteropatriarchal notions of gender and power or whether they draw on those notions of gender and power to reconstruct them differently remains a significant area of debate among feminist theorists.

Partially in response to the paradigms developed during the feminist sex wars, the majority of third-wave feminist theories of sexuality, inflected by and overlapping with queer theories of sexuality,<sup>16</sup> emphasize the importance of recognizing women's agency in sexual interactions and generally take a sex-positive approach (e.g. Abrams 1995; Franke 2001). Many third-wave feminist theorists argue that in order to foreground women's agency, we must attempt to understand how women create and experience sexual pleasure in the context of a heteropatriarchal culture in which women must constantly negotiate a variety of sexual dangers. For example, Johnson (2002a) argues that feminists must understand that sexuality "is play *despite* and *in resistance to* a context of danger and prohibition, *not* a result of imagining there is none" [italics hers] (p. 2). Sex positive third-wave feminist theorists emphasize that sexuality can be pleasurable for women and focus especially on the ways that women use sexuality in feminist and/or gender subversive ways (Johnson 2002b; Nagle 1997). Yet some third-wave feminist theorists of sexuality are critical of the tendency of sex-positive feminist and queer theories to "encourage us, as feminists and sexual minorities, to fuck our way to freedom" (Glick 2000, 19). While the sex wars paradigm no longer dominates feminist conversations about sexuality, sexuality remains an area of significant debate and disagreement among feminist theorists and BDSM remains a highly divisive issue for many feminists.

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<sup>16</sup> As Glick (2000) explains, "pro-sex feminism's endeavor to cultivate sexuality as a site of political resistance is perhaps its most influential contribution to contemporary queer theory and politics" (p. 22).

### Queer Theoretical Approaches

Since the mid-1990s, much of the work associated with the sex positive position has been influenced by queer theory. Among the texts most central to the early development of the queer theoretical conceptualization of sexualities and practices is Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1990 [1978]), which argues that sexuality itself is a recent historical development that allows for the organization of bodies and pleasures through the technological *dispositif* (roughly—device) that functions to make sexuality “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (103). The passage that concludes *History of Sexuality*:

We need to consider the possibility that one day, perhaps, in a different economy of bodies and pleasures, people will no longer quite understand how the ruses of sexuality, and the power that sustains its organization, were able to subject us to that austere monarchy of sex... (p. 159)

is widely used by queer theorists interested in developing alternative arrangements of sexuality. It has been particularly important for queer theorists working on projects related to BDSM, not only because the passage can be read as gesturing to practices like those involved in BDSM, but also because of Foucault's own involvement in the leather community in San Francisco towards the end of his life (see especially Halperin 1995; Miller 1993; Plant 2007). Also influential are his remarks in interviews about SM as “the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure” (Foucault 1994, 165) and as a set of practices which “desexualize pleasure,” allowing participants to “produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations...” (Foucault 1997a, 165). Foucault (1997) comments explicitly on the eroticization of power in BDSM interactions, remarking on how erotic power differs from social power:

One can say that S&M is the eroticization of power, the eroticization of strategic relations. What strikes me... is how it differs from social power. What characterizes power is the fact that it is a strategic relation which has been stabilized through institutions... the strategic relations of people are made rigid. On this point, the S&M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course, there are roles, but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Sometimes the scene begins with the master and slave, and at the end the slave has become the master. Or, even when the roles are stabilized, you know very well that it is always a game... But I wouldn't say that it is a reproduction, inside the erotic relationship, of the structures of power. It is an acting-out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure... S&M is *the use* of strategic relationship as a source of pleasure. (Foucault 1997a, 169-170)

The view that BDSM practices do something other than simply reproduce normative structures of power shares much in common with sex positive feminist arguments, which argue that BDSM does not necessarily simply replicate structural inequalities.

Other queer theorists have taken up Foucault's arguments about the possibilities for creating different arrangements of sexuality within BDSM interactions.<sup>17</sup> Bersani (1995b), for example, notes that BDSM "has helped to empower a position traditionally associated with female sexuality...partly due to the frequent reversibility of roles, partly as a result of the demonstration S/M is said to provide of the power of bottoms." (82). Califia (2000) likewise argues that because BDSM practices are not genitally-centered, they can play an important role in unlinking gender and power. Seidman (2003b) summarizes this view of BDSM:

Unlike cultural gender roles, S/M roles are individually negotiated and agreed upon, and they can be changed. More important, S/M roles do not typically extend beyond the sexual scene. S/M gives individuals a chance to experiment with roles and the associated feelings of power and powerlessness. Rather than reinforcing gender norms, its defenders argue, S/M undermines such roles because it approaches them as socially negotiated. S/M participants know that anyone can be dominant or submissive, regardless of gender. Rather than S/M being

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<sup>17</sup> Sullivan (2003) explains that "many contemporary theorists claim that it [BDSM] can be said, for various reasons, to be queer, at least potentially" (153).

antifeminist, then, it brings a greater awareness of the arbitrary, socially constructed character of gender roles. (110-111)

For queer theorists and others interested in the potentially different workings of power in BDSM contexts, the crucial element is that in BDSM contexts, participants experience power and powerlessness based on the roles they choose, rather than roles assigned to them. In this way, normative associations between gender and power that are ubiquitous in non-BDSM contexts can potentially be avoided in BDSM contexts. C. Jacob Hale (2003) takes this line of argument the furthest, arguing that BDSM functions as “gender technology,” which creates a “culture of two” in which alternative arrangements of gender are possible. He<sup>18</sup> explains:

Leatherplay can create, so to speak, a culture of two, composed of those two people who are playing together. When I was a boy with my dyke daddy, in that culture of two I was a boy. I was not an adult woman playing a boy’s role or playing a boy, nor was I an adult woman doing boy in some other way.... In this culture of two, informed and structured by leatherdyke community gender codes, my communication of a masculine gender identification was legible to someone else, despite my female body... (p. 65)

In this project, I take the idea of the creation of such cultures of two in BDSM interactions seriously by exploring how participants perceive the salience of gender for self and others in BDSM compared with other social settings and investigating the extent to which participants rely on hegemonic or alternative cultural gender beliefs to guide interactions in BDSM contexts. I also explore how broader cultural gender norms may influence what roles participants choose in BDSM contexts, as I discuss in Chapter 7.

## **REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL LITERATURE**

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<sup>18</sup> Hale identified as a lesbian when he wrote the analyses presented in this essay and as a transman by the time of its publication.

While feminist and queer theorists have long taken BDSM practices as an area for theoretical engagement and have argued over how social power operates in BDSM practices, empirical evidence is notably lacking in those conversations. Newmahr (2008), for instance, notes that despite taking BDSM as an important theoretical case, feminist scholars conduct very little research on BDSM and fail to engage extant empirical work. Feminist debates about the relationships of gender inequality, patriarchy, and BDSM presently continue without empirical grounding. Deckha (2011), for example, uses postcolonial feminist theory to argue that “feminists should not dismiss the potential of S/M as part of a feminist project” (p. 130). While Deckha’s work uses the postcolonial feminist theoretical concept of world-travelling in insightful ways to argue the potentially feminist implications of BDSM, her argument relies on other feminist theoretical works rather than empirical research with BDSM participants to assign meanings to specific BDSM practices. Similarly, Stear (2009) uses Walton’s theory of “make-believe” to argue that “private acts of SM are indeed compatible with feminism” (22). While I rely heavily on feminist theory, particularly feminist work on the interactional, performative nature of gender and work that illuminates relationships between gender and power, this project differs from the majority of previous feminist scholarship on BDSM by exploring the uses and meanings of gender and power in BDSM contexts through data collected from BDSM participants themselves rather than through a theoretical conversation with other feminist scholars. While the purpose of this project is not to attempt to determine the compatibility of BDSM or any other sexual practice with feminism, the research presented here illuminates how issues important to feminist scholars, such as gender and power, influence and are influenced by participants’ BDSM experiences. Gender and

power influence BDSM experiences in part by affecting participants' beliefs about who should take which BDSM roles and how individuals should perform those roles, as I discuss in Chapter 7. Gender also influences the selves participants create and how they interact with others in BDSM contexts, as it does in all social contexts, as described in Chapter 6. In this project, I thus reverse the feminist analytical lens, asking not whether feminists should or should not support BDSM, but instead what BDSM can tell feminist scholars and others about how gender, power, and sexuality work in everyday interactions.

### **Early Sexological Approaches**

The earliest studies of BDSM (then referred to only by the clinical term, “sodomasochism”) were part of the work conducted by the founding sexologists and were based on clinical case studies that sought to find the underlying causes of sexual “disorders,” including BDSM (Ellis 1901; Freud 1905; Krafft-Ebing 1903). These early sexological studies treated BDSM as abnormal and deviant, and sought primarily to explain sadomasochistic etiology and establish “cures.” This pathologizing approach to BDSM characterized much of the work on BDSM through the mid twentieth-century, during which time BDSM was approached through a deviance model and studied as a medical and/or psychiatric “problem” (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006; Newmahr 2008; Taylor 1997).<sup>19</sup> The earliest empirical work on BDSM thus sought primarily to explain the underlying causes of BDSM participation and to find effective “treatments” (e.g. Avery 1977; Bach 1997; Bates 1975; Baumiester 1988; Berest 1970; Brenner 1959; Breslow 1987; Breslow 1989; Hunter 1995; Levitt 1971; Litman 1983; Malamuth 1977;

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<sup>19</sup> Partially in response to this pathologizing treatment, BDSM participants published their own explanations of their practices, which emphasized their consensual and mutually pleasurable aspects (e.g. Moser and Madson 1996; Thomson 1991).

Mitchell 1969; Pierce 1927; Robertiello 1970; Schad-Somers 1982; Weiss 1998). Around the middle of the century, BDSM began to appear in standard catalogs of human sexual behavior (e.g. Chesser 1949; Hite 1976; Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1953; Masters and Johnson 1966), which often continued to treat BDSM as a deviant form of sexuality.

### **Social Constructionist Approaches**

Early sociological approaches to BDSM also relied on a deviance model, but focused on social, rather than biological or psychological factors that influence BDSM participation (Plummer 1975a; Plummer 1975b; Seidman 2003b). These studies were interested in explaining rather than “curing” BDSM (e.g. Gagnon and Simon 1967; Rubington and Weinberg 1987)<sup>20</sup> and sought to identify and describe the BDSM population, focusing primarily on the gay leather community,<sup>21</sup> because it was assumed at that time that the BDSM population was comprised primarily of gay men<sup>22</sup> (e.g. Gebhard 1969; Kamel 1980; Kamel 1983; Lee 1983 [1979]; Spengler 1977; Weinberg 1978).

Beginning in the early 1980s, sociological approaches to BDSM began to include heterosexual participants<sup>23</sup> and shifted focus from describing the population to exploring

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<sup>20</sup> See Weinberg (1987) for a discussion of early sociological approaches to BDSM, which Weinberg argues shared in common an understanding of BDSM as dependent upon culturally produced meanings.

<sup>21</sup> See also Brodsky (1993) and especially Rubin (1994; Rubin 1998; Rubin 2000) for ethnographic accounts of gay leather. Rubin’s work focuses on documenting and describing the history of leather, the formation of leather as both identity and community, and the geographies and economies of leather in mid to late twentieth century San Francisco. She explains that leather is associated with a variety of communities, including biker, gay, SM, and fisting communities and, importantly, notes that leather, gay, and SM identities and communities, while often overlapping, are not synonymous.

<sup>22</sup> Some studies continue to focus on men (e.g. Lieshout 1995; Sandnabba, Santtila, and Nordling 1999) and even when women are included, they are frequently underrepresented in research samples, often comprising less than 25% of the sample.

<sup>23</sup> Heterosexual participants remain understudied, however (Sisson 2005) and little research has included lesbian BDSM participants—first because early BDSM researchers assumed that lesbians do not participate in BDSM practices and later because of the difficulty recruiting enough lesbian respondents to achieve a meaningful sample. However, lesbian women have long written about their experiences in BDSM (e.g. Califia 2000; Califia and Sweeney 1996; SAMOIS 1987) and a limited number of studies of lesbian BDSM

the ways that sexual orientation influences BDSM participation (e.g. Breslow, Evans, and Langley 1985; Breslow, Evans, and Langley 1986a; Breslow, Evans, and Langley 1986b; Buhrich 1983; Falk and Weinberg 1983; Weinberg, Williams, and Moser 1984; Weinberg and Kamel 1983b; Weinberg and Kamel 1983c).<sup>24</sup> At the same time, sociological studies were shifting away from the early model of deviance towards a social constructionist model (Beckmann 2009; Moser and Kleinplatz 2006; Seidman 2003a; Taylor 1997; Taylor and Ussher 2001; Weinberg 1987).<sup>25</sup> In the 1990s,<sup>26</sup> empirical work shifted from studying participants and practices to exploring the organization of BDSM subcultures and communities (e.g. Brodsky 1993; Ernulf and Innala 1995; Gosselin 1987; Graham 1998; Houlberg 1991; Levitt, Moser, and Jamison 1994; Moser 1998; Van Lieshout 1995),<sup>27</sup> further solidifying the influence of the social constructionist model.

This shift in sociological approaches to BDSM—away from deviance models towards social constructionist models—parallels quite closely the history of the sociology of homosexuality, which likewise began from a deviance model and has shifted to a social constructionist model. These shifts away from deviance to social constructionist models in the sociological study of particular kinds of sexualities have played a significant role in the development of the sociology of sexuality more generally.

As is so often the case, studying the “unnatural” demonstrates that what is commonly

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participants exist (e.g. Kennedy and Davis 1993; Mahoney 1998). Recent empirical research further disconfirms the assumption that lesbian women do not participate in BDSM (Tomassilli et al. 2009).

<sup>24</sup> Many of these studies are collected in the anthology *S&M: Studies in Sadoomasochism* (Weinberg and Kamel 1983c).

<sup>25</sup> See Bullough et al. (1994) for a discussion of how practices come to be labeled “sadoomasochistic” at different historical moments.

<sup>26</sup> The second edition of the *S&M* anthology, subtitled *Studies in Dominance and Submission* (Weinberg 1995) collected many of the sociological studies conducted in the 1990s. The change in subtitles from the 1983 to 1995 volume reflects a shift in sociological conceptualizations of BDSM, which shifted away from studying physical experiences, particularly pain, to studying emotional and relational dynamics involved in BDSM.

<sup>27</sup> The organization of BDSM communities and subcultures continues to be one of the main areas of sociological study (e.g. Langdrige 2006a; Sisson 2007).



perceived to be “natural” is also socially constructed. Early sociological studies of “deviant” sexualities revealed the processes through which some sexualities come to be constructed as deviant, thus making clear that others are constructed as *not* deviant; in other words, that all sexualities, normative and alternative alike, are socially constructed. This emphasis on understanding BDSM as socially constructed, first developed by sociologists, is now widespread in the empirical field of BDSM studies. Despite the persistence of the deviance model among scholars working in psychiatry and related disciplines, social constructionism has become the dominant paradigm for empirical BDSM research.<sup>28</sup> The social constructionist approach emphasizes that BDSM practices cannot be understood without understanding the contexts in which they take place.

While numerous studies contributed to the shift to social constructionist approaches, M. Weinberg, Williams, and Moser’s (1984) article, based on eight years of observations of and interviews with BDSM participants, has been especially influential. Emphasizing that BDSM is social behavior, the authors identify five aspects of BDSM: (1) dominance and submission; (2) role playing; (3) consensuality; (4) a sexual context; and (5) mutual definition. Yet while this definition played a significant role in creating an understanding of BDSM as a social rather than psycho-medical issue, not all of the features identified by Weinberg et al. apply to all BDSM participants. First, as discussed previously in the overview of BDSM, not all BDSM involves dominance and submission (somasochism and leather, for example, do not always fall under the umbrella of

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<sup>28</sup> Work on the social construction of BDSM focuses on a variety of issues, including, for example: identity formation (Chaline 2007; Kamel 1980; Kamel 1983), community/ sub-culture organization (Falk and Weinberg 1980; Langdridge 2006a; Weinberg, Williams, and Moser 1984; Weinberg and Kamel 1980), stigma and risk management, (Lee 1983 [1979]; Stiles and Clark 2011), and the negotiation of consent (e.g. Beckmann 2001; Beckmann 2004; Beckmann 2005; Beckmann 2009; Langdridge 2006a; Weille 2002).

dominance and submission). Second, not all participants engage in role-play.<sup>29</sup> Third, not all BDSM interactions take place in a sexual context or involve sexual content; a sexual context and sexual content are frequent, but not necessary aspects of BDSM. For some participants, for example BDSM is a spiritual rather than sexual experience (Schneider 2009), while for others it involves physical pleasure that is not sexual (Lawrence and Love-Crowell 2008). I investigate the ways that participants understand BDSM in relation to sex and sexuality in depth in Chapter 5.

Based on thematic discourse analysis of interviews with BDSM participants, Taylor and Ussher (Taylor 1997; Taylor and Ussher 2001) propose a slightly different set of features shared in common in BDSM: consensuality, an unequal balance of power, sexual arousal, and compatibility of definition. Their analyses reveal a variety of sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradictory “interpretive repertoires” used by BDSM participants to make sense of their practices, including BDSM as dissidence, as pleasure, as escape, as transcendence, as learned behavior, as intra-psychic, as pathological, and as inexplicable. The identification of a variety of interpretive repertoires is an important new direction in BDSM studies, because it helps to elucidate the variety of meanings that BDSM interactions have for participants. While Taylor and Ussher’s definition of BDSM is useful particularly because it recognizes a wide variety

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<sup>29</sup> BDSM does involve roles, but this is not a *distinctive* feature of BDSM social interactions; *all* social interactions involve taking social roles. The distinction between taking social roles, which happens in all social interactions, and role-playing, which happens in some BDSM interactions, is crucial, especially for this project. Role-playing includes a wide variety of roles (e.g. teacher, nurse, cop, etc.). But role-playing, at least as BDSM participants use the term, involves enacting a role that is different from the roles one takes in other contexts. This is not to say that a person who does policing work as her/his career could not role-play a cop in a BDSM interaction, but the way “cop” is played in BDSM interactions might be very different from the way “cop” is enacted in work interactions. Here again, the interactionist perspective is key: actions that might appear quite similar across work and BDSM contexts can nonetheless have very different meanings. A “cop” can handcuff a “criminal,” take her/him “downtown” for “interrogation”, and “force” the criminal to perform sexual acts to avoid arrest. However, whether the situation takes place in a BDSM context or a state/legal context can create significantly different meanings for the participants; the definition of the situation matters.

of meanings, like M. Weinberg et al.'s, it retains the assumption that all BDSM interactions involve an unequal balance of power and involve sexual arousal.

T. Weinberg (2006) proposes an alternative set of features that define BDSM based on a meta-analysis of empirical research on BDSM. These features include: that BDSM scenes are “framed by social definitions that give the behavior a specific contextual meaning,” that they are “collaboratively produced,” that these interactions occur “only with a sexual context” and that BDSM “behavior is highly symbolic” (p.33-34). Of the currently available empirically-based definitions, T. Weinberg’s best captures the key aspects of BDSM because it encompasses the widest variety of BDSM participants and practices. Additionally, this definition of BDSM emphasizes its similarity to other kinds of social interactions and focuses on the interactional and symbolic aspects of BDSM, which are central to my dissertation. I therefore draw on the features identified by T. Weinberg to guide my research questions and analyses, while being mindful that not all participants view BDSM as taking place only in a sexual context.

### **Symbolic Interactionist Approaches**

Much of the social constructionist work discussed above draws implicitly on symbolic interactionist concepts and approaches. Additionally, several studies make explicit use of interactionist perspectives. One of the earliest sociological studies (Weinberg 1978), for example, uses Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis approach to explore how BDSM participants define BDSM interactions. Weinberg found that “men are able to be submissive in an S&M scene because it is framed as play or fantasy, and that roles are frequently reversed in play without spilling over into other aspects of social

life” (p.52). Because Weinberg’s sample was limited to less than a dozen interviews with pro-Dommes (women who dominate men for pay) and their clients, however, it is unclear whether Weinberg’s findings about the role of gender in commercial BDSM settings can be generalized to non-commercial BDSM interactions.<sup>30</sup>

In a more recent study, Plante (2006) uses an interactionist framework to examine how BDSM participants who participate in sexual spanking neutralize stigma. Drawing on two of the earliest explicitly interactionist approaches to sexuality, Gagnon and Simon’s “sexual scripting” approach (Gagnon and Simon 2005 [1973]; Simon and Gagnon 1986; Simon and Gagnon 1987; Simon and Gagnon 2003) and Plummer’s “sexual stories” approach (1995a; 1995b), Plante argues that sexual scripts and sexual stories play a key role in how BDSM participants construct their sexual selves and the meanings of their interactions. Additionally, participants use sexual stories to normalize their practices and to neutralize perceived stigma.<sup>31</sup> Plante’s study is particularly important because it emphasizes that while participants can create alternative selves in BDSM contexts, BDSM contexts are already framed in relation to dominant social norms and narratives.

Langdridge and Butt (2004) also draw on the interactionist-based sexual stories approach to examine how BDSM identities are constructed. They argue that the increasing number of new sexual stories has been accompanied by a “rise of new sexual

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<sup>30</sup> Another recent study also focuses specifically on commercial BDSM. Based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 66 pro-dommes in New York City and San Francisco, Lindemann (2011) argues that participants who engage in commercial BDSM frame BDSM as having therapeutic value by providing “healthful alternatives to sexual repression,” functioning as “atonement rituals,” providing “mechanisms for gaining control over prior trauma,” and by providing a “process through which clients experience psychological revitalization through shame” (p. 157). Unsurprisingly given that commercial and non-commercial BDSM involve significantly different types of relationships and interactions, these themes were not present in my data.

<sup>31</sup> And see Wright (2006) for an in-depth discussion of the various forms of stigma and discrimination faced by BDSM participants.

subjectivities,” which “serves to undermine traditional notions of the self and traditional sexual identities” (p. 33). In particular, they examine stories of BDSM that have been told in the early twenty-first century, including in films, television shows, music, and literature and conclude that stories about dominance and submission are widespread in popular culture, thus making BDSM subjectivities more recognizable outside of BDSM communities and subcultures. Yet they also note that considerable opposition to BDSM sexual stories remains, leading BDSM participants to construct their own sexual narratives around two themes: rejecting pathology and explicitly negotiating consent. Like Langridge and Butt, I also found that participants frequently emphasized the consensuality of their BDSM experiences, yet the explicit negotiation of that consent was not a significant theme in my data. Rejecting pathology was not a prevalent theme in my data sources either, which may be a result of the kinds of data I collected. In my archival and discussion board data, participants are constructing sexual stories for other participants rather than for non-participants and/or community outsiders. Because few participants believe that their practices are pathological, it is unsurprising that rejection of pathology would be an infrequent theme in conversations among participants themselves. In my recruitment materials and interview guide, I specifically avoid pathologizing language and questions. Perhaps as a result of that avoidance of a pathologizing framework, while my interview partners did sometimes respond to their perceptions that BDSM is normatively perceived as pathological, this was not a major theme in my data. I report the major themes that appear in the stories about sexual experiences participants told me in the context of our interview conversations and that they tell one another in the context of discussion boards and correspondence in Chapter 5.

The contribution of the interactionist perspective to empirical BDSM studies is clearly articulated by Weinberg (1987):

Symbolic interactionist... approaches tell us that if we wish to understand S&M motivations and behavior, we must look to the definitions provided by these people rather than attempt to impose our own preconceived notions upon this activity... Failure to view S&M behavior and motivations within its social context risks 'misframing' (Goffman 1974) and thus misinterpreting what is going on. (p. 58)

The importance of understanding the meanings of particular interactions for those who engage in them is, I argue, a significant lacuna in feminist conversations about the relationship of BDSM to gender inequality. On the other hand, attentiveness to the meanings that BDSM participants assign to their practices has become increasingly common in empirical research on BDSM. Reviewing the most recent research in BDSM studies, Langdridge and Barker (2007a) note that BDSM studies now seeks to “understand the stories that SMers themselves tell of their lives and sexual practices rather than relying on pathologising psycho-medical explanations” (p.3). Understanding the meanings BDSM participants create and use to participate in and interpret BDSM interactions is crucial to our understanding of how BDSM may be similar to and/or different from other kinds of social interactions.

Yet while sociological studies have used and continue to use interactionist frameworks, the field of empirical BDSM studies does not always view BDSM in interactional terms. Newmahr (2008) explains that “little has been written about how SM ‘works,’ and the social settings in which it occurs,” and argues that this tendency has led to “our disinclination to understand SM as a social interaction” (625). Newmahr’s own work (2007; 2008; 2010a; 2010b; 2011) does the most to advance interactionist understandings of BDSM and sheds significant light on the interactional processes

involved in developing BDSM identities and structuring public BDSM communities. In the public northeastern BDSM community where Newmahr conducted the ethnographic fieldwork that grounds her analysis, BDSM is a form of “serious leisure”—participants invest significant time and resources, acquire a unique and highly specialized set of physical and mental skills, and develop community identities.<sup>32</sup> This investment allows participants to engage in what Newmahr calls “edgework”: collaboratively navigating the edges of emotional and physical risk in the context of BDSM play. This collaborative engagement in edgework creates a heightened sense of intimacy and trust for participants—one that goes beyond their experiences of intimacy and trust in most other social contexts. Edgework is a profoundly interactional experience, which requires continual communication and negotiation with other participants in a scene. Because these scenes happen in public play spaces in the community Newmahr studied, scenes are observed by other community members. In this public context, participants’ behavior is influenced not only by their partner(s) in a specific scene, but also by other community members, who watch and comment on one another’s scenes.

Newmahr also found that in the specific community she studied, participants view BDSM role as a more important social category than gender. She explains:

[T]he social organization of the Caeden community [the BDSM community on which the ethnography is based] is not especially intertwined with embodiments of masculinity and femininity. Instead, the community is organized around the related but significantly distinct identities built around topping and bottoming. (p. 107)

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<sup>32</sup> Working with a different community—one based in the San Francisco Bay area, Weiss (2006b) develops a similar model that emphasizes the significant investments of time and resources participants put into BDSM participation. She argues that BDSM can be understood as “working at play” in a process that involves working at producing BDSM identities and communities.

Newmahr further argues that in Caeden, “gender regulation is replaced by SM-identity regulation,” underscoring the point that for participants in the Caeden community, gender is a less important social category than is BDSM role (p.117). By replacing gender with BDSM role as the social category to which participants most strongly hold one another accountable, the social salience of gender is decreased. My work builds upon Newmahr’s findings to explore whether and how a general decrease in gender regulation in BDSM contexts influences how participants use gender as a social category when selecting and interacting with BDSM partners. I also investigate whether this pattern holds for participants who are involved in BDSM communities in other regions of the US and for those who do not engage in BDSM play in public settings.

### **Feminist- and Queer- Influenced Approaches**

Given the large feminist and queer theoretical literature on BDSM, it is surprising that empirical investigations of the analyses of BDSM forwarded in the theoretical literature have begun to appear only in the last decade. Several studies published in recent years, however, have begun to explore how gender influences BDSM interactions (Bauer 2007; Bauer 2008; Cross and Matheson 2006; Newmahr 2011; Ritchie and Barker 2005; Yost 2007). These studies lend support to queer and sex-positive theoretical approaches that suggest BDSM does not replicate normative patriarchal gender relations or ideologies by demonstrating that at least some participants explicitly reject gender stereotypes and/or roles, as I discuss below. Cross and Matheson (2006), for instance, found no empirical support for radical feminist theories of BDSM. Using interviews with 93 BDSM participants recruited through internet news groups, they tested four theoretical perspectives on BDSM, including radical feminism, psychoanalytic, medical, and escape-



from-self and found that none of these theories were supported by BDSM participants' reports of their BDSM experiences. Using the Feminist Attitudes Questionnaire and the Spanos Attitudes Towards Women Scale, which test support for feminist beliefs and rejection of traditional gender roles, respectively, the authors found no significant differences between the scores of the BDSM sample and a non-BDSM sample. Based on these findings, Cross and Matheson argue that BDSM participants are no more likely than the general population to hold anti-feminist beliefs and/or to support conservative gender ideology. While I did not include questions about feminist beliefs and/or identification in my interview guide, several of my partners self-identified as feminists during the course of our interview conversation. Additionally, many participants included in both my interview and discussion board data explicitly rejected traditional gender roles. Others, however, in archival, interview, and discussion board data explicitly supported traditional gender roles and stereotypes. I discuss these findings in more depth in Chapters 6 and 7.

Ritchie and Barker (2005) also explore the relationships between BDSM and gender, focusing on feminist ideology and BDSM participation. Based on their focus group conversation with seven women who identify as feminist and participate in BDSM, Ritchie and Barker challenge radical feminist understandings of BDSM. The women who participated in the focus group dispute the radical feminist "perception that SM reproduces conventional gendered hierarchies by drawing on their experiences of subverting these roles" (233). Instead, Ritchie and Barker explain that radical feminist accounts of BDSM interactions were "explicitly challenged by participants' accounts of the potential for SM to reveal and subvert heterosexual and patriarchal power imbalances" (236). They suggest that because BDSM requires explicit negotiation of

power exchange, it reveals the ways in which normative gendered power imbalances permeate non-BDSM contexts. In the process of consciously reflecting on and negotiating power, participants often become (more) aware of their experiences of power in other settings in which they interact. Because gender and power are normatively linked in contemporary U.S. culture, as I discuss in depth in Chapter 3, as participants reflect on arrangements of power in non-BDSM settings they are often attentive to those normative associations. I discuss how participants navigate those normative associations in the context of BDSM interactions in Chapter 7.

Yost (2007) also investigates the extent to which normative associations between gender and power extend influence BDSM interactions, focusing on the sexual fantasies of BDSM participants. Yost found that BDSM participants who have stable BDSM identities (e.g. dominant, submissive) have fantasies that lack gendered differences related to power, while BDSM participants who switch (e.g. take different BDSM roles in different situations) have fantasies that conform to traditional gender roles and arrangements of gender and power. This finding suggests that a stable BDSM role may override traditional gender roles, at least as they relate to sexual dominance and submission. Subsequent research lends additional support to this finding (Newmahr 2011). While my research lends additional support to these findings because it also demonstrates that many participants perceive BDSM roles as significantly more salient than gender in BDSM contexts, my work also suggests a more complicated relationship between gender and BDSM role. Specifically, I found that some participants use the gender of their partner to determine which BDSM role they will take. Additionally, many participants use gender to regulate and interpret their and their partners' performances of

specific BDSM roles. Some participants also hold normative beliefs about gender and power which lead them to believe that only men should top/dominate and only women should bottom/submit. For many of these participants, a stable BDSM role is an extension rather than a replacement of a traditional gender role. I discuss my findings related to gender and BDSM role in depth in Chapters 6 and 7.

Bauer (2007; 2008) uses interviews with queer (including gay, lesbian, and trans identified) BDSM participants to demonstrate that BDSM provides a space for self-exploration, particularly in relation to gender and especially through the use of role-play. Bauer argues that BDSM functions as a “safe space” or “playground” for experimenting with gender, which participants view as unique to BDSM contexts. Participants in Bauer’s (2008) study reported that BDSM “enabled them to question cultural assumptions about power in general and sex and gender specifically” (236). Like Bauer, I also found that many participants perceive BDSM as a unique social setting which allows them to experiment with gender in ways they are less able to do in other social settings. Unexpectedly, however, I also found that some participants perceive BDSM as a social setting in which gender norms and stereotypes are more salient than they are in other social settings, as I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7.

In the context of BDSM as a playground for exploring gender, Bauer argues that many participants engage in genderqueering,<sup>33</sup> a process that involves three distinct phases: renaming/reassigning, recognition, and integration. In the renaming/ reassigning phase, participants rename or recode body parts and adornments, as well as gestures, practices, and performances in gendered terms (e.g. a dildo becomes a dick). In the

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<sup>33</sup> Genderqueering refers to interactions and processes through which the distinctions between genders are resisted, blurred, re-aligned, or otherwise transformed, including by recombining elements normatively associated with masculinity or femininity.

recognition phase, participants rely on previously established recodings to interpret what they see without having to go through the process of renaming/reassigning again. It is in the recognition phase that these reassignments become “real” for participants. Finally, in the integration phase the reassignments that began in BDSM interactions are carried over into everyday life in other sexual and social contexts. Importantly, not all participants reach the integration phase, stopping short of integrating the gendered selves they create in BDSM interactions into their overall sense of self. In my data, while some participants report engaging in gender play in the context of BDSM, these participants are in the minority. Additionally, participants in this study who engage in gender play in the context of BDSM rarely transfer the gendered selves they create in the context of BDSM to non-BDSM interactions, as I discuss in depth in Chapter 6.

This project builds on and extends the groundwork laid by these recent studies, broadening the focus beyond feminist and/or queer identified participants to the larger BDSM population. This is an especially important contribution, because queer and/or feminist identified participants may use and experience gender in different ways than the general BDSM population. Whether BDSM creates a playground for exploring gender for other BDSM participants and, if it does, how they use that playground for creating selves and interpreting and interacting with others is one of the central questions this project explores and is the subject of Chapter 6. Additionally, this project provides a more in-depth exploration of how participants understand BDSM social settings in relation to other social settings in which they interact.

## CONCLUSION

BDSM studies has recently reached critical mass as an emerging interdisciplinary field, representing disciplines as divergent as law, sociology, communication studies, literary studies, anthropology, and psychology.<sup>34</sup> The consolidation of BDSM studies as a field is marked by the publication of several interdisciplinary anthologies (Kleinplatz and Moser 2006; Langdridge and Barker 2007b), as well as the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality* (2006) dedicated entirely to BDSM (the first time an academic journal has dedicated an entire issue to BDSM studies). In its current form, the field of BDSM studies, despite significant differences in disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological commitments, is held together by three primary areas of agreement: (1) BDSM is, by definition, consensual, and therefore distinct from abuse and violence; (2) participation in BDSM practices is not, in and of itself, indicative of pathology; and (3) BDSM is a complex social (rather than medical or psychiatric) phenomenon, deserving of serious academic study. This understanding of BDSM differs significantly from the approach forwarded by early sexologists and still used by many working in psychoanalysis and related fields. Treating BDSM as synonymous with abuse and violence led the early sexologists to view BDSM as either pathological (the desire to perpetrate or be the victim of violence) or non-consensual (the unwilling submission of the bottom to the top). The distinction between violence or abuse and consensual BDSM, demonstrated by sociological studies that focused on what BDSM means to those who

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<sup>34</sup> The diversity of topics in BDSM studies now include: BDSM themes in gay pornography (Joshi 2003), the complex legal status of BDSM, particularly in relation to the legal definition of consent as well as to the legal rights of BDSM participants (Attias 1996; Green 2001; Harvard Law Review Editors 1968; Klein and Moser 2006; Kotek et al. 2006; Langdridge 2006b; Pa 2001; Ridinger 2006; Taylor 1997; Weait 2005; Weiss 2008; White 2006; Wilkinson 2009; Wright 2006), the management of BDSM identities in cyber communities (Palandri and Green 2000), the use of language and narrative in BDSM contexts (Kulick 2003; Murray and Murrell 1989; Taylor and Ussher 2001), and identity formation among BDSM participants (Buchanan 2004; Langdridge and Butt 2004; Mosher, Levitt, and Manley 2006; Wilson 2005).

engage in it— shifted the terrain of empirical research on BDSM away from the deviance model to the social constructionist model, which opened the study of BDSM to a much wider array of disciplines and topics.

In this chapter, I provided an overview of both theoretical and empirical approaches to BDSM. In reviewing the theoretical literature, I focused on debates concerning the relationship between BDSM activities and systems of social inequality, focusing particularly on feminist and queer conversations about the relationship of BDSM to normative heteropatriarchal social structures built on and supported by gender and sexual inequalities. In this dissertation, I draw on these debates to explore how participants themselves understand BDSM practices in relation to systems of gender and sexuality. In reviewing the empirical literature, I traced the evolution of models of BDSM that have been created at different historical moments and demonstrated how these models have been shaped by the current prevailing approaches to sex and sexuality more generally. I showed that defining BDSM continues to be a serious challenge for the field, with significant implications for our understandings of BDSM. I focused particularly on recent social constructionist and symbolic interactionist approaches to BDSM, which have demonstrated that BDSM is a consensual, social activity that often involves highly symbolic interaction. In the next chapter, I draw on three of the conceptual approaches discussed here—feminist, queer, and symbolic interactionist— as well as the social psychological framing approach to build the conceptual framework that grounds this project.

### CHAPTER 3

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: A QUEER FEMINIST SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

To explore how BDSM participants negotiate their experiences of gender, power, and sexuality, I draw on three perspectives—feminist, queer, and symbolic interactionist. Each contributes to our understandings of gender, power, and sexuality, yet none of these approaches alone provides a full account. Drawing on these multiple approaches allows me to utilize the kinds of nuanced, complex analytical concepts that the experiences of BDSM participants require. These approaches share similar epistemological and social constructionist underpinnings; therefore, they are most frequently complementary rather than opposing approaches.

In this chapter, I present an interdisciplinary framework grounded in key feminist, queer, and symbolic interactionist concepts. I situate this framework in the context of recent feminist and sociological conversations about shifts in gender norms over time, as well as the possibility of reducing the salience of gender as a social category in the U.S. I argue that the experiences of BDSM participants can help us to better understand the processes that individuals use as they negotiate gender, particularly as they relate to power and sexuality in the contemporary U.S. because BDSM participants explicitly use and reflect on power in their interactions. Throughout the chapter, I use examples from my data to explicate my application of the concepts that ground this framework to the experiences of BDSM participants.

I begin with a discussion of one the key theoretical concepts that frames this research, Foucault's "different economy of bodies and pleasures." I provide an overview of how other scholars have explored the relationship of BDSM to economies of bodies

and pleasures and explain how my work draws on and contributes to this conversation. Next, I discuss the broad symbolic interactionist concepts that ground the conceptual framework, including interactions, meanings, and selves. I then turn to a discussion of the concepts I draw on in the three thematic areas explored in this project: gender—including gender salience and cultural gender beliefs, power, and sexuality and explain how I approach areas of intersection among these concepts. Finally, I explain how the experiences of BDSM participants can illuminate our understanding of the interactional processes involved in negotiating gender, power, and sexuality in everyday life.

### **ECONOMIES OF BODIES AND PLEASURES**

At the conclusion of *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1990), Foucault infamously refers to the possibility of a “different economy of bodies and pleasures” in which bodies and pleasures might be organized differently than they are in the current economy.<sup>35</sup> In the current economy, bodies and pleasures are organized, regulated, and interpreted through social systems including gender and sexuality. In this economy, some kinds of activities, behaviors, mannerisms, preferences, etc. are normatively constructed as more appropriate for bodies of a certain sex category/ gender than for bodies of other sex categories/ genders. In addition to regulating the appropriateness of behaviors and activities according to the sex category/ gender of the body engaging in those behaviors or activities, the current economy of bodies and pleasures also assigns different social value and status to those bodies. Male/masculine bodies, for example, are more socially valued compared with others (e.g. female/feminine, intersex, androgynous, trans, non-conforming, queer, etc.) The sexed and gendered regulation of bodies is also deeply

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<sup>35</sup> In *History of Sexuality, volume 1*, Foucault uses the concept of economies of bodies and pleasures both literally and metaphorically. In this project, I use the concept metaphorically rather than to explore what arrangements of bodies and pleasures under systems other than capitalism might be like.



enmeshed with the regulation of pleasures, especially those perceived as sexual. The appropriateness of pleasure is determined in part through the sex category/ gender of the body experiencing that pleasure.

Because Foucault elsewhere describes BDSM as “the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure” (Foucault 1994, 165), some speculate that he views BDSM as creating a potentially different economy of bodies and pleasures (Halperin 1995; Miller 1993). Building on Foucault, Hale (1997) argues that BDSM creates a “culture of two” in which gender performances that would in other spaces be unintelligible become intelligible to the individuals involved. Hale explains that in the culture of two created by BDSM leatherplay, gender operates differently than in other social contexts:

When I was a boy with my dyke daddy, in that culture of two I was a boy. I was not an adult woman playing a boy’s role or playing a boy, nor was I an adult woman doing boy in some other way... I was a boy with her by engaging in a gender performativity that made sense to both of us as a *boy’s gender performativity*. (p. 229; Hale’s italics)

For theorists such as Hale, BDSM creates a space in which the current economy of bodies and pleasures can be disrupted. Participants in such “cultures of two” can interpret bodies and create pleasures in ways that resist the normative organization of gender that exists in the current economy. Taking this argument further, Califia (2000) argues that for some participants, BDSM identity is more important than gender and sexual orientation, explaining “I identify more strongly as a sadomasochist than as a lesbian... If I had a choice between being shipwrecked on a desert island with a vanilla lesbian and a hot male masochist, I’d pick the boy” (p. 159). Theorists such as Califia argue that BDSM provides a space in which gender is comparatively less important than in other social settings.

In contrast, others, including many radical feminist theorists, argue that BDSM contributes to the current economy of bodies and pleasures by replicating the normative alignments of gender and power that exist within the current economy (e.g. Linden et al. 1982; Reti and Parker 1993). Lorde (1982), for instance, argues that BDSM reinforces and teaches us to accept the current economy in ways that are antithetical to social justice movements that seek to reduce inequality, including the feminist movement:

Sadomasochism is an institutionalized celebration of dominant/subordinate relationships. And it *prepares* us either to accept subordination or to enforce dominance. *Even in play*, to affirm that the exertion of power over powerlessness is erotic, is empowering, is to set the emotional and social stage for the continuation of that relationship, politically, socially, and economically. (p. 68; Lorde's italics)

Nichols et al. (1982) extend this view, arguing, “the roles of sadist and masochist are based on the division into powerful and powerless people... enacting or envisioning dominance and submission is an internalization of the dichotomy that feminists want to smash” (p.140). For many radical feminist theorists, normative linkages of dominance and power with men and masculinity and of submission and powerlessness with women and femininity mean that all interactions based on power inequalities by extension support gender inequality.

Rather than assuming that BDSM interactions always either subvert or support these normative alignments, I examine the specific conditions under which they do and ask whether those conditions are different from interactions that take place in non-BDSM contexts. Specifically, I investigate whether and how BDSM participants experience gender differently in the context of BDSM interactions compared with other social interactions. I ask whether, for whom, and with what consequences BDSM creates a different economy of bodies and pleasures and/or reinforces the current economy. I focus

particularly on gender and sexuality as systems through which bodies and pleasures are regulated and interpreted because these are two of the primary systems around which the current economy is organized. In Chapter 5, I explore how participants perceive sex and sexuality in BDSM compared with non-BDSM experiences and analyze participants' experiences of the relationships between bodies and pleasures in BDSM and non-BDSM settings. In Chapter 6, I examine whether and how participants use gender to interpret the performances of others in BDSM settings and in turn to guide their own performances. In Chapter 7, I explore how cultural beliefs about gender and power influence participants' perceptions of the appropriateness of the pleasures associated with dominance and submission in BDSM settings. In the next section, I provide an overview of the interactional components I focus on in exploring BDSM participants' experiences of BDSM.

### **COMPONENTS OF INTERACTIONS**

In this section, I provide an overview of the key interactional concepts I rely on in investigating experiences of BDSM: selves, interactions, and meanings. Because I am interested in how participants experience BDSM activities, these symbolic interactionist (SI) concepts allow me to investigate the processes participants use to create and interpret BDSM experiences. The SI framework emphasizes that both selves and meanings are interactionally created through negotiation with others and that meanings vary across settings as well as individual actors within a given setting. This element of the SI frame is crucial for this project, because it allows me to explore the variety of meanings that BDSM has for those who participate in it, rather than assuming a stable, fixed meaning across all participants.

## Selves

I use the plural, selves, to emphasize that individuals do not have one stable self that they carry with them across all settings. Instead, individuals have multiple selves that are created through interactions with others and activated in a variety of social settings. As Mead's (1934) early formulation makes apparent, "there can be different selves, and it is dependent upon the set of social reactions that is involved as to which self we are going to be" (p. 143). Selves are social, interactional processes that are created, sustained, and modified through interactions with others (e.g. Blumer 1969; Goffman 1967; Mead 1934; Stryker and Vryan 2003). Selves are social because they are produced through interactions with others. Additionally, selves are shaped by broader social norms and structures that individuals draw on to create their selves and respond to the selves that others present (Stryker and Vryan 2003). Selves are interactional because they are created through interacting with others. The interactional process through which social selves are created is described in part by Cooley's (1983 [1902]) concept of the "looking-glass self," which explains that our self-perceptions are mediated by how we believe others perceive us. The self we present in a given interaction is reflected back to us in part by the ways that others respond and we modify our behaviors based on the feedback we receive from others. The SI view of the self as a social, interactional process is key for this research because it lays the groundwork for understanding the fluidity and complexity of gendered selves, a point I return to in the following section. Additionally, understanding the creation of social selves as an interactional process is key to understanding how perceptions of the salience of gender influence the creation of selves, as I discuss in Chapter 6.

## Interactions

Interactions include all of the activities in which one engages with others (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1967; Mead 1934). Interactions are comprised of social processes that involve negotiating social activities with interactional partners. Human social interaction, in particular, is highly symbolic and individuals use symbols, including language, to mediate interaction (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). The SI frame emphasizes that interactions do not have inherent meanings. Instead, their meanings are determined through interactional processes in which participants in a given interaction act together to construct meanings.

The very fluidity of meanings in interactions makes pinning down a precise definition of a “BDSM interaction” difficult. As I demonstrate in Chapter 5, participants assign BDSM meanings to a wide variety of interactions, including many that do not involve specifically BDSM activities. In this project, the term “BDSM interaction” therefore has a variety of meanings, including (a) an interaction that includes activities participants define as BDSM activities (e.g. flogging, CBT, bondage); (b) an interaction that participants define as taking place in the context of a BDSM scene or play; and (c) an interaction whose meaning participants define through the BDSM frame (e.g. many participants told me that when they are interacting with their top/dominant or bottom/submissive, all interactions with that individual are BDSM interactions because they all take place within the context of a relationship defined in terms of BDSM). Importantly, I do not include in this definition interactions that take place in BDSM settings, scenes, or relationships to which participants do not assign BDSM meanings. For example, some participants view the process involved in setting up play space as a

BDSM interaction, particularly when the bottom/submissive does most of the physical work and the top/dominant directs the work, while other participants do not perceive setting up play space as having a BDSM meaning. In short, if a participant defines an interaction as having a BDSM meaning, I consider that interaction a “BDSM interaction.”

### **Meanings**

The SI approach demonstrates that meanings do not inhere in activities or objects themselves, but are “social products” created through interactional processes (Blumer 1969). Blumer’s classic statement concisely explains this process and the premises of the interactionist understanding of the creation of meaning:

The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world—physical objects...; other human beings...; institutions...; activities of others...; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (1969, 2)<sup>36</sup>

In sum, specific activities, interactions, and objects do not have fixed, universal, or inherent meanings. Instead, the meanings of particular activities are created through interactions between individuals (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1967; Mead 1934). BDSM participants themselves make explicit use of this reality, often using BDSM interactions to explore ways of creating non-normative meanings. As one participant writes to J.D. Rabbit, for example, “feeding coins to a vending machine is usually less sexy than using a spoon to feed cum to a bound slave, but everything depends on what is going on in the minds of the people involved” (“Mike” Undated). The notion that what happens in the

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<sup>36</sup> This original description of the interactionist perspective is still the most widely used and is generally agreed upon by interactionists (e.g. Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine 2006; Stryker and Vryan 2003).

minds of participants is of significant importance in the creation of meaning is a theme that occurs repeatedly in my data, as discussed in the findings chapters.

The shared recognition among feminist, queer, and symbolic interactionist approaches that selves and meanings are interactionally created allows these approaches to conceptualize gender, power, and sexuality in complex ways that account for the wide range of meanings that social experiences have for individuals. Yet they also recognize that each of these aspects of social life has an organizing core that individuals draw on as they create their own meanings. Importantly, these approaches acknowledge that the meanings of these concepts vary from person to person, as well as from interaction to interaction. Thus, they can account for different interpretations and responses to interactions that may appear equivalent on the surface level. At the same time, these approaches also recognize the prevalence and power of shared meanings—indeed, shared social meanings are at the foundation of the organization of social life.

## **GENDER**

In the contemporary U.S., gender is a highly salient social category— one of the 2 or 3 primary person categories (along with race and age) people consistently and continually rely on to interpret the bodies of others and guide their interactions with one another (e.g. Brewer and Lui 1989; Fiske 1998; Ridgeway 1991; Ridgeway 2009). As Ridgeway (2011) explains, “as a primary frame for social relations, gender is one of the most fundamental identities by which people render themselves comprehensible to others and to themselves in terms that are socially meaningful and valid (Ridgeway 2006; West and Zimmerman 1987)” (p. 53). As one of the most important social categories through

which people make themselves intelligible to others, gender significantly impacts everyday interactions.

Feminist theorists view gender as a pervasive feature of social life that influences both individual actions and broader social structures (e.g. Lorber 2005; Ridgeway 2009; Risman 1998a). In this project, I conceptualize gender as a multi-dimensional feature of social life. While I focus primarily on gender at the micro/ interactional level, I also explore how macro level cultural beliefs about gender influence and are influenced by interaction. I follow other scholars in conceptualizing gender as performative, as something that people “do” on a daily basis on the micro level. I draw on two similar conceptualizations of gender that were developed in different disciplines—doing gender and performativity— each of which has been and continues to be extremely influential in its field of origin<sup>37</sup> — to guide my analysis of micro level interactions. Additionally, I draw on Ridgeway’s recent (2009, 2011) framing approach, which provides a crucial link between micro and macro aspects of gender.

### **Doing Gender**

The first approach, “doing gender,” conceptualizes gender as a “routine, methodical, and recurring” accomplishment (Fenstermaker and West 2002a; Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman 2002; West and Fenstermaker 1993; West and Zimmerman 2002 [1987]; West and Zimmerman 2009). It views gender as an emergent feature of social interactions rather than a property of individuals (West and Zimmerman 2002 [1987]). It also emphasizes that what gender means hinges on individual interpretations of situations; gender does not have inherent or stable meanings (West and

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<sup>37</sup> Despite their remarkable similarities and their commitment to feminist analysis, these approaches have not been in conversation with one another (Moloney and Fenstermaker 2002; Smith 2002; West and Zimmerman 2009).



Fenstermaker 1993). In order to interpret performances, individuals draw on broader cultural assumptions about what counts as “appropriate” performances of masculinity and femininity as well as whether a particular performance should be interpreted in part through a gendered lens. I utilize the “doing” approach to explore which performances and interactions BDSM participants perceive as gendered, as well as which performances they perceive as appropriately masculine and feminine, focusing especially on their perceptions of enactments of power/dominance and powerlessness/submission.

### **Performativity**

The second approach, developed by feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler, conceptualizes gender as “performative” (1993; 1999 [1990]; 2004) Butler (1999 [1990]) explains:

That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality... words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core. (p. 173)

For Butler, gender “ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow;” rather, gender is created through a “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 179). Most importantly— and much like arguments made in interactionist approaches to gender, Butler argues that because gender attributes “are not expressive but performative... these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (p. 180). I use the performative approach to gender to explore how participants perceive the “naturalness” and stability of gendered selves, focusing particularly on their perceptions of similarities and differences in the gendered and/or non-gendered selves they and others perform in BDSM and other social settings.

Gender, for Butler as well as for West and colleagues, is a *result* rather than a *cause* of performances and interactions. Both approaches also conceptualize gender as an interactional process rather than as an individual characteristic, as something that is continually done, rather than accomplished once and for all. They both can account for considerable variability in gender, including multiple and seemingly contradictory gender performances by a single individual. Additionally, they emphasize that gender cannot be understood in isolation from the social contexts or situations in which it is performed or done; gender has situationally dependent meanings. This aspect of these approaches is key for this project, because it explores the extent to which participants perceive differences in the importance and meanings of gender across BDSM and non-BDSM settings.

### **Framing**

In addition to the doing gender and performativity approaches, I also draw on Ridgeway's (2009, 2011) social psychological framing approach, which builds on West and Zimmerman's conceptualization of gender to more explicitly articulate the linkages between micro/interactional and macro/structural aspects of gender. Ridgeway explains that because gender is a primary person category in the U.S., as discussed above, people:

use *sex* (that is, the physical status of being male or female) and *gender* (shared cultural expectations associated with being male or female) together as a primary frame for organizing that most fundamental of activities: relating to another person... people use *sex/gender* as an initial, starting framework for defining 'who' self and other are in order to coordinate their behavior and relate, whether they do so face-to-face, on paper, over the Internet, or on a cell phone. (p. 7; Ridgeway's italics)

Gender, as Ridgeway explains, is “a system of social practices within society that constitutes distinct, differentiated sex categories, sorts people into those categories, and organizes relations between people” on the basis of those differentiations (p. 9).

### **Gender Salience**

Because sex category/gender is socially constructed as a primary frame for social relations, individuals use gender as a sorting mechanism automatically and unconsciously. Yet the salience of gender—the extent to which it influences how we perceive and interact with others as well as how we create and enact our own selves—varies across settings. Because gender combines with other social roles and identities, the relative importance of gender and other social categories varies across contexts (Deaux and Major 1987; Wagner and Berger 1997). Additionally, we do not categorize others *only* in terms of sex category/gender and other primary person categories, but also according to situationally relevant social categories, such as teacher/student, employer/employee, etc. Gender is therefore most often a background identity that is not always or even usually the primary focus of the attention of actors in a given setting. Instead, gender becomes a way of doing or performing other, more situationally salient roles, such as teacher, employer, etc. For example, in an interaction between a doctor and a patient, the doctor and patient will interpret and evaluate one another's behavior according to the social roles “doctor” and “patient,” but will also use interpret and evaluate another's behavior according to gender. What counts as appropriate behavior for both doctor and patient will be inflected by their genders. So, for example, briskness may be viewed as rudeness when performed by a woman doctor and as efficiency when

performed by a man doctor. In this way, even when gender is not the focus of interaction, it nonetheless influences interaction.

### **Cultural Gender Beliefs**

Individuals perceive gender as a socially useful or salient category, Ridgeway argues, because shared cultural beliefs about gender make gender a helpful tool for coordinating, predicting, and interpreting social interactions. In using gender as a primary frame, individuals draw on broader social norms and beliefs about gender. Ridgeway (2011) explains:

The social category of sex works as a primary frame for social relations only because it carries with it ‘common knowledge’ beliefs about men and women. These are cultural beliefs about the distinguishing characteristics and behaviors of typical males and females that we all assume we all know. Because we not only know these gender beliefs but also take for granted that others know them, we can rely on these beliefs to begin to coordinate the dance of social relations... our shared cultural beliefs about who men and women are are clearly at the heart of our gender system. (p. 56)

At the macro level, these shared cultural beliefs shape the categories “men” and “women.” At the micro level, individuals draw on these shared cultural beliefs about sex category/gender to sex/gender categorize others they come into contact with and to predict and interpret the behaviors of those others. Individuals also rely on shared cultural beliefs about gender when constructing their own social selves and imagining how others will respond to the selves they present. As Ridgeway explains, “societal gender beliefs appear to shape interactional behavior in at least two potentially independent ways. They act as an identity standard that the individual seeks to maintain and they shape others’ expectations (and the individual’s anticipation of what others expect)” (269). In this project, I examine how shared cultural beliefs about gender and power that normatively link men, maleness, and masculinity with power and women, femaleness, and femininity

with powerlessness influence participants' perceptions of the appropriateness of BDSM roles for specific actor and their interpretations of how individuals perform specific BDSM roles, as I discuss later in this chapter.

## **SEXUALITY**

As with gender, this project follows other feminist, queer, and interactionist conceptualizations of sexuality as a process rather than an inherent, stable, individual characteristic (e.g. Foucault 1990 [1978]; Gecas and Libby 1976; Jackson 2007; Longmore 1998; Plummer 2002). The components that make up an individual's sexualities— and one can have different sexualities at different times and in different social settings— include one's self, identity, orientation, desires, fantasies, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g. Kimmel 2007; Plante 2007; Rye and Meaney 2007; Valocchi 2005). Sexuality, like gender, is situationally dependent. The sexuality one enacts in one social situation may not necessarily be the same as the sexuality one enacts in another social setting. The sexuality one performs while discussing sexual health with one's doctor during an office visit, for instance, may be different from the sexuality one performs while engaging in sexual activity with one's partner(s).

The very complexity of sex and sexualities makes sexuality a nebulous concept. This nebulousness is due both to the wide array of facets of sexuality identified above and to the diverse range of experiences and interactions that individuals interpret as "sexual." Any definition of sexuality is therefore partial and imperfect. To provide a general sense of how I conceptualize sexuality in this project, however, I turn to Aron and Aron's (1991) definition of sexuality, which emphasizes the variable, individual nature of sexual meanings. They define sexuality as "the constellation of sensations,

emotions, and cognitions that an individual associates with... sexual arousal and that generally gives rise to sexual desire and/or behavior” (p. 27). As demonstrated in Chapter 5, the flexibility of this definition of sexuality is crucial to understanding how BDSM participants understand BDSM in relation to sexual experiences.

### **Intersections of Gender and Sexuality**

In contemporary American culture, sexuality is a social system and individual experience that intersects significantly with gender (e.g. Kimmel and Plante 2004; Rich 1993 [1980]; Schwartz and Rutter 1998). Two points of intersection are of particular significance for this project. First, sexual identities, experiences, and desires are frequently constructed around and influenced by gender (e.g. Kimmel and Plante 2004; Schwartz 2007; Schwartz and Rutter 1998). Sexual orientations and identities such as bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual, gay, lesbian, pansexual, heteroflexible, bicurious, etc. are structured around the sex(es)/gender(s)/gender performance(s) of one’s preferred partners. Indeed, in contemporary American culture, sexual orientation and identity are organized primarily according to gender. Additionally, how individuals experience sexual desire, what kinds of things they desire, and how they articulate those desires both to themselves and to others, are aspects of sexuality significantly influenced by gender (Kimmel and Plante 2004; Schwartz and Rutter 1998). In American culture, the gender-based sexual “double standard” rewards men and punishes women for sexual agency, explicit expression of sexual desire, and having multiple sexual partners (e.g. Crawford and Popp 2003; Jackson and Cram 2010). Second, doing gender appropriately can be accomplished in part through displays of heterosexual sexuality (e.g. Rich 1993 [1980]; Schwartz 2007). Norms about appropriate gender expressions often intersect with those

about sexuality—heterosexuality in particular (e.g. Ingraham 1994; Jackson 2006; Rich 1993 [1980]; Sedgwick 1990). Norms about physical attractiveness for women are norms that concern both gender and sexuality; normative femininity in part involves making oneself sexually attractive to men. Similarly, normative masculinity in part involves expressing sexual attraction to women. Additionally, how individuals experience sexuality is frequently influenced both by their sense of their own gender(s) and the gender(s) of their partner(s).<sup>38</sup> In this project, I therefore explore how participants perceive BDSM in relation to sexuality and how they perceive gender as influencing their choices of and interactions with BDSM partners.

### **POWER**

Power is a notoriously slippery concept that is conceptualized in myriad ways (e.g. Allen 2011; Kippax and Smith 2001; Newmahr 2006; Piven 2007). In the sociological literature, power is conceptualized in two broad ways. Institutional/structural theories view power as a force external to individuals that operates through social institutions (e.g. Mills 1956; Parsons 1957). Valocchi (2005) explains that this view is predominant in mainstream sociology and that most “sociologists tend to view power as an external force operating through social institutions to limit the life chances of some groups and expand those of other groups” (p. 756). Interpersonal/ interactional theories, in contrast, view power as a property of a social relation (e.g. Emerson 1962; Emerson 1964; Kanter 1977). These theories view power as being produced through interactions,

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<sup>38</sup> This is not to say that it is impossible to “do masculinity” without expressing sexual attraction to women or that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals cannot or do not “do gender.” Gendered performances of sexual attraction and desire that do not conform to heteronormative standards of gender-based sexuality, however, are non-normative.

rather than as a fixed characteristic or capacity that individuals bring with them to the interaction.

Queer and feminist theorists also use both institutional and interpersonal theories of power and some have expanded conceptualizations of power to focus on productive power (e.g. Butler 1993; Butler 1999 [1990]; Foucault 1990 [1978]). Valocchi (2005) concisely explains the conceptualization of productive power shared by Butler and Foucault:

Power is constitutive of the self: The subject is constituted in and through the meaning systems, normative structures, and culturally prescribed taxonomies that circulate in society. Individuals internalize the norms generated by the discourses of sexuality and gender as they are circulated by social institutions such as schools, clinics, mass media, and even social movements. In so doing, individuals become self-regulating subjects. (p.756)

Power is generative, rather than (only) constraining. Power is everywhere and exists within and across relationships that are unequal and in flux. Power does not stem from a single location and its source is not fixed. Perhaps most importantly, Foucault (1990 [1978]) explains, “where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p. 96). To resist power is, in other words, to be always already inside its structure. Power and resistance are therefore co-constitutive. In my view, the productive conceptualization of power developed by Butler and Foucault, among others, helps to bridge micro- and macro-level theories of power by illuminating the ways in which individuals are influenced by macro, structural-level power, as well as the ways in which micro-level interactions enable and sustain structural-level power.

BDSM participants themselves express diverse notions of power. Newmahr’s (2006) study of power in public BDSM interactions, for instance, identifies “bottoms who



are empowered by bottoming, submissives who feel most potent through submission, dominants who dominate in order to serve, and tops who expend significant time and energy aiming to please” (p. 53). Taylor and Ussher (2001) also find that participants view power in multiple ways: some perceive power as a fixed characteristic that one person (the dominant) retains in the scene and the other (the submissive) relinquishes, while others view power as fluid during the course of interaction. The findings of the present study lend additional support to the documentation of diverse conceptualizations of power among BDSM participants. The complex ways that BDSM participants in this study conceptualize power is captured in part in a passage from a letter written by one of J.D. Rabbit’s correspondents. Her correspondent writes:

I do see it [a BDSM interaction] as a power exchange regardless of that terms [sic] current vogue. I also see it as power exercised. But I don’t see the contradictions in those terms. Rather I see them as interfacing concepts and mutually supporting. But then I also see the power dynamic as less confrontational than you apparently do and more cooperative. I have high respect and regard for anyone who can truly [sic] submit to the power generated through that cooperation. ("Mark" Undated)

For this participant, power is an interactional process of exchange that itself generates power. Others, however, view power as something that individuals bring with them to the interaction, rather than as something that is generated through interaction. As one participant who conceptualizes power in this way explains, in the context of BDSM, power involves “handing over, or receiving, the right and responsibility of decision making and control.”<sup>39</sup> For participants who view power in this way, power is a quality individuals bring to interaction and, in the case of BDSM, either retain or relinquish during interaction.

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<sup>39</sup> Posting on [bondage.com](http://bondage.com) thread titled “Power Exchange?” 7/17/2004.

In my view, analyzing the diverse range of ways that BDSM participants themselves view power requires understanding power at both the aggregate and interactional levels because power operates at both levels. Macro- or institutional- level power is supported by micro-level interactions. Additionally, micro-level interactions are influenced by the constraints of institutional power. In the context of BDSM, the psycho-medical system exerts power over BDSM participants by pathologizing many BDSM behaviors and desires (institutional/structural power), for example, *and* BDSM participants create and exert power over one another through interactions (interpersonal/ interactional power). Yet because this project focuses mainly on BDSM *interactions*, I rely primarily on interpersonal/interactional conceptualizations of power, which illuminate the power exchange aspects of BDSM.

### **Gender and Power**

Describing the various functions of power in relation to gender, Radtke and Stam (1994) emphasize that power has both productive and constraining effects. They explain:

Gender is constituted within a particular set of power relations and hence reflects those power relations. That which is considered to be female and male reflects the subordinate-dominant relationship of female and male, and when we ‘do’ our gender appropriately, we act to maintain that relationship. In this sense power is both productive and oppressive, creating and constraining our social practices of gender. (9-10)

Gender both constitutes and is constituted by a specific set of power relations that work to both create and constrain social interaction. The cultural construction of females/femininity as subordinate and males/masculinity as dominant is reflected in cultural gender beliefs about what is appropriate for people of specific genders, including notions of when and how it is appropriate for members of each gender to express power in interaction (e.g. Carli 1999; Fiske 1998; Glick et al. 2004; Molm and Hedley 1992;

Radtke and Stam 1994). Men are rated more highly on power and traits associated with it, such as assertiveness, forcefulness, and dominance, while women are rated most highly on traits such as emotional expressiveness, kindness, and nurturance (Ridgeway 2011). Importantly, while individuals may be evaluated negatively for not enacting traits associated with their sex category/gender, the strongest negative evaluations occur when individuals enact traits associated with members of a different gender. Women are especially penalized for acting socially powerful and dominant, while men are most highly penalized for acting weak and emotionally yielding (Prentice and Carranza 2002; Rudman et al. 2009).

Yet these normative linkages of gender and power do not always hold in BDSM contexts. The existence of women dominants and men submissives, for example, is an obvious indication that these normative alignments do not map easily onto BDSM experiences. It would be erroneous, however, to assume that women who dominate and men who submit are simply reversing normative linkages of gender and power and/or are intentionally resisting gender norms. Understanding the ways in which BDSM participants experience the relationships among gender and power in interaction that appear normative as well as those that appear non-normative requires that we go beyond surface-level appearances to explore what those interactions mean to participants. In Chapter 7, I explore participants' perceptions of the relationships between gender and power in depth.

### **Sexuality and Power**

Sexuality is also a social system that both influences and is influenced by power. That sexuality is significantly inflected by power is perhaps most clearly articulated by

Foucault in *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, in which he demonstrates that sexuality is organized by regimes of power-knowledge-pleasure. He argues that sexuality:

is an especially dense transfer points for relations of power... Sexuality is not the most intractable element in power relations, but rather one of those endowed with the greatest instrumentality: useful for the greatest number of maneuvers and capable of serving as a point of support, as a linchpin for the most varied strategies. (Foucault 1990 [1978], 103)

Indeed, it is through analyzing the ways that sexuality and power intersect that Foucault develops the conceptualization of power as productive that he lays out in *History of Sexuality, volume 1*.<sup>40</sup> Tracing the history of the development of sexual discourses and identities, Foucault rejects the repressive hypothesis—the notion that the relationship between power and sexuality is only reductive, negative, or prohibitive, that it has been exercised only to constrain or limit sexuality. He argues instead that the regimes of power-knowledge-pleasure that govern sexuality function to produce sexual subjects and desires. “It is through sex—in fact, an imaginary point determined by the deployment of sexuality,” Foucault explains, “that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility... to the whole of his body... to his identity” (Foucault 1990 [1978], 155-156). For Foucault, the deployment of sexuality— developed and perpetuated by culturally and historically specific regimes of power-knowledge-pleasure— both creates and governs subjects, and it is in this sense that power is productive. By exploring the extent to which participants perceive BDSM as having sexual meaning(s), I examine how participants perceive the relations of power that structure BDSM interactions in comparison with relations of power in other social interactions in which they participate.

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<sup>40</sup> Foucault conceptualizes power differently in other texts.

## CONCLUSION

Rather than attempting to provide support either for the position that BDSM contributes to gender inequality by re-enacting normative linkages among gender, power, and sexuality or for the position that BDSM contributes to the eradication of gender inequality by resisting or subverting those normative linkages, this project explores the multiple and complex ways in which BDSM participants negotiate these linkages in BDSM and other social interactions. By comparing and contrasting participants' experiences of gender, power, and sexuality in BDSM and non-BDSM interactions (such as at work and with family), this project investigates the extent to which participants perceive differences and similarities in experiences of gender, power, and sexuality across social settings.

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the conceptual approaches that guide this research. I focused on key concepts including: economies of bodies and pleasures, selves, interactions, meanings, gender, gender salience, cultural gender beliefs, power, and sexuality. I also discussed areas of intersection among the broad concepts—gender, power, and sexuality—at the foundation of this project. In the next chapter, I outline the methodology used in this study and provide a profile of the research sample.

## CHAPTER 4 METHODOLOGY

Like the conceptual framework, the research design guiding this project draws on intersections between feminist, queer, and interactionist approaches. These approaches to knowledge share similar epistemological frameworks, which emphasize the importance of understanding people's everyday experiences (Blumer 1969; DeVault 1999; Gamson 2003; Kleinman 2007; Stewart 1994). They emphasize the importance of understanding the research process itself as a social interaction, influenced by the researcher's own perspectives and experiences, a point I return to in the ethics and reflexivity section of this chapter (Gamson 2003; Hesse-Biber and Leckenby 2004; Sprague and Kobrynowicz 2004; Wolf 1996).

These approaches also share in common a commitment to understanding phenomena from multiple perspectives, rejecting both "objectivity" and a singular "truth" as possible or even desirable research goals (DeVault 1999; Doucet and Mauthner 2007; Gamson 2003; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser 2004; Wylie 2007). This study, like many qualitative studies, is thus primarily concerned with "how participants make sense of what happened... and how this perspective informs their actions, rather than in determining precisely what happened or what they did" and is interested in "how participants organize and communicate their experiences [rather] than in the 'truth' of their statements" (Maxwell 2005, 74). Like many qualitative researchers, I view qualitative research methods and data as providing necessarily partial and subjective information, rather than objective "truth" (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986; Denzin 1989; Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Lofland et al. 2006a), particularly when the subject is the interpretation of experiences. These shared epistemological commitments make

qualitative methods particularly useful for feminist, queer, and interactionist scholars, who need the kinds of nuanced, complex data that qualitative methods can capture (DeVault 1999; Gamson 2003; Kleinman 2007; Olesen 2003; Plummer 2000; Plummer 2002).

Qualitative methods are also particularly well-suited to this project because they provide tools that help researchers explore what experiences mean to the people who have them (Charmaz 2003; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Lofland et al. 2006a; Miles and Huberman 1994; Rubin and Rubin 2005). Miles and Huberman (1994) explain, “qualitative data, with their emphasis on people’s ‘lived experience,’ are fundamentally well suited for locating the *meanings* people place on the events, processes, and structures of their lives...” (p. 10; their italics). In order to understand what BDSM experiences mean to those who have them, I rely on qualitative methodologies, which allow researchers to explore the meanings that experiences have for those involved, as well as the processes of meaning-making through which people interpret their experiences (Biklen and Casella 2007; Maxwell 2005; Weiss 1994).

In this chapter, I outline the particular qualitative methodologies I utilized. First, I begin by defining who counts as a BDSM participant for the purposes of this study. Second, I briefly discuss the relationships among the variety of data sources included in this research. Third, I discuss my sampling and data collection procedures for the archival material I collected for this project. Fourth, I discuss my sampling and collection procedures for the discussion board data. Fifth, I discuss the recruitment and sampling procedures I utilized for the 32 semi-structured, in-depth interviews I conducted and describe the sample population. I also discuss the interview process as a collaborative, social interaction and provide an overview of the interview sample. Sixth, I describe the

methods I used to analyze these data. Seventh, I discuss the validity and limitations of these data. Finally I discuss reflexivity and ethical issues related to this research.

### **DEFINING THE BDSM POPULATION**

As discussed in Chapter 2, it is extremely difficult to define who exactly is part of the BDSM population. Langdridge and Butt (2005) explain that, “like many previous writers we believe all sexual practices involve power. However, S&M and BDSM explicitly recognize the role of power in sexual identities, practices, and relationships” (p. 69). I agree that all sexual practices involve power and find Langdridge and Butt’s distinction between BDSM and non-BDSM useful. BDSM participants, however, are not the only people who explicitly recognize the role of power in sex and sexuality. Thus, simply explicitly recognizing the role of power seems to me still too imprecise a mechanism for identifying BDSM participants. Moser and Kleinplatz (2007) discuss precisely this issue, explaining:

Of course there are other sexual interactions [in addition to BDSM interactions] or behaviors that have an implicit power differential, but that power differential is not generally eroticized in non-SM interactions. Sex partners may even disagree if a particular interaction or relationship constitutes SM, each seeing it from a different perspective. The boundaries between SM and non-SM interactions are not always clear, which is why self-definition is crucial for understanding SM phenomena. (p. 35)

Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I define the BDSM population in terms of self-identification; anyone who self-identifies as previously and/or currently engaging in BDSM practices is a “BDSM participant.” Labeling one’s experiences (only) with the term “BDSM” is not necessary. As discussed in the overview of BDSM, BDSM is an umbrella term for many identities, practices, and communities and identification with any of those terms (e.g. leather, D/s, EPE) made someone eligible for participation (whether



through inclusion in interviews, from archival sources, etc.). Importantly, although I focus specifically on power exchange, I did not require people to use the term power exchange to describe their practices—many people who participate in what I am interpreting broadly as power exchange dislike the term “power” and instead use terms like “control” or “dominance and submission” to describe their practices.

While I define the BDSM population as including anyone who has participated in activities they experience as BDSM, I placed additional constraints on participants to be included in the sample for this study. First, participants had to be at least 18 at the time of creation of data in question.<sup>41</sup> I included being 18 as an eligibility criterion on my interview recruitment flyer (Appendix A). Bondage.com, from which I collected discussion board data, requires people to be 18 or older to register to use the site. The personal papers from which I collected data at the Leather Archives were authored by individuals who were 18 or older at the time they wrote the materials. Finally, for practical purposes, I also required interviewees to currently reside in the United States.

### **DRAWING ON MULTIPLE DATA SOURCES**

The qualitative data I collected for this project came from several sources, including 32 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, public discussion boards on bondage.com (one of the largest BDSM community websites), and archival materials available at the Leather Archives and Museum, each of which I discuss in more detail in

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<sup>41</sup> This constraint is purely practical. Because age of consent laws vary across geographic locations, the simplest way to ensure that the experiences participants are describing are not considered non-consensual because of *age* in the jurisdiction they reside in is to set the minimum age for inclusion in the study at the highest minimum age of consent in the U.S.. Additionally, requiring participants to be aged 18 or older meant that it was not necessary to obtain a parent/guardian’s consent. This safeguard is one often taken in BDSM communities themselves; websites such as bondage.com do not allow anyone under 18 to enter the site and prevent anyone from talking about any BDSM experiences they may have had before they reached 18 (people can post about those experiences but cannot reference specific ages or use words like “teenager” or “kid” to refer to anyone, including themselves; many BDSM events require attendees to show identification for proof of age; etc.).

the sections that follow. I selected these specific sources of data because they provide information about what BDSM experiences mean to the people who have them. I use multiple sources of data for several reasons. First, there are likely to be significant differences among people who are and are not willing to participate in interviews, who do and do not attend and/or present at BDSM events, who do and do not participate in discussions about BDSM in cyberspace, and who do and do not write letters, journals, and/or memoirs about their experiences related to BDSM. By relying on these multiple sources of data, my goal was to create a sample diverse enough to represent the many different varieties of BDSM participants. Second, by drawing on these multiple sources, I was able to create a much more diverse sample in terms of demographic characteristics such as race, gender, BDSM role, and geographic location than I would have been were I have to relied on interviews alone. Finally, collecting data from several sources enabled me to triangulate my data—a methodological procedure through which findings from one kind of data can be checked against findings from another kind of data to ensure that findings are not simply a product of the method of data collection (Flick 2007; Maxwell 2005). I discuss triangulation further in the validity section. I suspected that participants might describe their experiences differently to a researcher than they would on public, BDSM-community forums and that those ways of describing experiences might each differ from how participants described their experiences in private, such as in journals and correspondence with other participants. Thus, incorporating multiple sources of data allowed me to include not only a diverse range of experiences, but a diverse range of ways of describing those experiences.

With one important exception, however, I found similar themes across all sources of data. In both the interviews and on public discussion boards, participants repeatedly stressed the consensuality of BDSM, often carefully steering away from discussions of the complexities of consent. In the archival data, however, participants often acknowledged the murkiness of consent and discussed strategies for negotiating consent in the context of power exchange at length. Because “safe, sane, consensual” is considered by many if not most participants to be the glue that holds together the wide range of activities, roles, and relationships that fall under the BDSM umbrella, acknowledging that one or more of these cornerstones of BDSM itself may not be as stable as it is portrayed by community members calls into question both the standards to which the community adheres and the foundation of the community itself. Langdridge and Butt (2004) found that “subscription to ‘safe, sane, and consensual’ practice [is] *the* key condition for membership of the broader (public) S/M community” (p.42; italics theirs). Equally important, defining BDSM as consensual is the most frequent method participants use to distinguish BDSM practices from abuse and to mitigate the significant stigma still attached to BDSM. In private correspondence and journals, however, participants more frequently called into question rote claims of consensuality and engaged in discussions and/or reflections about the complexities of consent, including a form of edge play known as consensual non-consent, in which playing with consent itself is part of a particular BDSM experience.

Using multiple sources of data is especially important for research on sensitive topics, such as BDSM, in which the research setting is likely to influence the data collected (Lee 1993). Because people tell different stories about their experiences in

different social contexts (Lee 1993; Weiss 1994), drawing on data created across a variety of contexts creates a fuller account of those experiences. Additionally, research that draws on non-interview methods provides an important addition to previous research on gender and sexuality in BDSM, which has relied primarily on interviews (Weinberg 2006).

### **Archival Data**

I began by conducting archival research at the Leather Archives and Museum.<sup>42</sup> I chose to include archival data because I was interested in the private conversations BDSM participants have amongst themselves. The six years I had previously spent reading and participating on bondage.com discussion boards made me aware that there were some issues that were considered taboo in the BDSM community and that were not publicly discussed, even in BDSM settings. Additionally, I was interested in understanding how participants negotiate the meanings of particular activities and roles. Because correspondence between partners and potential partners often contains negotiations of what activities will and will not occur and why participants like or dislike those activities, working with archival data provided important insight into how participants create and negotiate the meanings of particular activities and roles in the context of interpersonal interaction.

Created in 1991 from the personal holdings of several BDSM participants active in the gay leather scene and originally housed in a small Chicago storefront, the Leather Archives and Museum is the first and only facility of its kind in North America. From its modest origins, the LA&M expanded rapidly and now occupies a 10,000 square foot

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<sup>42</sup> For an excellent history of the creation of the Leather Archives and Museum and an overview of the materials available in its holdings, see Ridinger (2002).

building, which contains eight exhibit galleries,<sup>43</sup> an extensive reference collection,<sup>44</sup> the largest known leather/BDSM personal papers collection in the world, and the offices of a full-time administrative staff and dozens of volunteers. The range of personal papers held by the LA&M is particularly impressive and includes papers donated by individuals of diverse genders, sexual orientations, ages, geographic locations, and levels of participation in organized BDSM activities and clubs.

While the Leather Archives holds the largest known collection of BDSM-related personal papers, the majority of its collections are related to the formation, organization, and history of various BDSM and/or leather organizations, clubs, bars, contests, etc. The proportion of collections that contain materials related to participants' experiences of BDSM is therefore relatively small. Of this small subset of collections, I selected for analysis three collections that contained the richest and most in-depth reflection and/or discussion of the meanings of BDSM experiences and encompassed a variety of genders, sexual orientations, and BDSM roles.

The first, the Anthony deBlasé papers, contain correspondence to and from deBlasé between 1986 and his death in 2000. deBlasé, who identified as a gay leatherman and top, was a longtime leader in the BDSM community, publisher of *Drummer* magazine (one of the highest-circulating BDSM magazines of its time), the designer of the Leather Pride flag, organizer of numerous Living in Leather conferences, judge of over a decade of International Mister Leather contests, member of the LA&M Board of Directors, participant in and organizer of numerous National Leather Association events and chapters, author of dozens of published erotic BDSM stories (under the pen name

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<sup>43</sup> Items exhibited in the galleries include: artwork; prints; films; audio recordings; club memorabilia such as patches, pins, and flags; leathers; boots; clothing; oral histories; posters; banners; toys; and devices.

<sup>44</sup> The Teri Rose Memorial Library houses more than 5,000 books and 12,000 magazines related to BDSM.

Fledermaus), and long-time member of the Chicago Hellfire Club, one of the oldest and largest gay BDSM clubs in the U.S..

The second, the Justin Tannis papers, contain Tannis' diaries from 1995-1997. During that period, Tannis participated in the Journeyman II Academy, a formal BDSM training program designed taught by prominent BDSM practitioners, which took place over a series of weekends in San Francisco. Born Maggie Tannis, Justin Tannis identified as a lesbian during the Journeyman II Academy, but later transitioned. Tannis is a pastor with the Metropolitan Community Church and the author of *Trans-gendered: Theology, Ministry, and Communities of Faith*. The third collection with which I worked is an unprocessed collection that contains the papers of J.D. Rabbit, who identified as a heterosexual female switch. The collection contains hundreds of letters written to Rabbit in the 1980s and 1990s in response to personal ads Rabbit placed in BDSM-related magazines and newsletters.

Drawing on my research questions and previous six years of conversations with BDSM participants on-line and in-person, I read these papers for themes related to gender, power, and sexuality. I also read and took notes on several rare and unpublished manuscripts held in the Leather Archives' library. I focused especially on exploring how participants understood and experienced power, how BDSM related to their sexuality, and how they conceptualized their gender(s). The data I collected at the Leather Archives helped me to refine my interview guide before I began conducting interviews and helped me generate additional search terms to use as I collected discussion board data.

### Discussion Board Data

I chose to include discussion board data for several reasons. First, incorporating discussion board data allowed me to include the experiences of a much greater number of BDSM participants than would have been possible through archival and interview data alone. Second, because discussion boards contain conversations among participants, they provided an ideal avenue for exploring how participants negotiate meanings with others. Discussion board participants frequently engage in heated debates with one another over the meanings of particular terms, activities, and roles. Watching these debates play out enabled me to investigate how particular meanings are created and dispersed among BDSM participants. Third, being attentive to the kinds of topics discussed on community discussion boards helped me to understand the kinds of issues that are of particular importance to BDSM participants themselves. Because my goal for my research was to generate findings that would be of interest and use both to academics and community members, this was an especially important benefit of including discussion board data. Fourth, including discussion board data allowed me to include an additional type of account of BDSM experiences, different from both the private accounts participants create in correspondence and journals and the accounts created in interview settings.

I chose the community site [bondage.com](http://bondage.com) in particular for several reasons. First, it is one of the largest and oldest BDSM community websites in the world. Founded in 2002, it has grown to over 1 million members. Second, [bondage.com](http://bondage.com) is a community site on which many participants have personal (though not necessarily BDSM) relationships with one another and the site functions *as a community*. Participants share non-BDSM life events, such as deaths, birthdays, graduations, and anniversaries and half of the

discussion board sections are non-BDSM related (e.g. Politics and such, Sports!, Philosophy and Religion, etc.).<sup>45</sup> While the use of usernames allows participants a certain level of anonymity, many participants interact in physical communities as well and discussion threads often digress into conversations about where and when participants can arrange to meet “IRL”—in real life and/or into reminiscences of past meetings. Discussion board participants self-police to prevent “trolling”—posting intentionally inflammatory remarks to get attention. When an initial post is perceived as trolling, other participants respond by naming the post as trolling and/or the person posting as a troll. As I collected discussion board data, I intentionally excluded threads that multiple participants identified as having been initiated by a troll. This self-policing functions as a type of check on the authenticity of the accounts participants present on the discussion boards at bondage.com. This is not to say that participants never post statements that they themselves do not believe to be accurate accounts of their experiences or beliefs. Instead, it is to note participants on discussion boards at bondage.com are highly invested in the authenticity of the experiences represented on the discussion boards.

Third, unlike some BDSM community sites, bondage.com does not cater to particular roles, interests, or relationship dynamics and is instead one of the most inclusive community sites. Fourth, the discussion boards are one of the most utilized features of the site and form the backbone of the site, in contrast to other BDSM sites that function primarily as adult personals sites. Fifth, the bondage.com discussion boards are organized topically and are searchable by key word, a feature unavailable on most other

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<sup>45</sup> Of the BDSM discussion board sections, the sub-section with the largest number of posts, BDSM relationships, has nearly 20,000 posts with approximately 680,000 replies. Of the non-BDSM specific discussion board sections, the sub-section with the largest number of posts, Politics and such, has over 48,000 posts with nearly 1.25 million replies.



BDSM site discussion boards. Sixth, because I joined bondage.com shortly after it was founded, I am highly familiar with the site, including its organization, prominent members, and the kinds of conversational patterns that occur on its discussion boards.

As of June 2010, when I began collecting discussion board data, the bondage.com discussion boards included 246,390 threads (an individual discussion topic) with over 6 million replies, averages 25.4 replies per thread. Discussion threads are grouped by category and sub-category. Categories include: BDSM talk, with sub-categories such as Technique, Relationships, and Yes Ma'am<sup>46</sup>; Welcome, with sub-categories such as Site Announcements and Getting Started; Other Talk, with sub-categories such as The Arts, Politics, Sports, and Philosophy and Religion; Regional, with regional sub-categories (e.g. North America-South, Europe, Canada) for discussion about BDSM communities and activities by region; and Support, with sub-categories including Suggestions and FAQ.

I sampled discussion boards using two techniques. First, I used keywords related to my research questions. I searched by keyword, limiting the results to those that appeared in either the title or subject line (instead of the entire discussion thread) and did not limit the results by date or category. I created a list of keywords to use based on the data I collected in the Leather Archives and conversations with BDSM participants I knew from my personal network and through previous work. For instance, to collect threads related to gender, I searched terms including: masculine, feminine, male, female, man, woman, gender, feminization, sissification, etc. In addition to gender, the

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<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, “Yes, Ma’am,” a female-dominant, male-submissive forum, is the only relationship dynamic-specific forum on the site. “Yes, Ma’am” was not added to the forums until 2005. While some users post relationship questions in this forum, the forum is often used for personal ads and discussions about female-dominant/ male—submissive relationships continue to take place in the “Relationships” forum alongside discussions of other relationship dynamics.

major categories for which I created subsets of search terms included power, relationship dynamic, consent, and sexuality. In total, I used 47 search terms. Discarding non-relevant results such as “Sexuality Event in the Bay Area” and “Top-Heavy Dungeon Equipment,” I collected a total of 344 discussion threads, with an average of 37 replies per thread. Second, because people often talk about a subject without explicitly naming it, I wanted to be able to include conversations about the major themes in my research that took place without explicitly naming the subject. I therefore read all of the threads that were active between July 2009 and July 2010 in the two categories most relevant to my research questions, Relationships (n=353) and Yes, Ma’am (n=59). Of these, approximately one-third contained discussions relevant to my research questions.

This combined sample included threads ranging in date of creation from 2002, when bondage.com was created, to a few days before I collected the threads. More than 1,000 unique users contributed to the threads I collected. Ascertaining a demographic overview of participants represented by these data is difficult for several reasons. First, bondage.com does not make available demographic information about its users. Second, while it is possible to search profiles by gender (men, women, trans, CD/TV), sexual orientation (straight, bi, gay), and role (top, bottom, switch, vanilla), results are limited to the first 1,000 results, making it impossible to obtain demographic data for these variables. However, in 2004 in response to repeated community member requests, a site moderator posted the following information: “A quick survey of our database turns up 25,476 straight male bottoms to 5,323 straight female tops -- a pretty significant imbalance... There are 76,396 straight male tops compared to 25,477 straight male

bottoms.”<sup>47</sup> Requests from community members for additional information were not answered. While I did not visit the profile of each poster to collect demographic data, posters often self-identified within their posts and represented a variety of genders, sexual orientations, BDSM roles, and years of BDSM participation.

It is important to note that demographics from community websites such as *bondage.com*—even were they available—should not be taken as representative of the BDSM population overall for several reasons. First, not all BDSM participants have internet access. Second, even community websites that claim to be inclusive, such as *bondage.com*, often end up catering more to a particular subset of the population than others. Third, the proliferation of BDSM community websites in the past few years (such as *fetlife.com*, *collarme.com*, *alt.com*, etc.) have further splintered the online community, with each site catering to a slightly different segment of the population. Fourth, and most importantly, not all BDSM participants choose to participate in BDSM communities—web-based or otherwise. As with each of my other sources of data, as I discuss further in the following section, my goal was to include as wide as possible a range of participants in terms of the categories of primary focus in my project rather than to create a generalizable sample.

### **Semi-Structured, In-depth Interviews**

The archival and discussion board data I collected informed the interview guide (Appendix B) I used to conduct thirty-two in-depth, semi-structured interviews between May 2010 and May 2011. In-depth,<sup>48</sup> semi-structured<sup>49</sup> interviews are an especially

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<sup>47</sup> 2004, “Ratio of female dominants to male submissives?”

<sup>48</sup> In-depth interviewing is sometimes also referred to as intensive interviewing (e.g. Charmaz 2003; Charmaz 2006).

useful method for creating rich data<sup>50</sup> about what experiences mean to those who have them because they create space for respondents to share detailed, complex accounts of their own experiences (Charmaz 2006; DeVault and Gross 2007; Hesse-Biber 2007a; Kvale 2007; Rubin and Rubin 2005). Seidman (2006) describes the utility of in-depth interviews for accessing perceptions and reactions known only to those who had them, explaining that “at the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (p. 9).<sup>51</sup> In-depth interviews are also especially well-suited for research on sensitive topics because they allow the researcher to move beyond surface appearances and emphasize the meanings of and contexts surrounding interactions (Lee 1993).

While in-depth interviews create spaces for interviewees to recount their experiences in detail, interviews do not, of course, produce one “true” narrative; rather, they occupy a somewhat ambiguous space between fact and fiction (Denzin 1997; Rosenblatt 2001).<sup>52</sup> This ambiguous space between fact and fiction occurs because there are many possible narratives of an experience that could be told by the interviewee. Additionally, as Alldred and Gillies (2002) explain, the “research interview is not a clear window onto the interviewee’s experience, rather it is the joint production of an account

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<sup>49</sup> Semi-structured interviews are guided by a list of topics or questions, but do not proceed in a fixed way across all interviews. This allows the interviewer the flexibility to follow up on topics and issues that arise in the interview, while also ensuring that each interviewee will be given the opportunity to discuss the same set of topics (Bernard 2002a; Rubin and Rubin 2005).

<sup>50</sup> Rich data are data that “provide specific examples about how the informants understand their situations and how they make sense of things” (Biklen and Casella 2007, 13).

<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Weis (1994) explains, “interviewing gives us access to the observations of others. Through interviews, we can learn about places we have not been and could not go... We can learn also, through interviewing, about people’s interior experiences. We can learn what people perceived and how they interpreted their perceptions. We can learn how events affected their thoughts and feelings. We can learn the meanings to them of their relationships... and their selves. We can... by interviewing, learn about settings that would otherwise be closed to us...” (p. 1).

<sup>52</sup> For an excellent overview of debates among qualitative researchers over whether to treat data as fact or fiction, see Lofland et al. (2006b).

by interviewer and interviewee through the dynamic interaction between them” (p. 146). In-depth interviews in particular often elicit contradictory truths that researchers can use to better understand complex processes (Rosenblatt 2001). This aspect of in-depth interviews makes them particularly useful for answering the research questions guiding this project, which ask about the complex ways that individuals experience gender, power, and sexuality in social interactions.<sup>53</sup>

Because I am interested in the diverse range of participants’ experiences of gender, power, and sexuality in BDSM interactions and because this diversity has yet to be fully reflected in either the empirical or theoretical literature on BDSM, I used purposive (also referred to as theoretical) sampling to generate interviews (Bernard 2002b; Clarke 2007; Flick 2007; Hesse-Biber 2007a; Maxwell 2005; Weiss 1994).<sup>54</sup> As Maxwell (2005) explains, in qualitative research, purposive sampling, which involves deliberately selecting participants, is a common sampling strategy. Purposeful selection involves “defining the dimensions of variation in the population that are most relevant to your study and systematically selecting individuals... that represent the most important possible variations on these dimensions” (Maxwell 2005, 89-90), or as Weiss (1994) puts it, “selecting respondents purposively so that we obtain instances of all the important dissimilar forms present in the larger population” (p. 23). While purposeful sampling is not representative and therefore cannot be generalized to the population as a whole, working with small, purposefully created samples, as qualitative researchers do, allows us

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<sup>53</sup> In-depth interviews have a long history of use in feminist, queer, and interactionist research concerned with complex social processes, including those involved in meaning-making related to sexuality and gender (DeVault 1999; DeVault and Gross 2007; Gamson 2003; Hesse-Biber 2007a; Kong, Mahoney, and Plummer 2001; Plummer 2002; Plummer 2003; Reinhartz 1992).

<sup>54</sup> Purposive sampling is frequently used with hidden populations (Heckarthon 1997) and is particularly well-suited to the grounded theory method of analysis used in this project (Clarke 2007; Flick 2007).

to examine the meanings individuals create for their experiences and the processes through which they create those meanings (Hesse-Biber 2007a). Additionally, purposefully created samples can be used for conceptual or theoretical generalization, particularly in terms of “social processes” and “configurations of social interaction” (Snow, Morrill, and Anderson 2003, 188).

Purposeful selection of the sample allows for the generation of maximum range in the data, which is achieved when data saturation occurs and additional interviews generate no new information (Bernard 2002b; Weiss 1994). The particular dimensions I focused on to determine when I had reached maximum range were those dimensions most important to my research questions: gender, power, sexuality, and BDSM role. Additionally, I was able to use the range of variation on these dimensions evidenced in the archival and discussion board data I collected to help determine when I had reached maximum range in the interviews. As discussed later in this section, while I was unable to reach maximum range in sexual orientation in interviews, I was able to reach maximum range on this dimension in the archival and discussion board data, another benefit of including multiple sources of data.

Both because I wanted to create a purposive sample and because the BDSM population is hidden, I used multiple recruiting strategies suggested for research on sensitive topics with participants who are unusual in a population and not listed anywhere (Lee 1993; Weiss 1994). I advertised for interviewees in a wide variety of cyber<sup>55</sup> and physical venues including community discussion boards, e-mail lists, newsletters, and announcement boards at congregating places such as BDSM conventions, community

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<sup>55</sup> Cyberspaces dedicated to BDSM, such as [bondage.com](http://bondage.com), [alt.com](http://alt.com), [collarme.com](http://collarme.com), and [mydungeonspace.com](http://mydungeonspace.com), have open discussion boards that allow anyone to create, read, and respond to discussion threads and I used these discussion boards to post my recruitment flyer.

events, and workshops, as well as through my personal network of BDSM participants. boards, as well as e-mail listserves, to post calls for participation in the study. Due to the sensitive topic of this study and my concern not to intrude on the privacy of participants, I did not directly contact potential respondents, even when interviewees referred me to others for an interview. Instead, I asked interviewees who wanted me to talk to others that they knew to share my contact information.

Respondents who contacted me, regardless of whether they were recruited from cyber or physical settings, had the option of being interviewed face-to-face (if they were in the Atlanta metro area), over the phone, or in cyberspace.<sup>56</sup> I provided these multiple interview setting options for participants to choose from for two primary reasons. First, I expected that respondents might have differing levels of comfort in terms of privacy and anonymity. In-person interviews provide the least privacy for interviewees, while cyber interviews provide the most privacy; phone interviews provide a mid-range of privacy. Providing interviewees with a range of options for protecting their privacy enabled me to develop a larger and more diverse sample than would have been possible had I relied solely on face-to-face interviews because it allowed me to include participants who are not “out” about BDSM participation and/or who had significant privacy concerns. Second, including phone and cyber interviews in addition to in-person interviews allowed me to include respondents who for practical reasons could not otherwise be included (e.g. cost and time involved in traveling to multiple and geographically isolated sites).

While face-to-face interviews are the setting most preferred by qualitative researchers because they facilitate the development of rapport, enable interviewers to

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<sup>56</sup> I conducted cyberspace interviews with the aid of instant messenger programs including GoogleTalk and Yahoo Messenger. I also conducted interviews by Skype.

read and respond to non-verbal cues, and allow researchers to gain additional information about the interviewee, such as how s/he presents her/himself (e.g. Hesse-Biber 2007a; Lofland et al. 2006a; Seidman 2006; Weiss 1994), sexuality researchers argue that in-person settings are the least desirable for sexuality research because they are the least anonymous form and interviewees are least comfortable talking about sexuality-related issues with strangers in face-to-face settings (e.g. Binik, Mah, and Keisler 1999; Lee 1993; Wiederman and Whitley 2002a). Establishing rapport is only somewhat more difficult in cyber and phone than in face-to-face interviews, however, and researchers who are comfortable with cyber chat norms can establish rapport with relative ease (Mann and Stewart 2001). Sexuality researchers argue that phone and cyber settings are the preferred setting for interviews on sexuality topics because they provide respondents with the greatest amount of privacy, respondents are less likely to feel embarrassed and to censor themselves talking about sexuality issues, and many more people are willing to participate in the relative anonymous cyber interview setting than in-person or even over the phone interviews (Mustanski 2001).

In contrast, some methods experts (e.g. Mann and Stewart 2001; Shuy 2001) identify a possible increase in fabrication by respondents in phone and cyber interview settings compared to face-to-face settings as a potential drawback of non-face-to-face interviews.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, previous research demonstrates that interviewees participating in sexuality-related interviews respond with less social desirability and social anxiety in cyber and phone than in face-to-face interviews, thus increasing the

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<sup>57</sup> Others argue that the issue of fabrication is similar for researchers working in both face-to-face and cyber settings. Fernback (1999), for instances, argues that “the same concerns about validity in the interpretive approach that have plagued ethnographers all along are applicable in the virtual realm as well” and caution that researchers working in both physical and cyber settings “must develop a sense about the truthfulness and candor of their informants...” (p. 216).



potential for interviewees to give accounts of their experiences that they feel accurately reflect those experiences and decreasing response effects such as social desirability and expectancy (Binik, Mah, and Keisler 1999; Joinson 1999; Lee 1993; Shuy 2001; Wiederman and Whitley 2002a; Wiederman and Whitley 2002b).<sup>58</sup> Additionally, researcher effects related to the researcher's social position (e.g. gender, race, etc.)<sup>59</sup> are minimized in phone interviews and especially in cyber interviews, where the researcher's social status is often less apparent and/or salient (Binik, Mah, and Keisler 1999; Mustanski 2001; Wiederman and Whitley 2002b).

I do not view the issue of greater or lesser fabrication in cyber or phone interviews compared with face-to-face interviews as particularly problematic, in part because I do not assume that interviewees will tell me the "truth" in any interview setting or even that such a "truth" exists to be discovered. Instead, I view phone and cyber settings as providing interviewees with spaces for creating accounts that may be less constrained by social norms and my own particular social location than the spaces created in face-to-face interviews. My primary concern, in other words, was providing interviewees with settings in which they felt comfortable constructing and recounting narratives that most accurately represented their own interpretations of their experiences, rather than attempting to access some form of objective truth or definitive interpretation of the experiences being recounted.

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<sup>58</sup> Response effects are created when interviewees' responses are significantly influenced by the interview process. Social desirability effects occur when respondents give responses they perceive to be the most socially acceptable/desirable and expectancy effects occur when respondents give responses they perceive the researcher expects to hear.

<sup>59</sup> These effects are introduced when interviewees moderate their responses based on the researcher's social status.

At the beginning of each interview, I briefly reviewed the purposes of the study, described the procedures I followed to protect interviewees' privacy—including obtaining a waiver of signed consent from the IRB and destroying all identifying information immediately— and minimize possible risks of harm, and explained that I would be tape-recording the interview or saving the chat transcript. I gave each interviewee an opportunity to ask questions or talk informally “off the record” before I turned the tape recorder on. I also reminded interviewees that they could choose to skip any question or discontinue the interview at any point. Once the interviewee was ready to begin the interview, I explained that I was going to turn on the tape recorder or start saving the chat log and I asked the interviewee to say or type “I consent to participating in this interview.”

I conducted each interview with the use of a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix B), which included a list of open-ended questions for several major topics. Using open-ended questions allows the interviewer to guide the direction of the interview without forcing the interviewee to select pre-established responses (Bernard 2002a; Lofland et al. 2006a). The use of an interview guide with open-ended questions was particularly appropriate to my research questions because there is not yet enough empirical research on the *meanings* of BDSM practices to develop a guide with pre-existing, fixed answers. Additionally, because I was interested in capturing maximum range in terms of experiences of gender, power, and sexuality, it was vital that I not enter into the study with preconceived, fixed conceptualizations of what these categories mean or how BDSM participants experience them.

Because I am interested in the range of meanings of these categories, the interactional processes through which they are negotiated and assigned meanings, and the possible differences in these meanings and processes in BDSM and non-BDSM contexts, I asked interviewees to walk me through several BDSM scenes, play, and/or activities in which they had participated (e.g. their first, most recent, favorite, one that surprised them, etc.). For each experience, I asked interviewees to describe how they felt physically and emotionally or mentally before, during, and after. I also asked participants to describe their relationship dynamics if they were in or had previously been involved in relationships that involved BDSM in some way. In the second half of the interview, I asked participants a series of questions about each of the major concepts of the study: gender, power, and sexuality. Next, I asked interviewees to reflect on the role BDSM plays in their life overall. Finally, I asked interviewees a series of basic demographic questions. I saved demographic questions until the end of the interview so as not to cue standard, normative responses. I did not offer respondents a set of pre-selected categories from which to choose, instead leaving each demographic question open-ended, with the exception of the age question, in which I asked interviewees to provide me with their age in a ten-year span. I concluded each interview by providing the interviewee with another chance to ask any questions they might have and I asked each interviewee whether there were things they thought it was important for people studying BDSM to know that we hadn't yet talked about. Before we ended the interview, I reminded participants that I would immediately destroy their contact information, but encouraged them

to keep in touch with me if they had any questions or additional ideas they wanted to share and to check in about the progress of my research. Interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and three hours, with most interviews lasting approximately one hour and forty-five minutes.

One of my most important and difficult tasks as an interviewer was how to address the common assumption among BDSM participants that academic researchers think BDSM participants are mentally ill, non-consensually violent, and/or victims of abuse. College students frequently post uneducated, offensive, stereotypical, and/or stigmatizing requests for information on BDSM community sites, explaining that they have a paper due the next week and need to research “deviance.” On one of the sites on which I posted my recruitment flyer, I included in my post information about my background working with BDSM, a brief summary of my own prior participation on that community site, and information about how to contact the Emory University IRB with questions or concerns, hoping to avoid the impression that I was one of the many people who join a BDSM community site simply to attempt to gather a few quick responses that can prove what is “wrong with” BDSM participants. Another community member responded to my post:

Brandy, we often get these requests. At least once a year someone is writing a thesis on kinky folk. If I can possibly speak for the kink community just for one second in regards to this, we are tired of being studied, measure[d] and held up as examples of the 'other.' You want our time and our stories and what do we get in return? ...Tell us why we would be inclined to cooperate with you? Or even trust that you know enough about BDSM and most importantly that you are not on some witch hunt? We are doctors, lawyers, engineers, housewives/husbands, dancers, artists, marketing & sales, old & young and from every demographic possible; this is only one aspect of our lives. Maybe the lack of response is due to the fact that we do not want to be portrayed as freaks and cultists

and that we have no way of knowing just what your angle is and what you are seeking to prove without knowing you or what you are about.

This person is a well-known and respected member of this particular community site and has written over 10,000 posts on this site alone. I responded publicly and in detail in that discussion thread to each concern that this individual raised.<sup>60</sup> Based on my response, that person not only agreed to participate in an interview, but publicly posted about the interview experience and later helped me to recruit additional interviewees.

Because I had access to insider language and community norms, I was often able to mitigate concerns that I was “on a witch hunt” simply by the ways I phrased my questions and by what questions I did not ask. Although I used insider terms such as “vanilla,” “subspace,” and “squick,” I also asked interviewees to explain what those terms meant to them personally, citing the frequent contestation of insider terms among community members. Using insider language and not asking questions such as “what kind of abuse did you suffer during childhood?” or “why do you think it’s ok to beat women?” signaled to interviewees that I did not have a hostile view of BDSM. Sam, for example, told me at the end of our interview:

I think for academic researchers—I’ve seen some of the academic research on this myself and there’s not much out there. For academic researchers who are interested in it and I’m glad you avoided this pitfall but it’s to avoid the concept that all of this is some form of mental illness. You, you you’ve never given me any kind of indication that you fell into that pitfall. Fortunately. But you see some of that out there. These people making accusations that these people who do this you know are. They go and cite the DSM-IV and all of that. And say these people are sick. And it’s really not. I mean it’s we could happen to be doing things a little differently but we’re sane, healthy people.

Similarly, Reese said:

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<sup>60</sup> My complete response is included in Appendix C.

It's pretty clear to me that you're studying BDSM from a sympathetic orientation. And you know the nature of the questions and your sort of flexibility in rolling with the questions sort of suggests that you know sort of what's up. And I can think of. There are plenty of studies out there from a much less sympathetic point of view. But they're coming from a kind of place where anything you [an interviewee] say is not actually going to make much of a difference.

At the end of the interview, when I gave each interviewee an opportunity to ask any questions they had not yet asked, Morgan said, "I don't have any questions. A lot of the questions that I was wondering about you've answered by the type of questions you've asked. So I pretty much see where your head is going."

Demonstrating that I was trustworthy and not out to demonize BDSM was not a one-time accomplishment, but rather an on-going interactional process that unfolded as our conversations, including the interview itself, unfolded.

I was also very aware of the strong similarities of the interview process itself to the kinds of interactions that frequently happen between BDSM participants who are considering engaging in BDSM together. Questions about what one likes and dislikes and why, as well as questions about past experiences and fantasies are part of the standard set of questions participants engage in as part of the process of negotiating a scene. I was also aware of the complexity of the power dynamic of the interview, which closely parallels that of many kinds of BDSM power exchanges in interesting ways. As the interviewer, it was my task to guide the direction of the interview and to set the pace. As a researcher, I also had a specific form of institutional authority and power. Yet at the same time, the interviewee also had power—power related to having valuable information and power to skip a question or end the interview.

Because I was especially concerned to make sure that interviewees were comfortable with each set of questions and did not feel pressured to talk about issues they preferred not to, I often said things like, “next, I’d like to talk a little about your sexuality more generally. Is that ok with you?” These kinds of “checking-in” moments, although not usually as explicit as those that occurred in our interviews, are what makes BDSM activities possible. These moments of checking in were also moments of re-establishing consent to the interview process. Although I had “obtained consent” in the standard method required by the IRB at the beginning of the interview, I wanted to reiterate that the interviewee had the option of stopping the interview or choosing not to discuss certain topics at any point. In fact, the overly formal language I used to ask for consent at the beginning of each interview, including the language required by the IRB, was a frequent source of humor for interviewees, who often made it a point to repeat “Yes, I consent to participating in this interview” in mocking or overly serious tones. In nearly every interview, the interviewee and I shared a laugh over this “moment of consent.” Because this moment occurred at the very beginning of each interview, it helped to establish an easy rapport between us in many cases and also, I believe, signaled to interviewees that I had at least some insider knowledge if I could understand why that overly dramatic, formal moment of consent was laughable.

I found few differences in the kinds of interview conversations that occurred across phone, face-to-face, and Skype conversations. The few interviews that took place over instant messenger, however, were less rich compared with other interviews and took significantly longer than did interviews that took place in other settings. It was also more difficult to develop rapport over instant messenger than it was in other interview settings.

Instant messenger-facilitated interviews nonetheless were a productive aspect of the research process, because they allowed me to include participants who could not meet face-to-face and did not have access to a place where they could have a phone conversation in private. All of the interviewees who chose to be interviewed over instant messenger worked or went to school during the day and had significant care-giving responsibilities for children and/or family members in the evenings.

The combination of cyber and physical recruitment allowed me to recruit a sample that is diverse in terms of geographic location, age, years of BDSM participation, BDSM role, gender, and sexual orientation, as summarized in Appendix D. I collected age data in ten-year intervals. Age intervals ranged from 20-30 to 60-70, with a median of 30-40 and a mode falling between 30-40 and 40-50. Approximate length of time participating in BDSM ranged from less than one year to more than 20 years. 27% had participated in BDSM for 20 or more years, 33% for 11-19 years, 23% for 6-10 years, 13% for 1-5 years, and 3% for less than one year. Although my sample included a relatively diverse range of years of participation in BDSM, only one interviewee reported having participated in BDSM for less than a year. I believe this is because of the general difficulty of capturing new participants in any activity close to their initial first experience. Additionally, because I required interviewees to be at least 18 and many people first become involved with BDSM before they reach 18, the age constraint may have also reduced the number of interviewees new to BDSM that I was able to include.

Because I was aware that community-specific norms often vary by region and location, I collected geographic data for participants as well. 44% of my sample lived in the Midwest, 34% in the Southeast, 13% on the West Coast, and 8% in the Northeast;



none of the interviewees lived in the Southwest, although several interviewees talked about their experiences of BDSM and various BDSM communities while visiting or living in the Southwest. The vast majority of interviewees lived in a city or metropolitan area (81%), while 9% live in the suburbs, 3% lived in a small town, and 3% lived in a rural area. Living in or visiting urban areas facilitates participation in BDSM because places in which one can publicly engage in BDSM, such as clubs and dungeons, are seldom located outside of major urban areas. Additionally, the ability to purchase BDSM equipment, clothing, and accessories is facilitated by access to urban areas, in which specialized adult stores can be found. Finally, the larger population of urban areas increases the number of potential BDSM partners that are within close enough proximity to make playing in person (as opposed to in cyberspace) possible. Whether living in an urban area exposes individuals to BDSM or whether participants choose to live in urban areas in part because of access to BDSM spaces, equipment, and partners is individually variable. Some of my interviewees, for whom BDSM was a very significant component of their lives overall, reported changing careers, homes, and/or lifestyles to move to places where they had access to BDSM communities. For others, for whom BDSM was either a less important aspect of their overall lives or who played in private in the context of a monogamous relationship, access to BDSM communities, facilities, and potential partners was less important.

Although not a primary area of focus in the current project, race/ethnicity is a category in which I was not able to obtain significant diversity. 78% of my sample reported white and/or Caucasian as their race or ethnicity. 6% reported Native American ethnicity, while Indian and Ukrainian ethnicity were each reported by 3% of the sample.

9% of interviewees did not report race/ ethnicity. It is difficult to gauge whether my sample is significantly whiter than the BDSM population in general, because very few studies of BDSM report demographic information and those that do usually do not include race/ ethnicity in reported demographics of their samples (e.g. Cross and Matheson 2006; Ernulf and Innala 1995; Levitt, Moser, and Jamison 1994; Richters et al. 2008; Stiles and Clark 2011; Weiss 2006b). The only two studies, to my knowledge, which report race/ethnicity of participants also obtained primarily white samples. Weiss (2006b) obtained a sample of BDSM participants in the San Francisco Bay area that was 87% white. Bauer (2008) reports a sample that is primarily white, but does not give specific demographic information. Bauer explains that the low participation of people of color is likely representative of the lesbian BDSM community, which is primarily white. The pansexual cyber BDSM communities in which I have worked, as well as physical communities in Florida, North Carolina, Georgia, and California, were also overwhelmingly white. I posted recruitment materials to several racially/ethnically-specific cyber BDSM community groups, but I do not know whether participants of color are more likely to join racially/ethnically-specific communities, mixed communities, or both. My sampling strategy itself may have also contributed to the relative whiteness of my sample for at least two reasons. First, the community sites from which I recruited have mostly white members, paralleling the apparent overall whiteness of the BDSM community. Second, because some of my interviewees were referred to me by other interviewees and most of my interviewees were white, if their BDSM networks primarily included other whites, people of color would have had a lesser chance of being referred for an interview.

Participants self-identified in extremely complex, nuanced ways in terms of gender in the course of interview conversations, something that is not reflected in the demographic overview of gender I provide here. Although participants often reported non-normative gender identifications, performances, and/or expressions in the course of the interview conversation, when I asked demographic questions at the conclusion of the interview and asked “Could you tell me your gender or genders?,” participants gave standard, dichotomized answers. Interestingly, although I specifically asked for gender rather than sex, and while many interviewees were careful to draw distinctions between sex and gender in the course of the interview,<sup>61</sup> with only two exceptions—which were also the only two non-dichotomized genders reported—interviewees responded with sex rather than gender. When asked demographic questions, 47% of my sample self-identified as female, 47% self-identified as male, 3% identified as trans, and 3% identified as non-gendered. Again, these data in no way reflect the multiple and complex gender identifications participants discussed during the interviews, a point which I discuss in much greater detail in Chapter 6. Both because participants described gender identities and expressions that do not always correspond with dichotomized masculine/feminine categories and because many participants described different gender identifications and/or performances in different settings, I assigned gender-neutral

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<sup>61</sup> Tracy, for instance, when asked about whether gender had any influence on BDSM interactions said, “I don’t really have a big hang-up about gender or gender roles. Frankly. Well, there’s obviously biological sex. There are biological males and biological females. Of course there are intermediate cases where—well that’s not true now. But gender, gender is just social. I don’t really care about it. So I never have the feeling of oh my masculinity is being violated. I don’t really care about. To be honest I don’t really even know what masculine and feminine mean. I mean I know male and female. So no this is just never an issue for me. No, it doesn’t bother me at all, the gender issue. Like I said there’s of course a difference between male and female. That actually does matter. But gender as distinct from sex doesn’t concern me. [Can you talk about that sex difference or that difference between male and female that you just mentioned?] Well I think it really just to be a biological matter. I’m just attracted to men and not to well, there are plenty of attractive women. There are women who are just objectively beautiful women. And I can recognize that. But I’m not sexually attracted to women.”

pseudonyms to interviewees and refer to interviewees by gender-neutral pronouns (e.g. zir, ze).<sup>62</sup> Although in some instances, this leads to more awkward sentence structure than I would prefer, I believe the benefits of not assigning interviewees dichotomized genders through the use of gendered names and pronouns outweigh the awkwardness of the writing.

Respondents also reported a much greater range of sexual orientations in the course of our interview conversations than they did when asked demographic questions. However, the range of responses to the demographic question about sexual orientation were significantly more diverse than were responses to the demographic question about gender. This may in part because many BDSM community sites recognize a greater diversity in sexual orientations than they do in genders or sexes. 38% of my sample identified as heterosexual, 10% identified as heteroflexible, 3% identified as primarily heterosexual with some bicurious tendencies, 21% identified as bisexual, 7% as pansexual, 3% as queer, 14% as gay, and 3% responded, “I like everybody.” Lesbian-identified participants are missing from my interview sample. Lesbian-identified BDSM participants are among the least well-represented in mixed-orientation cyber BDSM communities, for reasons which are unclear. I discuss the absence of lesbian-identified interviewees further in the limitations section.

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<sup>62</sup> My archival data contain less information about the ways in which participants identify in terms of or enact gender and instead most often include standard acronyms and language related to personals ads (e.g. gay male bottom). Thus, I assign correspondents from whom I include quotes pseudonyms that match the sex/gender identifications included in their letters. Perhaps because personal ads elicit demographic-like narratives of categories such as gender and sexual orientation, participants included in my archival sample nearly universally identified in terms of standard, dichotomous sex/gender categories. These self-identifications may also be related to the fact that the letters I analyzed were written in response to ads looking for people who identify with/as or enact a specific gender (e.g. both deBlasé and Rabbit placed ads looking specifically for men).

As with gender and sexual orientation, interviewees reported an extremely wide range of BDSM roles and identifications. In many cases, interviewees drew strong distinctions between roles that are often seen as overlapping (e.g. top, master, dominant) and identified strongly with one while disavowing others. Interviewees often also explained that these roles and/or identifications refer to different types of interactions, relationship dynamics, activities, and/or levels of power exchange. For some, however, distinctions between these roles and identities were meaningless. While recognizing the problematic ways in which lumping together roles and/or identities that are for some disparate categories may obscure meaningful differences, I nonetheless created umbrella categories for BDSM roles in order to keep track of the general kinds of roles or identifications in my sample. BDSM studies differ significantly in their use of these umbrella categories, depending in part on their specific focus on particular kinds of BDSM practices, relationships, and/or identities. I use top, bottom, and switch as umbrella categories because these are the most inclusive of the various categories of BDSM roles and identifications, while recognizing that these categories are problematic both because of their lack of precision and because for some, these terms describe actions rather than roles or identities. For the purposes of demographics only, I therefore include someone who identified as a master under the category “top” and someone who identified as a masochist under the category “bottom” here. Because the reader is not likely to be aware of the meanings of, relationships among, or distinctions among these roles and identities at this point, I include these categories only to provide the reader with a general sense of the sample. In the rest of the dissertation, I use participants’ own self-

identifications in terms of BDSM roles and identities. Using these broad categories, my sample was divided fairly even among tops (34%), bottoms (34%), and switches (31%).

### **METHODS OF ANALYSIS**

In order to analyze these data,<sup>63</sup> I utilized the grounded theory method of analysis (Charmaz 2001; Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2008; Glaser 1978; Glaser 1992; Glaser and Strauss 1967), which is a leading qualitative data analysis method in sociology, feminist theory, and queer theory (Charmaz 2006; Clarke 2007; Gamson 2003; Hesse-Biber 2007b). The grounded theory method of analysis is particularly well-suited to research on meanings and processes because it allows researchers to draw on the data to identify meanings and processes created and used by participants (Charmaz 2006; Charmaz 2007; Clarke 2007). It is also advantageous for analyzing data on sexualities because it enables researchers to develop meaning-making categories and codes from the data, rather than establishing those categories in advance and forcing them onto the data, thus allowing researchers to reflect the full range of meanings related to sexuality in the data (Kippax and Smith 2001).

The grounded theory method of analysis is referred to as “grounded” because analyses are rooted in the data and explanations and interpretations are generated from the data, rather than drawn only from extant theories. This aspect of grounded theory is particularly useful for this project because there is so much disagreement in extant theory over the meanings of BDSM. Another strength of the grounded theory method of analysis

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<sup>63</sup> The grounded theory method of analysis is ideal for data collected through theoretical/purposive sampling; indeed, theoretical sampling was developed by grounded theory scholars (Flick 2007). As Clarke (2007) explains, in grounded theory, “‘sampling’ is driven not necessarily (or not only) by attempts to be ‘representative’ of some social body or population or its heterogeneities but especially and explicitly by *theoretical* concerns” that have emerged in the analysis. Theoretical sampling is a fundamental strength of grounded theory analysis” (p. 346).

is that it views patterns in the data as indications of the presence of a particular phenomena rather than a conclusion about some aspect of it. Because grounded theory views phenomenon as being open to infinite interpretations, absolute closure is not a possibility, another aspect of the grounded theory method that fits very well with the queer feminist interactionist conceptual framework I use in this project.

Grounded theory is also an ideal method of analysis for this project because it is closely linked to symbolic interactionism, the perspective that orients the conceptual framework of this project (Charmaz 2006; Clarke 2007). As Clarke (2007) explains, grounded theory is rooted in symbolic interactionism, sharing with it an emphasis on actual lived experiences and practices—the “lived doingness of social life”—and relying heavily on Mead’s (1934) concept of perspective, which emphasizes partiality, situatedness, and multiplicity (p. 347). This recognition of perspectives as situated and partial shares much in common with feminist standpoint theory and epistemology (e.g. Collins 1986; Collins 2000; Haraway 1988; Harding 1986; Smith 1987; Smith 1999; Smith 2004; Sprague and Kobrynowicz 2004), and insists that grounded theory analyses represent “*all* understandings...of those studied” (Clarke 2007, 348). The joint use of the symbolic interactionist perspective and the grounded theory method of data analysis, Clarke (2007) argues, is implicitly feminist:

Grounded theory/ symbolic interactionism can be seen as a constituting theory/methods package that is implicitly feminist... This concept of theory-methods package focuses on the integral... aspects of ontology and epistemology as these are co-constitutive. And, *vis-à-vis* symbolic interactionism, this features researching the meanings held by the actors themselves—an implicitly feminist stance. (p. 348)

Thus, because the grounded theory method of analysis shares an epistemological orientation with the queer feminist interactionist conceptual framework that guides this

dissertation, because it emphasizes the meanings that interactions have for the individuals who participate in them, and because it recognizes that all perspectives are partial, it is an ideal method of analysis for this project.

The grounded theory method of data analysis involves several interrelated steps,<sup>64</sup> including coding and memoing.<sup>65</sup> First, all data must be converted to textual form, including transcribing interviews, which I did within a few days of the completion of each interview. Next, data must be coded.<sup>66</sup> Coding, as Lofland et al. describe it, involves “the process of sorting... data into various categories that organize it and render it meaningful...” (Lofland et al. 2006a, 200). For interview data, I line-by-line coded each interview, a process in which I assigned each line of every interview one or more codes that described the content of the line. I next began focused coding, which is more selective and conceptually-oriented than line-by-line coding. At this point, I used focused, or thematic codes, to analyze discussion board and archival data as well as the interview data. The final process in the coding phase of analysis is theoretical coding,

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<sup>64</sup> Clarke (2007) provides a detailed description of the process of developing grounded theory analyses: “In using/doing GT [grounded theory], the analyst initially codes the qualitative data (open coding)—word by word, segment by segment—and gives temporary labels (codes) to particular phenomena. Over time, the analyst determines whether codes generated through one data source also appear elsewhere, and elaborates their properties. Related codes that seem robust through the ongoing coding process are then densified into more enduring and analytically ambitious “categories.” Analytic memos are written about each designated category—what does it mean; what are the instances of it; what is the range of variation within it found in the data to date; what does and doesn’t it seem to ‘take into account’? These categories are ultimately integrated into a theoretical analysis of the substantive area that is the immediate focus of the current research project. Thus, a “grounded theory” of a particular phenomenon of concern is composed of the analytic codes and categories generated abductively in the analysis and explicitly integrated to form a theory of the substantive area that is the focus of the research project: the analyst generates an empirically based ‘substantive theory’” (p. 346).

<sup>65</sup> The coding and memoing process described here is also widely used in other qualitative methods of analysis (Dey 1993; Gibbs 2007; Kvale 2007; Lofland et al. 2006a; Rubin and Rubin 2005; Weiss 1994). It is used frequently in feminist research interested in the meanings of women’s experiences (Hesse-Biber 2007b).

<sup>66</sup> I used the qualitative data analysis software program MaxQDA, to facilitate the coding and memoing process. MaxQDA allows for the creation of subcategories within codes and allows for comparisons among codes. MaxQDA also has functions that create code matrices, which visualize areas of intersection and overlap among codes.



which involves conceptualizing the relationships between codes developed in focused coding. I used theoretical coding to analyze all of the types of data included in the project. As I was collecting data as well as during the coding process, I wrote memos about themes, patterns, and irregularities in the data. Memoing functions as an intermediate step between coding and the final analysis (Charmaz 2001; Hesse-Biber 2007b). Through memoing, I linked theoretical codes to one another to form the theoretical framework that grounds the final analysis (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Kvale 2007).

Because the grounded theory method allows for the extension and development of theory (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 1992) and a primary goal of this project is to refine and extend theory related to gender as an interactional process, this method of analysis was ideal both for the types of data I collected and my goals in analyzing those data. In particular, the grounded theory method allows researchers to identify new relationships and develop new conceptualizations of the topics of study.

Using multiple sources of data also allowed me to begin to develop my analyses prior to the completion of data collection. For example, I used the themes that emerged in the archival data to help develop my interview guide. As I was conducting interviews, I noted the variety of terms participants used to describe common themes, concepts, and experiences, and added those terms to my list of keywords to search on the discussion boards. Having collected the archival data and some of the discussion board data prior to beginning the interviews also allowed me to use specific examples when appropriate to clarify my questions early on in the interview process before I had conducted enough interviews to rely primarily on examples from other interview conversations.

## VALIDITY AND LIMITATIONS

Qualitative researchers, especially those working from queer and feminist perspectives, emphasize that the question of validity in data and analysis is complex because multiple valid interpretations exist (Gamson 2003; Newman 2002; Olesen 2003; Smith 1987; Smith 2004). As Kippax and Smith (2001) explain in relation to sexuality-related research in particular, “a person’s talk about the meaning of their own practice does not exhaust what else could be said about that practice and what is left unspoken may be consciously or unconsciously withheld... there is more going on in sexual practice than any individual can account for, even if that sexual practice is a person’s own” (Kippax and Smith 2001, 424). In other words, data, regardless of richness or validity, will always be partial, as will analyses based on those data. Because there is no “objective truth” to be discovered, many qualitative researchers instead focus on giving voice to multiple accounts and grounding analyses in data in ways that are transparent in the written product, strategies I relied on in this project (Gamson 2003; Olesen 2003; Smith 1987; Smith 2004). In the grounded theory method of analysis, described previously, “verification is built into the entire research process with continual checks on the credibility, plausibility and trustworthiness of findings” (p. Kvale 2007, 123).

Additionally, I utilized several more traditional methods of assessing the relative validity of my data and findings. Incorporating multiple sources of data provides the first of several traditional checks on validity built into the study design—triangulation, which involves gathering and comparing data from multiple sources (Flick 2007; Gibbs 2007; Lofland et al. 2006a; Maxwell 2005). A second traditional check on validity involves long-term, intensive study, which is essential because it can “help to rule out spurious

associations and premature theories” (Maxwell 2005, 110). Since 2002, I have worked in several BDSM communities, both cyber and physical. In the first several years of my work in BDSM communities, I spent an average of 40 hours a week talking with BDSM participants and continued my intensive involvement as I conducted research related specifically to my dissertation project. By the completion of this dissertation project, I will have worked in BDSM communities for more than a decade, allowing me to build the kinds of relationships that facilitate intensive, long-term involvement. Intensive, long-term involvement is key to a third traditional validity measure, the generation of rich data, which can capture the complex experiences of participants, helping to guard against overly simplistic analysis (Maxwell 2005). Excerpts from rich data are also included in the written analysis itself, creating what some qualitative researchers refer to as “audit trails,” which allow readers to see the data sources on which the researcher’s analyses are based (Maxwell 2005; Olesen 2003).

My long-term, intensive involvement with a variety of BDSM communities also facilitates a fourth traditional check on validity, respondent validation, which involves soliciting feedback on your analyses and interpretations from study participants themselves (Maxwell 2005; Olesen 2003). The on-going process of discussing my ideas with BDSM participants has been integral to this project since its very conception. I first became aware of BDSM in the process of writing a senior honors thesis on sexual consent and began to talk with BDSM participants about feminist theories of BDSM. Academic theories and interpretations of BDSM are frequently raised within BDSM communities (e.g. discussion forums on [bondage.com](http://bondage.com) that specifically address the relationship between feminist and BDSM identities; the recent heated debates over

whether or not a BDSM workshop should be held at Charis, a feminist bookstore in Atlanta). Throughout the process of collecting and analyzing my dissertation data, I relied on the strong relationships I have built with BDSM participants to help determine whether the understandings of gender, sexuality, and power I develop in my analyses reflect their experiences. At each step of the way, I shared my ideas with BDSM participants, including those I knew before I began my dissertation research and those I came to know as a result of this project in particular. Participants provided feedback on my dissertation prospectus, interview guide, coding scheme, and analyses in their various forms, including papers I have given at conferences and sections of the dissertation itself. I am indebted to the many participants who have shared their insights with me, not only in interview conversations, but in the many conversations we have had before and after. In many ways, the analyses contained in my dissertation are a collaborative effort.

Despite my efforts to create analyses that reflect the complexities and nuances of participants' experiences, the analyses presented here are necessarily partial and limited. As discussed at the beginning of this section, the analyses I present here are only one of many possible stories that could be told using the data I collected. My findings are also limited in several important ways. First, although I was able to include people of a somewhat diverse range of racial/ethnic backgrounds in the archival and discussion board data I collected, my interview sample was relatively racially/ethnically homogenous. To my knowledge, no published work to date has explored race/ethnicity and BDSM. Future research could explore the ways in which race/ethnicity influences experiences of BDSM. The use of the master/slave relationship dynamic and titles may have significantly different meanings for people of different racial/ ethnic backgrounds, for example. Race

and ethnicity are also likely to influence experiences of BDSM in many other ways, as they do all aspects of social life in modern America, a society in which race/ ethnicity remains an important social category upon which inequalities are based.

Second, although the range of sexual orientations represented in the archival and discussion board data I collected included many lesbian-identified participants, I was not able to include any lesbian-identified participants in the interview sample. Because gender and sexuality are among the key areas of focus in my project, having been able to interview lesbian-identified participants would likely have strengthened my analysis of the ways in which gender, sexuality, and BDSM intersect.

Third, my findings are the result of data collected from people who participate or at least have access to one or more BDSM communities. Individuals who participate in BDSM but are unaware of or choose not to participate in BDSM communities are likely to have significantly different experiences of BDSM than those who have access to the shared meanings created in BDSM communities. Additionally, people who do not participate in BDSM communities may engage in activities that would commonly be considered to fall under the category of BDSM but either be unaware of BDSM itself or choose, for a variety of reasons, not to identify their practices with BDSM. I expect that those who engage in practices that would meet all of the criteria for inclusion as BDSM other than self-identification in BDSM terms may have significantly different experiences of activities similar to BDSM than do those who identify their practices as BDSM. Because choosing not to identify one's practices in conventional terms may be an act of resisting the categorization, organization, and control of pleasure, research including such

individuals would likely significantly expand our understanding of the ways in which individuals resist the current economy of bodies and pleasures.

Fourth, I chose not to focus on those who engage in commercial BDSM—that is, who pay for BDSM interactions. One interviewee reported having previously engaged in commercial BDSM, purchasing the services of pro-Dommes for several decades, but with this exception, interviewees reported engaging only in non-commercial BDSM. Although analyses of power exchanges in commercial BDSM are likely to provide an important addition to our understanding of power and BDSM and I hope to include analyses of commercial BDSM in future work, such interactions were outside the scope of the present work. The present findings are thus limited to non-commercial BDSM.<sup>67</sup>

Fifth, as discussed previously in this chapter, my sample contains only one BDSM “newbie.” People’s experiences of BDSM, as with all social experiences, likely change over time and as they gain more experience with a particular type of activity. Relatedly, I conducted only one interview with each interviewee, reflecting their experiences of BDSM at only one particular moment in their lives. By including correspondence and journals spanning months and even years, as well as discussion board posts from users who posted repeatedly over a period of several years, I attempted to mitigate this limitation of the study as much as possible. Longitudinal studies of BDSM would enhance our understandings of the ways in which experiences of BDSM change over time.

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<sup>67</sup> Although not a focus of most research on BDSM, a handful of studies of commercial BDSM have been published (e.g. Lindenmann 2010; Lindenmann 2011; Wilson 2005). These studies demonstrate that many of the processes used to create meanings, establish consent, and facilitate power exchange are similar in both commercial and non-commercial settings. However, the kinds and intensity of emotional experiences of BDSM, the subject of Chapter 6, appear to differ in commercial and non-commercial settings.

## ETHICS AND REFLEXIVITY IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Protecting the privacy of participants and ensuring confidentiality is one of the most significant ethical issues related to qualitative research (Binik, Mah, and Keisler 1999; Kvale 2007; Robson and Robson 2002; Weiss 1994). This was especially the case for my project, because the continued stigmatization of BDSM can have serious consequences for participants who are involuntarily outed. Thus, while archival data are generally considered “public,” how to treat the data I collected at the Leather Archives is an important ethical issue. Several of the collections with which I worked contain letters written to the person who donated her/his papers to the LA&M. These correspondents likely had no knowledge that their letters would end up in a publicly available archive. Many of the letters written to the individual who donated her/his papers to the LA&M include identifying information such as name, address, and/or phone number. Because the people writing *to* the person who donated her/his papers likely did not know that their letters would end up in the archive, in my view, they did not give consent to having their letters used in an identifiable way. Therefore, when I discuss archival materials, I distinguish between those created by the person who arranged for her/his papers to be donated to the archive and those created by people who did not expressly consent to having their materials available at the archive. Thus, to preserve the privacy and anonymity of people who did not expressly consent to having their letters made available at the Leather Archives, I assign pseudonyms to each of these individuals and remove all identifying information from their letters. When referencing materials created by the person who donated her/his papers (e.g. deBlasé, Tannis, Rabbit), I refer to that person by their real name.

Similarly, while posts to internet discussion boards that can be accessed, read, and posted to by anyone are technically “public,” some people who post to public discussion boards nonetheless view these posts as semi-private. Waruszynski (2002) explains that what should be considered public and what private on the internet is a quite murky area. Most researchers treat anything posted on the internet as public, while many people believe that what they post on the internet, even in public forums, is private. This blurriness of public/private in cyberspace is an ethical dilemma for all researchers using data generated in cyberspace. In order to err on the side of protecting the privacy of people who post to public discussion boards, I do not provide identifying information (e.g. screen name) when I refer to discussion board posts.

Anonymity and the protection of privacy were among the primary reasons I provided interviewees with a choice of settings with different levels of privacy and anonymity and obtained a waiver of signed consent from the IRB. While phone and cyber interviews provide interviewees with a greater level of privacy and anonymity than do in-person interviewees, anonymity can never be 100% guaranteed, regardless of the setting (Binik, Mah, and Keisler 1999). While I could not promise participants absolute anonymity in any interview context, I took several steps to safeguard their privacy and to maintain confidentiality.

For all interviews, regardless of setting, I destroyed contact information immediately following the interview and removed identifying information from the interview after transcription or when I saved the chat log. This turned out to be a difficult issue for many interviewees, many of whom hoped I would keep in touch with them following the interview. In those cases, I turned off the tape recorder or ended the chat



log and then provided interviewees with my personal e-mail address, so that we could stay in touch without a way to link their interview to their contact information. On the whole, BDSM participants are generally quite savvy about protecting their identities. Even in BDSM communities, participants almost never use their real names, instead adopting scene names to safeguard their privacy. There were, however, some exceptions—interviewees who told me that they didn't care who knew about their BDSM participation. Several interviewees stressed to me repeatedly that I did not need to destroy their contact information, yet in each case, I explained to them that doing so was for their protection and that I was required to do so by the IRB. I kept interview transcripts password-protected in electronic form, backed-up to a password-protected hard drive stored separately. I did not keep hard copies of research materials. While there exists a small possibility of a breach of anonymity or confidentiality in relation to participation in this research, the risk of exposure by participating in my study is no greater than the risks participants encounter in their everyday lives, because all participants were recruited through venues in which they already discuss their participation in BDSM activities with others.

In addition to the potential risks to participants related to confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy discussed above, which are similar to the risks participants face in everyday life (Wiederman 2002), there was also a minimal risk that some participants might be negatively impacted simply by talking about their experiences. As Weiss (1994) explains, the risk of harm from participating in interviews is relatively small, especially compared with the potential benefits of participation: "Respondents are very unlikely to be harmed simply by participating in a research interview. Indeed, as I have noted, the

chances of their being benefited by the interview are much greater than the chances of their being harmed” (p. 130). The already small risk that respondents might experience harm simply by discussing their experiences in the context of the interview was further minimized through my sampling design, which ensured that there was no way that an interviewee who had never discussed BDSM with someone before could be included in the study. Thus, although BDSM participation may be a sensitive topic for some participants, it is a topic that every participant that was included in the study already discusses in her/his everyday life.

To further minimize the possibility that participants might feel uncomfortable talking about their BDSM experiences in the context of our interview, the interview guide began with neutral questions before asking potentially difficult questions. This strategy follows Weiss’ observation that although interviewing about “sexual behavior is difficult,” there is a relatively tactful way of entering a difficult area” that involves “establish[ing] a reliable research relationship before entering the area” and explaining why the information is needed (Weiss 1994, 76). Indeed, interviewees were often more concerned that *I* might be harmed by our conversations than that they would be. For instance, while describing a scene, Aubrey stopped to question whether I would be uncomfortable with the level of graphicness ze used:

So he took me in there and he told me to... to get undressed. Told me to remove my clothing and put them in a pile on the floor, which I did. And then I stood before him naked. I... I don’t know how graphic you want me to get. [I mean you won’t offend me by anything you say but at the same time you know don’t feel any pressure to say anything more than you want to either.] Oh, ok. Good. Good...

There were, however, instances in which participants told me of traumatic, emotionally and/or physically painful experiences, including the death of a loved one, the end of a

significant relationship, diagnoses of illnesses, sexual assault, domestic violence, and being involuntarily outed. When I sensed that an interviewee was telling me about something that was or had the potential to be emotionally painful, I asked if they felt comfortable talking about that subject or if they would prefer to go on to another topic. Without exception, each interviewee wanted to continue our conversation about the topic in question.

There was only one instance in which I was aware that an interviewee was experiencing emotional distress and the moment seemed to catch both of us off guard. It occurred toward the end of the interview and the interviewee and I had already talked about several traumatic experiences. I asked, “If for some reason, whatever the reason would be, you were no longer to participate in BDSM. And I don’t just mean the specific activities, but to have this dynamic, how would that impact your life?” While replying, Alex started to cry. Ze told me:

I don’t even like to think about it. I mean it is so important. It has taken. It’s taken [crying]. It’s taken somebody that’s. Was so. Messed up. And I don’t mean. You know. I never was. I did drink but that was never a big issue. It wasn’t that kind of stuff. But I was so messed up with self-esteem issues. And with because I was in the extreme religious being Amish background. And then to be a minister myself. And to have all of that. And that’s part of me is so messed up. That he was able to rescue me. And. To imagine going back to a life without it. It’s. I couldn’t... I just can’t. I can’t imagine being any other way.

Simply being asked to think about the hypothetical impact of no longer being able to participate in BDSM was painful for Alex. After the interview ended, Alex explained that crying during the interview had been an acknowledgment of gratefulness for experiences, rather than fear of having those experiences end. The interview had provided Alex with a profound moment of gratitude.

While it was important to me both personally and professionally not to expose interviewees to harm, it was equally important to me that participants would benefit in one or more ways from participating in the interview. I hoped that participants might enjoy the interview process itself—the opportunity to discuss their experiences with a nonjudgmental observer, having their experiences taken as a significant and important source of knowledge (Lofland et al. 2006a). My previous experience talking with BDSM participants about their experiences, especially their views of academic theories of BDSM, suggested that this would likely be a benefit for many participants, some of whom rarely have the chance to discuss their experiences with people who are not current or potential play partners. Having the opportunity to educate others about BDSM is an important aspect of community participation for many BDSM participants. The opportunity to be part of a research project was in itself a rewarding experience for several interviewees. Jordan, for example, told me, “I’ve really enjoyed this interview. Like I said I’ve never done this before and I think it’s so neat that I get to educate people on our lifestyle and what BDSM is and try to debunk the myths and all that.” The opportunity to contribute in some way to the de-stigmatization of BDSM is rewarding for many people both personally and as a method of serving the community. Jordan told me, “I think it’s wonderful that academics like you are doing this interview because it shows you that we’re just normal people who happen to like having different relationships in our marriage or if the couple is living together or whatever.” Other interviewees expressed appreciation for the chance to reflect on and talk about their experiences with BDSM. Many times during interviews, participants would tell me that they’d never thought of a particular issue that was raised in the interview before and that it had made them realize

something about their experiences. Peyton, for instance, at the conclusion of the interview, told me, “This, Brandy, has been very insightful. Thank you.”

My goal for this research, as discussed previously in this chapter, was to complete a project that has use for both academic and community audiences. I thus chose to submit my project for review to the Community-Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities (CARAS), an organization composed of both academics and leaders in alternative sexuality communities.<sup>68</sup> CARAS reviews projects for both academic/ scholarly merit and benefit to the community being studied. CARAS’ endorsement of my project not only provided an important stamp of legitimacy to my research in the eyes of participants—much more so than did having my project reviewed by a university review board—it also helped to assure participants that my research would benefit the community, that I was not simply coming in and “taking” data from them without recognizing my responsibility to reciprocate the exchange of valued resources.

My hope that interviewees would find participating in the project beneficial was met at the conclusion of several interviews when interviewees expressed their gratitude to me for taking on this project. Andy, for instance, as we were saying goodbye, told me, “It’s good work. It’s important work. Thank you for doing it.” Similarly, when I asked at the end of the interview whether Harper wanted to discuss anything else before we wrapped up, Harper said:

I’m really— [Harper’s partner, who also participated in the interview] and I are both— very, very pleased that you’re doing this. And that this has become something that is starting to get a little bit more public understanding. And we appreciate the time and effort that you’re putting

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<sup>68</sup> For an overview of CARAS and the importance of linking scholarly and community goals, see Sprott and Bienvenu (2007).

into this particular research project. And we just kind of wanted to let you know that we appreciate someone doing this. Taking an open viewpoint. And we're glad that you've chosen to. And we wish you a lot of luck with it. [Oh, thank you so much. I really appreciate that!] I know that interviewing a lot of people and that sort of thing takes a lot of effort. And you know. We commend your effort and your commitment to understanding and research and we just. There needs to be more people like you out there. So we basically just want to say thanks for approaching it with an open mind and being willing to find out more. Do the research and put in the effort. [That means so much to me. Thank you.]

And Pat told me, "I really am glad you're doing this project because we need more valid projects, more valid research and that's why I'm a real big proponent of CARAS and really proud of their stuff." In my view, being able to conduct research that has value to the people involved in the research is one of the most important ethical issues related to academic research in general.

While the process of the interview itself was of benefit to many participants, several interviewees also benefited from knowledge resources I was able to share. For instance, one interviewee (who for privacy reasons I do not name) told me that being blind meant that there were virtually no BDSM materials that were accessible to zir. I was able to share information about the Leather Archives' digital collection, available in cyberspace, which includes a selection of audio materials including life histories, and interviews. Ze was extremely excited about the possibility of being able to learn about other people's experiences of BDSM, something ze had not previously been able to do because publishers would not make digital copies (which computer software can read aloud) of books available. Several other interviewees asked me for bibliographic references related to a particular aspect of BDSM we had discussed and I was able

to provide them with information about resources of which they had previously been unaware.

In order to make my findings available to the BDSM community in general, I am also creating brief reports written for general audiences on the major themes of the study, which will become part of the traveling and cyber exhibits at the Leather Archives and Museum (by previous arrangement with the Executive Director) and which will be available on the CARAS website. I will also post these reports to each of the sites from which I recruited participants. These steps will allow me to reciprocate the exchange of knowledge with study participants, an important step in ensuring that the research process is non-exploitative (de Laine 2000; Hesse-Biber 2007b; Kirsch 1999; Preissle 2007; Robson and Robson 2002; Seidman 2006).

While the issues discussed above are the primary ethical issues of concern to the IRB, there are additional ethical issues involved in this research, which stem from the recognition that the interview itself is a social interaction and as such is influenced by the positionality and relative power of each of the participants in the interview process (DeVault and Gross 2007; Hesse-Biber 2007b; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser 2004). Qualitative researchers, especially those working from feminist and/or queer perspectives, advocate reflexivity—attention to how the researcher’s own social location and experiences influence the research—throughout the research process (Adkins 2002; Doucet and Mauthner 2007; Gamson 2003; Haney 2002; Hesse-Biber 2007b; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser 2004; Hesse-Biber and Leckenby 2004; Lofland et al. 2006a;

Mustanski 2001; Reinharz 1992).<sup>69</sup> Reflexivity and attention to one's own positionality is of course an analytical concern as well, as it enables the researcher to identify biases and partial interpretations in the analysis (Hesse-Biber 2007a; Skeggs 2002). In other words, my own social location and lived experiences—from my interest in the particular research questions guiding the project to the interactions I had with participants influenced not only the interview interactions but my analysis of all of the data included in this project.

The relative importance of my positionality as a white, middle-class, able-bodied, pansexual, feminine-identified, doctoral student likely varies across interview settings—my race and ability status, for instance, were likely more difficult to ascertain in cyber and phone settings than in face-to-face settings—as well as from interviewee to interviewee. My gender and sexual orientation, however, were likely salient across interview settings, in part because gender and sexuality were explicit topics of interview questions. Even if the interviewee had not been thinking of gender and sexuality, being asked questions about gender and sexuality likely cued awareness of these social categorizations. In some instances, an interviewee's perception of my gender and/or sexual orientation clearly influenced our interview conversation. For example, while trying to explain the appeal of a potential BDSM partner taking a particular role, Ryan, said:

Have you ever been standing on a street corner and you see a car drive by and you go wow? That is a cool car. Or I can do it this way. You walk past a window—from a woman's perspective—and you look in a window and just for some reason that pair of shoes catches your eye and you go wow those are hot. I like those shoes. It's that same type of thing.

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<sup>69</sup> Hesse-Biber (2007) explains that reflexivity is the “process through which a researcher recognizes, examines, and understands how his or her own social background and assumptions can intervene in the research process” (334).



Similarly, while explaining the power exchange process, Cody said:

So there is a power struggle. And there is an exchange. Because if there's no exchange, what's the point of doing it? You know. It's like. You kiss a guy. You didn't feel anything. Will you kiss him again? Will you give him your phone number? No, you won't. You will, but it'll be someone else's. You know. How many times have you done that? You won't admit it, right? [Laughs.]

In both of these instances, the interviewee was trying to help me understand something about BDSM and relied on their perceptions of my gender and sexual orientation to come up with examples they assumed would be relevant to my life. Although I cannot know exactly how interviewees' perceptions of my social location influenced our interview conversations, it is important to recognize that for at least some interviewees, their perceptions of my gender and sexuality influenced the kinds of examples they used and/or the kinds of responses they shared.

Ethnographers have reflected extensively on how researcher's sexualities influence the research process, particularly when the research itself concerns sexuality-related topics (e.g. Altwort 1995; Bolton 1995; Kulick and Wilson 1995; Lewin and Leap 1996; Markowitz 1999; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999). While this body of work applies primarily to fieldwork settings involving extensive participant observation, many of the observations made in this literature apply to interview settings as well (Coffey 2002; Skeggs 2002). This work suggests, for example, that some participants may experience the interview itself as a sexual interaction and that research participants are especially likely to be interested in the experiences of the researcher when the research involves sexuality-related issues. I did not find this to be the case. Participants were primarily interested in whether I viewed BDSM as pathological and not whether I myself participate in BDSM.

Although my analyses of the experiences reflected in the data I collected are necessarily the product of my own social location, I have attempted, as much as possible, to include participants' own voices in the written analysis itself. This is an especially important ethical concern for feminist researchers, who emphasize that women's voices in particular are often absent from both the process and products of research (DeVault 1999; Hesse-Biber 2007b; Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser 2004; Hesse-Biber and Leckenby 2004; Kirsch 1999; Olesen 2003; Preissle 2007). Additionally, feminist researchers emphasize that research reports should be constructed in ways that demonstrate women's agency in their own lives, even—and perhaps especially—then the focus of research is on constraints to that agency (DeVault 1990; DeVault and Gross 2007; Kirsch 1999). Feminist qualitative researchers also emphasize that the voice of the researcher should be present in the text, in order to be attentive to the politics of representation and interpretation, to make our biases as transparent as possible, and to make our decision-making process related to methodological and ethical issues apparent (Charmaz 2007; Kirsch 1999; Skeggs 2002). Including one's own voice as well as the voices of participants is one of the many ways in which qualitative researchers attempt to tell multiple stories and to emphasize that the particular stories being told are only some of the possible stories that could be told about the data (Charmaz 2007; Denzin 2007; DeVault 1990; Hesse-Biber 2007b; Kirsch 1999; Olesen 2003).

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have described the methods I employed to create the multiple types of data that inform this project, which include archival data, discussion board data from a large public BDSM community website, and 32 semi-structured, in-depth

interviews. I also discussed the procedures I utilized to analyze these data, focusing on my use of the grounded theory method. I have also discussed the limitations of these data and methods for the findings I report in subsequent chapters. Additionally, I discussed the ethical issues related to the use of these methods and to this project in particular and the ways in which my own positionality informs this project. In the chapters that follow, I present the findings of this research.

## CHAPTER 5 SEX AND THE SEXUAL IN BDSM INTERACTIONS

At the conclusion of *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* Foucault (Foucault 1990 [1978]) gestures to the possibility of a “different economy of bodies and pleasures.” His comments elsewhere about the pleasures of S&M lead some to speculate that he may have viewed BDSM as creating one such different economy (see Halperin 1995; Miller 1993). For instance, in “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity” (1997b), Foucault argues:

S&M is... the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously... We know very well what all those people are doing is... inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticisation of the body. I think it’s a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure... These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations. (165)

Yet most research on BDSM explores the pleasures of BDSM through a sexuality model that defines those pleasures as specifically sexual and/or as taking place only in sexual contexts.

In this chapter, I investigate the relationship of the pleasures available in BDSM to sex and sexuality. I focus specifically on how participants perceive their experiences of BDSM in relation to sex and sexuality. I begin with a discussion of how extant empirical studies treat BDSM in relationship to sex and sexuality. I suggest that the nearly universal assumption in previous studies that BDSM is always and for everyone a sexual experience may obscure BDSM experiences that participants construct as non-sexual. I then present the findings of my research. I first show how BDSM participants distinguish between “sex” and “sexual” as types of experiences. Participants frequently differentiate between “sex”—especially “vanilla sex,”<sup>70</sup>—on the one hand and “sexual experiences,” involving BDSM, on the other. I analyze the role of this distinction in meaning-making processes, demonstrating that participants use this distinction to frame BDSM sexual experiences as not only different from but also better than “sex.” Next, I explore how participants distinguish between non-sexual and sexual experiences in the context of BDSM. I find that for most participants, the difference between sexual and non-sexual experiences rests not in the presence or absence of specific BDSM activities but instead in a diverse array of interactional processes. The archival data I collected include few reflections on the relationship of sex and sexuality to BDSM. The findings reported in this chapter are therefore based primarily on my interview and discussion board data.

### **SEX AND SEXUALITY IN PREVIOUS BDSM RESEARCH**

Research on BDSM nearly universally begins from the premise that BDSM is a type of sexuality and/or sexual practice (e.g. Deckha 2011; Langdridge 2005; Langdridge 2006a;

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<sup>70</sup> “Vanilla” is a term used in a variety of ways by community members. Vanilla is used to refer to non-BDSM sex in general. It is also often used to refer to non-BDSM practices and people in a way that has strong pejorative connotations and is used as a synonym for boring, unfulfilling, stereotypical, conforming, unthinking, unemotional, close-minded, selfish, and/or heteronormative people and practices.

Langdridge 2006b; Richters et al. 2008; Santtila et al. 2002; Taylor and Ussher 2001; Weinberg, Williams, and Moser 1984; Weinberg 2006). Indeed, despite significant debate among scholars about how to define BDSM, proposed definitions almost always include an identification of BDSM as taking place in a sexual context and/or as having a sexual meaning for participants. For example, M. Weinberg, William and Moser's classic 5-part definition of BDSM (1984), the most widely agreed upon and utilized definition of BDSM, includes a criterion that BDSM take place in a "sexual context." Similarly, Taylor and Ussher (Taylor 1997; Taylor and Ussher 2001) define BDSM as taking place in the presence of "sexual arousal." In a recent review of empirical research on BDSM, T.S. Weinberg (2006) similarly includes a sexual context as a definitional criterion for BDSM; identifying BDSM interactions as "occur[ing] only within a sexual context" (p. 33). And in their introduction to a recent anthology on BDSM, Langdridge and Barker (2007a) write, "Our understanding of S/M is broad and includes all sexual identities and practices involving pain play, bondage, dominance and submission and erotic power exchange" (p.6). In the same volume, Moser and Kleinplatz (2007)—among the foremost experts on BDSM— similarly define BDSM as sexual: "SM (also known as BDSM, i.e. Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission and Sadism and Masochism) is a term used to describe a variety of sexual behaviors that have an implicit or explicit power differential as a significant aspect of the erotic interaction" (p. 35). Moser and Kleinplatz conclude by calling for a more nuanced model of BDSM, while simultaneously continuing to narrowly identify BDSM as a sexual interest: "Our field is in need of a model parsimonious enough to account for both the minute and huge differences among individuals who profess to have the same general sexual interests" (p. 53). Given that

BDSM scholars are acutely aware of the wide range of experiences and interests of BDSM participants, treating sexual meaning as a universal experience for BDSM participants is a surprising pattern in BDSM scholarship.

The widespread practice of assuming sexual meanings for BDSM interactions is especially problematic in studies whose goal it is to discover the meanings of BDSM for participants, because assuming a sexual meaning precludes exploring the extent to which that meaning is actually present. For instance Santilla et al. (2002) categorize “29 individual sexual behaviors” into “1 of 4 different broad themes of sadomasochistically oriented behavior” (p. 185). Assuming sexual meanings for all of these behaviors significantly influences the four themes developed by Santilla et al. Assuming that all of the 29 BDSM activities they identify have sexual meaning for all participants who engage in those behaviors forecloses an important opportunity to fulfill the goal of the study: to understand what the behaviors mean to those who engage in them. Similarly, Tomassilli et al.’s (2009) study of “kinky sexual behaviors” assumes sexual meanings of the practices being studied, including bondage, domination, and SM. Their conclusions about the prevalence and clustering of what they identify as “kinky sex behaviors” proceed from the assumption that BDSM practices are always “sex behaviors.” Assuming that BDSM is always and for everyone a sexual activity or interest has significantly influenced the direction of the field, leading scholars to ask some kinds of questions while overlooking others in ways that reaffirm the assumption that BDSM is for all participants a sexual practice.

Recently, however, Newmahr (2010a; 2010b; 2011) has challenged the widespread tendency to frame BDSM as necessarily sexual. Newmahr (2010b) argues, for example:

Although many SM participants do frame their ‘play’ as having an erotic aspect, the conceptualization of SM as ‘kinky sex’ has obscured a more nuanced understanding of this community and their activities... This view of SM persisted despite evidence to the contrary: in their pioneering definition of SM, Weinberg, Williams, and Mosher (1984) considered a sexual perspective of SM to be a criterion for inclusion in their sample: “Some people engaged in SM-type activities but did not give them sexual meaning and thus were not considered to be ‘into SM.’ The perspective that SM is “about sex” persists despite widespread acknowledgement that at least some SM community members reject this framing. Research reveals that many participants do not understand their activities as an alternative or a prelude to, sexual interaction (Dancer, Kleinplatz and Moser 2006; Weiss 2006). (p. 314-316)

Newmahr goes on to explain that BDSM “has not been theorized outside of the paradigm of sexuality,” but stops short of explaining the limitations of the current sexuality-based paradigm (p. 317).

Understanding the limitations of this paradigm is critical for my project for several reasons. First, by interpreting BDSM activities, identities, and interactions through a sexuality-based paradigm, we risk assigning sexual meanings that do not exist empirically. Understanding what *BDSM* means to participants is an empirically different task than understanding what *BDSM sexuality* means to participants. Second, we significantly reduce our ability to understand the potential transgressive, resistant, and/or subversive implications of BDSM for normative gender and sexuality if we begin by defining BDSM narrowly as a sexual interest or type of activity that takes place only in a sexual context. Third, as is evidenced in previous studies that assign meanings to specific types of BDSM activities through a sexuality-based paradigm, our ability to understand the processes of meaning-making used by participants is diminished when we assume a



universal, pre-given meaning. That is, when we ask, “what does this sexual activity mean to participants?” we have already partially foreclosed the answer. If we ask instead, for instance, “what does flogging mean to participants?” we can capture the meanings—sexual and otherwise—flogging has for participants, while avoiding imposing meanings not supported by the data. Moving away from a paradigm that assumes sexual meanings is likely to significantly expand our understanding of BDSM. For example, our understanding of BDSM identities currently relies on work that frames BDSM identities as *sexual* identities (e.g. Chaline 2007; Langdrige 2006b; Langdrige and Butt 2004; Taylor 1997; Taylor and Ussher 2001). What components of BDSM identities might we uncover by expanding our understanding of BDSM beyond sexuality? How might we better understand the meanings of BDSM activities if we treat “sexual” as a meaning that BDSM may have for some participants rather than using sexuality as a definitional criterion? In this chapter, I explore a variety of answers to these questions by investigating how participants understand their BDSM practices in relationship to sexual experiences.

### **“IT’S SEXUAL BUT NOT SEX”: DIFFERENTIATING AND EVALUATING SEX AND SEXUAL BDSM EXPERIENCES**

The majority of participants across both interview and discussion board data strongly distinguish between BDSM and sex, explaining that while BDSM is often “sexual,” it is nonetheless distinctly *not* “sex.” Among my interview partners, for instance, 78% (n=25) view their BDSM sexual experiences as significantly different from “sex”—the definition of which I left open to each interviewee. A small minority (6%; n=2) perceive sex and their sexual BDSM experiences as being mostly similar, while another small minority (9%; n=3) construct sex and their sexual BDSM experiences as

being in some ways similar yet in others different. Finally, two of my interview partners responded that they could not make a comparison, because they had never had a non-BDSM sexual experience.

Among the majority of participants who distinguish between sex and sexual BDSM experiences, three primary ways of differentiating sex and sexual BDSM experiences appear. The first method involves constructing sex as requiring genital contact and/or intercourse and sexual BDSM as activities and experiences that involve physical and/or sexual arousal, feelings, and/or fulfillment that do not require normative indicators of sexual pleasure, particularly those which are genitally-based (e.g. orgasm). The second method involves constructing sexual BDSM experiences as deeper, more meaningful, and/or more fulfilling than sex as a result of the more intense emotional/mental and interpersonal experiences available in BDSM compared with sex. The third method involves a temporal distinction, in which sex is constructed as what happens after BDSM. In the sections that follow, I explore these three methods of differentiating experiences, examining the messages they convey about both sex and sexual BDSM experiences. Importantly, these methods are used not only to differentiate but also to evaluate sex and sexual BDSM experiences. A majority of participants (78%) evaluate sexual BDSM as “better” than sex and would choose sexual BDSM over sex if given the choice.

#### **“The Practice Need Not Begin or End with Exchange of Fluids”: De-emphasizing Genitally-Based Pleasures**

The first method participants create and utilize to distinguish sex and sexual BDSM experiences involves constructing sex as centered around genitally-based activities, especially genital stimulation and intercourse, while constructing sexual

experiences involving BDSM as sexually pleasurable yet not genitally-centered. Robin, for example, says, “I can engage in technically challenging scenes without that [sex], but with some form of sexual intimacy. I don’t have sex with everyone that I scene with but I do have some sexual energy exchange.” For Robin, sexual energy exchange is integral to zir ability to enjoy BDSM, but sex is not. Similarly, when I asked whether BDSM involves sex in zir play or scenes, Andy told me:

Well, it depends on how you define sex. But if we define it in a more traditional way involving genital contact that results in orgasm. My husband and I can do a BDSM scene and probably half of the time I don’t have an orgasm. And I’m just fine with that... So there are times in BDSM scenes when it is fulfilling in and of itself without an orgasm. Is that sexual? In my broadest definition of sexual, yeah, it’s all sexual. I could do BDSM scenes and be perfectly happy with them and love them to death and not have an orgasm at all.

Andy identifies sex as something traditionally associated with genital contact and orgasm and alternatively constructs BDSM as an experience that can be extremely sexual and result in zir feeling “perfectly happy” in the absence of genital contact and orgasm. Other participants also describe BDSM as sexually arousing and fulfilling in the absence of “sex.” For instance, one participant explains, “bondage makes me horny as hell. That doesn’t mean we always have intercourse.”<sup>71</sup> Similarly, on a thread about the relationship of BDSM to sex—of which there are several dozen on [bondage.com](http://bondage.com)—another participant emphasizes BDSM as a sexual experience distinct from sex: “I believe BDSM to be very sexual in nature, even if it does not include the actual act of having sex... Even if there is no intercourse, I think BDSM is very sexually based.”<sup>72</sup> Another participant writes, “[BDSM has] always been sexual for me... that isn’t sex but for me it is part of

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<sup>71</sup> 2006 “bondage without sex?”

<sup>72</sup> 2006 “BDSM and Sex”

the sexual relationship.”<sup>73</sup> Cody, who also strongly distinguishes between sex and sexual and rejects the idea that sexual BDSM requires conventional sex, has a slightly different take on the distinction:

Well it's [BDSM] sexual in its own way. In its own way it's sexual. It's a different type ... It's a part of my sexuality. That's the importance to me. Is it about getting my cock hard? Yes it gets hard sometimes. But is that my focus? No. It's not. Because it's really not about sex. Because sex is the actual act of what you're doing. Penile insertion into an orifice is sex. Taking a bullwhip and hitting someone else is sexual. It's two different types. Both parties still get off. They get off in a different way. And there's been many times when I've had people beg me to let them come because they're so turned on. And to me that is a really powerful gift. That they were actually that sexual with it. Or that they could actually— you could just be playing, just kicking their balls or kicking their butthole and they actually begin to come internally versus ejaculating.

For Cody, BDSM isn't “about sex,” which means it's not primarily about genitally-centered experiences or intercourse. Cody also explains that orgasm can take a different form (“coming internally”) in sexual BDSM than it does in sex (“ejaculating”). For Cody, like for many others, the ability to transform experiences and sensations not normatively associated with sexual arousal and/or gratification (e.g. whipping, kicking) into sexual experiences is a strong part of the appeal of BDSM.

Other participants similarly explain that while BDSM isn't “about sex,” it is nonetheless intensely sexual. One participant, for example, writes “for myself, D/s isn't ‘about’ sex, but it certainly is partly sexual for me.”<sup>74</sup> A different participant also resists the idea that BDSM is “about sex”, explaining, “I don't think the practice of bdsm is all about sex. I don't think it equals sex. It's the practice of power. The practice need not begin or end with exchange of fluids.”<sup>75</sup> Similarly, another explains: “For me sex is not the focus of the scene, but the release that I give to the submissive is. I am not going to

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<sup>73</sup> 2006 “BDSM and Sex”

<sup>74</sup> 2004 “sexuality and BDSM and life”

<sup>75</sup> 2004 “sexuality and BDSM and life”

say that it is not erotic, but it does not have to end up with sex. The emotional exchange can be enough, and satisfying to me... there is a closeness that goes deeper than just sex.”<sup>76</sup> For this participant, the emotional exchange ze experiences through BDSM is satisfying in and of itself and provides a closeness deeper than that available through sex. Another writes, “In a way it’s a sexual thing but for me it’s also so much more. I could do a complete BDSM scene without any kind of sexual touching and be as fulfilled (if not more so) than having a completely intimate moment of sex.”<sup>77</sup> For this participant as well, sexual touching is not necessary to a sexual experience in the context of BDSM. Similarly, in a thread that begins with the question, “is BDSM more than just sex,” another participant writes, “In a word YES! It is so much more than just sex. It adds depth and breadth to everything.”<sup>78</sup> And Tracy says, “It’s not actually about sex. Sex is just a means to what BDSM actually is about. And it’s about this intense interaction. And it’s about what it allows you to do... And actually I have no use for just the idea that BDSM is some sort of way to spice up sexual play.” The idea that BDSM is sexual but is about “so much more” than just sexual experiences is one of the most frequent themes in my data and I explore participants’ experiences of that “so much more” throughout this chapter. Resistance to the idea that BDSM is “about” sex is also common in the second method—discussed later in the chapter—through which participants frame sexual BDSM experiences as primarily about self-exploration and connection with others.

On another thread, participants again discuss the relationship of BDSM to sex and sexual experiences. For nearly all participants who post in this thread, sexual meanings are at the core of their BDSM experiences, yet this does not translate to understanding

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<sup>76</sup> 2005 “D/s without sex? Something else to this?”

<sup>77</sup> 2004 “Sexuality and BDSM and life”.

<sup>78</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

BDSM as “sex.” For example, one poster writes, “Whether or not one brings sex directly into BDSM play, for me at least the sexual undercurrent is always there.”<sup>79</sup> Similarly, in an interview, Pat told me, “For me it’s mostly sexual. I mean I’ll play with people without having actual sex with them but... it’s pretty sexual for me. [And by actual sex do you mean intercourse?] Yes.” Another participant, discussing a specific BDSM activity—shibari [a form of Japanese rope bondage]— writes, “The act [doing shibari] is inherently sexual. However, you may or may not actually have physical sex in the form of intercourse or fellatio etc.”<sup>80</sup> For this participant as well, BDSM—and in this case shibari in particular—is sexual but does not require traditional “sex” or genital contact. Christian, discussing his interest in impact play explains this distinction similarly, “It’s always sexual for me. So like even if I’m not having sex with the person or you know even if someone is doing impact play, hitting me, it’ll still be sexual for me.” Another participant explains, “THE SEX ACT itself isn’t essential for me, I can play for a long time and not feel the need to have sex. In other words, no hard on! But saying that, isn’t it what is going on inside someones [sic] head that really matters? Whether I have a physical reaction or not, it still feels sexual to me.”<sup>81</sup> For this participant, whether or not an experience is sexual is related not to physical experiences, but instead to mental experiences—a theme that is especially prevalent in my data.

In addition to resisting the conflation of “sexual” with “sex” by constructing intercourse and genitally-based sex as distinct from BDSM, many participants also resist the importance of orgasm as an indicator of a sexual experience or sexual fulfillment. For instance, Andy, quoted above, explains that BDSM “is fulfilling in and of itself without

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<sup>79</sup> 2004 “Sexuality in S&M”

<sup>80</sup> 2006 “bondage without sex?”

<sup>81</sup> 2003 “Sex and BDSM”

an orgasm. Is that sexual?... Yeah. I could do BDSM scenes and be perfectly happy with them and love them to death and not have an orgasm at all.” For Andy, like for many others, neither intercourse nor orgasm are necessary components of a good and highly sexual scene. Similarly, another participant explains, “[BDSM] play has not always ended up in one or both of us having actual orgasms. Nonetheless it has almost always been intensely erotic.”<sup>82</sup> Another writes, “BDSM is sexual for me, but it’s not really \*about\* sex at all... it’s more than that, more intense. I could quite happily do without sex, without ever coming again, even, but I would never be able to do without [BDSM] again.”<sup>83</sup> For this participant, neither sex nor orgasm are necessarily part of BDSM and BDSM is significantly more important to this participant than either sex or orgasm. On a different thread, another participant writes, “It’s not about orgasms or intercourse for me; my goals are larger, my drive different.”<sup>84</sup> And another explains that while arousal is a necessary component of BDSM because it increases pain tolerance, arousal doesn’t necessarily lead to either intercourse or orgasm. Ze writes, “To me the sexual element is very important although not every scene necessarily needs to end in intercourse or orgasm. If I’m not at least aroused though I don’t enjoy the pain and I find my tolerance for pain is often directly proportional to the degree of arousal.”<sup>85</sup> In these accounts, participants construct orgasm as irrelevant to the kinds of sexual satisfaction and fulfillment than can be found through BDSM. Because sexual fulfillment through sex is normatively associated with orgasm, rejecting orgasm as the primary indicator of sexual fulfillment in the context of BDSM serves to further distinguish sexual BDSM

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<sup>82</sup> 2006 “BDSM and Sex”

<sup>83</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

<sup>84</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

<sup>85</sup> 2004 “Sexuality in S&M”

experiences from “sex.” Many participants construct BDSM as particularly unique and satisfying precisely because it provides a method of experiencing sexual arousal as well as sexual fulfillment that does not require intercourse, genital contact, or orgasm. In these accounts, participants are working against the normative meaning of “sexual fulfillment” as “orgasm” and instead constructing sexual fulfillment as an emotional or mental rather than physical experience, a point to which I return in the next section.

Because intercourse and orgasm are both genitally-based experiences, constructing them as irrelevant to sexual experiences and pleasures in the context of BDSM works to de-emphasize genitally-based experiences and pleasures. Instead, many participants focus on the non-genital sexual pleasures and satisfactions found through BDSM. One participant, for example, describes the arousal ze experiences in the context of BDSM as an arousal of the mind rather than of the genitals:

I think it is difficult to fully understand that the BDSM itself can be not only extremely arousing, but immensely satisfying, until you experience and appreciate it for yourself. It’s hard to say how it feels. There are powerful headspaces to experience and there is intense arousal through the mind rather than the genitals. Without sex as a distraction I find my arousal to be stronger and prolonged.<sup>86</sup>

For this participant, the headspaces than can be achieved through BDSM and the arousal of the mind are stronger and more satisfying than those that can be achieved through sex.

Similarly, another participant writes:

I’ve had scenes that were so hot and intense... that have been so deeply satisfying on a whole body and emotional level that even orgasm, never mind intercourse, either were or would have been almost anticlimactic and certainly not \*necessary\*. I love it when that happens. It really brings home the sheer power of wiitwd<sup>87</sup> [what it is that we do].<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> 2006 “BDSM and Sex”

<sup>87</sup> WIITWD is the most recent participant-created term to describe BDSM practices. WIITWD evolved from struggles within and across BDSM communities to define precisely what BDSM means, which kinds of identities and practices are included under this umbrella, etc. The term WIITWD avoids debates over which particular practices (e.g. D/s, S&M, bondage, etc.) are included in the experiences one is describing.



The idea that the pleasures available through sex—especially orgasm— are less intense and/or satisfying than those available through BDSM is echoed by another participant, who writes, “Things that are sensual—and, to me, bondage is tremendously sensual—do not automatically have to lead to sex. Sometimes, frankly, sex gets in the way of appreciating things that are amazingly sensual all by themselves.”<sup>89</sup> The idea that sex gets in the way of other, often “better” things is a theme that appears repeatedly and I return to this theme in the following section. Constructing the pleasures available through BDSM as distinct from those available through sex, or constructing the pleasures available through BDSM as better or more intense, as does the participant quoted above, allows participants to use the distinction between sex and sexual BDSM experiences to evaluate as well as to differentiate between experiences.

Like the participants discussed above, others also perceive the pleasures available through BDSM as distinct. For instance, another participant writes, “Although I enjoy sex, I certainly also love to tie up and control a partner, and sex doesn’t have to be involved at all. Like other people have written here before me, bondage has so many erotic and sensual pleasures of its own.”<sup>90</sup> Another participant who also uses the term “erotic”<sup>91</sup> to describe the pleasures of BDSM similarly explains:

Maybe a good way to look at all of this is instead about things erotic. Sexuality is a part of that, yes, but not the only part. A look, a glance can be highly erotic. A word can touch you to your very core. A specific situation can make a mundane activity totally charged with eroticism. Certain aromas can be highly erotic, especially if they have been associated [sic] other [sic] activities. For sure, there are sounds that are incredibly erotic, the sounds that a submissive can make which

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<sup>88</sup> 2003 “Sex in a BDSM relationship”

<sup>89</sup> 2006 “bondage without sex?”

<sup>90</sup> 2006 “bondage without sex?”

<sup>91</sup> Very few participants in any of my three data sources used the term “erotic.” Participants much more often used the term “sexual” and, to a lesser extent, “sensual” to describe non-genitally based pleasure.

stem from a variety of activities, from soft and barely audible to intense and filled with emotion. Likewise, the natural sounds that certain accoutrements [sic] make, the sound of leather upon flesh. All of these things are incredibly fulfilling, and all can be accomplished without ever addressing the genitalia, intercourse, orgasm, etc.<sup>92</sup>

The catalog of erotic, non-genitally-based pleasures this participant describes include both activities and sensations specific to BDSM (e.g. the sounds a submissive makes, the sound of leather on flesh) and not specific to BDSM (e.g. a look, a word, certain aromas). Yet this participant also explains that “a specific situation can make a mundane activity totally charged with eroticism” and for most BDSM participants, BDSM is the specific situation that can make mundane activities sexual or erotic. That is, for most BDSM participants, a look or certain aroma becomes sexual in the context of a BDSM situation, and *not* in the context of other situations, including non-BDSM sexual situations. The idea that BDSM is particularly appealing precisely because of its ability to eroticize or sexualize experiences not normatively understood as sexual is one that appears frequently on the discussion boards. Another participant writes, “BDSM may not be... sex. But one of the things I love about D/S (that’s my main draw), is that it has the potential to eroticize just about every darned thing. Erotic pathways get laid down as experience accumulates, making more and more of what you do erotic (sexual).”<sup>93</sup> Similarly, another says, “For me, D/s is sexual in nature, and even D/s that is not explicitly sexual has the effect of eroticizing non-sexual events... not that it is particularly arousing, or even intended to be arousing, but that the sexual and non-sexual are unified through D/s.”<sup>94</sup>

For many participants, BDSM provides a context in which virtually any pleasure can be

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<sup>92</sup> 2004 “Sexuality in S&M”

<sup>93</sup> 2006 “BDSM and Sex”

<sup>94</sup> 2005 “D/s without sex? Something else to this?”

sexualized and this is among the most appealing aspects of BDSM for a significant number of participants.

In these accounts, participants construct “sex” as a primarily genitally-centered physical activity, sensation, or experience, usually involving genital contact, intercourse, and/or orgasm; “sex” refers most often to bodily sensations centered in the genitals. “Sexual,” however, is most often constructed as a mental experience, based neither in the genitals nor in the body more generally, but instead in participants’ minds. The association of sexual BDSM experiences with mental and emotional feelings, sensations, and experiences, on the one hand, and of “sex” with physical experiences, on the other, lays the groundwork for a second and especially frequent type of distinction participants use to differentiate sex and sexual, which I discuss in the following section.

#### **“It’s the Mindfuck that Gives Me the Buzz”: Emphasizing Emotional/Mental Experiences**

In addition to distinguishing between “sex” and “sexual” by defining sexual as a category of experiences that include non-genital and non-orgasmic experiences, participants also distinguish between “sex” and “sexual” by assigning different meanings to “sex” compared with “sexual BDSM experiences” and constructing these experiences as serving different purposes. For many participants for whom BDSM is a sexual experience, BDSM is not only or primarily a sexual experience, but is instead an experience that bears a variety of other significant meanings as well—meanings participants construct as unavailable through “sex.” “Sex”—especially vanilla sex—is often constructed as about mindless, selfish, *physical* gratification. “Sexual,” and especially “BDSM sexual experiences,” on the other hand, are constructed as primarily about *emotional and/or mental* experiences such as personal growth, intimate connection,

spirituality, healing, etc. Importantly, however, not all participants construct these emotional and relational experiences as sexual, a point to which I return later in this chapter. For those who do construct emotional and interpersonal experiences as sexual, however, these experiences are available in BDSM in ways that they are not in sex. Tracy, for instance, draws a strong distinction between her mental experiences in sex compared with those she has had in sexual BDSM:

There's a huge difference. Sex is just plain sex. I mean it's just a physical act. It's devoid of profound significance. But with BDSM just like everything else that's going on by virtue of the fact that it's taking place within this dynamic of power and powerlessness and control and being controlled and submission and dominance it—everything that happens in it from sex to fetishistic acts, anything—it's transformed, it's imbued with this whole ritual almost significance. And it immediately transports it from the comparative mundane level of ordinary sex to something much more intense and it's because of that for me that the interaction in BDSM is so intense, is so profound, has such an incredible impact. And so yeah I think there's a world of difference. I mean you could compare non-BDSM sexual or erotic activity to a tune played on a kazoo whereas BDSM is a work by Bach or something. It's that kind of night and day difference between something. Just profane and something truly transcendent for those who are experiencing it. Which is perhaps [a] very chauvinistic attitude about well BDSM is better than ordinary sex. I don't really want to say that because I mean what's best for people is what they like. But for me there's the deepest difference just between non-BDSM eroticism and BDSM eroticism. It's almost a mystical experience. It can almost reach that level. Not in the way that some stupid people talk about sex being mystical. Because the way you get this incredible bliss. It's really something.

Tracy defines sex as “just a physical act” and explains that BDSM is a much more intense interaction that includes transcendent, mystical experiences that result in “incredible bliss.” Like Tracy, Ryan also feels that while BDSM is sexual, the kinds of emotional experiences available in BDSM are significantly different from those available in sex.

Ryan told me:

To a degree yes, I do classify it [BDSM] as a sexual thing. It doesn't necessarily mean that I'm out to achieve climax or an orgasm. But it is a turn-on, it is, you know... Yes. It's sexual. At the same time it doesn't have to be just sexual. It

could be very emotional. It could be very mental. It could be very spiritual. You know so again it depends on the parties involved, the scene that's taking place. A lot of people would say it's always sexual. Well, to a degree it is. Spirituality is sexual. Emotions are sexual. So yeah you could always say that it's sexual. But at the same time can you take it above that sexual plane into another level of emotional or psychological pleasure and go above just the sexual aspect of it? So that's what I'm trying to do when I play in that mode. Is yeah it's going to be sexual but you know can we take it higher? Can we go past the physical sexual aspect? Make it more emotional, make it more fantasy, make it more spiritual, make it more mental. That's what draws me to it in the first place.

Like other participants, Ryan refutes orgasm as a goal of BDSM, while explaining that BDSM is nonetheless arousing; “a turn-on.” Ze explains that BDSM allows zir to take an experience beyond “just the sexual aspect” to a more emotional, mental, and spiritual experience. For Ryan, like for many others, the emotional/mental aspects of BDSM are significantly different from the emotional/mental experiences they have had during sex.

The relative importance of mental/emotional experiences compared with physical experiences in BDSM compared with sex is for many participants the strongest distinguishing factor. A significant majority of participants frame the physical activities involved in BDSM as means to an end—participants explain that it is not the physical activities themselves but the mental/emotional experiences they create that are pleasurable. One participant, for example, writes, “BDSM is about a lot more than sex. The mental aspect of it is of far greater importance.”<sup>95</sup> Similarly another participant explains, “The most important part of S&M is not the physical activities for me, it is the mental aspects. The physical parts are simply means for me to push myself and give myself completely over to my Master.”<sup>96</sup> For this participant, like for most BDSM participants, the physical activities involved in BDSM are a means to the emotional/mental goals of BDSM— including for many the kind of intimate connection facilitated

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<sup>95</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

<sup>96</sup> 2004 “Sexuality in S&M”

by power exchange. Another participant also emphasizes the importance of the mental aspects of BDSM, writing, “It’s more than sex for me. The mental capacity of it intrigues the hell out of me.”<sup>97</sup> And another explains, “It’s much more than sex. I can play and never consider sex. It’s the feeling of power, the mindfuck that gives me the buzz... and its [sic] good for stress too. Amazing how relaxed you can be after a good session.”<sup>98</sup> For this participant, like for many others, the mental aspects of BDSM— particularly the mindfuck<sup>99</sup> and relaxation and stress relief— are experiences available in BDSM but not in sex. Similarly, another posts, “It’s all mental for me, and not about having sex, or getting fucked. Stimulate my brain.”<sup>100</sup> Mental rather than physical stimulation is of primary importance for most participants.

For many participants, the emotional and interpersonal aspects of BDSM make BDSM a type of “mind” or “head” sex that is significantly different from “physical” sex. Morgan, for instance, says, “It is always sexual. Always. Even when there isn’t penetration or sex involved. It’s head sex. Always. It’s always erotic for me.” For Morgan, BDSM is always sexual even in the absence of traditional sex because BDSM is “head sex.” For participants like Morgan, what happens mentally in BDSM is more

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<sup>97</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

<sup>98</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

<sup>99</sup> Mindfuck is a term used by BDSM participants to refer to particularly intense and/or extreme power exchange and/or edgeplay. Mindfucks are experiences where the bottom/submissive is led to believe that something more extreme is happening than is actually the case. For instance, one participant described a scene ze did with zir top at a dungeon on the west coast in which ze was suspended in an intricate rope web over a floor littered with broken glass and then blindfolded. The top began to cut the ropes one by one. At one point the dungeon monitor (the person charged with ensuring the safety of all activities taking place in the dungeon that evening and who has the authority to stop any scene) came over and demanded that the top end the scene, at which point the top began to quickly cut the remaining ropes. Ze described feeling intense sensations of panic and fear at that point, sure that ze was about to be sliced and severely cut as ze fell on the glass. When the last rope was cut, ze was shocked to fall only a short distance onto a soft surface. Zir top had moved a sheet of plywood over the glass and covered it with blankets and pillows immediately after breaking the bottles on the dungeon floor. The dungeon monitor and everyone else in the dungeon that evening were “in on” the scene; the dungeon monitor turned up the music to cover the sound of the plywood being moved over the broken glass.

<sup>100</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

important than what happens physically—and it is what happens mentally rather than what happens physically that determines the meaning of the experience. Similarly, another participant explains, “Have to agree it’s [BDSM] very liberating and mind sex is probably more intense than just physical sex.”<sup>101</sup> For this participant, like for many others, “physical sex” is significantly different from the mental engagement available through the mind sex aspect of BDSM. Another participant more explicitly describes the headspace<sup>102</sup> available in BDSM as sexual without “actual sex.” Ze writes:

BDSM for me is about the mental experience. This can include sex, but in no way requires it. I think you can differentiate between sex in bdsm and sexuality in bdsm. You can experience headspace that is deeply powerful and long lasting that can have a sexual component without actual sex taking place. In fact, in my experience, sexual satisfaction through intense headspace (rather than any form of physical intercourse) can be much more intense, long lasting and emotionally and physically satisfying.<sup>103</sup>

This participant, like the majority of participants included in this study, experiences the sexual satisfaction ze achieves through the headspace that results from BDSM as more intense and satisfying than the sexual satisfaction ze achieves through sex, particularly intercourse.

Likewise, another participant explains, “BDSM is a tool for achieving headspace for me. I’d chose [sic] headspace over an orgasm everytime [sic].”<sup>104</sup> The sexual pleasures that accompany headspace/subspace are, for many participants, more intense and satisfying than those available through conventional sex, including orgasm. The equation of the pleasures available through BDSM with mental pleasures and those

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<sup>101</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

<sup>102</sup> Headspace is usually used as a synonym for subspace. Both terms refer to a mental state achieved by bottoms/submissives, which participants describe as an experience similar to an out of body experience, using adjectives such as “floating,” “flying,” and “freedom” to describe the mental/emotional feelings that accompany subspace. There is no equivalent “top space” and headspace is a term used almost exclusively to describe the emotional/mental experiences of bottoms/submissives during BDSM scenes/play.

<sup>103</sup> 2006 “BDSM and sex”

<sup>104</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

available through sex with physical pleasures— particularly orgasm—is made particularly explicit by one participant, who writes, “scene= subspace, sex=orgasms.”<sup>105</sup>

Similarly, another participant writes:

More than sex? I’d say beyond sex. Subspace, for example is beyond orgasm. Mindset and headspace are not major elements in vanilla sex, which is an experience that often lacks psychological elements and interplay. It’s an entirely different paradigm. Comparing it to vanilla sex is like comparing apples to oranges.<sup>106</sup>

For this participant, mental and emotional experiences are not “major elements” of vanilla sex, which is what makes BDSM an “entirely different paradigm” of experience than vanilla sex. Subspace, for this participant, is not only different from but beyond orgasm. Another participant articulates a similar view, writing, “S&M play, whether physical or emotional, has more of a cathartic effect [than sex]—I find it more satisfying to be brought to tears and left in a miserable heap than to have a cock between my legs, but I don’t get off on it. It’s cleansing.”<sup>107</sup> The emotional experiences of cleansing and catharsis available through BDSM are, for this participant, more satisfying than the pleasures of sex, including orgasm. Pat also experiences the emotional/mental pleasures of BDSM as more fulfilling than orgasm. Ze explains:

It’s [BDSM] more fulfilling because it encompasses so much more than just an orgasm. It’s what I am. [What makes it so much more than just an orgasm?] It’s the sensations. It’s other sensations besides just the erotic part of it. The power exchange. The interaction between the two of us or five of us, whatever. You know it just involves more of your senses. With BDSM you’ve got a lot of endorphins going on that aren’t there just during vanilla sex.

For Pat, the emotional experience of power exchange goes beyond the erotic and beyond the senses and sensations usually involved in vanilla sex. Similarly, another participant

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<sup>105</sup> 2006 “activities—sex vs scene”

<sup>106</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

<sup>107</sup> 2006 “BDSM and sex”



writes, “Most interesting to me has been that I can attain a higher level of ecstasy from a good flogging than I ever felt from sex alone. I feel more claimed and connected to my Master through the falls on the flogger than I ever did from sex. I could live without sex but I could never live without the lash again.”<sup>108</sup> For this participant, and others like zir, physical activities involved in BDSM, such as flogging, are means to an emotional end—often the experience of connection through power exchange. In accounts like these, participants construct BDSM as not only different from but better than sex because of the significantly different mental experiences available through each. What is particularly interesting about these comparisons is that through them participants define the pleasures of sexual BDSM as mental pleasures (e.g. subspace) and the pleasures of sex as physical pleasures (e.g. orgasm).

For many participants, the intense and/or extreme mental experiences provided by BDSM lead to a deeper connection with a partner than what participants have experienced through sex. For instance, explaining the appeal of mental aspects of BDSM, including the pleasures of creating a mindfuck, one participant writes, “It’s the brain stimulation. I love the human chess aspect of BDSM. Thinking three or more steps ahead of your sub to get the results you want knowing there is another person to contend with. Fucking with another’s mind in a positive or sexual way is all good... makes me satisfied.”<sup>109</sup> For this participant, the mental pleasures of BDSM are related to an intimate connection with zir sub, made possible through a process that requires getting inside zir sub’s head to create a mindfuck. Similarly, for Chris, the emotional/mental intensities of BDSM are related to the deepness of the connection with zir partner. In comparing

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<sup>108</sup> 2003 “Sex in a BDSM relationship”

<sup>109</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

BDSM and non-BDSM sexual experiences ze has had, Chris says, “ I didn’t even know there were more extreme ways of experiencing those same feelings, in other words amplify[ing] the feelings, the emotions, the mental aspects of being intimate.” For Chris, the intensity of the mental and emotional aspects of intimacy are heightened in BDSM, which allows for a deeper connection with a partner. Unlike most participants, however. Chris identifies the differences in feelings available in BDSM compared with sex as one of magnitude rather than of type. Like Chris, Andy has also experienced a significantly deeper connection with a sexual partner during BDSM compared with vanilla sex. When I asked whether zir sexual BDSM experiences had been similar to or different from zir non-BDSM sexual experiences, Andy said:

Yes, very different. What BDSM has done is to show me that there is a lot more to intimacy and eroticism than the vanilla sex that I was doing. It’s provided me with an opportunity to feel both emotionally and physically in ways that in the more vanilla sex roles I was in didn’t do... I mean most of us in a vanilla sexual relationship don’t have a discussion before about what we’re going to do and what we’re not going to do and how long it’s going to last and you know whatever. But if you were having a discussion about planning a scene and how this is going to work out and what you want to try. In a BDSM world you’re doing all that communicating up front. And that communicating to me, so far, has turned out to be a really, really fun, important piece of it. Because it creates the mutuality going in to the scene already... BDSM is much more fulfilling. It’s more than just let’s have some genital sex. It involves a lot more emotionally and a lot more communication and a lot more interplay with your partner. And that’s part of the reason that I like power exchange is because it even adds to that dynamic. But beyond that it involves more than just focused foreplay to orgasm kind of sexuality. It involves an eroticism that is a much bigger world than non-BDSM sex, at least in my experience.

For Andy, BDSM provides an avenue for emotional experiences and intimacy with a partner not available in sex. Andy explains that these experiences are facilitated by the importance of communication in BDSM, which was missing in zir non-BDSM sexual experiences with the same partner. Importantly, Andy explains that the communication

that happens up front in BDSM is “really, really fun.” For Andy, as for most participants, the communication required to engage in BDSM is in itself one of the pleasures of BDSM. Harper similarly emphasizes the differences in communication and connection with a partner in vanilla sex compared with BDSM. Ze says:

You know, I’ll be honest, Brandy. My vanilla sexual experiences have been few and far between. Because when I realized finally that I was kinky that was pretty much the only kind of sexual activity that I was interested in. And quite frankly vanilla sex doesn’t excite me. We don’t have vanilla sex... There is a greater mental fulfillment from kinky sex. I mean I have never had orgasms like I have with kinky sex anywhere else. The mental enjoyment is far greater also. You know I have had vanilla partners in the past and there’s always that sort of trepidation I suppose if you want something a certain way or something’s not pleasurable. Then you know you’re wondering if you should say anything. If you should drop hints and suggestions and things. And I have found that people in the lifestyle as a general rule kind of know a lot about this. So there’s not a whole lot of guesswork. Which means things end up being so much more enjoyable. Because you know if we’re doing some kind of sexual activity with someone and they actually tell you hey that doesn’t feel good. We’ll that’s a hell of a lot easier than playing a guessing game for 30 minutes as to what something works to get off. Vanilla sex to me involves way too much guessing game and hinting and suggesting and trying to beat around the bush about what works and not really knowing what the other person likes. Not being willing to admit what you like. Kinky sex basically gets rid of all of that fear. And you just get down to this is what I like, this is what I enjoy. This is what turns me on. Do this.

For Harper, the increased connection with a partner that is made possible by BDSM stems from what Harper sees as more honest and open communication. Feeling safe, or getting rid of “all of that fear” of what one’s partner might think of one’s desires is part of the pleasures of communication. As one participant explains:

It’s not just sex it’s about freeing oneself from limits and societal expectations. It’s about taking the risk to trust another completely. It’s about exploring oneself through another’s desires. It’s about handing power to another while accepting responsibility for their pleasures, it is about learning, stretching, developing, being re-moulded to another’s image of you. It’s about feeling, thinking...<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

For this participant, like for most BDSM participants, the experience of “trust[ing] another completely” is unique to BDSM and is part of what creates the context for mental and emotional pleasures. Another participant similarly explains that the intimacy created through the honesty of BDSM relationships is among the mental pleasures of BDSM. Ze writes, “it’s [BDSM] emotional and intellectual. It’s the intimacy and honesty I found sorely lacking in ‘nilla relationships.”<sup>111</sup> Cody also emphasizes the importance of honesty in BDSM as a significant difference between sex and BDSM. Ze says, “Yeah. Yeah. Very different. It’s [BDSM] about being honest and about knowing what you need.” Another participant emphasizes the importance of respect through deep exchange and honesty. Ze says:

BDSM is VERY sexual to me. I enjoy the mental game. As I explained to a ‘vanilla’ friend the other day, in a straight [straight in this context refers to vanilla, not different sex/gender] relationship, encounters are based on casual contact and lies. In a BDSM relationship, encounters are based on deep exchanges and respect. The difference between the two? Fulfillment!!!<sup>112</sup>

The idea that BDSM encourages and often requires more honest and open communication than does sex—particularly vanilla sex—is one that appears frequently in my data and is a recurrent way that participants distinguish the intensity of the connections with a partner they experience in BDSM compared with sex.

Participants also explain that the intensity of BDSM requires both partners to be fully present mentally in ways that they often are not in sex. Jamie, for instance, says:

I think the BDSM is way more intense [than sex]. Just because of—there’s elements of pain, there’s elements of restriction, there’s a whole lot of other dynamics going on. And it requires both partners really to concentrate on each other. Whereas in a—I’ll use my former marriage. It was an act. You know? Ok. We did it [sex]. Great. We all had an orgasm, everybody was happy. Fine. But with BDSM it’s more of a dynamic. Or really intense. You really have to be in it.

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<sup>111</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

<sup>112</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

You can't just do it. Sex could be, ok, you do me or I'll do you. But BDSM you really both have to be there 100% of the time.

For Jamie, sex often involves going through the motions without being fully present and engaged with zir partner. On the other hand, because of the complex physical and mental activities involved, BDSM requires “both partners really to concentrate on each other, to “really... be in it,” and to “really both... be there 100% of the time” and for Jamie these experiences are significantly different from zir emotional/mental experiences during sex. Like Jamie, Sam also explains the importance of connection that makes BDSM sexual play very different from non-BDSM sexual play:

No I think that it [BDSM] can be very different from [sex]. Because with BDSM experiences there's so much more going on. You know you've got if they're inflicting pain or doing anything like that. You know you've got to pay attention to what you're doing. Even when you're not doing that. Just being dominant over somebody you've really got to be paying attention to what you're doing, making sure to take care for their sake, for the submissive's safety and all that all while at the same time taking pleasure from it, from the activity. It's important to be fully present. Which is why for most BDSMers drinking and drug use, you know, either before or during the scene is like most people consider it a big no-no.

Participants often construct “paying attention” and “being fully present” as both requirements and pleasures of BDSM. In other words, paying attention and being fully present are not onerous requirements necessary for getting to the pleasures of BDSM but are instead are deeply pleasurable sexual experiences in and of themselves.

Participants use emphasizing emotional/mental experiences over physical experiences as one of the ways of distinguishing and evaluating BDSM and sex. For the majority of participants, the emotional experiences available through BDSM are both different from and more intense than the emotional experiences they have had during sex. For many participants, the value of the emotional experiences available through BDSM is closely tied to the feelings of intense connection with a partner that they create.

Importantly, many participants explicitly construct these emotional/mental experiences as *sexual* experiences. Emphasizing these experiences relative to physical experiences is another way that participants de-emphasize genitally-based pleasures, including orgasm. In this way, emphasizing emotional experiences is often correlated with de-emphasizing genitally-based pleasures.

### **“And Afterwards... There was Sex”: Differentiating Through Temporal Boundaries**

A third way participants distinguish BDSM sexual experiences from sex is through the use of a temporal boundary— defining “sex” as what happens *after* BDSM. Significantly, there was not a single instance in any of my data sources in which a participant defined sex as something that happens *before* BDSM, although a small minority of participants defines BDSM as something that happens during sex— usually as a style of sex akin to “rough sex.” Although I did not ask questions about the chronological order of activities or otherwise prompt this distinction, many of my interview partners used this temporal distinction while explaining that BDSM is not always sexual and/or while describing scenes in which they had participated. Sam, for instance says:

That I can exert this level of control over her and do this kind of thing with her and afterwards the having sex and part of it is the intimate aspect and also a chance because of what I’ve been doing is likely painful for her I try to give her something that would also give her some pleasure... And she also did enjoy the pre-sex activity as well. [The whipping?] Yeah.

And when Sam described a specific scene, ze again drew a temporal distinction in differentiating sex and BDSM: “So I was whipping her and I proceeded to play with and I guess quote-unquote torture her breasts. And then afterwards, afterwards I unbound her and we went and had sex.” Whipping and breast play for Sam are not part of sex and are

instead part of sexual BDSM experiences that happen before sex. Similarly, while describing a specific scene, Peyton concluded his description of the scene by saying, “and afterwards there was sex.” Jordan used a similar construction while describing a scene, saying, “and we had great sex afterwards with my hands in handcuffs bound behind my head.” And while describing a typical scene, Quinn told me, “we typically end up making love at some point... after we get to the right pain play then there’s the session of usually pretty intense damn love making.” For Quinn, not only does making love come after BDSM, but making love is the usual conclusion of BDSM.

For some, constructing sexual BDSM experiences as interactions that happen before sex includes explicitly constructing BDSM as foreplay for sex. References to BDSM as foreplay are ubiquitous on the discussion boards, for instance. In discussing BDSM and sex, participants write: “for me the S&M is foreplay;”<sup>113</sup> “I use BDSM as a form of foreplay before an act of penetration;”<sup>114</sup> “BDSM is in effect a form of foreplay to me;”<sup>115</sup> “the entire [BDSM] lifestyle is my foreplay;”<sup>116</sup> “for us, play is often foreplay for sex... it sets the stage;”<sup>117</sup> and “S/M is pretty much like foreplay.”<sup>118</sup> Some participants construct BDSM as a particularly intense type of foreplay, as does the participant who writes, “I agree with those who say that play is like foreplay. After playing, I am all hot and excited and I want to. To me, Sex and BDSM Scening, are two separate things.”<sup>119</sup> While this participant explains getting “all hot and excited” during BDSM, those feelings are constructed as “separate” from sex. As discussed in the

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<sup>113</sup> 2004 “Sexuality in S&M”

<sup>114</sup> 2003 “How does sex fit into your relationship.”

<sup>115</sup> 2003 “Sex and BDSM”

<sup>116</sup> 2004 “Is BDSM about more than sex?”

<sup>117</sup> 2006 “activities—sex vs scene”

<sup>118</sup> 2006 “Sex or not”

<sup>119</sup> 2003 “Sex in a BDSM relationship”

previous section, constructing feelings of arousal, such as feeling “all hot and excited” as part of sexual BDSM play that are distinct from “sex” is one of the ways that participants emphasize sexual aspects of BDSM while maintaining a distinction between sex and sexual.

For some participants who construct BDSM as what happens before sex, sex is the inevitable result of BDSM. A discussion board participant, for instance, writes, “it [BDSM] will almost always lead to sex. Only very occasionally will He give me a flogging or spanking and not fuck me after.”<sup>120</sup> Another writes, “There is nothing better than a great primal fuck after play! I’ve had extremely sexual scenes end without \*actual sex\*, but tend to have that “something’s missing” feeling afterwards.”<sup>121</sup> For these participants, sex is a frequent but not necessary outcome of sexual BDSM play.

For others, however, sex is always the end point of sexual BDSM play. One participant describes the relationship between sexual BDSM experiences and sex by writing, “I can’t imagine a scene that doesn’t end in sex.”<sup>122</sup> Likewise, another explains, “play always ends in sex for us.”<sup>123</sup> Similarly, a different participant writes: “Winding up a scene with sex once the pervery is done serves to reinforce a connection... Sex to me is incredibly intimate, and perve play without it seems ‘unfinished’ somehow.”<sup>124</sup> And Shannon says, “if we’re playing I’m going to have sex with you. So you’ve transitioned from doing a scene to sex.” Shannon explicitly marks a transition between the two types of activities, further reinforcing the idea that they are distinct, yet also reinforcing a relationship between sexual BDSM and sex by constructing sex as the necessary outcome

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<sup>120</sup> 2006 “activities—sex vs scene”

<sup>121</sup> 2003 “Sex and BDSM”

<sup>122</sup> 2003 “How does sex fit into your relationship.”

<sup>123</sup> 2003 “Sex and BDSM”

<sup>124</sup> 2003 “Sex and BDSM”



of BDSM. Constructing sex as a natural or necessary outcome of sexual BDSM play is often correlated with explicit constructions of BDSM as foreplay. One participant, for example, writes, “Personally, I have found that when I have engaged in a scene the interaction is like foreplay. The natural next step, for me is sex or sexual gratification. I do think it is a natural progression for scening to lead to sexual gratification.”<sup>125</sup> For this participant, like for others who construct BDSM as foreplay for sex, there is a “natural progression” from BDSM to sex. The idea of a natural progression from BDSM to sex is echoed by another participant, who writes, “for me scening is a form of foreplay. I get so wet from it, how could I not have sex afterward?”<sup>126</sup> For this participant, BDSM is so arousing as to make sex the inevitable next step after BDSM.

Another participant similarly constructs BDSM as being a particularly arousing form of foreplay that leads to a “need” for sex, writing, “any BDSM act, even D/s interactions, for me... is foreplay, and I have a frequent need to conclude that foreplay with sex.”<sup>127</sup> Another participant indicates that BDSM as foreplay results in an “urgent desire” for sex, posting, “The practice of SM gives me a throbbing, insistent erection, and the urgent desire to introduce it into a body cavity of the object of my SM intensions. Flogging is foreplay.”<sup>128</sup> And Taylor says, “Bondage, tying up a woman and then usually something involving pain, involving spanking, flogging, riding crops, and then always followed by sex. BDSM is always foreplay to me.” Significantly, Taylor was the only interviewee who reported that BDSM always leads to sex and although the theme of sex being inevitable following BDSM did appear on the discussion boards, participants who

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<sup>125</sup> 2003 “Sex in a BDSM relationship”

<sup>126</sup> 2003 “How does sex fit into your relationship.”

<sup>127</sup> 2003 “Sex in a BDSM relationship”

<sup>128</sup> 2006 “Sex or not”

always have sex after a BDSM scene are in the minority. Among the minority of participants who construct sex as the inevitable outcome of sexual BDSM play, while these are distinct experiences, constructed as such through a strong temporal boundary, they are nonetheless highly correlated, with sex constructed as the automatic, inevitable outcome of sexual BDSM play.

Public play spaces (e.g. dungeons) often explicitly forbid sex or genital contact, yet even participants who do not play in public spaces rarely report that BDSM is always followed by sex. Instead, the majority of my interview partners perceive sex as one among many possible activities that may follow BDSM. For most participants, whether or not sex will follow a particular scene or experience is a complex issue influenced by multiple factors such as how tired each participant is, whether sex has been established as a limit, the emotional and mental state of each participant, whether or not one or more participants are sexually aroused, etc. For example, Dominique, who uses both temporal and emotional/interpersonal distinctions in explaining how ze decides whether or not to have sex with a BDSM partner says, “I’ve done the same exact things with people. And sometimes I’d have sex with them afterwards and then sometimes I wouldn’t... It [BDSM] can be an emotional experience. I mean it can be very freeing. And when you go through something like that you don’t necessarily want to go have sex.” Another participant explains, “Play is sensual and it can be very sexual. For me it depends on the type of play and who I am playing with whether or not it becomes sexual in thought or action. I usually get aroused by play but there is not always a desire to have sex afterwards... most of the time the play alone leaves me quite satisfied.”<sup>129</sup> Particularly emotionally and/or mentally intense sexual BDSM play is often unlikely to conclude with

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<sup>129</sup> 2003 “Sex and BDSM”

sex, because participants often report feeling fully satisfied from that emotional/mental experience. For most participants, achieving a particularly intense emotional/mental experience through sexual BDSM play is an end in and of itself.

### **Summary**

While these three differentiating methods are conceptually distinct they often overlap empirically. Yet not all methods of differentiation overlap to the same extent. For example, constructing sexual BDSM as an experience that decenters genitally-based pleasures rarely appears in conjunction with constructing BDSM as foreplay through a temporal distinction. Likewise, constructing sexual BDSM play as especially emotionally intense does not frequently overlap with the temporal method of distinction, in part because those who construct sexual BDSM play as a particularly intense experience are often uninterested in sex, explaining that they have already achieved a fulfillment greater than any available through sex. On the other hand, constructing sexual BDSM play as a particularly emotionally and/or interpersonally intense experience often empirically overlaps with constructing sexual BDSM play as distinct from sex through a decentering of genitally-based pleasures.

These methods of distinguishing “sex” from “sexual BDSM,” as I have argued, do not simply serve a differentiating purpose but also allow participants to evaluate these experiences. In drawing these distinctions, participants frequently construct BDSM as not only different from but better than “sex.” Constructing BDSM as “better” than sex is also reflected in participants’ responses to the interview question: “if on any given day you had to choose between sex and BDSM, which would you choose?” A strong majority of my interview partners (78%; n=25) said they would choose BDSM. Two of my interview

partners challenged the premise of the question, explaining that for them there is no distinction between BDSM and sex because they never have sex without BDSM. A minority of participants (16%; n=5) said that they might choose sex over BDSM and explained that life sometimes interferes with their ability to engage in BDSM.

Participants who said they would choose sex over BDSM explained that they don't always have the time or energy to engage in BDSM and in those instances prefer "just sex." Importantly, even in the relatively few instances when participants indicated a preference for sex over BDSM, they did so in ways that maintained the construction of BDSM as a better, more fulfilling, and more significant experience by explaining that while they prefer BDSM, it's sometimes easier and quicker to have sex than a sexual BDSM experience. When asked why they prefer BDSM to sex, my interview partners explained that BDSM "involves more parts of my personality;" "is a much deeper experience;" "is just so much more meaningful;" "lets me really connect with my partner;" "is what I do to reduce stress" and other responses that focus on the emotional and mental rather than physical aspects of BDSM. Most participants do not construct the choice for BDSM as a choice between two different types of physical activities and experiences. Instead, participants are much more likely to construct the choice as one between a physical experience (sex) and an emotional experience (sexual BDSM).

In this section, I have argued that participants often distinguish between sexual BDSM and sex. For the majority of participants, this distinction does not result in a comparison between two equally valuable, intense, and/or pleasurable experiences. Instead, participants use this distinction in an evaluative way, nearly universally constructing sexual BDSM as more fulfilling, satisfying, intense, and/or meaningful than

sex. Interestingly, while outsiders often perceive BDSM as being primarily about particularly intense physical sensations (e.g. pain), participants themselves construct the intensity of BDSM as primarily an emotional/mental intensity that allows for both deeply intimate connection with one's BDSM partner(s). Indeed, participants often construct sex as being primarily about physical sensations and BDSM as being primarily about emotional experiences. While for a majority of participants, BDSM is at least sometimes a sexual experience, for most participants BDSM also involves non-sexual experiences and it is to these experiences and the distinction between sexual and non-sexual BDSM experiences that I turn my attention in the remainder of this chapter.

These findings demonstrate the larger difficulties in doing research on sex and sexualities and the importance of definitions of sexuality broad enough to accommodate the wide variety of experiences to which individuals assign sexual meanings. They suggest that we may be missing important information if we ask about what people do or how they feel when they "have sex," for example. Additionally, they underscore the point that what individuals experience as "sexual" varies not only from individual to individual but also across interactions in which a given individual participates. Asking individuals which activities they experience as sexual is therefore likely to yield a partial or potentially inaccurate picture. For instance, individuals may be less likely to include activities that they find sexual only with a certain partner under very specific conditions.

#### **"THE THRILL ISN'T SEXUAL": SEXUAL AND NON-SEXUAL BDSM EXPERIENCES**

Nearly all participants across all data sources perceive BDSM as an experience that often involves a sexual component. At the same time, however, a strong majority of participants also perceive BDSM as a kind of experience that does not necessarily nor

always involve a sexual experience. The vast majority of my interview partners (87%; n=26), for example, perceive BDSM as not necessarily or always sexual. A minority of my interview partners (13%; n=4), however, perceive BDSM as always and necessarily sexual.<sup>130</sup> Those for whom BDSM is always sexual explain that the sexual element plays a critical role in differentiating BDSM from non-consensual violence or abuse. These participants are often comparatively less interested in the emotional/mental aspects of BDSM and are also less likely to be in relationships they define as BDSM relationships. The minority of participants who argue that BDSM is always and necessarily sexual are often subject to intense criticism on community discussion boards, where other participants suggest that these participants are why non-BDSMers believe that BDSM is “just kinky sex.”

Criticisms often center on the idea that defining BDSM as always sexual obscures the significant emotional/mental and relational aspects of BDSM, which may or may not be sexual. Shawn, for example, told me that BDSM can provide a completely non-sexual high. When I asked whether there were some aspects of BDSM that are not sexual for zir, Shawn told me:

Oh, absolutely, yeah. There are plenty of scenes that I do with people that absolutely don't do anything that goes into any sexual arousal for me. It does absolutely nothing for me sexually. It doesn't give me arousal, it doesn't excite me. It doesn't make me want to pull back and strap a condom on and just rail her or whatever after I've wound myself up from beating her. Nothing. That's completely non-sexual. Completely non-sexual. It's not even foreplay... It's just a completely different high.

Explaining that BDSM “does absolutely nothing” for zir sexually, can be “completely non-sexual,” and is “not even foreplay,” Shawn explains that the high available through

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<sup>130</sup> The responses of two participants with whom I conducted a joint interview were inaudible during the sexuality section of the interview tape and are excluded from this analysis.

BDSM is “completely different” from a sexual high. Other participants also experience the high available through BDSM in non-sexual ways. For example, one participant writes, “there are scenes where I don’t so much as get a tingle in my pants. Some of them are more spiritual or cathartic.”<sup>131</sup> Similarly, responding to an initial post that asks whether sexual experiences are a necessary part of BDSM, another participant explains, “Nope. S/m is power, is spiritual, is transcendent and glorious. But the thrill isn’t sexual to me at all, either Top or bottom.”<sup>132</sup> For these participants, the emotional experiences they have in the context of BDSM—transcendence, catharsis, and spiritual experiences—are distinct from sexual experiences. Yet for other participants described earlier in this chapter, these same experiences are part of sexual experiences—part of the sexualization of experiences that happens through BDSM.

As discussed previously in this chapter, most participants do not use the presence or absence of traditional markers of sexual experience (e.g. genital contact, orgasm) in assigning sexual or non-sexual meanings to specific activities or even to scenes more generally. Instead, for the majority of participants who perceive BDSM as involving both sexual and non-sexual aspects, the particular aspects perceived as sexual or non-sexual vary *not* according to the particular activity but instead according to a variety of interactional factors, such as the particular partner(s) present, what other kinds of activities are taking place, the overall definition of the scene or set of interactions, and whether or not participants intend the scene or play to be sexual. Avery, for instance, explains:

It’s [BDSM] not always sexual. Like when I’ve played with a couple of people. You know particularly there was a couple that I played with and they you know

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<sup>131</sup> 2003 “Sex in a BDSM relationship”

<sup>132</sup> 2003 “Sex and BDSM”

they put me up on a cross and they just kind of whipped and caned my back a little bit. And it wasn't sexual at all. It was still sensation and physical... It was hot. It was a cool scene. But it wasn't like 'ooh I want to go have sex with you right now.' Or like kiss or anything like that. It's still part of BDSM but it's not sexual... When it just comes to 'hey let's play with a whip or cane' or any kind of BDSM play that's not necessarily sexual. And I have two friends who are practicing rope together. They're a couple. And they both like rope. And I've joined them not to play in a sexual sense. But to play. And the rope was beautiful on her skin. And it wasn't for sex. So I think for me playing with rope can be different depending on who you're with. What the purpose of the play is. You know the context, really.

For Avery, whether or not particular activities such as whipping, caning, and rope play will have sexual meanings depends on who zir partner(s) is/are, the purpose of the play, and the context of the play or scene. Like Avery, Dominique also explains that the purpose(s) of BDSM play a critical role in the meanings activities will have for zir.

Dominique says:

There are parts that aren't necessarily sexual. You know doing stuff with somebody it doesn't mean that we're going to have sex. It isn't a equals b every single time. [By have sex do you mean intercourse?] Yes. [And can you talk a little bit more about the parts that aren't necessarily sexual?] Well like I've done the same exact things for people. And sometimes I'd have sex with them afterwards and then sometimes I wouldn't. It just kind of depends on where we're both at at the time. And sometimes the other person is just really exhausted from it all. I mean it can be a very freeing. And when you go through something like that you don't necessarily want to go have sex.

Dominique explains having “done the same exact things for people” with very different outcomes—sometimes leading to sex and sometimes not. The purpose of a scene or activity is critical in the process of sexual meaning-making for participants like Dominique, Avery, and others. Devon highlights the control participants have over the meanings of BDSM experiences, explaining, “BDSM isn't necessarily all sexual. [Can you talk about when it's sexual and when it's not sexual or what makes that difference for you?] The stuff that I don't find to be sexual just isn't sexual. No sexual component. And



that I would think would be like a personal preference.” Devon explains that what ze doesn’t “find to be sexual just isn’t sexual” and further points out that whether or not something is sexual is a “personal preference.” For participants like Devon and others, BDSM creates a context in which their own perceptions of what is and is not sexual are among the primary criteria in determining whether a scene or activity will be constructed as sexual. This method of assigning meaning to activities differs significantly from normative processes of sexual meaning-making, in which the presence or absence of culturally determined criteria— especially those related to particular types of physical activities (e.g. orgasm)— significantly influences whether or not participants will define an interaction or activity as sexual. This is, of course, not to say that those broader culturally determined criteria do not influence personal, individual perceptions of what is and is not sexual among BDSM participants, but instead to note that participants experience BDSM as providing an interactional context in which the use of those criteria is not the automatic or only factor influencing the meaning(s) of activities and interactions.

For other participants, the purpose of the scene is tied to its outcome and results in a slightly different process of assigning meanings. For these participants, whether or not a scene is sexual is determined after the fact, based on whether or not participants had conventional sex after the scene. Drew, for example, explains that whether a spanking or other activity is sexual depends on whether the scene ends in sex. Ze says:

Oh there are lots of parts of it that aren’t necessarily sexual. There’s spankings that are sexual. But there’s a lot of spankings that aren’t. And there’s you know flogging and just many, many activities.[It sounds like you’re saying that the same activity can sometimes be sexual and sometimes not be sexual. Is that right?] Absolutely. Absolutely. [And what is it that makes it sexual? Or what’s not there when it’s not sexual?] If you looked at the session as a whole. It’s kind

of like an outcome based—but I mean you can have sessions where it’s just a spanking or a flogging or a paddling. And there’s just really nothing really sexual about it.

Another participant similarly explains, “As for “Is sex BDSM?” not necessarily... We’ve had several scenes after which we did not feel the need to fuck. The scene was satisfying on it’s [sic] own—and not in a sexual way.”<sup>133</sup> For this participant, as for Drew and others, the meanings of particular activities in a scene are determined in part based on what happens after the scene. In this case, not “feel[ing] the need to fuck” after a scene results in this participant defining the scene as not sexual. Participants who determine whether or not a scene or play was sexual at least in part based on whether or not sex follows a scene are in the minority, however. While purpose-based meaning-making processes can involve sex as the purpose for a scene, participants much more frequently use other kinds of purposes in assigning sexual and non-sexual meanings to BDSM activities and scenes.

Unsurprisingly, for many participants the primary meanings of BDSM are related to power exchange. For most participants, when “sexual” is one of the meanings of BDSM, it is a secondary meaning. While a majority of participants usually assign sexual meanings to power exchanges that occur in the context of BDSM, for a significant minority of participants power exchange in the context of BDSM is not always or necessarily synonymous with sexual experiences. Sam, for example, says, “The whole thing [BDSM] is about me being able to dominate her, not about sex. Yeah, I would definitely say that there are times where the sexual stuff is not part of it.” For Sam, BDSM is about the experiencing of dominating zir partner, not about sex or sexual

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<sup>133</sup> 2003 “Sex in a BDSM relationship”

experiences and dominance is distinct from “sexual stuff.” For Quinn, too, the power exchange aspect of BDSM is not always sexual. Ze explains:

It’s possible to take a spanking and have it be completely non-sexual. I enjoy the power trip that comes from taking a large, physically dangerous man—taking somebody like that—you know a guy who could probably send your ass to the hospital without a lot of effort. And paddling that person to the point where they are literally sobbing uncontrollably. That’s a huge power rush. Here’s a guy who could probably fucking kill you six different ways. And he’s bawling like a baby. That’s a huge rush. But it’s not sex. He’s not having an orgasm. You’re not having an orgasm. But you’re both getting this massive emotional rush from it. You know. That’s where the non-sexual thrill comes from. From you know from either the thrill of not having power or the thrill of having the power.

For Quinn, the “non-sexual thrill” of BDSM results from the experience of power. Quinn, using the example of spanking, also explains that particular activities can be completely non-sexual. For Quinn, like for many others, activities that are not sexual are often activities that allow participants to experience power or powerlessness. Similarly, another participant explains:

Despite the fact that a gazillion people insist that BDSM is all about sex, it still isn’t true for some of us. I engage in scenes and activities where I do not get wet, sexually aroused, or titillated, and I find it emotionally satisfying... Sex is nice. Intercourse is nice. Both are far less interesting to me than a good power transfer.<sup>134</sup>

For this participant, the emotional satisfaction of BDSM is of primary importance and contributes to the “good power transfer” that ze prioritizes over sexual experiences.

Another participant explains a similar view, “for me D/S has zero to do with sex. It’s simply a power dynamic. D/s doesn’t have to be sexual in nature and it doesn’t have to include sex.”<sup>135</sup> And another says, “D/s for me has absolutely nothing at all do to with sex... it’s simply one leading and one following... It’s a power dynamic. Sex is just

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<sup>134</sup> 2003 “Sex in a BDSM relationship”

<sup>135</sup> 2005 “D/s isn’t about sex—huh??”

sex.”<sup>136</sup> For these participants, BDSM is about neither sex nor sexual experiences but is instead about power. Another participant elaborates this distinction, writing:

MOST of the play I have been involved in has not included conventional sexual activity as part of it and certainly not as the goal for activity at all... I find the power/ energy exchange and the SM itself to be very satisfying on another level entirely and not frustrating or lacking at all without orgasm or over sexual actions.<sup>137</sup>

For this participant, as for many others, BDSM goes beyond sexual experiences to a different level of emotional experience. For participants like these, their interest in and enjoyment of BDSM stems from perceiving BDSM as a power exchange rather than as a sexual experience. Yet even among participants like these, who do not view sexual experience as a necessary component of BDSM power exchanges, a sexual component is nonetheless sometimes present.

The importance of the power exchange dynamic and the emphasis on power rather than sexual meanings also leads some participants to construct particular kinds of activities or interactions as being integral to maintaining a power exchange dynamic or relationship that has no sexual meaning for participants. Participants in 24/7 relationships—relationships in which the BDSM dynamic is maintained continually, in which there are no “time-outs” from BDSM roles—are especially likely to construct BDSM as not always sexual. BDSM activities that are constructed as not necessarily sexual are instead often constructed as activities that maintain the relationship and/or the relationship dynamic. Jamie, for instance, says:

I mean we live it as part of our daily life. It’s not always sexual... It’s just part of who we are. She takes care of me by opening doors, setting my table, getting my glass, what have you. That’s not sexual. But it reinforces what and where we are with each other. And those things aren’t sexual. The things we do in a non-sexual

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<sup>136</sup> 2005 “Sex without D/s is almost as pointless as D/s without sex”

<sup>137</sup> 2003 “Sex in a BDSM relationship”

context are just reinforcing the relationship. They're things that reinforce who we are.

Sydney similarly explains that there are some BDSM activities that are non-sexual that help maintain the D/s dynamic in zir relationship, “[Are there some parts of BDSM that aren't sexual for you?] I guess that would be more like everyday life duties. You have things that the dominant wants you to do around the house or in general. Submitting to do those things. So I guess I would find that not sexual.” Tasks that facilitate everyday life, such as household chores, are often defined as service activities. In the context of a scene or BDSM play, however, the same activities frequently take on sexual meanings.

Peyton, too, explains that service activities are usually not sexual. Ze says, “there's definitely some parts of it that aren't necessarily sexual. The whole service aspect of it.” And Christian explains: “Well the parts that are not [sexual] would be more like the day to day service.” Similarly, Pat says, “There's things I do for him throughout the day like I get his coffee in the morning. I wake him up every morning with a cup of coffee in bed and you know that's our way of starting out the day. There's nothing sexual about that.” Likewise, service activities aren't always sexual for Jordan, who describes liking the service components of zir relationship. Jordan says, “I like the non-sexual parts of it as well. Like he can order me to wear certain clothing or to fix him his meals or drinks or have certain instruments laid out for a scene. Things like that.” Like Jordan, Casey also explains that service activities are part of zir relationship. Ze says:

It is an interesting balance between being submissive in sex and in non-sexual ways. Our sexual relationship involves bondage and some sadomasochism and frankly I do what I'm told in the bedroom. Non-sexually I do things like keep a journal of any concerns I may have that I make available for him. I make the bed, sit by his feet. Things like that. Those things help to reinforce the roles.

For Casey, specific activities that “help to reinforce the [dominant and submissive] roles” in zir relationship are non-sexual. Making the bed and sitting by zir dominant’s feet are critical to maintaining the D/s dynamic in zir relationship. Another participant explains the importance of non-sexual relational maintenance activities similarly. Ze says:

For me, D/s is about far, far more than sex, and most of the ways in which it [BDSM] is expressed in my relationship have nothing whatsoever to do with sex. It’s about power, and power is a context which is far wider than sex... I get no sexual charge from disciplining my slave or training her... Sex, pain, power, control, these concepts are not reducible to one another.<sup>138</sup>

For this participant, as for many, discipline and training are about relationship maintenance rather than sexual arousal or satisfaction. Whether a particular activity (e.g. spanking) is constructed as part of discipline and/or training or alternatively as a sexual component in the context of a scene or play, depends primarily on what purpose the participants intend the activity to serve.

Importantly, not all service activities take place in the context of dyadic relationships (e.g. Master/slave). Non-sexual service can be part of any BDSM play or scene, including with a partner one has only recently met. Dana, for instance, frequently does non-sexual service for tops/dominants with whom ze is neither in a relationship or hoping to be. Like others, ze explains that service activities are not necessarily sexual, yet nonetheless provide a positive emotional experience. Dana says:

I would say there are some parts that are not necessarily sexual. Not always sexual. Some parts of the service that I do are not really sexual. I mean going to someone’s house and cleaning their bathroom. How sexual can that be? And that’s the kind of thing that I do. I do it because I enjoy making the person happy and making their life a little bit easier. That’s not sexual. It’s service. But I get a good feeling over it.

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<sup>138</sup> 2004 “sex=BDSM”

Non-sexual service helps create the power exchange dynamic that serves to guide BDSM interactions, regardless of whether that dynamic is part of an on-going relationship or is created for a particular scene or play by partners who have not previously played together and do not intend to form an on-going relationship.

### **Summary**

While the meanings of specific activities vary widely across interactions, service activities such as opening doors, setting the table, preparing meals, etc. are among the specific activities least often assigned sexual meanings by participants. Yet this is not to say that service activities are never assigned sexual meanings; for a minority of participants, service activities that take place outside the context of BDSM scenes or play can still have sexual meaning. More frequently, however, participants label an activity “service” when it takes place in isolation from a scene, play, and/or activities constructed as sexual and construct that same activity as sexual when it takes place in the context of other activities also assigned sexual meanings. Activities participants construct as non-sexual but vital to relationship maintenance create the framework for the relational context in which sexual BDSM activities occur. In this way, while not all activities have sexual meanings for participants, non-sexual activities help create the context that facilitates sexual BDSM play and allows participants to sexualize virtually any activity they wish to.

In sum, whether or not participants *want* a particular activity or set of interactions more generally to be sexual or not is among the most frequent methods participants use to create meanings. Like other scholars (Taylor 1997; Taylor and Ussher 2001), I found that BDSM participants use a variety of interpretive repertoires to construct, negotiate, and

assign meanings to their experiences. I added to previous work by focusing specifically on the use of sex and sexuality in relation to interpretive frameworks used by participants. For many participants, BDSM creates a context in which simply *wanting or intending* an activity, scene, or set of interactions to be sexual is enough to make it so and this is among the most appealing facets of BDSM for a majority of participants. The ability to sexualize virtually any activity is of vital importance for many participants. Expanding the range of experiences—especially emotional/mental experiences—that can be perceived as sexual—is a significant part of the pleasures of BDSM for many participants and is, as I argued earlier in this chapter, one of the ways that participants construct BDSM as both different from and better than other types of sexual activities, especially conventional, “vanilla” sex. Like Plante (2006) and Langdrige and Butt (2005; 2004), I found that constructing and telling sexual stories is an important component of BDSM experience. In this study, I demonstrate that these stories often serve an evaluative purpose. While my data demonstrate that participants include a variety of activities that they construct as non-sexual under the category of “BDSM,” non-sexual activities and interactions are less frequent than sexual activities and interactions. This suggests that while sexual experiences are a common aspect of BDSM interactions, not all BDSM interactions involve activities or experiences participants define as sexual. Assuming that all participants experience BDSM in sexual ways in all of their BDSM interactions creates a skewed understanding of the relationship of BDSM to sex and sexuality.

## CONCLUSION



While many aspects of BDSM have sexual meanings for participants, not all do, which suggests that defining BDSM as a sexual interest (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006), practice (Langdrige and Barker 2007a), identity (Langdrige and Barker 2007a), or behavior (Moser and Kleinplatz 2006) or as a set of activities that take place only in a sexual context (Weinberg, Williams, and Moser 1984; Weinberg 2006) or that require sexual arousal (Taylor 1997; Taylor and Ussher 2001)— as most BDSM research has done—fails to accurately capture the diversity of meanings that BDSM experiences have for participants. More importantly, even for participants for whom most of their BDSM experiences involve a sexual meaning, sexual meaning is only one of the many meanings of BDSM play and for most participants in this study, sexual meanings are among the least important meanings of BDSM. Recognizing that BDSM has many meanings that are more important to participants than sexual meaning suggests an urgent need to rethink the tendency to define BDSM primarily as a sexual interest, practice, or behavior.

Additionally, as I have argued in this chapter, the meanings participants assign to sexual BDSM experiences differ significantly from the meanings they associate with sex, suggesting that models of sex and sexuality based on non-BDSM sexual experiences may not capture the meanings of sexual experiences for BDSM participants. Developing models of sexual experiences and sexualities that can illuminate non-genitally-centered sexualities including BDSM is likely to be of significant benefit in our continually evolving understanding of sexualities and sexual experiences. Because our present models of sexuality are built around homo/hetero understandings of sexual experiences that rely on sex category/ gender, these models cannot account for desires and experiences *not* organized at least in part according to genitals, sex category, or gender.

As Weiss (2006b) explains, “ ‘unintelligible desires’—desires that fall outside hetero/homo logics of identity—have received little scholarly attention (Valentine 2003).” Developing models of sexuality that do not assume that sexual experiences are genitally-centered or organized through the logics of sex category/ gender can help us develop a more accurate understanding of the range of sexual experiences, identifications, and orientations that exist in the empirical world.

Detaching sexual pleasure from genitally-centered experiences and activities is among the most important ways participants create contexts in which their intent for a scene or set of interactions comes to replace normative indicators of sexual experience. Decentering orgasm and genital arousal thus not only allows but *requires* participants to create and utilize other indicators of sexual experience and satisfaction. While non-BDSM participants often perceive BDSM as being primarily about intense physical experiences (e.g. pain), participants themselves construct BDSM as *about* emotional/mental experiences, with physical experiences simply providing the means to achieving those experiences. Emphasizing emotional/mental experiences over physical experiences thus creates an interactional context in which bodily experiences are significantly less important than mental/emotional experiences.

Foucault’s (1997) analysis of BDSM, which suggests that BDM practices demonstrate that “we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations,” is thus only partially supported by my data (p. 165). The majority of participants included in this study do indeed perceive BDSM as an unusual, even unique situation that allows for the production of pleasure with very odd things. Yet the “odd things” participants use to produce pleasure are mental, rather than

physical. The mind, rather than “very strange parts of... bodies” is the primary location of the pleasures participants experience through BDSM. While Foucault (1997) argued that in BDSM people are “inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticisation of the body,” I find instead that for most participants, the pleasures of BDSM arise not through using strange parts of their bodies or through eroticizing bodies, but instead through the eroticization or sexualization of non-physical mental and emotional experiences (p. 165). Moving away from genitally-based pleasures, in other words, has not led participants to experiment with pleasures centered in other parts of the body—strange or otherwise, but instead to develop a battery of pleasures centered primarily in emotional and mental experiences.

In this chapter, I have explored the meanings of BDSM for participants, focusing particularly on how participants understand BDSM in relationship to other sexual experiences. I have argued that participants perceive BDSM as a setting significantly different from other social and sexual contexts and settings. For most participants, this difference is related to the relatively greater importance of emotional/mental experiences and the relatively lesser importance of bodily experiences in BDSM than in other contexts. In the next chapter, I explore whether this decreased emphasis on bodily experiences leads participants to de-emphasize gender—a social system that organizes and is used to interpret bodies—when constructing selves and interacting with others in the context of BDSM.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER SALIENCE IN BDSM INTERACTIONS**

In this chapter, I utilize Ridgeway's recent work (1999; 2009) on gender as a primary frame to illuminate my use of the doing (West and Fenstermaker 2002 [1993]; West and Zimmerman 2009; West and Zimmerman 1987) and performative (Butler 1993 [1991]; Butler 1999 [1990]; Butler 2004) approaches to gender described in Chapter 3, which view gender as an interactional accomplishment rather than a fixed individual characteristic. I explore the extent to which BDSM participants perceive gender as a salient social category, focusing on comparisons they make between the salience of gender in BDSM and other social contexts. I begin by providing an overview of the framing approach and the concept of gender salience. Next, I turn to an analysis of the extent to which participants view gender as a salient category when constructing selves in BDSM and other contexts. I then analyze participants' perceptions of the salience of gender in choosing and interacting with BDSM partners. Although partners are not always the only others participants encounter in a given BDSM setting, partners are the others with whom participants most frequently interact and, for most, are the actors whose actions and perceptions matter most. Finally, I explore the effects of the relative salience of gender for self and others on BDSM interactions. In this final section, I investigate perceptions of the malleability of the sex category/ gender correlation that serves as the basis for the framing process. I investigate the extent to which participants' use of gender stereotypes is based on an acceptance of the sex category/gender

correlation presumed by the gender system. Because the archival data I collected rarely included descriptions of or discussion of correspondents' gender(s) or observations about the gender(s) of their partners, the findings reported in this chapter are based primarily on interview and discussion board data.

### **GENDER AS A PRIMARY FRAME**

Ridgeway's (2009, 2011) framing approach helps to explain why and how people do or perform gender in everyday interactions, as well as how they draw on broader social messages about gender both to guide their own actions and interpret those of others. This approach also provides a crucial explanation of the relationship between the micro-interactional accounts provided by the doing and performative approaches and macro-level structural accounts. While feminist theorists have long recognized that gender is a multilevel structure or system that involves both micro/interactional and macro/structural processes and social practices (e.g. Acker 1990; Lorber 1995; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999; Risman 1998a), Ridgeway's development of the framing approach to gender advances our understanding of gender by specifying the nature of the relationship between micro and macro facets of gender.

Drawing on West and Zimmerman's doing gender approach, Ridgeway argues that people "do gender" in interaction because gender serves as a primary frame for social relations. She explains that framing results from "the coordination problems inherent to organizing social relations [that] drive populations of people who must regularly relate to one another to develop shared social-category systems based on culturally defined standards of difference" (2009:148). She goes on to explain that in order to "manage social relations in real time, some of these cultural-category systems must be so

simplified that they can be quickly applied as framing devices to virtually anyone to start the process of defining *self* and *other* in the situation” (148).<sup>139</sup> People, she argues:

Use *sex* (that is, the physical status of being male or female) and *gender* (shared cultural expectations associated with being male or female) together as a primary frame for organizing that most fundamental of activities: relating to another person... People use sex/gender as an initial, starting framework for defining ‘who’ self and other are in order to coordinate their behavior and relate, whether they do so face-to face, on paper, over the Internet, or on a cell phone. (p. 7)

As a primary frame, gender thus works as a cultural category system that allows people to immediately and instantaneously define self and other in a given situation.<sup>140</sup> Social cognition research demonstrates that 2-3 cultural-difference systems serve as primary categories of person perception in a given society (Brewer and Lui 1989; Fiske 1998). Primary person categories in the U.S. include sex category/ gender, along with race and age (Brewer 1998; Brewer and Lui 1989; Fiske 1992, 1998; Fiske and Neuberg 1990; Ito and Urland 2003; Strangor et al. 1992). Although Butler relies on different conceptual terms in her explication of gender as a mechanism for sorting individuals, her approach is remarkably similar to that of Ridgeway and other social psychologists. Butler (2004)

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<sup>139</sup> Ridgeway (1997) explains that the dichotomization of sex/ sex category/ gender is essential to its utility as a primary person category: “Once sex is constructed as a simple, roughly dichotomous distinction, its constant use in interactions keeps it always accessible in people’s minds (Bargh 1989) and discourages its differentiation into more than two sexes, which would reduce its usefulness as a quick, prior way of classifying self and others.” (220)

<sup>140</sup> Ridgeway (2011) provides a concise summary of interactionist and social psychological understandings of the construction of self and other in interaction: “Coordinating your behavior with another in order to relate requires you to find ways to anticipate how the other will behave in a given instance so that you can decide how to act yourself. For this dance of coordination to work, the other similarly needs a means to accurately anticipate your behavior. Essentially, the two of you need to make your behavior mutually predictable... the participants need shared cultural knowledge that allows them to initiate the process of defining who the others in the situation are and, therefore, who in comparison they are in this situation and, thus, how each person can be expected to act. To define who someone is, we need to categorize that person in some way. And when we categorize another in some way, by implication we categorize ourselves as similar to or different from that other. This mutual categorization, in turn, carries suggestions for how we are likely to act in relation to that person. For this process of defining one another to effectively coordinate our *joint* behavior, it must be based on some common cultural knowledge that we share about ways of categorizing and making sense of people. This suggests that to begin to coordinate our behavior with another, we need to bring to the situation at least some commonly shared cultural systems for categorizing and defining one another.” (34-36)

argues, “persons are regulated by gender... this sort of regulation operates as a condition of cultural intelligibility for any person” (p. 52). Butler (2004) explains that gender is always done in concert with others and in response to norms or stereotypes that one does not create oneself:

One does not ‘do’ one’s gender alone. One is always ‘doing’ with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary. What I call my ‘own’ gender appears perhaps at times as something I author or, indeed, own. But the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author. (1)

For Butler, as for Ridgeway and West and colleagues, on the micro/interactional level, gender works as a basic category through which individuals are interpreted, but the terms of that interpretation are not of our choosing.

Gender, as a primary person-category, thus serves to frame social interactions because it can be used to sort individuals into categories based on socially salient distinctions. As Ridgeway (2011) explains, “the utility of socially defined gender, as a cultural device for coordinating social relations, lies in the construction of shared beliefs about presumed differences that are associated with sex category” (p. 34). Ridgeway’s framing approach thus specifies the link between micro-level aspects of gender (e.g. using gender to define oneself and other in a given context) and macro-level aspects (e.g. cultural stereotypes about gender) by explaining that “primary categories of person perception, including sex category, work as cultural frames for coordinating behavior by associating category membership with widely shared cultural beliefs about how people in one category are likely to behave compared to those in a contrasting category” (2009; p.149). Importantly, Ridgeway (2011) argues that widely shared cultural beliefs influence

interaction even when the participants in a given interaction do not personally subscribe to those beliefs:

These cultural beliefs are shared stereotypes... We all know these stereotypes as cultural knowledge, whether or not we personally endorse them. But the point is, because we think 'most people' hold these beliefs, we expect others to judge us according to them. As a result, we must take these beliefs into account in our own behavior even if we do not endorse them. (p. 149)

Shared societal gender beliefs or stereotypes influence interaction in two primary ways:

“they act as an identity standard that the individual seeks to maintain and they shape others’ expectations (and the individual’s anticipation of what others expect)”

This reality creates what West and Zimmerman (1987; 2009) refer to as “accountability.”

That is, in everyday interaction people know that they are likely to be held accountable to gender stereotypes and act accordingly. Even when people act in ways intended to resist or reject gender stereotypes, their behavior is still structured in response to those stereotypes.

Yet people’s reliance on gender stereotypes is not static across all situations.

Ridgeway (2011) explains:

While automatic sex categorization makes gender stereotypes implicitly available to actors in all social relations, the actual impact of these stereotypes on behavior can vary from imperceptible to substantial, depending on the context. The extent to which it varies, however, can be specified... The extent to which gender stereotypes actually do modify people’s behavior and judgments in a given situation depends on gender’s *salience* or relevance for them, given the nature of the situation. The more salient gender is, the greater its effects on their behavior. Salience, in turn, depends on the extent to which gender in a given setting appears to actors to give them useful clues about how others in the situation are likely to behave, so that they can figure out how to behave themselves. (p 71)

To the extent that gender stereotypes do not appear to give individuals useful clues about how they and others in the situation should behave, gender becomes less salient and has a potentially lesser effect on individual’s behavior. In other words, while gender



stereotypes are always available to actors in a given context, people's reliance on those stereotypes varies.

### **PERCEPTIONS OF THE SALIENCE OF GENDER IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF SELVES**

Some queer theorists argue that BDSM provides a space for the creation and expression of gendered or non-gendered selves that differ from the selves participants enact in non-BDSM contexts. Hale (1997) for example, argues that BDSM creates a "culture of two" in which gender performances, which would in other spaces be unintelligible, become intelligible to the individuals involved. Hale explains that in the culture of two created by BDSM leatherplay, gender operates differently than in other social contexts:

When I was a boy with my dyke daddy, in that culture of two I was a boy. I was not an adult woman playing a boy's role or playing a boy, nor was I an adult woman doing boy in some other way... I was a boy with her by engaging in a gender performativity that made sense to both of us as a *boy's gender performativity*. (p. 229; original italics)

Importantly, Hale argues not that BDSM allows participants to take on different gendered roles, but instead that it allows participants to enact different selves. The gender of participants is not role play, but the performance of a gendered self—in the example Hale provides, the self being performed is that of a "boy" engaging in a "boy's gender performativity." Participants—both self and other—experience the gender each participant enacts as real, authentic, or legitimate, as Hale makes clear by specifying that Hale's gender performance "made sense" to both Hale and zir partner.

Several recent studies of BDSM provide support for the idea that BDSM settings allow participants to create and enact gendered and non-gendered selves in ways that differ from the selves they create in non-BDSM settings. For example, Bauer (2007;

2008) interviewed 50 dyke-, trans-, and/or queer identified BDSM participants from the U.S. and Western Europe, focusing on transgressive gender practices. Bauer found that for most participants in the dyke and/or queer BDSM communities <sup>141</sup> studied, BDSM functions as a “playground for exploring gender,” allowing participants to use role play in the context of a social space that is constructed as a “safe” space for experimenting with gender. Bauer also found that what often starts out as gendered role playing ends up having broader implications for participants. BDSM enables participants to develop “transformative subcultural skills” that allow them to engage in a process of transferring BDSM-specific gendered selves to other parts of their lives. This three-part process involves renaming and/or reassigning particular behaviors new gendered meanings, recognition of the new gendered meanings by others, and integration of those new gendered meanings and performances into the participant’s non-BDSM-specific selves. Bauer concludes that “exploring gendered selves in BDSM can ultimately lead to developing a trans or genderqueer identity in everyday life. Indeed, this seems to be a quite common experience” (2008; 243). Bauer argues that this process is made possible by BDSM because “within the [BDSM] community, the sexed and gendered body is generally perceived as more performative than in mainstream culture, its boundaries not necessarily restricted by its own skin (for example, when ‘dildos’ become ‘dicks’)” (2008; 248). Similarly, Weiss (2006b) argues that “SM practices and identities dismantle any clean connection between bio-body, gender, and sexuality,” explaining that “the practitioners I spoke with were adamant that there is no essential, generalizable or immutable correspondence between one’s body or genitalia, one’s gender presentation, and one’s BDSM practice” (p. 240). Bauer’s and Weiss’ findings lend support to queer

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<sup>141</sup> Bauer identifies as a queer transfag.

theorists such as Hale, who argue that in the context of BDSM interactions the relationship between sex and gender is reconfigured such that gender is not assumed to flow automatically or necessarily from a particular kind of sexed body.

Additionally, Ritchie and Barker (2005) found that many participants experience BDSM interactions in ways that subvert traditional gendered dynamics. Based on a focus group discussion that included seven women who participate in BDSM, Ritchie and Barker argue that BDSM “challenge[s] the [radical feminist] perception that SM reproduces conventional gender hierarchies,” noting that participants frequently describe “their experience of subverting these roles,” including, for instance, enabling men to cry and experience vulnerability, ensuring physical control over male partners, and redressing the orgasm gap (p. 233). Ritchie and Barker conclude that the experiences of BDSM participants they analyze:

offer some challenge to the assumptions that underpin the feminist condemnation of SM as reproducing and perpetuating heterosexual and patriarchal power hierarchies. The women SMers whose voices we share in this paper are freely choosing subject positions which they suggest have the potential to recognise, challenge, subvert, parody and transgress these hierarchies of power. (p 237)

For the participants included in Ritchie and Barker’s work, BDSM provides a setting in which the gender system can be negotiated differently than it is in other social settings, which in turn allows for the creation of selves (or subject positions) that subvert normative gender.

These studies suggest that for some participants, gender may be less salient in BDSM compared with other social contexts in terms of how they create and enact selves. These participants perceive gender subversion, transgression, and/or resistance as an acceptable type of gender performance in BDSM settings and do not feel that they will be

held accountable to normative gender in these contexts. Because these studies are restricted to feminist-and/or queer-identified participants, however, they do not speak to the salience of gender in BDSM contexts for the broader population of BDSM participants. Additionally, while feminist- and/or queer-identified participants may be more likely to report perceiving gender as less salient in BDSM than other social contexts, these participants are probably among those most likely to perceive gender as having low salience in general. It is also difficult to ascertain whether the presence of other feminists and queer-identified individuals, the BDSM context itself, or some combination of the two facilitates in participants' perceptions of a comparatively lower salience of gender.

My research thus builds on and extends this previous work by testing whether these findings extend to non-feminist- and/or queer- identified participants. My work also differs from these previous studies by focusing specifically on participants' perceptions of the salience of gender for the selves they enact in BDSM settings as well as for how they select and interact with BDSM partners—the subject of the next section of the chapter. Because creating one's self and interacting with others are co-constitutive, interactional processes, I argue that this dual focus can better illuminate how gender influences and is influenced by interactions. Participants may rely on gender less frequently and/or in different ways when creating and enacting selves and/or in selecting and interacting with BDSM partners than they do when creating and enacting selves and making decisions about with whom and how to interact in other settings. If they do, this would suggest that participants may perceive BDSM as a setting in which gender has a different influence on the selves they and others create than it does in other social

settings. By exploring participants' perceptions of the salience of gender for self and others across BDSM and other social settings, this work also contributes to feminist and queer conversations concerning the relationship of BDSM to normative gender.

Because gender is one of the primary categories through which bodies and pleasures are regulated, organized, and interpreted in the current economy, I argue that to the extent individuals perceive gender as a category with low social salience, a different economy of bodies may be in operation—an economy in which one of the foundational categories of the current economy becomes less significant. Determining the extent to which individuals rely on gender as a salient interpretive category when enacting their own selves and interacting with BDSM partners, however, is not simply a matter of ascertaining whether participants enact selves that are highly gendered or engage in BDSM with partners of only one gender or of a variety of genders, as the findings analyzed in the sections that follow demonstrate. Instead, understanding the salience of gender requires understanding not just if, but how participants use gender when creating and enacting selves as well as selecting and interacting with BDSM partners.

#### **A Note on the Complexities of Gender in the Present Samples**

A quick look at the table of demographic characteristics of my interview sample (Appendix D) might suggest a fairly gender-normative sample. Yet the demographic data presented there do not capture the complexity of the ways interviewees self-identified during the course of our interview conversations. As discussed in Chapter 4, at the conclusion of each interview I asked interviewees a standard set of demographic questions, but did not supply a set of answers from which they could choose. Interviewees created their own response categories for each of the questions (except age).

Lorber (2006) explains the importance of not relying (only) on traditional research designs for understanding complex social categories:

In mainstream sociology, most research designs assume that each person has one sex, one sexuality, and one gender, which are congruent with each other and fixed for life. Research variables are therefore ‘sex,’ polarized as ‘females’ and ‘males;’ ‘sexuality,’ polarized as ‘homosexuals’ and ‘heterosexuals;’ and ‘gender,’ polarized as ‘women’ and ‘men.’ But these vary, and for accurate data we need the variations. By recognizing the multiplicity of genders, sexes, and sexualities, feminist research is able to go beyond the conventional binaries. (449-450)<sup>142</sup>

Because I anticipated that being asked a series of demographic questions might cue normative responses, I saved the demographic questions until the conclusion of the interview.

While in the course of our interview conversations interviewees often described their gender(s) in complex, non-dichotomous ways, with only two exceptions, interviewees self-identified their gender with standard, dichotomized labels. For instance, during the interview, when asked about gender, Sydney replied, “I can’t think of a way other to be. And others have accepted me in the community. I identify as like a around ten years old kind of a tomboy but with a little girl kind of thing.” Yet when asked demographic questions at the conclusion of the interview, Sydney replied, “female.” For another interviewee, gender was similarly complex. Devore explained:

My gender... I very much identify with gay men. In their thinking. And maybe that goes back to that how I came out as an adult. With all gay men. I’ve been told that I think like a gay man. And I feel that even though I know I’m a physical woman, I think like a gay man. [What does it mean to think like a gay man? What kinds of thoughts are those?] You know. It’s men, men, men. Very attracted to that... And if I go into a room and

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<sup>142</sup> On bondage.com, BDSM participants provide a similar critique of past surveys of BDSM participants. In a 2006 thread titled, “How Does Dom/sub breakdown [sic] in terms of gender?” several posters discuss ratios of male to female participants. Many critique the notion of gender as dichotomous. For instance, one poster writes, “and then many of us are neither or both. Ahhhhh, such a wonderfully complex world” and another writes “only males and females surveyed? Too bad.”

there's five men in there I usually end up talking to the gay man in there if there's one gay man. There's just a connection there. I've been told we kind of have our own language when we talk to each other.

And later in the interview, Devore again referenced identifying as part of the gay male community while talking about the strong bonds among community members, "I think it's the way with the gay men's community... You know. We tend to stick together."

When we got to the demographic questions, however, Devore self-identified simply as "female." Dana, who identified as "trans" in the demographic section, explained in the course of our interview conversation, "I identify primarily as a sissy maid," a specificity of gendered identity that is not captured by the simplified category "trans." Many interviewees talked about resisting gender as a social and/or identity category in BDSM settings and in their lives more generally, yet with the exception of Devon, none resisted categorizing themselves in sexed/gendered terms when asked demographic questions. This suggests that simply being asked standard demographic questions may cue normative responses.

Interestingly, although I specifically asked about gender, rather than sex (i.e., "And could you describe your gender or gender(s)?"), all but two of the interviewees (Devon, who identified as non-gender and Dana, who identified as trans, which can refer to sex and/or gender) responded with sex rather than gender identifications, including several who were careful to distinguish between sex and gender in the rest of the interview. During the other sections of the interview, some interviewees switched back and forth between discussing gender (e.g. masculinity and femininity, man and woman) and sex (male/ female) in ways that collapsed these categories, some exclusively used

terms that referenced either sex or gender, and some discussed sex and gender in ways that drew strong distinctions between these concepts.

As discussed in Chapter 4, I did not view bondage.com discussion board participants' profiles (which allow them to include demographic information from bondage.com-created categories), but participants often gender (and/or sex)- identified within their posts (e.g. "as a submissive female," "from a man's perspective)" etc. and gender identity itself was a topic of discussion on some threads. Similarly, although I did not have access to demographic information for the authors of the letters from which I collected data at the Leather Archives, letter-writers often self-identified in the course of their letters, likely because many of the letters with which I worked were written in response to personal ads. Across all sources, some participants identified in normative ways while others identified in less conventional ways and some did not gender identify.

Participants' perceptions of the salience of gender to the selves they enact in BDSM settings compared with other social settings vary significantly. While the majority of my interview partners reported similar perceptions of the salience of gender for their selves across all settings (60%; n=19), a significant minority (40%; n=13) reported different perceptions of the salience of gender for their selves across BDSM and other social settings. Given previous theoretical and empirical work that suggests that participants experience a decrease in the influence of gender norms in BDSM contexts compared with other social settings, I expected that those who perceive differences in the salience of gender for their selves in BDSM and non-BDSM settings would perceive a decrease in gender salience in BDSM settings. This was not the case universally, however. While some participants in this study did report perceiving a decrease in the



salience of gender in BDSM settings, these participants were in the minority (23%; n=3) of the thirteen of my interview partners who perceived differences in the salience of gender across settings. Unexpectedly, I found that the majority (77%; n=10) of participants who perceive differences in the salience of gender across BDSM and other settings perceive gender as *more* salient in BDSM than other social settings.

**Stability in the Perception of Salience of Gender for the Self Across Settings: “I Just Am Who I Am.”**

In contrast to theoretical work on BDSM by scholars like Hale and empirical work by scholars like Ritchie and Barker (2005), Bauer (2007; 2008), and Weiss (2006b), which suggests that BDSM creates a context different from other social contexts in terms of the construction of gendered selves, I found that most participants (60%; n=19) perceive BDSM as similar to other social settings in terms of the salience of gender for the selves they enact in most settings. Given that gender is normatively constructed as a stable, fixed, individual characteristic, it is unsurprising that most participants perceive their own gender in ways that align with this normative construction. Based on previous empirical and theoretical work, I anticipated that participants would report stable gendered selves but would report feeling less compelled to express specifically gendered aspects of their selves in BDSM compared with other settings, but this was not the case. Additionally, while for some participants experimentation with gender—including reducing the importance of gender for the social selves they create and enact—is a goal of BDSM, this was not the case for a majority of participants in this study.

When I asked whether ze experiences zir gender similarly or differently in BDSM and other settings, for example, Sam told me, “I feel the same way about my gender in just about any situation.” Similarly, Chris said, “In other words, did I ever feel like I was

taking on the feminine gender role? [Sure. Or a different version of masculinity.] Neither. Honestly, that never applied to me. It never, for me it never changed.” For Chris, zir sense of zir gender does not change across settings; Chris perceives the salience of gender for zir self as relatively stable. Dana, who identifies as trans, also explains enacting a similar self across social settings. Ze says, “I have a whole room with little girl dresses and French maid uniforms. And that’s how I go to the grocery store and live my life.” For Dana, the importance of gender to zir self is the same in BDSM settings as it is in the grocery store. Experiencing the salience of gender as similar across social settings, including BDSM, is not limited only to participants who identify with a specific gender. Morgan, for example, who does not strongly identify with any gender, when asked whether ze feels a different sense of zir gender or genders in BDSM and other settings, says, “No. I am who I am. I don’t feel feminine or don’t feel masculine. I just am who I am. [In BDSM as well as other settings?] Correct.” For participants like these, BDSM does *not* provide a unique setting in terms of their experiences of their own gender(s). The salience of gender in relation to the selves they create and enact— how significant gender is to the selves they create, as well as their perceptions of how likely others are to hold them accountable to gender norms—is stable across BDSM and other settings.

**Decreased Perception of the Salience of Gender for the Self in BDSM Settings: “In a BDSM context it’s an area where I just don’t have to think about it.”**

Some participants (n=3; 9% of all interview participants; 23% of those who perceive differences in the salience of gender in BDSM and non-BDSM settings) perceive gender as less salient for the self they create and enact in BDSM settings compared with other social settings. While for some participants this perception stems from feeling less obligated to act in conventionally masculine or feminine ways, for

others their perception of the decreased salience of gender in BDSM settings results from their ability to enact what they construct as non-gendered selves. Reese, for instance, told me:

You know when it's in a good sort of BDSM context it's a place. It's a place where there's more fluidity allowed than in most of the public sphere and even most of the private spheres as well. I've always really been aware of the ways in which I don't really jive with masculinity in quotes.... So even if it's not explicit, even if I'm not engaged in an activity that actively, that explicitly questions gender roles or changes gender roles. For me, just the fact that I like to be on the bottom is enough of a transgression that I feel like I'm getting something accomplished. [And what it is that you're getting accomplished?] It's about transgressing. Transcending. It's about relaxing... Almost all my long-term relationships have been marked... they've all been sort of hindered by really traditional male female gender roles and the ways in which I don't relate to them. And in the BDSM contexts it's been a lot more comfortable in that way. [So that sense of transgressing gender is something specific to BDSM for you?] Oh yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. You know the culture is so gendered at every level. And you know it's— even— or maybe especially as sort of you know a very gender conscious feminist male— even especially given those things I feel like I'm always thinking about it. And I guess the real difference is that in a BDSM context it's an area where I just don't have to think about it. Where fluidity ideally is allowed and sort of a given part of it. And I guess that's sort of what I was getting at and didn't even realize it. By talking about relaxing a little bit that way. [And do you mean fluidity specifically in terms of like gender stereotypes and gender norms?] Yeah. Yeah.

For Reese, BDSM creates a context in which gender norms are relatively less salient for the self ze enacts, which ze describes as a kind of “fluidity” in terms of gender that is unavailable to Reese in other contexts. Importantly, the kind of gender fluidity Reese describes is not a fluidity in which ze alternates between enacting different kinds of gendered selves, but one in which ze enacts a self that ze perceives as less highly gendered than in other settings.

Harper also describes a gender-fluid self, explaining that this fluidity results in making gender not matter for the participants involved:

The way I approach it— because it’s almost like my gender becomes an issue. Because they [women who identify as heterosexual who are interested in playing with Harper] see themselves as heterosexual. And I would say in that sense being female can be somewhat of a hindrance. But at the same time ... there’s an ability to transcend my gender. Both from my perspective and from the person that I’m playing. Allows us both to have a successful scene. Without having to worry about whether or not we’re female. Whether or not we’re male. It’s like once we get into it. What our gender is doesn’t matter anymore. And it’s more about enjoying the scene with another person. And seeing that person on a level of something other than a physical body.

Harper explains that before a scene, gender is often highly salient, as evidenced by Harper’s potential partners viewing Harper’s gender as “an issue.” Yet during a BDSM scene, Harper experiences a drastic decrease in the salience of gender for both zirsself and zir partner. Both the sex category of the participants and the gendered selves they usually otherwise enact become, for Harper, irrelevant to the experience. For participants like Reese and Harper, BDSM becomes a space in which the salience of gender is significantly reduced to the point where the sex category of a participant’s “physical body” matters almost as little as gender.

Dominique explicitly contrasts the salience of gender for zir self in BDSM and other contexts. When I asked if there had ever been any time when ze felt like zir own sense of zir gender or genders either clashed with or matched with something that happened during BDSM, Dominique responded:

No. Not during play. I mean I’ve had that happen in like the real world. Everyday life. Like my job and stuff like that. And people would expect me to be one way and I’m just not that way. And I’ve had clashes there. Like I said earlier. Diesel mechanic, which is traditionally a male job and a male role. And you know. Here I am this little woman with pigtails in those days. And I’d crawl out from underneath a truck and people are literally shocked by it. And I’ve had people just go ‘shit,’ you know? They just don’t expect it. Which is fine. I accept the fact that people were shocked and ‘oh my god.’ What bothered me is they assumed I automatically had no idea what I was doing. And that is a sure way to really really get under my skin is to treat me like I’m stupid. Because I mean come on. I knew my job. And I was very good at it. And when people would question and ask

ridiculous things like ‘oh do you know what a slack adjuster is sweetheart?’ I just—Like if you’re a mechanic and you don’t know what a slack adjuster is. You’ve got some big issues. Things like, “does your husband mind if you have his tools?” [So it sounds like you’ve had those experiences frequently at work and in non-BDSM contexts but you’re saying that hasn’t been the case in BDSM. Is that right?] That is absolutely correct. Yeah. Yeah. I can be more of myself because I don’t have to sit there and explain anything.

Dominique explains being treated according to gender stereotypes in the “real world” and “everyday life,” explaining that people often assumed ze “had no idea what I was doing” and that ze must be borrowing zir husband’s tools because of zir gender. Dominique contrasts these experiences of being treated in highly gender stereotypical ways in non-BDSM contexts with how ze is treated in BDSM contexts, explaining that ze can “be more of myself” in BDSM contexts, where the comparative decrease in reliance on gender stereotypes means ze doesn’t “have to explain anything.”

Participants like Reese, Harper, Dominique, and others like them perceive gender as less salient to the selves they create and enact in BDSM compared with other settings. For these participants, the comparatively lower salience of gender in BDSM settings is tied to their perception that others are less likely to treat them in accordance with gender stereotypes or to hold them accountable to gendered norms for behavior in BDSM compared with other contexts. The creation of interactional contexts in which participants feel less compelled to “do gender,” especially in normative ways, is thus an interactional process. Participants anticipate how their BDSM partner(s) will respond to the selves they create and enact. In the same way that highly gendered selves are produced through interactional processes that rely on interactions with others, so are less highly gendered selves. In both cases the creation and enactment of selves requires the negotiation of cultural gender beliefs with the other participant(s) in the interactions.

**Increased Perception of the Salience of Gender for the Self in BDSM Settings: “I Prefer to Be Softer and More Femme”**

Finally, many participants (n=10; 31% of all interview participants; 77% of those who perceive differences in the salience of gender across BDSM and non-BDSM settings) perceive gender as highly salient for the selves they enact in the context of BDSM. These participants explain that BDSM contexts give them a heightened sense of their own gender and reaffirm their sense of their own gendered selves. Peyton, for example, explains that BDSM has “reinforced my sense of self as a woman.” Ze explains that in BDSM contexts ze, “Very much felt like a woman. I felt very, very feminine. [And what gave you that feeling?] His [zir dominant’s] power. His power. How powerful he was. Goes back to like the confidence, the take what I want type attitude.” For Peyton, feeling “like a woman” and “very, very feminine” result directly from the power zir dominant has in the context of BDSM and zir dominant’s “take what I want type attitude.” For Peyton, feeling like a woman means feeling relatively powerless in comparison with zir partner. Enacting a submissive role in the context of BDSM with a masculine dominant whom ze perceives as very powerful thus heightens Peyton’s sense of zir feminine gender. For participants like Peyton, hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power (e.g. men are powerful, women are comparatively powerless) are highly salient in the context of BDSM, which heightens participants’ sense of the salience of gender for their own selves. Peyton goes on to explain specific instances in which interactions with zir top have provided reinforcement of zir sense of zir gender. Ze says, for example, “When he was you know just whenever he wanted to just like bend me over and take me. If it was just for like a five minute type thing. Or pulling me down on top of his ummmm— You know perform oral sex. Or just basically take what he wanted when

he wanted it. That made me feel very feminine.” Zir partner “taking what he wanted”—demonstrating power over zir—makes Peyton feel feminine. Significantly, Peyton frames the power exchange in this interaction in terms of gender rather than BDSM role. It is especially significant that Peyton does not view this interaction as one that made zir feel very *submissive*, but instead as one that made zir feel very *feminine*.

Robin similarly explains experiencing a more strongly gendered self in BDSM than other social contexts. Ze says, “I identify as female ... some scenes reinforce that for me... I dress more feminine, wear make up, not really girly, but I prefer to be softer and more femme... not butch.” The gendered self Robin creates and enacts in BDSM contexts is “softer and more femme” than the self ze enacts in other settings and BDSM scenes can serve to reinforce Robin’s sense of zir gender. Similarly, when I asked whether Taylor had ever felt that something that happened during BDSM reinforced Taylor’s gender, ze responded, “Yes. But I don’t think I’m necessarily proud about that, but yeah. Something more about the standard role model. The dominating male, you know, head-of-the-household attitude or something like that.” The standard role model to which Taylor refers, the head-of-the-household dominating male, is not a role Taylor enacts in non-BDSM-contexts. In BDSM settings, however, Taylor feels comfortable enacting a self that conforms more closely to gender stereotypes, particularly those related to dominance and power. For participants like Taylor and Robin, the selves they enact in BDSM settings are created in part through performing in more gender stereotypical ways than they do in other settings and these more stereotypical gender performances in the context of BDSM serve to reinforce their broader sense of their gender.

Like Peyton, Robin, and Taylor, the vast majority of participants who report perceiving gender as more relevant to their sense of self in BDSM than other settings enact or identify with BDSM roles that conform to normative associations of masculinity with power and dominance and femininity with powerlessness and submission. The overwhelming majority of participants who identify as men and perceive gender as highly salient identify with or enact a top/dominant/master role, while the overwhelming majority of participants who identify as women and perceive gender as highly salient identify with or enact a bottom/submissive/ slave role. The increased salience of gender is thus often correlated with adherence to normative linkages of gender and power and suggests a high level of acceptance of normative cultural gender beliefs.

Perhaps most interesting however, is an unexpected pattern that emerged in my data: participants who for various reasons (often including feminist and other progressive political commitments) actively resist the salience of gender in non-BDSM contexts, such as in the workplace, in social settings with friends and family, etc., perceive BDSM as creating a context in which the salience of gender for their selves *increases*. Furthermore, many of these participants seek out BDSM experiences precisely because they enjoy participating in contexts in which the salience of gender is increased. Devon, for instance, told me:

For me in my vanilla life non-gendered is my preference. But when I'm with my partner I definitely play the female role. And I usually play the young female role. Because I think the fact that I play a young female role a lot of the time— I think that that says something. So I guess the word gender is... I definitely would never play the non-gender role with him. Even though I've always played that role with other people. Because when I'm with my play partner that's the person that I get to be. I get to be the feminine female part. And I can play the narrow female feminine vulnerable gal. So in... BDSM I get to play the part that I don't play in my



real life. Even though when I'm [Devon] with anyone else I'm just pretty much [Devon]. There's no gender.

Devon constructs the self ze performs in non-BDSM settings as non-gendered—as a self for which ze perceives gender as having low salience. Yet in the context of BDSM, gender becomes significantly more salient for zir sense of self as ze takes on a highly stereotypical “narrow female feminine vulnerable” self.

Similarly, Aubrey also describes the salience of gender for zir self as being elevated in BDSM compared with other social contexts. Ze explains:

I think that the gender dynamic when I'm playing is what heightens the whole scene. Feeling very, very feminine, submissive, even to how I dress. You know it's like I don't wear spiked heels usually but when I play I get very—I like wearing the silky, satiny, the black lace, the spike heels. Put on makeup. I don't usually wear a lot of makeup but I really like the girly and the big strong caveman kind of dynamic. You know. I mean I like very I guess maybe stereotypically gendered or whatever...I think during a scene it's when I feel the most feminine.

Aubrey does not feel particularly feminine in non-BDSM settings and doesn't usually engage in stereotypically feminine behavior outside the context of BDSM. In BDSM settings, however, gender becomes more salient for the self ze creates and enacts. The salience of gender and zir use of “stereotypically gendered” behaviors such as wearing stereotypically feminine lingerie, spike heels, and makeup and acting in “girly” ways are strongly correlated for Aubrey, because gender is significantly more important to and influential for the self ze enacts in BDSM settings. Aubrey further indicates zir increased perception of the salience of gender for zir self in BDSM settings by explaining that ze feels most feminine during a scene.

Like Aubrey, Shannon also explains enacting a highly stereotypical gendered self in BDSM contexts that contrasts sharply with the self ze enacts in non-BDSM settings:

Aspects of the interactions and roleplay definitely do involve definite gender roles. And you know I guess when I'm topping—versus like work or normal life—I definitely focus more on the 'I'm a man you're a woman. These are things about my masculinity. These are things about your femininity.' And I guess I go more into you know stereotypes of you know you're going to be the sexually objectified woman. And I'm going to be the alpha male. And that's not generally really who I am in my everyday life.

Shannon explains that the stereotypical, normative masculine gender self ze sometimes enacts in BDSM settings is “not generally really who I am in my everyday life”—and marks this self as a significantly different and explicitly gendered self. For Shannon, zir ability to enact this highly gendered self in BDSM settings is related to the gender of zir partner. Ze explains that focusing on “things about my masculinity” is accompanied by focusing on things about zir partner's femininity. Similarly, Shannon's ability to enact an “alpha male” self— a self in which gender is significantly more salient than the self ze enacts in “everyday life”—is associated with zir partner enacting a self built on stereotypes of the “sexually objectified woman.” For Shannon, like for most participants who report perceiving an increase in the salience of gender for their selves in BDSM contexts, the salience of gender for their self is correlated with their perception of the salience of gender for their partner. Participants who perceive gender as being more salient for their own selves are also likely to interact with their partners in ways that elevate the salience of gender, often by drawing on what they acknowledge as highly stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity.

Similarly, when I asked if Riley's gender is different in BDSM and non-BDSM settings, Riley explained:

You know. It's funny. I've always known you know designation female. That's kind of obvious. How I feel is kind of a little bit more fluid than that. Not necessarily male. I don't believe that I've ever specifically felt male. I don't know that I'd know what it feels like but I don't feel like my thought patterns are bound by my gender... people have sometimes said to me that I think like a guy. [Laughs.] I like playing with everything. Girl things, boy things. I don't really care. If it's something that I want to do or am interested in then awesome. So I'm not typically girly. [And is that the same or different in BDSM?].... [In BDSM] I get to get all dolled up and stuff... I think it gave me a place to acknowledge that I don't always think of myself as female. And it's funny because there's nothing to replace that with. As in I think of myself as male. I don't know that there's an actual feeling that is associated with gender. Kind of fluid in that regard.

Riley describes feeling not particularly bound by gender, indicating that in non-BDSM contexts, ze does not perceive gender as especially salient to how ze creates and enacts zir self. The distinctly feminine gendered Riley explains enacting in BDSM contexts, however, suggests that ze perceives gender as comparatively more salient to zir sense of self in BDSM than other contexts.

For participants like Riley, Devon, Shannon, Aubrey, and others, BDSM is the setting in which they feel most comfortable performing gender in normative, stereotypical ways and the setting in which gender becomes comparatively more salient to their sense of self. This is one of the most interesting and unexpected findings in my data. It would be a mistake, however, to interpret this finding as entirely contradicting the argument made by some queer theorists that BDSM is a space in which participants can transgress or subvert normative gender. For while participants may be choosing to create and enact highly stereotypical, normative, and gender-conforming selves, the creation and enactment of those selves nonetheless problematizes gender normativity in several significant ways. First, the gender-normative selves participants like these create are explicitly marked *as* constructions— that is, as *not* being natural, essential, or fixed

gendered selves. Second, these selves are also marked as stereotypical. BDSM participants like Devon, Shannon, Aubrey, Riley, and others are attempting to enact stereotypes, rather than attempting to express their “real” or “natural” gendered selves, further marking these gendered selves as constructions. For these participants stereotypical gendered performances are something that must be worked at and constructed, rather than “natural” expressions of an innate gender. Third, by marking these selves as different from rather than similar to the selves they enact in non-BDSM settings, these participants trouble one of the foundations of the gender system—the idea that people have *one* fixed gendered self that they enact across all social settings.

In these ways, even enactments of highly stereotypical, normative gendered selves can challenge the foundational tenets of the gender system. As Ridgeway (2009, 2011) explains, gender works as a primary frame by linking sex category with shared cultural belief about gender. Actors’ perceptions of gender salience are directly related to whether they perceive gender as providing useful informational clues that they can rely on to predict the behavior of others and in turn modify their own behavior. Performances that disrupt the assumption that sex category can be used to reliably predict gendered performances undermine the assumption that sex category and gender will always or automatically “match.” By disrupting the normative correlation between sex category and gender, such performances disrupt the normative linkage between sex category and gender on which the framing process depends. Importantly, even highly stereotypical gender performances can create this disruption when they involve performances not normatively understood to “match” the sex category of the performer.

### **Summary**

These findings suggest that while some participants do indeed experience BDSM as providing a context in which gender is less salient for the self they enact compared with other settings, for others the salience of gender for their sense of self is relatively stable across settings, and for still others gender is *more* salient to the selves they create and enact in BDSM contexts than in other settings. That even when participants experience BDSM contexts as settings in which gender is comparatively less salient they are especially mindful of this decreased salience suggests that the gender system significantly influences interactions even in settings where it is comparatively less salient. Participants are usually highly aware of moments in which they feel relatively “free from” gender or feel that gender is comparatively less salient and mark these moments as different from their everyday lives and for many participants these moments are among the most significant pleasures of BDSM; yet this very awareness also keeps gender present in the minds of participants.

Thus, I argue that BDSM does not provide a context in which BDSM participants are “*freely* choosing their subject positions” in relation to gender, as Ritchie and Barker (2005) suggest, but instead creates a context in which participants create social selves through a process that requires negotiating the gender system with their BDSM partner(s). While participants may feel better able to choose gendered or non-gendered subject positions and to have those subject positions or selves recognized as legitimate by their partners in BDSM settings compared with other social settings, gendered subject positions are not freely chosen, but are instead created and chosen in ways that respond to the possibilities and limitations created by the gender system itself through a process that involves negotiating those possibilities and limitations with other participants in the

situation. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of how participants perceive the salience of gender when selecting and interacting with others, focusing specifically on interactions with their partners and potential partners.

### **PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER SALIENCE IN CHOOSING AND INTERACTING WITH BDSM PARTNERS**

In the only other study to date to explore the relative importance of gender and BDSM role, an ethnographic study of a BDSM community in the northeast, Newmahr (2011) found that in the context of the specific community she studied, participants viewed BDSM role as a more important social category than gender. She explains:

[T]he social organization of the Caeden community [the BDSM community on which the ethnography is based] is not especially intertwined with embodiments of masculinity and femininity. Instead, the community is organized around the related but significantly distinct identities built around topping and bottoming. (p. 107)

Newmahr further argues that in Caeden, “gender regulation is replaced by SM-identity regulation,” underscoring the point that for participants in the Caeden community, gender is a less important social category than is BDSM role (p.117). By replacing gender with BDSM role as the social category to which participants most strongly hold one another accountable, the social salience of gender is decreased. My work builds upon Newmahr’s findings to explore whether and how a general decrease in gender regulation in BDSM contexts influences how participants use gender as a social category when selecting and interacting with BDSM partners. By exploring the salience of gender in the context of choosing and interacting with BDSM partners, this research contributes to our understanding of “the extent to which gender in a given setting appears to actors to give them useful clues about how others in the situation are likely to behave” (Ridgeway 2011; 71). In this section, I thus explore the extent to which BDSM participants perceive

gender as providing them with clues about how others—specifically partners and potential partners— are likely to behave.

Across both discussion board and interview data, several patterns related to gender and choice of BDSM partner(s) emerged, with differences both in the relative salience of gender as a social category and in how participants use gender in making choices about BDSM partners. For example, on a 2004 discussion thread titled “Gender or D/s role—which trumps the other?” participants explicitly debate the relative importance of gender and BDSM role in the selection of BDSM partners. Perhaps referencing Califia’s (2000) infamous assertion “if I had a choice between being shipwrecked on a desert island with a vanilla lesbian and a hot male masochist, I’d pick the boy” (p. 159), the initial poster writes:

My mostly straight master once made the casual comment that he’d rather be stranded on a desert island with a male submissive than a female non-submissive, and that’s where the idea came from. If you could only have one erotic partner for the rest of your life, would you prefer one who was compatible in terms of D/s role or in terms of gender?<sup>143</sup> When does gender trump D/s role? When does D/s role trump gender? For example, would you prefer to be stranded on a desert island with a member of your less-preferred gender but more-preferred BDSM role or vice versa? For example: for straightish dommes, would you prefer a submissive female, or a non-submissive male?

The first person to respond answers:

I wasn't going to answer this question because I'm a bisexual without any particular preference for one gender or the other. Then I remembered that the *reason* that I don't particularly have a gender preference is because, for me, D/s compatibility almost always trumps gender completely. So give me a good dominant of either gender over any kind of non-dominant.

The next poster agrees, “what she said.” The following poster agrees as well, “I’d rather have a submissive male than a nonsubmissive female. I agree...it’s all about the D/s

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<sup>143</sup> The first part of the question was added by the initial poster after the thread had received several dozen responses.

compatibility vs. gender. ALWAYS.” And another writes, “it would have to be Dom - male or female for me.” Similarly, a different poster writes, “In my case, I'd pick D/s over gender.” For these posters, BDSM role “trumps” gender when it comes to selecting BDSM partners. Yet this does not mean that gender is a completely non-salient social category for these participants, a point to which I return in the following section.

For the next several posters, however, gender “trumps.” One writes, “gender definitely. I have absolutely no interest in any kind of sexual or romantic relationship with a woman, vanilla, dominant, or submissive.” And another explains, “I'm a straight submissive...in this scenario, I'd prefer a non-Dominant male over a Dominant female,” again indicating that gender is of greater relative importance than BDSM role when choosing a partner for this participant. Likewise, a different poster explains, “All my close relationships have been with males - either switches, Dominants, Sadists, or vanillas. So I'd have to say gender always trumps D/s roles with me.” And another explains, “Gender of course... I like males... DOMINANT males...no way on earth would a female ever dominate me.” Yet another poster responds, “For me, gender trumps. I want a man to act like a man whether he is on the top or the bottom. And I want a man to treat me like a lady whether I am on the top or the bottom.” Many other posters echo the “gender trumps” theme: “for me, gender is trump;” “gender definitely trumps D/s orientation;” “Gender trumps all.. I am not attracted to women;” “Most definately [sic] for me does gender trump D/s,” etc. For these participants, gender is of primary importance compared with BDSM role; these participants will not play with a partner who does not enact their preferred gender. Because gender rather than BDSM role is the most important social category when selecting BDSM partners for these participants,



gender is highly salient in BDSM contexts. Gender provides these participants with important clues about how to interact with others, because gender serves as the basis for defining others in the situation as either potential partners or not.

For other posters, however, the question of “trumping” leads to more complex patterns. One person, for instance, responds:

OK, strange answer maybe. I adore men, however, you are putting a forced choice question to us. So...D/s orientation would trump gender. HOWEVER, if I could not be with a dominant male then the next choice for me would not be a dominant female, but a submissive female. And I'm not a switch, except with the rare exceptional girl. I guess that means lifestyle trumps orientation trumps gender.

For this participant, both gender and BDSM role are highly salient in BDSM contexts, yet these categories interact in ways infrequently reported by other participants. Another poster shares a similarly complex response, explaining “I'm sub to women, and I like topping men very much.” For this participant, gender influences which BDSM role she will take. And a different poster responds:

I wouldn't be sexually compatible with a dominant woman, because I'm straight; I wouldn't be sexually compatible with a 'nilla man, because I'm kinky. So the desert island thing is kind of a wash, in that regard. I would not be erotically interested in either a dominant woman or a 'nilla male (on or off the island); the former would be incompatible due to gender, the latter due to lack of kink. No trump.

For this participant, BDSM role and gender are equally salient factors when determining whether someone is a potential partner. In this thread alone, an extremely diverse range of ways of using gender when selecting and interacting with BDSM partners is apparent. Participants report significantly different perceptions of the relative salience of gender in BDSM contexts, particularly in comparison with BDSM role. Unlike Yost (2007), I did not find a relationship between stable BDSM identity (e.g. top, bottom) and the relative

importance of gender roles or identifications. I found instead that participants' perceptions of the salience of gender varied independently of their BDSM role/identification.

In this section of the chapter, I identify and analyze three primary patterns of using gender when interacting with others in BDSM contexts that emerge in my data, focusing particularly on interactions with partners and potential partners. I argue that these patterns indicate that the salience of gender in BDSM contexts is not static, but varies across specific situations. I find that in addition to gender salience varying situationally, as Ridgeway and others argue, it also varies across individual actors in a given setting. I suggest that this individual-level variance of gender salience in a specific setting is correlated with individual perceptions of whether other actors in that setting maintain hegemonic or alternative cultural gender beliefs, the subject of Chapter 7.

The majority of my interview partners (60%; n=19) engage in BDSM with partners of any gender(s), while a significant minority of my interview partners (40%; n=13) engage in BDSM with partners of only one gender (e.g. men or women).<sup>144</sup>

Interestingly, while 60% of my interview partners reported engaging in BDSM activities with both men and women, in the demographic questions I asked at the end of the interview, only 46% identified their sexual orientations with categories that include partners of more than one gender (categories participants created to describe their sexual orientations and that I interpret to include partners of more than one gender include: queer, pansexual, bisexual, bicurious, and heteroflexible).

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<sup>144</sup> Interestingly, across all of my data sources, no participant who reported engaging in BDSM with partners of only one gender reported choosing partners whose gender did not conform to a normative, dichotomous gender category (e.g. men, women). No participants, for example, reported participating in BDSM only with trans or non-gendered partners.

I suspect that this difference results from two factors. First, as discussed in Chapter 5, not all participants perceive BDSM as sexual. Participation in BDSM may thus have little to do with participants' sexual orientation for some participants. Second, also as discussed in Chapter 5, some participants view BDSM as sexual but not sex and may define their sexual orientation in terms of their sex partners (e.g. those with whom they engage in intercourse or other genitally-centered activities) rather than their sexual partners (e.g. those with whom they engage in non-genitally centered activities that have sexual meanings for them). This finding has potential implications both methodologically and conceptually. Methodologically, it suggests that relying on demographic questions about sexual orientation may not accurately capture the gender(s) of BDSM participants' partners. Conceptually, it suggests that "sexual orientation" may be too narrow a concept to adequately examine gender-based partners choices among BDSM participants. It also raises the question of whether there are other alternative sexual practices for which "sexual orientation" is not an adequate conceptual category. My data suggest that the ways in which individuals use gender in selecting sexual partners vary across particular kinds of sexual contexts or activities (e.g. BDSM compared with "vanilla" sexual activities).

While my interview partners were more likely to report engaging in BDSM with partners of a variety of genders (60%) than to report gender limitations on their choice of partners (40%), these results cannot be understood as a simple case of using versus rejecting gender as a salient social category in selecting partners. Even for those who engage in BDSM with partners of a variety of genders, gender often plays a significant role in their choice of partners, as the following sections will show. Additionally, gender

plays an important role in how many participants interact with BDSM partners, regardless of whether they choose or exclude potential partners in part on the basis of gender. In the sections that follow, I first explore the ways in which participants who engage in BDSM with partners of a specific gender use gender in selecting and interacting with partners. Next, I turn my attention to how the majority of participants who play with partners who enact a variety of genders perceive the salience of gender in the context of interactions with their BDSM partner(s).

**Perceptions of Gender Salience and Uses of Gender as a Social Category Among Participants Who Engage in BDSM with Partners of A Specific Gender**

Among participants who engage in BDSM with partners of only one gender (40% of my interview partners; n= 13), gender is a highly salient social category, because participants use gender as an initial sorting mechanism to determine potential partners. These participants overtly hold others with whom they interact accountable to gender by using gender to judge the behavior of others with whom they act in determining whether that person is a potentially suitable BDSM partner. Dakota, for example, told me: “I play with women. Solely women. I don’t play with transgenders or TVs, TGs. Anything like that. Solely women.” Similarly, Dominique, who has had past experience dominating both men and women, will no longer play with women partners. Ze explains, “I’ve had women partners as well in the past. But I don’t like to be really mean. I don’t play with them very hard. Because I get frustrated with them. [And why is that?] I think it was just how I was raised.” Dominique no longer plays with women because ze feels uncomfortable interacting with women partners in the way ze prefers. Participants like Dominique perceive gender as highly salient, because gender provides these participants with important clues about how to interact with others. Using these gender-based cues

about appropriate ways of interacting, participants like Dominique choose not to interact with partners outside their preferred gender, because they perceive their preferred styles of interaction to be inappropriate with partners of their non-preferred gender.

Unsurprisingly, participants who perceive gender as a highly salient social category and for whom gender plays a significant role in their choice of partners often explain their gender-based partner preferences in terms of gender stereotypes, as does Dominique, who explains not feeling comfortable being “really mean” or playing “very hard” with women.

Ryan, whose non-BDSM sexual experiences are only with women and whose BDSM experiences are only with men told me:

I have met some incredible, wonderful, talented women. Both that are doms and passive. Incredible in what they know and what they can do. And I've watched women really, really work men over. And I could stand to watch that for hours. But, she's not going to do it to me and I don't want to do it to her. When I'm into the bondage, BD S&M mode my playmate is going is to be male. I do not get into BDSM with a female. I tend to put my women on pedestals. I want to make love to them. I do not want to hurt them. I do not want to control them. I do not want to dominate them. I want to please and satisfy the woman. Therefore if I'm in the mood. You know. Call it bisexuality, homosexuality, whatever term you want to put on it, if I'm going to dominate, I want to dominate another male. That takes it to a level beyond what society accepts. You know unfortunately for women in this country, they're still second class citizens. So to dominate a woman. That's what men are supposed to do. I mean, when you look at a lot of your heterosexual male attitude. You know, her role is to take care of me. So that's where it trips my trigger the most. When I can find a man that doesn't really, how can I say this... I just really want to dominate the male. So with the gender aspect that's one thing that could stop it for me real quick. The thing that could really stop a scene for me very quickly is if he would become any signs of femininity. Because I do not get into the feminine men. I do not get into playing with switchers [switchers indicates people who switch genders, as opposed to switches, who switch BDSM roles]. Cross-dressers. Whatever term. You know, a man in a dress in a wig does nothing for me. But to be with another man that you know is very masculine and all that kind of stuff to

be able to turn around and dominate him is more of a turn on to me than anything else.

For Ryan, gender is an extremely important criterion when selecting BDSM partners, because Ryan will not engage in BDSM with a woman partner, no matter how “incredible, wonderful [or] talented” she is. Ryan also holds partners accountable to “appropriate” gender displays, indicating that any “signs of femininity” in zir partner will bring a scene to a complete stop and that ze “does not get into the feminine men.”

Both Dominique and Ryan choose partners who bottom and who enact masculine selves. And for both Dominique and Ryan, their preference for masculine-identified bottoms is influenced by their beliefs about appropriate ways of relating to men and women. Dominique perceives women partners as limiting zir ability to be as physically rough and aggressive as ze would prefer, which ze attributes to childhood gender socialization. Ryan, on the other hand, chooses not to engage in BDSM with partners who enact femininity because to Ryan, masculine-dominant/feminine-submissive patterns are so stereotypical as to be unexciting. Because Ryan perceives women as socially inferior to men, dominating a partner who enacts a feminine gender is simply living up to social expectations about gendered behavior. Dominating a partner who enacts masculinity, on the other hand, is exciting to Ryan in part because it “takes it to a level beyond what society accepts.” The taboo of exerting power over someone whose gender performance socially codes that person as powerful is much more interesting and desirable to Ryan than is exerting power over someone who is socially coded as powerless.

For participants who use gender as a screening mechanism when selecting BDSM partners, gender is an extremely socially salient category. Whether or not the

individual[s] with whom one is interacting is a potential partner significantly impacts the kinds of interactions one will have with that individual. In this way, the high level of salience of gender in BDSM contexts for these participants influences both how they will perceive others as well as how they themselves will act in relation to others. Gender plays a significant role in whether these participants will perceive others as potential partners, which in turns influences how participants will interact with those others. In this way, gender serves as a primary frame for interaction, facilitating the process of defining self and other in a given situation and providing guidelines for both how one should behave zirsself and how ze can expect others actors to behave.

#### **Perceptions of Gender Salience and Uses of Gender Among Participants Who Engage in BDSM with Partners of a Variety of Genders**

Among participants who engage in BDSM with partners of a variety of genders—the majority of participants in this sample (60%; n=19)— the importance of gender varies, as do the specific ways participants use gender when making decisions about and interacting with BDSM partners. Among these participants, two main patterns related to the use of gender in the selection of and interaction with partners emerged. The first pattern, *gender-based switching*, is the least frequent among my interview partners (n=1), but appears repeatedly on the discussion boards and is analytically one of the most interesting patterns. The second pattern, *rejection of gender* as a salient criterion in the selection of BDSM partners, is the most frequent among my interview partners (57%; n=18). In both of these patterns participants engage in BDSM with partners of a variety of genders. The salience of gender differs across these patterns, however.

**Gender-based switching: “I only bottom to men and top women.”**

In one pattern of gender use among participants who engage in BDSM with partners of a variety of genders, *gender-based switching*, participants engage in BDSM with partners of a variety of genders but take particular BDSM roles based on the gender of their partner. For example, Chris, who identifies as a switch, says:

I've always felt more how should I say— more— I felt safe being a little more sexually aggressive with women. And then more sexually or sensually submissive with other men. So even through college, when I think of that, when I had a boyfriend, he was always on top, he was always the top, I was always bottom.

Although Chris was the only interviewee who reported gender-based switching, this theme emerged repeatedly on the discussion boards. For instance, on a 2005 thread titled, “Switching based on gender,” posters describe choosing roles based on the gender of their partner(s). Like Chris, the initial poster describes submitting to men and dominating women, writing, “I am a switch who is submissive with males and top with females. I don't really try to understand it, it's just how it is, but I do wonder how many others are out there like me who are gender-specific switches.” Another writes, “I am a definite sub bottom with men, but when I have fantasies of women, I'd want them as my slaves. I'm not sure why but it's true.” Yet another explains, “I am sub to male top to female.” Quoting the original post, another responds, “what you describe is exactly how I interact as well. I don't start out feeling that I want to top anyone, but when I get involved with girl-girl play I seem to be the more sexually aggressive player, and I tend to naturally get into a toppy mode with other female submissives.”

Similarly, another poster writes, “it is defintiely [sic] gender specific for me so far. I have never subbed to a woman and I doubt I ever will. I enjoy topping females, but the lady has yet to come along who makes me feel I could or would like to submit to.”



And another writes, “So far, have only submitted or bottomed to men... So if anything runs along gender lines, it's who I submit/bottom to.” Although these participants engage in BDSM with partners of a variety of genders, gender is nonetheless an extremely salient social category in their choice of partners, because participants use the gender of their partner to determine what BDSM role they will take in interactions with that partner. In these instances, rather than gender *replacing* BDSM role, as Newmahr (2011) found, gender *determines* BDSM role. For these participants, gender is highly salient in BDSM contexts, because gender provides participants with important clues about how they should interact with others. By using the gender of the person with whom they are playing to determine the role they will take, participants indicate that gender plays a crucial role in their interactions with BDSM partners.

Interestingly, participants of all gender identifications overwhelmingly reported preferring to bottom to men and top women, a finding related at least in part to both men's and women's perceptions of men as being more “authentically” and/or “naturally” dominant and women being more “authentically” and/or “naturally” submissive, which I discuss in depth in Chapter 7. Gender-specific switches who top men and bottom to women are extremely rare, however, which may be related to the overall greater prevalence— or perception of a greater prevalence—of masculine-identified tops and feminine-identified bottoms.<sup>145</sup> This is a particularly important finding in relation to

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<sup>145</sup> In the only large-sample study of BDSM participants in the past two decades, Bienvenu and Jacques (1999) found women were most likely to identify as only a bottom (44.%) and least likely to identify as only a top (6.2%), while men's identifications were spread more evenly across a range of role-identifications (only a bottom, mostly a bottom, equally switch, mostly a top, only a top). Men, however, were least likely to report identifying as only a bottom (14.4%). It is difficult to determine whether these data reflect the “overall” BDSM community for several reasons, including that their sample contains a larger number of women than men participants. Additionally, there are often significant differences in the number of men and women tops and bottoms across hetero, pansexual, queer, and gay, and lesbian communities, and the boundaries between these communities are stronger in some Scenes than others.

understanding how participants use gender, because it demonstrates that those who rely on gender to determine the BDSM role they enact in a given situation make gender-based choices that conform to normative constructions of gender and power. Men, as a social group, are normatively constructed as powerful and masculinity is normative associated with power and dominance, while women, as a social group, are normatively constructed as powerless and femininity normatively associated with powerlessness and submissiveness; cultural gender beliefs that link power and gender are the subject of Chapter 7. That the majority of participants who engage in gender-based switching are submissive only with men and dominant only with women suggests that normative constructions of gender and power are highly influential among these participants. Their choices of partners conform to normative associations of gender and power both by relying on the gender of their partners to determine the role they will take and by constructing men as more natural dominants and women as more natural submissives in ways that support current normative linkages of gender and power. I discuss how participants negotiate normative linkages of gender and power in the context of BDSM and other interactions in more depth in Chapter 7.

For participants who engage in gender-based switching, gender is highly salient in BDSM contexts for both self and others. Indeed, this pattern provides an exemplary case of the interactional nature of gender. Participants rely significantly on the gender of their BDSM partner(s) to guide their interactions with that partner. The gender of their partner(s) influences how they will interact with a given partner by determining the role they will take with that partner. While the openness of gender-based switches to playing with partners of a variety of genders may on the surface suggest that gender is relatively

less salient than other social categories when it comes to selecting a partner, this analysis demonstrates instead that gender is among the most salient social categories in BDSM contexts, because participants use gender to determine the other roles they will take. In this case gender does more than just provide a set of guidelines for how to enact a particular role—it determines the role that a participant will take.

**Rejecting gender: “Give me a good dominant of either gender over any kind of non-dominant.”**

Finally, for many BDSM participants (57%; n=18 in the interview sample), BDSM role rather than gender is the most relevant social category when choosing a BDSM partner. These participants do not perceive gender as a particularly salient social category and view other social categories, such as BDSM role, as providing more important informational clues about how to interact with others in the context of BDSM. These participants explain that gender does not influence their choice of partner and some also reject the idea that gender influences how they interact with specific partners. For instance, Alex says,

It’s not whether I’m gay or straight. And with Christina, she’s a female. She was a straight woman. And she was the one that first started me in this. I had no problem submitting to her any more than I do with Sir [Alex’s current, gay male-identified dominant]. Because it’s more about the connection than the gender of who it is.

Likewise, when asked, “Does gender matter when you are considering a potential BDSM partner?” Pat says, “It isn’t really much difference...So I play with women and men.”

Similarly, Cody says:

I really don’t think that gender had anything or has anything to do with what I do because I play with men and women. So I really don’t think gender would have anything to do with it. At all. Because I’ve played with some really rugged lesbians and some straight men have bottomed to me. And gay men as well. I’m a

gay male. I've actually owned a female slave. You know. So gender doesn't have anything to do with it at all.

For Cody, gender is irrelevant to zir choice of BDSM partners. Cody emphasizes that ze has “actually owned a female slave,” indicating that zir indifference to the gender of zir BDSM partners is not restricted to casual or time-limited scenes but extends to long-term relationships as well.

Harper also explains viewing gender as irrelevant to zir choice of partners.

Ze says:

To me gender has no relevance in who I'm attracted to. The best way I can describe it is I see gender simply as an issue of plumbing. And I don't understand why that would affect why you care for somebody or how you care for somebody or whether or not you're attracted to them. That just really makes no sense to me...I enjoy playing with male, female, TG [transgender], TS, [transsexual], and everything in between. It really makes no difference to me. To me the importance is the mental connection. And enjoying the play. And plumbing's really not an issue to me. So what gender I play with is not an issue at all.

For Harper, it's about the mental connection with another person—a connection that can exist with partners regardless of gender. Harper explains that for zir, gender doesn't influence why *or* how ze cares for someone. Similarly, Shawn, who identifies as a top, says, “I'll play with a guy as much as I'll play with a girl...For me it doesn't matter if you're a female or male or something in between, making your transition.” Participants like Harper and Shawn reject the idea of dichotomous gender by explicitly acknowledging the existence of trans-identified people and simultaneously reject the idea that gender has any bearing on their choice of BDSM partners. Rejecting the construction of gender as a dichotomous category has important implications for participants' perceptions of the salience of gender, because salience is related to the usefulness of gender as a sorting mechanism, which is in turn related to its construction as a simple

system with few categories. To the extent that individuals recognize categories of gender outside those recognized by the normative sex category/ gender system, the general salience of gender is likely to be decreased for these individuals compared with those who perceive normative categories as adequate.

For some participants, the relatively low salience of gender in BDSM interactions is explicitly linked to the distinction participants draw between “sex” and “sexual,” described in the previous chapter. Andy, for example, explains:

I can't say that I wouldn't be involved in a BDSM scene with a woman, but it's not my focus... If a female dom came along that was offering to do [a scene] that was really good and was offering to do [an] impact scene with me. Yeah, I would probably say yes. But if I was going to do a BDSM scene that involved sex it would be exclusively male.

While Andy will engage in BDSM with partners of any gender, ze will only engage in BDSM that involves sex with male partners. Similarly, Jamie says, “I mean I know some people play only with females or only with males. I don't think it matters to me because it's sexual but it's not sex.” Jamie will engage in sexual BDSM play with partners of any gender, but, like Andy, has “sex” only with partners of a specific gender. And Robin says, “I play with women and men. [And does it involve that sexual energy exchange with both women and men?] Yes, absolutely. [But not necessarily intercourse or sex?] Right.” Participants like Andy, Jamie, Robin, and others like them engage in “sex” with partners of only one gender, while engaging in sexual BDSM play with partners of a variety of genders. The importance of gender as a criterion in selecting partners thus varies across BDSM settings and those that involve traditional “sex.”

Participants who do not use gender as a criterion in selecting partners or base the BDSM role they take on the gender of their partner perceive gender as a social category

with relatively low salience in the context of BDSM. Importantly, these participants rarely identify as switches, instead identifying strongly with a specific BDSM role. These strong BDSM role-identifications influence how participants interact with others in the context of BDSM. In other words, one's own strong BDSM role identification appears to make the BDSM role, rather than the gender, of others with whom one interacts the most salient social category. This is not to say, however, that gender has *no* influence on interactions among participants who perceive gender as having relatively low influence. As we would expect based on Ridgeway's explanation of gender as a primary frame, gender serves as a way of orienting and organizing interactions when gender is a background status as well as when it appears highly salient. I discuss how gender influences participants' perceptions of tops and bottoms, as well as the legitimacy of topping and bottoming behaviors, in the next chapter.

### **Summary**

In sum, I find that participants' perceptions of the salience of gender and uses of gender as a criterion in evaluating other participants as potential partners varies. For a significant minority of participants, gender is a highly salient social category when evaluating other participants as potential partners and interacting with partners. These participants use gender as an initial sorting rubric to determine who is or is not a potential partner. Many participants who limit their choice of partners according to gender do so based on their often highly stereotypical perceptions of how it is appropriate to interact with individuals who enact a specific gender. The majority of participants in this study, however, report engaging in BDSM with partners of a variety of genders. This is an especially interesting finding because many of these participants define BDSM as sexual

yet identify their sexual orientation with monosexual categories (e.g. straight/heterosexual, gay). This suggests that compared with non-BDSM sexual settings, the salience of gender when selecting partners may be reduced in BDSM sexual settings. The salience of gender in selecting and interacting with BDSM partners is also demonstrated in the gender-based styles of interacting with tops/dominants and bottoms/submissives that many participants use, as I explore in the next chapter.

### **PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER SALIENCE IN BDSM INTERACTIONS**

There are at least two specific components of BDSM settings that influence the relative salience of gender both in constructing selves and in interacting with others. These components are tied not to BDSM activities but instead to BDSM participants. In other words, it is not *what* one does in BDSM, so much as *with whom* one does those things that participants identify as the source of possibilities for gendered/non-gendered selves that differ from the possibilities that exist in other social settings. For some participants, the difference in possibilities for gendered and non-gendered selves in BDSM and non-BDSM settings is related to the greater acceptance of gender diversity and non-conformity in the BDSM community in general, or at least in the BDSM community/ies in which they participate. While I did not ask any questions about BDSM communities, the majority of interviewees independently brought up differences in BDSM and other social communities in which they participate. Without prompting, a third of my interview partners identified the BDSM community at large and/ or the communities in which they participate in specific as being much more diverse in terms of gender and/or sexual orientation compared with other social communities in which they participate. Chris, for instance, explains, "... people of any race, gender, sexual

orientation, anyone was accepted and welcome.” Similarly, Robin explains being drawn to BDSM in part because, “there are a lot of varied gender expressions in my local community.” Likewise, Ryan says:

Like I said I’ve got some great friends. Some great guys that are in blue collar jobs. That are cross-dressers, you know, switchers. They like being dressed up as the upstairs maid and just having the woman totally dominate them. You know? And that’s great. That’s cool for them if that’s what they’re in to. I am not. You know, so they get to experience and explore more gender issues than they would in the vanilla society. And they’re not going to be shunned, they’re not going to be looked down upon, they’re not going to be ridiculed. Because people in the community— It’s like well, ok, the last time I saw you you were a dom, but now you’re cross dressing. Ok. What’s up? Well, you know, I don’t know just all of the sudden I want to explore my feminine side. Ok. Cool. Awesome. So there is a lot more acceptance of experimentation with gender roles in the BDSM community than I’ve found in any other community.

For Ryan, BDSM provides a context in which participants “get to experience and explore more gender issues than they would in the vanilla society.” The ability of participants to explore gender in BDSM contexts in ways they cannot in other settings results from the knowledge that they will not be “shunned,” “looked down upon,” or “ridiculed” by other BDSM participants, who instead not only accept gender exploration, but perceive it as “cool” and “awesome.” As Ryan explains, this leads to a greater sense of acceptance of gender diversity in BDSM contexts than in most other social settings.

Harper similarly identifies the acceptance of gender diversity as an important aspect of the BDSM community:

I would definitely say that BDSM has created a very open and understanding sort of culture in that respect [gender diversity]. And I have gotten that sort of feeling from most people in the lifestyle. They tend to be much more open and accepting of gender. Gender play. Gender fluidity.



Importantly, Harper notes that not just gender play—a particular style of BDSM play that is nearly universally accepted and unremarkable in the communities with which I am familiar—but gender fluidity is accepted. Gender fluidity, unlike gender play, extends beyond the boundaries of a particular scene or set of interactions and is a way of enacting a self rather than a particular role within the context of BDSM play. That participants accept gender fluidity outside the boundaries of scene/ play settings suggests that gender fluidity need not be viewed as *play* to be accepted.

Several participants reflected specifically on the community acceptance of non-normative gender expressions, including transgender, explaining that because of the general culture of acceptance of gender diversity and fluidity, participants often feel more comfortable enacting their “real” or “true” gendered selves in BDSM contexts than they do in other settings. Indeed, for many participants, BDSM is the *only* context in which they feel comfortable enacting these non-conforming gendered selves. Christian, for example, says of zir gender identification, “I can’t think of a way other to be. Because I identify as like a around ten years old kind of a tomboy but with a little girl kind of thing. I get to be a girly girl. And others have accepted me in the community. [Is that only in BDSM?] Right.” Similarly, Dana explains feeling for a long time—up until zir recent retirement—that BDSM was the only context in which ze could enact zir gender feelings. Ze says:

You know as far as gender I identify as a female even though my voice doesn’t sound that female. I’d say all of the people in the community in the Scene who I come in contact with can identify me as that. As a matter for fact they all call me [feminine name]. But when I go to see a colleague from work— like actually I’m going tomorrow for lunch with someone, a very good friend. I’ll go dressed as a man... there’s no need to upset the cart there. But otherwise I identify as transgendered woman. Primarily as a sissy maid.

In BDSM contexts, Dana doesn't worry that zir gender presentation will "upset the applecart." Equally importantly, Dana's gender presentation is accepted and reinforced by others in the community, who signal their support for zir gender presentation and identification by referring to zir by zir preferred name and gender pronouns. What is especially significant in this account is that Dana feels compelled to dress and act "as a man" even with "a very good friend." In contrast, Dana explains that everyone with whom ze comes into contact with in the local Scene "can identify me" as zir preferred gender. Dana feels more acceptance and support for zir gender identification and presentation from casual acquaintances in BDSM contexts than ze does even with very good friends, signaling the relative importance of non-BDSM friends compared with BDSM community members in supporting and reinforcing zir gender identification.

Similarly, Chris explains supporting a former slave that was collared to both Chris and zir spouse through zir transition, noting the importance of BDSM community acceptance to the transitioning process. Ze says:

A close friend of [scene name of partner omitted] and I, we in fact, she has finally went through the surgery to transition from male to female. When we first met her, she was doing the hormone replacement, she felt comfortable in the community, felt safe. Where she will say, and I remember this very well, she would say I do not feel comfortable or safe in vanilla life. At work for example. For awhile, she was collared to [scene name of partner omitted] and I and then just to myself for awhile. Then [scene name of partner omitted] and [scene name of slave who was collared to them omitted] went to Thailand to actually go through the gender reassignment surgery... She didn't feel like the freak, for lack of a better word. She felt that she fit in as everybody else. And I've seen a lot of men who have transitioned to female, or male to female, in fact two, actually three other people I know of who have transitioned as a part of being in the lifestyle. They felt comfortable first cross-dressing, then going through therapy, hormone replacement, and then the final surgery.

Chris explains that the BDSM community provides a context in which people who are transitioning feel “comfortable” and “safe” in ways they do not in vanilla life. In BDSM contexts, people who are transitioning are not made to feel like a “freak” and instead experience a sense of acceptance accompanied by the feeling that they fit in as well as everyone else. In this way, the general openness to and support of gender fluidity in BDSM contexts often extends to higher levels of support for people who are transitioning than participants experience in non-BDSM contexts.

For participants like Chris, Ryan, Harper, and many others like them, the diversity and acceptance built into the culture of the community itself facilitates experimentation with gender. This aspect of the BDSM community serves an important dual purpose in terms of gender. It both enables participants to feel comfortable experimenting with gender—enacting gendered and/or non-gendered selves that differ from the gendered and/or non-gendered selves they enact in non-BDSM settings—and serves to encourage acceptance of the gendered and non-gendered selves enacted by others. While most interviewees identify the overall diversity and acceptance of the community as an important and distinguishing feature of the community, for some interviewees, their ability to enact different gendered and/or non-gendered selves in BDSM settings than in other settings is tied more specifically to the relationship dynamic they have created with their BDSM partner(s). That is, while the acceptance of the overall community may be beneficial, it is the dynamic of their individual relationship(s), participants’ perceptions of the salience of gender to their partner, and their perceptions of whether their partner holds normative or alternative gender beliefs that matter most.

Because of the general acceptance of gender diversity and fluidity in the BDSM community, however, in the absence of disconfirming evidence participants may be more likely to expect partners and potential partners to be accepting of gender fluidity and diversity than they would their interactional partners in non-BDSM settings. In interactions in non-BDSM settings participants often expect to be treated according to gender stereotypes and to have their actions interpreted according to whether they conform to gender-specific behavioral norms. In BDSM settings, however, participants often expect *not* to be treated according to those stereotypes or to have their behavior interpreted through gender norms. While specific information that an interactional partner supports gender stereotypes can quickly change that expectation, in the absence of that information many participants assume that other BDSM participants do not support those stereotypes. For many participants, this is a significantly different interactional process than they experience in non-BDSM or vanilla settings, in which the significant majority of participants expect the reverse to be true—that is, in the absence of disconfirming evidence, they expect interactional partners to support gender stereotypes. In the sections that follow, I explore how participants perceive the salience of gender specifically in the context of interactions with their BDSM partner(s), focusing on interactions that take place in the context of relationships based on stereotypical gender roles or that involve gender play.

**Gender as a Relationship Structure: “Think June Cleaver... old fashioned, men are men and women are ladies and caretakers.”**

Although most participants in my data do not have explicitly gender-based relationship structures, for a small but significant minority (31%; n=10),<sup>146</sup> gender provides the basis for the construction of their BDSM relationship(s). For these participants, gender itself is part of the organizing structure of their relationship dynamic. Although there are a wide variety of types of gendered structures of relationships, participants included in this study (across all data sources) most often reported one of two types of gendered relationship structures: a 1950s household/ June Cleaver structure (19%; n=6) and a daddy/girl structure (19%; n=6). In both of these relationship structures, the masculine role (bread-winning husband; daddy) is the role of control/power and the feminine role (housewife; girl) is the role of accepting control and relinquishing power, both in terms of normative narratives about these relationships and in terms of how these relationship structures are used to define dominant/submissive and/or master/slave relationship dynamics. Although these relationship structures rely on normative associations of masculinity with power and femininity with powerlessness, participation in relationships with these kind of gendered structures is not always nor necessarily a simple case of conforming to normative gender.

Additionally, ascertaining the relative salience of gender in these contexts is a complex task, because the sex category of participants often does not match the normatively associated gender role participants take. Participants who use explicitly gendered relationship structures rely on gender stereotypes to create and enact the gendered roles that structure their relationships. Some participants use gender stereotypes in ways that conform to the normative sex category → gender → stereotypical gender

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<sup>146</sup> Two participants reported relationship structures that involved both a 1950s traditional marriage dynamic and a daddy/little girl dynamic. Both of these participants described the daddy/little girl dynamic as most influential during play and the 1950s traditional marriage dynamic as more broadly influential.

performance progression that makes gender appear to be a useful interpretive frame. For these participants, their use of gender stereotypes supports and is supported by their perceptions of gender as highly salient, because these participants perceive gender stereotypes as relatively accurate and reliable predictions about how actors of a certain sex category/ gender can be expected to perform and how others will expect them to perform. For these participants, BDSM provides a context in which a sort of hyper-doing of gender is possible. BDSM is often one of the few or even only contexts in which they feel comfortable returning to the “natural” order of relations between men and women. These participants perceive gender as a highly salient category because they and their partners use stereotypical gender relationship structures to guide highly stereotypical gender performances that they and their partners perceive as “matching” their sex category/ gender. Using gender as an organizing relationship structure helps these participants hold each other accountable to normative gender in ways they often feel unable to do in other social contexts. Riley, for example, says:

You know when Master and I are living in the same you know the same abode in the same place it's going to resemble at least to the outside world a 1950s household. That's ideal for me. [And when you say a 1950s household I think I know what you mean but can you just briefly describe what you mean by that so I'm sure?] Yeah. It's where he is the head of the household and I am his helpmate. I give him my opinion. I never speak against him in public. You know. Any disputes we have we keep private. And ultimately he has veto power. He is the ultimate decision maker and I offer my opinions. You know and of course we'll throw in toys and bondage and whatever as we like. But I think that the foundation of it is going to be that.

Lee describes a similar relationship dynamic:

I will retrieve things for my sir upon his request, make his breakfast and do his laundry, but they are not orders he is giving me, I do it because that's my role. Think June Cleaver... old fashioned, men are men and women are ladies and caretakers. [Can you describe your role a little

more? You said June Cleaver and old fashioned...] I was raised in a household where my mother was in charge and she was a stay at home parent. She cooked, cleaned, drove us around, taught us and just about everything else you picture a June Cleaver type doing, she was non-stop 24/7. She believed firmly that women were to be at home and to care for the men and children and house. That transferred over to me.

Lee explains that zir “role” as June Cleaver is not a result of her role as a submissive, but is instead a result of her affirmation of the belief that women are “to be at home and to care for the men and children and house.” For Lee and others like zir, gender is a highly salient social category that reinforces the BDSM role ze enacts. Sam explains a similar view of the salience of gender in zir relationship:

One of the things that we try to do. That we do with her being my slave and all that is one of the things that she’s found very helpful and very comforting is we’ve tried to relate it in some way, our relationship, to married couples of eras past in which the wife was expected to be at home doing the housework and whatnot. And the man was the breadwinner. Now we don’t follow that to the letter. Like right now, especially given the state of the economy and the fact that we need income, she’s looking for work, great. You know. But you know something we’ve always said too is that if we could afford it and she wanted to be a housewife that was cool. But for us we do kind of relate our we relate our marriage a little bit to that. It helps to kind of mesh the marriage and slavery thing together.

Like Lee, Sam and zir slave [who I also interviewed] perceive gender as highly salient and use highly stereotypical gender norms as a method of structuring their relationship. For these participants and others like them, structuring a relationship dynamic around gender in ways that normatively correspond to the sex category and gender of participants in the relationship serves to heighten the salience of gender in the context of their BDSM relationship.

Other participants, however, use gender stereotypes in ways that disrupt the normative sex category → gender → stereotypical gender performance/ behavior progression. For instance, Alex, who identifies as a gay leatherman, told me: “And so I

was explaining to my dad what the master slave life is and he goes oh it's like being married back in the 50s. [Laughs.] And I was like, yeah, that's pretty much what we do." For Alex, the traditional heterosexual 1950s marriage is an apt analogy to the gay leather master/slave relationship in which ze is currently involved. Gender is highly salient as a social category for Alex, because highly stereotypical gender roles provide the relationship structure for ze and zir master. By engaging in a 1950s style relationship, in which Alex's role is that of a housewife and zir master's is that of a breadwinner, Alex and zir master rely on normative cultural beliefs and stereotypes about gender to guide their behavior. Yet neither Alex's sex category (male) nor gender (man/masculine) match the gender role (1950s housewife) that Alex uses as a model of appropriate interaction with zir master. Participants such as Alex use the gender stereotypes available through the gender system, yet reject the normative sex category/ gender correlations that facilitated the development of those stereotypes.

Other participants also draw on the 1950s marriage model in ways that trouble easy assumptions that these types of relationship structures are simple replications of gender-based power inequalities and that trouble an analysis that might treat these relationships as examples of intensified gender salience. Morgan, for example, explains:

We don't go in for a lot of titles and names and positions unless we're playing. Otherwise it looks like an old-fashioned relationship from the outside. [Can you describe what that means—old-fashioned?] Old-fashioned in the sense that despite the fact that I'm an arch-feminist from the outside it looks like a relationship that my grandparents probably had. You know where the male has the final say and the wife just attends to whatever when she's told to do something. Well yes, but it's not because he's the male, it's just because he's the boss.

Morgan does not perceive enacting highly stereotypical gender roles as a result of sex category/ gender, but instead as the result of the power differences built into the roles ze



and zir partner enact. Morgan, in other words, does not perceive gender as being a particularly salient factor in zir interactions with zir top and instead perceives their respective BDSM roles as having more significant influence on their interactions.

Yet while Alex, Morgan, Riley, Sam, and Lee each describe a traditional 1950s style relationship dynamic, what this dynamic means to them and how it organizes interactions in their relationship varies significantly. Most importantly, the ways that these participants use gender to structure their relationships differs. Participants like Lee, Riley, and Sam perceive the stereotypical gender roles upon which their relationships are structured and which serve to guide their interactions in the context of those relationships view those roles as natural extensions of their sex category and gender. Yet for others, such as Alex and Morgan, stereotypical gender roles structure their relationships and interactions in ways that suggest a different understanding of the naturalness of the relationship between sex category and gender. Interestingly, these participants use the shared cultural beliefs about gender created by gender as a primary frame in ways that simultaneously reject the linkage of those gender beliefs with sex category.

Similar patterns appear across participants who engage in a second common gendered relationship structure: the daddy/ girl relationship. As with the 1950s marriage relationship structure, participants who identify with a variety of genders also use this structure. That is, while this relationship structure is based on specific gender roles, participants who do not identify with the gender upon which a particular role is built nonetheless find these gendered roles useful as a relationship structure and use the norms and stereotypes associated with those gender roles as guidelines for interaction within the context of their relationships. Nineteen percent (n=6) of interviewees reported being in

relationships that involved a daddy/ daughter dynamic (one interviewee reported being in a relationship that involved a mommy in addition to a daddy). In each of these instances, the feminine-identified participant reported taking the little girl/ daughter role and the masculine-identified person took the daddy role; in the polyamorous relationship, the masculine-identified person was in the daddy role, one of the feminine-identified participants was in the mommy role and the other was in the daughter role. While participants in daddy/girl relationships in my interview sample reported taking on gendered roles in this relationship structure that “match” their general gender identification, participants on discussion boards and whom I have met during fieldwork take on gendered roles in this relationship structure that do not necessarily “match” their sex category or broader gender identification, a point to which I return later in this section.

Pat, who is currently in a daddy/girl relationship dynamic explains zir relationship structure and how it differs from more traditional D/s relationships. Ze says:

My husband is a dominant. And he and I we have a basically a 24/7. We do it kind of role as a daddy/ little girl type of relationship. I call him daddy. [And can you talk a little bit about how that dynamic works for the two of you?] He takes care of like the business part of our life. He does like the budget and stuff like that. I call him daddy. When we play you know—How it’s different from another like a regular d/s relationship –. It’s more nurturing there. It’s hard to put it in words because it’s more of a mindset of where we’re at when we’re together. There’s a lot of cuddling and caressing.

Pat’s daddy does conventionally masculine things such as taking care of “the business part of life” like the budget, yet also acts in more nurturing ways that Pat perceives men dominants in general as acting. Peyton also describes a similar relationship dynamic:

He [Peyton’s dominant-identified husband, who died a few years prior to our interview] was a very strong man. And knew how to handle me. And the love. And the care afterwards [after BDSM play] as well. I just again felt very safe and

kind of how our roles were becoming more and more defined. You know that daddy type relationship. It was just very fulfilling. [Can you talk a little about how that felt and how it worked for you?] I guess it felt like... The best word that comes to mind is just safe. Like I always knew that he loved me. I always knew that he was going to handle things properly as far as business goes and everything else. And the whole notion of everything's going to be ok... And it's always been like you know what? Everything's going to be ok. We're going to get through this.

Like Pat, Peyton also describes zir daddy doing traditionally masculine activities in the context of the relationship such as handling the business aspects of life. Peyton repeatedly emphasizes feeling "safe" in the context of zir daddy/girl relationship, explaining that ze felt loved and taken care of by a "very strong man" who "knew how to handle me."

Participants on the discussion boards also explain feeling protected by daddy dominants.

One participant, for instance, explains, "I know what Daddy means to me... He protects me, he cares for me, he controls me in every form... he just takes control and somehow picks up the pieces from anything and fixes it. Very much like a Daddy should."<sup>147</sup>

For participants like these, the feeling of safety they often experience in the context of BDSM results in part from feeling protected by a male partner who enacts a stereotypically masculine gender role, allowing them to feel that "everything's going to be ok" to a much deeper extent than they do in other contexts.

Participants like Pat, Peyton, and others view the daddy/daughter relationship structure as being significantly different from other D/s relationship structures, perceiving the daddy/daughter structure as creating a more nurturing and caring relationship dynamic. One participant, for instance, explains, "those that use the term 'Daddydom' is [sic] usually someone playing the role of caring, nurturing, being more into guidance and

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<sup>147</sup> 2006, "Daddy Dom."

growth, like a fatherfigure [sic] would be.”<sup>148</sup> Another poster explains zir preference for a daddy dominant, “for me it's somewhat simple. Most of my reasons are psychological. Its [sic] about being nurtured, being taken care of.”<sup>149</sup> Another explicitly compares the nurturing ze experiences with daddy dominants compared with other types of dominants:

I have the perception that they [daddy-identified dominants] are much more attentive and compassionate when compared to the more demanding type... The Daddy's [sic] I have spoken with are charming, gentle, caring. I have never seen this conveyed with any other type in any conversations I have had. Ever. The Daddy's [sic] I have spoken with have had a kindness and paternal air about them. They like to guide, help and nurture.<sup>150</sup>

Participants like this poster and others view daddy dominants as having a gentler, more nurturing style than others and explicitly associate this nurturing style with the masculine gender role, daddy.

For some participants, the nurturing and care provided by daddy dominants are evidenced through the teaching and mentoring daddy dominants often provide. One participant, for example, explains, “I think daddies also like teaching and helping their submissives learn things that are interesting to them but not directly related to their service more than regular doms...”<sup>151</sup> For participants like these, part of the nurturing provided by a daddy dominant compared with dominants more generally is evidenced in part through their interest in and willingness to help their submissives with non-BDSM activities and interests, which also serves to reinforce the relationship dynamic in contexts that are not distinctly marked as BDSM. Another poster, who identifies as a daddy, explains

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<sup>148</sup> 2006, “Daddy Dom.”

<sup>149</sup> 2005, “Subs: Explain your take on D/LG [daddy/ little girl].”

<sup>150</sup> 2006, “Daddy Doms- More and Deeper?”

<sup>151</sup> 2006, “Daddy Dom.”

zir use of the daddy role as an opportunity to help zir submissive learn and grow in areas unrelated to BDSM:

I always felt more like a mentor, particularly mentoring the woman in what SHE wants to do. As an example, I taught one woman how to ride a motorcycle... I also taught little girls how to work on cars, do woodworking, carpentry and cabinetmaking among things like computer programming. I definitely see the Daddy role as one of a mentor focusing on what the woman wants to learn.<sup>152</sup>

This participant explains that the role ze takes as a daddy involves helping zir submissive(s) learn non-BDSM skills. As this participant makes clear, the skills ze can teach in zir role as a daddy are skills related to conventionally masculine interests and work, such as riding a motorcycle, working on cars, woodworking, carpentry, cabinetmaking, and computer programming. The kinds of things a daddy teaches are often highly stereotypically masculine skills, which serves to further reinforce the gender roles participants take. By constructing the skills a daddy can teach a little girl as stereotypically masculine skills, participants draw on cultural gender beliefs and stereotypes about which areas men and women have competence in. Relying on these gender stereotypes to inform both the selves participants enact and the types of interactions they engage in serves to further increase the salience of gender in these contexts.

While many participants see teaching and mentoring as part of the nurturing and care daddy dominants provide, not all participants view nurturing and caring as masculine traits. For instance, responding to another poster who writes that daddy is a “natural” role for dominants who are caring and nurturing, one participant writes, “I do not agree with this. Caring & nurturing are as much maternal characteristics as paternal

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<sup>152</sup> 2006, “Daddy Dom.”

ones.”<sup>153</sup> Other participants also question the association of nurturing and caring with the masculine gender role daddy. One participant, for example, asks:

Why not 'Mommy'? In other words, I've seen a \*lot\* of submissive females (and males) looking for Daddy. There aren't nearly as many submissive males (or females) looking for Mommy. I know there have to be Domes [the feminized spelling of Dom, short for dominant] who are nurturing, caring, mentoring, etc... but I've never seen them referred to as "Mommy Domes" - why then do the men call themselves "Daddy Doms"?<sup>154</sup>

This poster calls attention to a particularly interesting pattern among participants who engage in ageplay: both men and women are overwhelmingly likely to identify as daddies. While there are some women dominants who identify as mommies rather than daddies, these participants are a small minority of those who engage in ageplay based around parental roles. Strikingly, I was unable to find a single instance of a dominant who identifies as a man or as male identifying as a mommy.

The significantly greater frequency of daddy identifications compared with mommy identifications is also evidenced by a keyword search of the bondage.com discussion boards. A search for ‘daddy’ in the initial post in threads in the “BDSM Relationships” section returned 375 results, while a search for ‘mommy’ returned 47 results.<sup>155</sup> Additionally, one of the most common discussions on the ‘mommy’ threads is why mommy relationships are so rare in comparison with daddy relationships. In a 2003 thread titled, “Mommy/ boi/ boy/ girl relationships,” for instance, the initial poster asks, “the Daddy/girl relationship is fairly common, but have any of you ever been involved in a

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<sup>153</sup> 2006, “Daddy Dom.”

<sup>154</sup> 2006, “The ‘Daddy’ thing.”

<sup>155</sup> Search performed in August 2010.

Mommy/boy/boi/girl one?” One of the few participants to respond with a post that does not simply echo the question writes:

I'm a [female] Daddy and have a [female] boy... and get consistently asked if I'm a Mommy. Hate it. A friend is a Mommy to her boy. Runs about the same, far as she and I can tell, as a Daddy/boy relationship—she's just way, way more femme than me and identifies as female a whole lot more than me.

This thread got less than a dozen responses—significantly fewer than the 37 average responses per thread in the BDSM Relationships section overall. Similarly, on another thread titled, “Mommy/Little Girl play?” (2004) the initial poster writes, “I was wondering, I hear soooo [sic] much about Daddy/little girl/boy play, well what about Mommy/little girl/boy play? I NEVER hear about that! I'm SURE someone has to do it somewhere, right?” One poster responds by referring to the frequent observation that there are fewer female tops than male tops in general, suggesting that this may explain the relative infrequency of mommy/boi/boy/girl relationships, “I've heard about it. I'd say its pretty rare, though. You've got to consider that by the numbers there's less Dommies, thus less Mommies/Big Sis/Coaches than other roles.” Another responds, “I know only one lesbian couple that does it, and they do Daddy/girl play.” This topic received only 8 replies, again significantly fewer than the average number of replies on threads in the Relationships section. In contrast, threads about daddies typically received between several dozen and more than one hundred responses.

What is especially interesting about this pattern is that it suggests that participants can utilize gender stereotypes and gender roles to guide performances even in contexts in which they perceive a clear “mismatch” between the sex category and/or gender of the performer and the stereotypical gender performance ze is enacting. gender can be highly

salient even in contexts where there is a clear “mismatch” between sex category and gender. What is also particularly intriguing about this pattern is the association of stereotypically feminine traits with masculinity. I expected that nurturing and caring in the context of BDSM would not be perceived as particularly feminine traits and instead would be perceived as important traits for dominants regardless of sex category/ gender. Participants who participate in daddy/girl relationships reverse the traditional associations of nurturing and caring with femininity, instead perceiving those characteristics as masculine. This suggests that even in contexts in which participants rely on gender stereotypes to guide interaction, participants do not always use cultural gender beliefs in expected ways. How participants use cultural gender beliefs, both hegemonic and alternative, is the subject of the next chapter.

**Gender Play: “Genderfucks are hot, and you can't have them without the gender roles to fuck with.”**

Other participants, whose relationships do not involve explicitly gendered roles, use gender as a source of interaction through what is known among participants as “gender play”—a type of BDSM play that involves one or more participants enacting a gendered self different from the gendered selves ze usually enacts in other settings. Like participants who use gendered relationship structures, participants who use gender roles as sources of play rely heavily on gender stereotypes. Yet like participants who use gender stereotypes to structure their relationships, those who use gender stereotypes as sources of inspiration and guidelines for behavior do so in ways that sometimes trouble the linkage of gender stereotypes with sex category and gender. One participant, for example, explains, “there’s a lot of fun to be had in using defined gender roles as an opportunity for exploration, by messing with them and playing around with them. But I



think in doing so, there's implicit acknowledgement that the society-defined gender roles are largely artificial constructs anyway."<sup>156</sup> This participant explains using gender roles as a source of play in BDSM interactions. For this participant, gender play in the context of BDSM allows participants to acknowledge the socially-constructed nature of gender roles. Similarly, Tracy says, "I like gender-bending just because you get to combine things. And if you're not hung up about these ridiculous rigid gender categories it's just a lot more exciting. And you can explore greater depths of interaction with your dominant." For Tracy and others like zir, gender categories serve as a source of excitement, rather than "rigid categories" to which participants' actions can be held accountable.

Viewing gender as providing resources, rather than rules, is a common theme among those who engage in gender play. One participant, for example, says, "I am in favor of maintaining gender roles. I am against abiding by them, myself."<sup>157</sup> For this participant, as for many others, gender roles are important as tools or resources and their very usefulness lies in resisting, transgressing, or subverting them. Similarly, another participant explains that gender roles are necessary for gender play: "genderfucks are hot, and you can't have them without the gender roles to fuck with."<sup>158</sup> And another points out that "you can't screw with gender roles unless the roles are defined in the first place."<sup>159</sup> A different participant also explains using gender roles for genderfucks, writing, "I like to indulge the gender roles, so that fucking with them is hotter." Another participant agrees, writing, "I seriously agree with you that the gender roles are great fun. They are also the

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<sup>156</sup> 2006, "Does Gender Really Matter in Power Exchange?"

<sup>157</sup> 2004, "What's the point of gender?"

<sup>158</sup> 2004, "What's the point of gender?"

<sup>159</sup> 2004, "What's the point of gender?"

basis for many a fetish and kink. Kind of like the best toys in the sandbox. But they aren't 'the' sandbox itself."<sup>160</sup> This participant perceives gender as a tool for interaction rather than as a system that constrains or governs interaction. A subsequent poster agrees, adding, "I don't suggest we throw the fun toys out of the sandbox."<sup>161</sup> Another replies, "Bravo! Exactly. Boundaries are resources."<sup>162</sup> For these participants, gender provides useful guidelines for interaction, yet participants choose the gender(s) they wish to use as guidelines for their own behavior and for interpreting that of others rather than being held accountable to doing gender in ways that "match" their sex category.

My conversations with my interview partners illuminate the ways that BDSM participants use gender as "toys" or "tools" or "resources." Shawn, for instance, talked about planning a scene in which gender will play a significant role. Ze told me ze wants to do something that involves:

Giv[ing] my submissive her date night [they have regular date nights that usually involve BDSM in some way] and give her a French maid outfit. And then I say hey clean my place... so in the near future I'll be buying a French maid outfit. And then that will be clearly some sort of femininity role. Some sort of role that she'll be taking on in addition to herself.

Shawn explains that having zir submissive take on the "femininity role" is a role that "she'll be taking on *in addition* to herself," indicating that femininity is something outside the self zir submissive normally enacts. French maid, as a highly stereotypical feminine role that involves dressing in stereotypically "sexy" ways and doing stereotypically feminine labor such as housecleaning, is, for Shawn, not something ze usually associates with zir partner and the femininity role is one exterior to the self of Shawn's partner. It is in this sense that gender is a tool for participants who engage in

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<sup>160</sup> 2006, "Does Gender Really Matter in Power Exchange?"

<sup>161</sup> 2006 "Does Gender Really Matter in Power Exchange?"

<sup>162</sup> 2006, "Does Gender Really Matter in Power Exchange?"

gender play. Participants perceive significant differences in the use of gender stereotypes in BDSM and other social settings. In BDSM contexts, participants perceive gender stereotypes as resources that they can choose to use in interaction. In non-BDSM contexts, participants frequently perceive gender stereotypes as rules to which they are held accountable when they do not wish to be.

Shannon similarly explains using gender in play in ways that contrast with how ze perceives and enacts gender in non-BDSM contexts. Ze says:

And you know I guess when I'm topping. It's definitely. Versus like work or normal life. I definitely focus more on the I'm a man, you're a woman, these are things about my masculinity, these are things about your femininity. And I guess I go more into you know stereotypes of you know you're going to be the you know sexually objectified woman. And I'm going to be the alpha male. And that's not generally really who I am. In I guess my everyday life. But it's sometimes part of the role that it's fun to play.

Like Shawn, Shannon views gender as a role individuals can take on, rather than as a fixed, innate individual trait. Shannon explains using stereotypes (e.g. “sexually objectified woman, alpha male) as roles that guide interactions in ways ze would not to in zir “everyday life.” By explaining that these stereotypes are part of a role that’s fun to play, Shannon explicitly marks these roles as stereotypes. Similarly, Casey says of gender play, “there are things I can do to make myself feel like that [feminine], wear certain clothes for instance...but it doesn't change who I am, just adds to the experience.” Casey explains that wearing feminine clothes and acting in feminine ways in the context of gender play does not “change who I am” but “adds to the experience,” indicating, like Shawn and Shannon, the belief that stereotypically gendered behaviors are roles, tools, or performances, rather than a natural expression of who someone is. Additionally, by marking these kinds of roles explicitly as performances and as involving taking roles

outside or beyond one's "normal" or "everyday" life,' participants like Shawn and Shannon resist the idea that these kinds of roles, or the stereotypical behavior they involve, are "natural."

These participants perceive BDSM as a setting in which their own interests and desires more directly influence the salience of gender compared with non-BDSM settings. Importantly, through an interactional process of negotiation these participants choose both whether they and their partner(s) will be held accountable to gender stereotypes and which particular gender stereotypes they will be held accountable to and to which they will hold their partner(s) accountable. For many of these participants, this choice in both whether they and others will be held accountable to gender stereotypes and which gender stereotypes they and others will be held accountable to is a significantly different experience from their experience of accountability to gender stereotypes in non-BDSM contexts. Many of these participants report being treated according to gender stereotypes in contexts when they do not want to be and/or being held accountable to gender stereotypes in ways that assumes a "match" between their sex category and gender.

What is particularly important about how participants like these frame gender play in the context of BDSM is that while participants feel comfortable using gender stereotypes in consensual BDSM activity, they do not rely on these stereotypes in other areas of their lives. This isolation of stereotypes for use in BDSM is significant for two primary reasons. First, gender play that uses gender stereotypes is optional—participants who engage in this type of play choose to treat one another in gender stereotypical ways (regardless of their sex category). In this way, the use of gender stereotypes in BDSM

contexts is often significantly different from the use of those same stereotypes in non-BDSM contexts, in which consent to being treated in stereotypical ways and being held accountable to gender stereotypes and norms is less often optional. Second, the use of these stereotypes in BDSM contexts differs by being explicitly marked as *play*. In many non-BDSM contexts, gender stereotypes are taken quite seriously and not as toys or tools for interaction—to be taken out or put away at will. As I discuss in the conclusion of this chapter, participants' perceptions of differences in the uses and implications of gender stereotypes across interactional settings has important implications for how we understand the role of gender norms and stereotypes.

### **Gender in Non-Explicitly Gendered Interactions**

Gender does not only influence interactions in which gender plays an explicit role, as it does in interactions that take place in the context of gendered relationship structure and/or in gender play. Gender also influences interactions in which gender is not the explicit focus of interaction and it is in part this aspect of gender that Ridgeway, West and Zimmerman, and others argue contributes to the intractability of the gender system. For participants who perceive gender as highly salient in BDSM settings, including those who perceive its salience as similar to other social contexts as well as those who perceive its salience as increased compared to other social contexts, the salience of gender significantly influences the kinds of interactions they have in the context of BDSM. For many of these participants, the salience of gender is evident primarily through their resistance to specific kinds of activities based on normative messages that those activities do not “match” the sex category/ gender with which the participant identifies. For these participants, gender limits the types of BDSM activities in which they will engage.

Quinn, for instance, explains being unwilling to engage in activities that might undermine zir sense of gender. Ze told me, “I don’t think there’s really ever been anything that I’ve felt, you know, clashed with my gender identity as a heterosexual male... The activities that I engage in—they’ve never really crossed that. Probably because there’s certain negotiated boundaries. I won’t do gender swap play.” For Quinn, gender provides part of the boundaries or limits ze sets with BDSM partners. Ze explicitly negotiates with zir partners that gender play (play that involves enacting a different gender than one does in other settings) is off limits. Quinn goes on to explain “but even like some of the more publicly humiliating things I’ve done, I’ve never felt like less of a man because of it.” For Quinn, it is important that BDSM play does not challenge zir sense of zir gendered self. Similarly, Dakota told me, “we don’t do the sissifying of me. It’s not something which— No. No. Just. No. We don’t go there.” For participants like these, gender is highly salient in BDSM contexts because gender provides useful informational clues about what specific BDSM activities they should or should not engage in based on their sex category/ gender identifications. For these participants, BDSM play that challenges their gendered selves can be an unpleasant experience. Taylor, for example, told me, “I was forced to stop a scene just because the woman demanded it to be stopped... it feels a little less male, castrating, whatever that term may be.” Taylor, who identifies strongly both as a man and as a dominant, perceives a challenge to zir power in the context of a BDSM scene as a challenge to zir masculinity. For many participants, challenges to or clashes with the gender(s) they are enacting in the context of BDSM are among the most apparent ways that gender, particularly cultural beliefs and stereotypes related to gender, can influence interactions that take place in BDSM settings.

Yet gender also influences interactions in myriad other ways. Gender provides guidelines for *how* one should enact a particular BDSM role. Because normative cultural beliefs and stereotypes about gender associate masculinity with power and femininity with powerlessness, gender provides guidelines for how people should enact dominance and submission in the context of BDSM and influences perceptions of the naturalness, authenticity, and legitimacy of dominance and submission based in part on the gender(s) enacted by dominants and submissives. In the next chapter, I explore how participants use normative and alternative gender beliefs related to power in interactions with others because gender and power are intimately intertwined. I demonstrate that these gender beliefs strongly influence interactions even when gender is not explicitly used in interaction as it is in gender-based relationship structures and in gender play.

### **Summary**

In sum, gender shapes interactions in both explicit and less obvious ways. In the context of gender-based relationship structures and gender play, participants use gender stereotypes in a variety of ways. Some participants use cultural beliefs about gender to hold one another accountable to gender-appropriate behavior based on the sex category of each participant. These participants perceive gender as highly salient, because gender appears to these participants to be an accurate predictor of the stereotypical gendered performances their partner(s) enact and gives them useful information about the gendered performances they themselves should enact. Other participants, however, use gender stereotypes to provide guidelines for how to enact what they perceive as constructed gender roles that are not reflective of real men's and women's behaviors and do not perceive as stemming naturally or automatically from sex category. The presence of

gender stereotypical behavior alone does not tell us *how* participants perceive gender stereotypes or how they use them in the context of interactions with others. Many participants use gender stereotypes in normative ways, viewing gender stereotypes *not* as stereotypes but instead as useful informational clues about how most men and women act, which in turn shapes their own behavior as well as how they perceive the behaviors of others and leads participants to perceive gender as highly salient. Other participants, however, perceive gender stereotypes as resources on which they can draw to enact specific gender roles in the context of gender play. These participants view gender stereotypes *as* stereotypes and do not view them as providing useful information about how most men and women act in either BDSM or other social settings; instead, these participants view gender stereotypes as hyperbolic caricatures of gender which are not accurate reflections of how men and women act in everyday life. Gender also influences interactions in which gender does not play an explicit role in interaction, as I explore in the next chapter.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I intervene in feminist and queer debates concerning whether BDSM subverts or replicates normative gender by exploring *how* participants use gender when constructing and enacting selves and interacting with others. My findings do not entirely support either the radical feminist/anti-SM position or the sex-positive-feminist/queer/pro-SM position. Instead, my research demonstrates that interactional processes significantly influence the meanings of gender in the context of BDSM. In other words, it is not BDSM itself, but what one does with other BDSM participants in



the context of BDSM interactions that influence the extent to which BDSM interactions support or subvert the normative gender system.

I find that the relative salience of gender—that is, the extent to which gender appears to participants to provide important informational clues about how others will act and how they in turn should act—as well as participants’ use of gender stereotypes varies significantly across participants. Participants’ perceptions of the salience of gender in BDSM contexts is shaped by their perceptions of how community members in general view gender, as well as by their perceptions of how the other(s) with whom they are interacting in a given settings—such as a scene—view gender. Especially significantly, I find that participants use gender stereotypes in complex ways, often including ways that resist the idea that gender stereotypes reflect “real” men or women and/or resist normative linkages of sex category with gender. That participants’ perceptions of the salience of gender for self and others vary significantly suggests it is not BDSM per se but instead how one engages in BDSM that influences the gender-related meanings of BDSM. BDSM itself is not inherently or automatically *either* gender normative *or* gender subversive. Instead, particular *ways* of interacting in BDSM settings can work in gender normative and/or subversive ways.

While BDSM is not inherently, automatically, or necessarily gender-subversive, a significant minority of participants (40%; n=13) perceive a difference in the salience of gender between BDSM and other social settings. Interestingly, in contrast to previous research, I did not find that this difference always resulted in perceptions of a decrease in the salience of gender in BDSM compared with other contexts. While a minority of participants (9%; n=3) do perceive a decrease in the salience of gender in BDSM settings,

a majority of participants perceive the salience of gender as similar across BDSM and other settings (60%; n=19). Unexpectedly, I also found that a small but significant minority of participants (31%; n=10) perceive an increase in the salience of gender in BDSM contexts, a finding not suggested by previous research. The perception of an increased salience of gender, however, does not necessarily lead to gender normative interactions. Instead, the increased salience of gender for some participants is a result of using gender stereotypes to facilitate gender play—a form of interaction in which the relationship of sex category to gender is often called into question and in which gender performances in general (not only in that setting) are frequently treated as *unnatural*.

Other types of interactions that take place in BDSM, settings, in contrast, often support the notion that the doing of gender, rather than a socially constructed performance, is the natural result of one's sex category. For instance, many—but not all—participants who participate in relationships structured around stereotypical gender roles view these relationships as the “natural” or “right” way that men and women should interact. The vast majority of participants in this sample who participate in relationships structured around traditional gender roles—across all data sources—take gender roles that normatively align with their sex category as well as with stereotypes about the appropriate relation of people who occupy that sex category and gender to power (e.g. female/June Cleaver-style housewife/submissive; male/ breadwinning head-of-household/ dominant). For participants like these, gender is often highly salient for self and other, through a logic that links sex category, gender, and BDSM role: one's sex category (e.g. female) determines one's gender (feminine) determines one's BDSM role (submissive).

For participants such as these, the economy of bodies and pleasures that governs BDSM interactions is synonymous with the normative economy that regulates bodies and pleasures in part through the gender system. These participants view sex category and gender (systems for regulating, organizing, and interpreting bodies) as providing useful information about the kinds of BDSM pleasures that are appropriate to people who belong to a specific sex category/gender. They construct the pleasures of dominance as appropriate to male/masculine-identified participants the pleasures of submission as appropriate to female/feminine-identified participants and this linkage mirrors that of the current normative economy of bodies and pleasures.

Other participants, however, perceive gender as a less important system for interpreting and regulating bodies in BDSM contexts compared with other social settings. These participants' perceptions of a decrease in the salience of gender often also results in a rejection of the normative linkage between gender and power, such that these participants often explicitly reject the idea that dominance and submission are more appropriate to or legitimately enacted by people of one gender compared with others. These participants perceive the economy of bodies and pleasures that governs BDSM settings to be different from the normative economy in several significant ways. First, these participants feel less compelled to act in gender conforming ways and feel that others are less likely to treat them according to gender stereotypes or judge their behavior according to gender norms in the context of BDSM. Second, these participants often explicitly reject gender stereotypes, which results in gender not appearing to provide participants with useful information clues about how others might act. By rejecting gender stereotypes as accurate and useful, participants also reject the notion that the

appropriateness of pleasures is tied to one's gender/ sex category, as I demonstrate more fully in the next chapter.

In this chapter, I have argued that BDSM participants' perceptions of the salience of gender for both self and other varies. Some participants perceive gender as a social category that does not provide particularly useful information about how to define self and others, while others perceive gender as providing useful informational clues about self and others. My findings lend partial support to previous research that suggests that gender may be less salient for participants in BDSM compared with social contexts. My findings also suggest, however, that many participants perceive gender as more salient in BDSM than other social settings.

The findings presented in this chapter also contribute to our understanding of gender as an interactional process. First, they lend additional support to the notion that while gender serves as a primary frame for interactions the relative salience of gender varies significantly across interactions. While shared cultural beliefs make gender an interpretive resource upon which actors can always draw, the extent to which those beliefs appear to provide useful informational clues to guide interaction varies, as the findings presented in this chapter demonstrate. Some situation-specific statuses, roles, and/or identities may appear significantly more salient to actors in a given setting compared with gender. Interestingly, however, even in settings in which a majority of actors perceive situation-specific identities, roles, or statuses as comparatively more salient than gender, some actors may nevertheless continue to perceive gender as the most salient identity, role, or status. Future work could further investigate how actors

negotiate gender in interactional settings in which various actors hold different perceptions of the salience of gender.

Second, these findings also suggest that actors in a given setting may perceive differences in the salience of gender for their own selves compared with others in the setting. In this study, participants reported higher perceptions of the salience of gender for their own selves compared with their perceptions of the salience of gender for their interactions with others. This discrepancy may be related to the role of gender accountability in interactions. West and Zimmerman (West and Zimmerman 2002 [1987]; West and Zimmerman 2009) argue that when one engages in interaction, one does so at the risk being held accountable to gender by one's interactional partners. If one does not perceive gender as a useful frame for predicting the behavior of others, one can instead choose to rely on other interpretive frames—such as BDSM role. In so doing, one can also choose not to hold one's interactional partners accountable to gender. Yet in the absence of explicit rejections of gender accountability by one's interactional partners, one cannot readily assume that one's interactional partners are similarly choosing not to rely on gender as an interpretive frame. One must therefore consider one's own behavior and presentation of self in light of how it will appear to others who may be using gender as an interpretive frame.

While the findings presented in this chapter lend support to West and Zimmerman's emphasis on the importance of accountability to gender in interaction, they also present a challenge to their claim that the risk of gender accountability makes "doing gender unavoidable" (West and Zimmerman 2002 [1987], 13). Although other scholars have critiqued the idea that doing gender is unavoidable, West and colleagues reiterate

this claim in their responses to those critiques, arguing that in human social interaction, “accountability is invariant and hence doing gender is unavoidable” (West and Fenstermaker 2002 [1993], 54). West and colleagues view the invariance of gender accountability as a result in the constancy of the “notion that women and men have different natures” (Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman 2002, 30).

In social settings in which participants reject the idea that men and women have different natures, however, including some of the BDSM settings described by participants in this study, gender accountability *does* vary. In interactional settings in which one’s interactional partners explicitly reject the idea that men and women have different natures and that there are gender-based differences in the ways in which actors enact particular social roles, participants perceive a significantly reduced or even eliminated risk of being held accountable to gender by their interactional partners. Many participants in this study, for example, perceive significant differences in the likelihood that they will be treated according to gender stereotypes and held accountable to gender in BDSM settings compared with other social settings in which they participate. Importantly, however, one cannot assume that one’s interactional partners will not hold one accountable to gender unless they explicitly demonstrate that they are not doing so.

Third, these findings suggest that participants make use of gender norms and stereotypes in complex ways. Many participants, for example, use gender stereotypes as resources for exploring their own and their partners’ gendered selves while rejecting the idea that those stereotypes provide useful information about “real” men and women. Participants who engage in gender role play frequently perceive gender stereotypes as providing roles that they can choose to perform but that do not flow naturally from their

or their partners' sex category or gender. Thus, even when participants enact highly stereotypical gender performances, they may do so in ways that undermine the utility of gender as an interpretive framework. Gender is only useful as an interpretive framework to the extent that it appears to actors in a given setting as a useful tool for predicting the behaviors of others. By explicitly marking their stereotypical gender performances as *unnatural*, participants thus challenge the logic of the sex category/ gender behavior correlation at the foundation of the gender system.

Finally, in addition to its theoretical implications, this finding also has important methodological implications. It suggests that simply observing the presence of apparently gender stereotypical behavior can provide only a partial account of the ways in which gender affects and is affected by interaction. Understanding how gender stereotypes influence interaction requires investigating how actors understand and use stereotypes in the context of interaction with others.

In the next chapter, I investigate how the use of hegemonic cultural gender beliefs and/or alternative cultural gender beliefs influences BDSM participants' perceptions of gender salience. I focus particularly on the relationship of cultural beliefs about gender and power to participants' perceptions of the legitimacy of specific BDSM roles (e.g. dominant, submissive) for men and women. I also explore whether and how participants perceive gender as influencing how dominants and submissives enact power and powerlessness in BDSM settings.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **HEGEMONIC AND ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL BELIEFS ABOUT GENDER AND POWER**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the utility of gender as an interpretive schema is in its ability to coordinate social relations through “the construction of shared beliefs about presumed differences that are associated with sex category” (Carli 1999, 34). These shared cultural beliefs make gender useful as a social category, allowing individuals to predict the behavior of others and modify their own behavior accordingly. Yet the extent to which such shared cultural beliefs influence a given situation varies based on the salience of gender in that situation as well as participants’ own level of acceptance of hegemonic cultural beliefs and perceptions of the extent to which the behavior of other individuals in that setting is likely to be influenced by hegemonic cultural beliefs.

In this chapter, I explore the use of shared cultural beliefs about gender and power in the context of BDSM. As described in Chapter 3, I draw on both interpersonal/interactional approaches (e.g. Emerson 1962; Kanter, 1977) and institutional/structural approaches (e.g. Mills, 1956; Parsons, 1957) to power. I focus specifically on cultural beliefs about gender and power for several reasons. First, gender and power are closely intertwined, because gender inequality is based in part on differences in men’s and women’s access to power. At the structural level men as a social group have more power than women. Molm and Hedley (1992) explain the relationship between gender inequality and power:

One of the most basic indicators of gender inequality is the distribution of power between men and women. Across time, across societies, and across a wide range of settings, men have greater power than women. They have greater access to, and control over, valued resources, and they have greater formal power, embedded in



positions of authority and codified in law. At the macro level, this unequal distribution of power is a basic indicator of gender inequality. (1)

At the macro level, power is a resource whose unequal distribution contributes to gender inequality.

Second, at the interpersonal/ interactional level, power influences gendered interactions. In addition to power being a resource unequally distributed across the genders, it is also a way of *doing* gender. Masculinity can be done in part by demonstrating power or dominance while femininity can be done in part by demonstrating powerlessness, submission, or subordination. Radtke and Stam (1994) explain, “That which is considered to be female and male reflects the subordinate-dominant relationship of female and male, and when we ‘do’ our gender appropriately, we act to maintain that relationship. In this sense power is both productive and oppressive, creating and constraining our social practices of gender” (p. 9-10). Enacting dominance and subordination—other ways of doing power—are thus ways of doing gender. This view of the relationship between power and gender on the interactional level reflects both West and Zimmerman’s “doing” approach to gender and Ridgeway’s view of gender as a primary frame.<sup>163</sup>

Third, normative beliefs and stereotypes about gender and power are well-documented in the empirical literature as shared cultural beliefs. As shared cultural beliefs, these beliefs are those that individuals assume everyone knows and that therefore play a powerful role in framing interactions. Ridgeway (1999) summarizes studies of the content of cultural gender beliefs:

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<sup>163</sup> Ridgeway (2011) explains that “in most situations, rather than a coherent set of independent behaviors, gender becomes a bias in the way that other nominally ungendered activities are performed, like teaching, playing a piano, or acting as a manager” (7).

A wide variety of research... has demonstrated that people in the United States hold well-defined, largely consensual gender stereotypes (e.g., Broverman et al. 1972; Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2007; Diekmann and Eagly 2000; Fiske et al. 2002; Glick et al. 2004; Koenig and Eagly 2006; Lueptow, Garovich-Szabo, and Lueptow 2001; Spence and Buckner 2000; Williams and Best 1990)... Men are rated more highly than women on agentic qualities such as instrumental competence, assertiveness, confidence, independence, forcefulness, and dominance. Women are rated more highly than men on communal attributes such as emotional expressiveness, nurturance, interpersonal sensitivity, kindness, and responsiveness... Men are seen as higher status, more powerful, and more agentially competent than women, especially at the things that count most in society. (58-61; see also Glick et al. 2004)

Power, as well as traits associated with it such as assertiveness, forcefulness, and dominance, is a trait associated with men. The traits most often associated with one gender are viewed especially negatively when demonstrated by individuals enacting another gender. Ridgeway (2011) explains:

Interestingly, evidence suggests that men and women are especially likely to be punished for violating cultural assumptions about the behaviors people of their sex should *not* display (Rudman and Fairchild 2004; Rudman et al. 2009)... As we would expect, traits of communality (e.g. warm, emotional, sensitive to others) are seen as especially desirable in women, just as traits of agency (e.g. assertive, aggressive) are particularly desirable in men (Prentice and Carranza 2002; Rudman et al. 2009). Interestingly, however, the traits that are seen as especially *undesirable* in women are not those of insufficient warmth. Rather, the most undesirable traits in women are those like domineering and arrogant that violate the cultural presumption of women's subordinate status. Similarly, the traits viewed as most undesirable in men are those like weak and emotionally yielding that contradict the presumption of men's status superiority (Prentice and Carranza 2002; Rudman et al. 2009). (59)

It is less socially desirable for women to demonstrate stereotypically masculine traits than it is for women to fail to sufficiently demonstrate stereotypically feminine traits. This is in part because women who demonstrate dominance violate the social construction of women as subordinate to men; men who appear weak similarly violate the social construction of men as superior to women. Ridgeway goes on to explain that the social

undesirableness of dominance in women influences how people perceive women in positions of authority:

Gender status beliefs make authority seem less legitimate and proper for women.... Research demonstrates that women in leadership and management positions face a backlash to their assertiveness. Their assertiveness contradicts the hierarchical aspects of gender status beliefs, and, thus, violates others' implicit expectations about gender and authority. The gender status incongruity in their assertive behavior makes it seem illegitimate and rudely dominant. (81)

Gender status beliefs undermine the legitimacy of women in positions of power. Further, women in positions of authority undermine the gender/power hierarchy, frequently leading to a perceived conflict between their gender and their use of power. The normative association of masculinity with power and dominance and of femininity with powerlessness and submission, as well as the highly negative perceptions of non-normative gender traits in men or women that work against the normative construction of women as subordinate and men as dominant make BDSM an especially interesting context for exploring perceptions of gender and power. In BDSM contexts, gender and power often do not align in normative ways (e.g. women who top, men who bottom, people who switch), providing an ideal setting for exploring how individuals negotiate normative, hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power.

One of the ways participants negotiate normative associations of gender and power is through the use of alternative forms of gender beliefs. Ridgeway (2011) argues that despite widespread acceptance and use of hegemonic normative cultural gender beliefs, non-hegemonic gender beliefs are also present. She explains:

Alternate forms of gender beliefs do exist in American society alongside hegemonic stereotypes... Different ethnic, class, or regional communities sometimes share beliefs about men's and women's traits that are slightly different from the dominant stereotypes... Ideological groups such as feminists or other groups such as gays and lesbians may hold alternative gender beliefs as well.

When people who hold alternative gender beliefs are around like-minded others, such as at a gathering of African Americans or feminists, it is their alternative gender beliefs that may be evoked and serve as the rules of gender in that setting, as some research suggests (Filardo 1996; Milkie 1999). Yet people who hold alternative gender beliefs are also likely to be knowledgeable about the hegemonic stereotypes that are institutionalized and widely available in the society around them. As these people leave their like-minded gatherings and enter into more public settings or settings in which they do not know the others present, they are likely to expect to be treated by these dominant stereotypes. For these people as well, then, hegemonic gender stereotypes are a stubborn aspect of reality that must [be] dealt with and often accommodated in many social contexts. (68)

In this chapter, I explore whether BDSM participants hold alternative forms of gender beliefs specifically related to gender and power, as well as whether and how those beliefs influence BDSM interactions. I also explore the extent to which participants perceive differences in cultural gender beliefs about power in BDSM and other social contexts in which they participate, investigating whether BDSM participants expect to be treated according to dominant stereotypes to the same extent in BDSM and other contexts. This project thus responds to Ridgeway's call for future research "to investigate the context in which we systematically rely on alternative gender beliefs, rather than hegemonic beliefs, to guide our behavior" (150). Specifically, I explore the extent to which participants rely on hegemonic cultural gender beliefs that associate masculinity with power and dominance and femininity with powerlessness and submission compared with alternative gender beliefs that disassociate gender and power in BDSM contexts. I analyze the extent to which hegemonic and alternative beliefs about gender and power influence participants' perceptions of the relationship between gender and BDSM role. While in the rest of the dissertation, I use the terms "top" and "bottom" as umbrella categories, because power exchange interactions nearly always involve "dominant" and "submissive" roles or identities, in this chapter I use the combined terms, dominant and

submissive rather than top and bottom to emphasize participants' constructions of these roles and identities as based on power exchange dynamics. All of my data sources include participants' reflections on the relationships of gender and power. The findings presented in this chapter are therefore based on my archival, interview, and discussion board data.

In this research, I focus specifically on the kinds of interactions participants have in BDSM settings and the extent to which they perceive those interactions as different from those they have in non-BDSM settings. I do not directly examine the extent to which the cultural gender beliefs participants use in BDSM contexts influence the beliefs they use in other settings. Because individuals rely in part on their past interactional experiences when interacting with others (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1967), however, BDSM interactions—like all social interactions—have the potential to influence interactions that take place in non-BDSM settings.

### **PATTERNS IN GENDER AND BDSM ROLE IDENTIFICATION**

Among BDSM participants, particularly those whose community involvement is primarily with hetero- and/or pan-sexual communities, there is a ubiquitous perception that there are many more female/feminine-identified submissives compared with female/feminine-identified dominants and that there are significantly more male/masculine-identified dominants compared with submissives. For example, one participant who created a discussion thread about the ratio of submissive to dominant female, asks, "I've been wondering, why is the proportions [sic] of submissive vs. dominant females so out of whack? Do you think females are just genetically like this, or

is it a cultural thing?”<sup>164</sup> Another participant responds, “I don't know why the numbers are what they are, but in BDSM most women are submissive.”<sup>165</sup> Demographic data available from recent studies lend empirical support to participants’ perceptions of the ratios of men and women tops and bottoms. Stiles and Clark (2011) found that men are more likely to identify as primarily or exclusively dominant (65%) while women are more likely to identify as primarily or exclusively submissive (79%).

In the only large survey (n=1,056) of BDSM participants in the U.S., Jacques and Bienvenu (1999) also found that people who identify as bottoms are significantly more likely to be female than male<sup>166</sup> (44.4% of females compared with 14.4% of males) and that people who identify as tops are significantly more likely to be male than female (22.8% of males compared with 6.2% of females). Interestingly, however, the pattern shifts when we combine people who only top or bottom with people who primarily top or bottom. Among females, 68.3% report only or primarily bottoming while just 14.7% report only or primarily topping. The remaining 17% of females in this study identify as switches. Thus, females are not only much more likely to identify as only bottoms than as only tops, they are also overwhelmingly more likely to identify as only or primarily bottoms than as only or primarily tops. The difference in males’ preference for bottoming and topping disappears, however, when we combine the ‘only’ and ‘primarily’ categories. About 38% of males report only or primarily topping, compared with 39.2% of males who only or primarily bottom; the remaining 23% of males identify as switches.

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<sup>164</sup> 2010, “Submissive Females”

<sup>165</sup> 2010, “Submissive Females”

<sup>166</sup> Participants reported high correspondence between biological sex and current gender orientation (97.7% of males and 98.6% of females).

While these patterns hold in my interview sample,<sup>167</sup> the strength of the differences is significantly decreased, which is unsurprising given that I used purposive rather than representative sampling, a methodological decision described in detail in Chapter 4. That is, I did not attempt to create a sample that reflected general patterns in gender and BDSM role identification in the BDSM population, but instead attempted to obtain a sample that included a diversity of combinations of gender and BDSM role identification. My interview sample is divided evenly in thirds across BDSM role identifications: bottom, switch, and top. As discussed in the previous chapter, participants reported more complex, often fluid gender identifications in the course of our interview conversation than when I asked demographic questions at the conclusion of the interview. While I asked, “how would you describe your gender or genders,” 94% of interviewees responded with dichotomized sex category rather than gender identifications. The summary of the interview sample provided below should thus be taken only as a rough indicator of the range of sex category/gender and BDSM role identifications in my interview sample. The table below, for example, does not reflect the complexity of identifications of participants like Devore, who described zir gender identity as “gay leatherman” and zir sex category as “female.”

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<sup>167</sup> As discussed in depth in Chapter 4, demographic data for the BDSM community site from which I collected discussion board data, nor, for ethical reasons, did I attempt to collect demographic data on particular participants who posted on discussion board threads. Despite relatively frequent requests from site members to site moderators, bondage.com does not make information about the demographics of the site public. In what is, to my knowledge, the only exception, in 2004 a site moderator posted some information and then refused to respond to subsequent requests for additional information. The site moderator wrote: “A quick survey of our database turns up 25,476 straight male bottoms to 5,323 straight female tops -- a pretty significant imbalance. There are 76,396 straight male tops compared to 25,477 straight male bottoms.” (2004, “Ratio of female dominants to male submissives?”)

**Table 1. Sex Category/ Gender and BDSM Role in the Interview Sample**

	<b>Bottom</b>	<b>Switch</b>	<b>Top</b>
	40%	27%	33%
<b>Male</b>	27%	27%	46%
<b>Trans</b>	100%		
<b>Non-Gender</b>		100%	

While patterns in gender and BDSM role identification may suggest gender-based identifications that appear to align with normative cultural beliefs concerning gender and power, participants' identifications tell only a partial story. Exploring participants' beliefs about the appropriateness of specific BDSM roles based on sex category/ gender can shed light on the extent to which BDSM interactions are influenced by hegemonic or alternative gender beliefs. Further, as discussed in the previous chapter, a majority of participants in this sample do not have gender-based preferences for partners. Investigating whether and how participants perceive gender differences in the ways that their partners enact particular BDSM roles can also reveal patterns in participants' use of normative and alternative gender beliefs.

The majority of participants in this study (72% of interviewees) do not believe that some BDSM roles (e.g. dominant, submissive) fit better with one gender than others and do not perceive gender-based differences in the ways that people enact BDSM roles. Other participants (16% of interviewees) who do not believe that some BDSM roles fit better with one gender than others, however, perceive gender-based differences in styles of enacting particular BDSM roles. Finally, some participants (12% of interviewees) believe that the appropriateness of BDSM role for a specific participant is determined largely or entirely by sex category/ gender. In the sections that follow, I explore these



beliefs, analyzing the extent to which they reflect normative or alternative gender beliefs about power.

### **HEGEMONIC CULTURAL BELIEFS ABOUT GENDER & POWER**

Hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power link men, maleness and masculinity with power, dominance, and authority and link women, femaleness, and femininity with powerlessness, submission, and subordination, as discussed above. Additionally, hegemonic cultural beliefs also specify some ways of using power as more appropriate for one gender than others. In this section, I explore the ways that some participants rely on these hegemonic beliefs about gender and power in their perceptions of the relationship between gender and BDSM role/ identification. First, I analyze how participants who view specific BDSM roles such as top/dominant as appropriate and/or legitimate for only one gender rely on hegemonic cultural beliefs in their constructions of gender and power in the context of BDSM. Second, I analyze how participants who perceive different gender-based styles of enacting BDSM roles make use of hegemonic cultural beliefs. Traits such as emotional expressiveness and nurturance are viewed as more appropriate for women than for men while traits such as forcefulness are viewed as more appropriate for men than women (Deaux and Kite 1993; Eagly 1987; Wagner and Berger 1997). I argue that participants construct different yet equally legitimate gender-based styles of enacting power around these highly gender-type traits. Participants who perceive gender-based differences in styles perceive women as using emotional/mental control and power more frequently than men. They also perceive men as using physical strength and power more frequently compared with women. Participants construct these differences as differences in styles or types of power and associate these differences with

gender. While these two sets of beliefs have different implications for participants' BDSM interactions, particularly in terms of the importance of gender when selecting partners, both sets of beliefs about gender and BDSM role/identification are grounded in hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power, as the following sections will show.

### **Gender Is Power: “A Woman Could Never Top Me”**

For a minority of participants in this study (12% of my interview partners), the appropriateness of a particular BDSM role to a specific individual is determined largely or entirely by their gender. There are several specific types of BDSM relationships built on the belief that one's gender determines one's BDSM role and in nearly all of these styles men can only be dominant and women can only be submissive.<sup>168</sup> Gor<sup>169</sup> and Christian Kink,<sup>170</sup> for example, hold that only men should be dominants and only women should be submissives, based on presumed natural, innate differences in men's and women's

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<sup>168</sup> The vast majority of specific styles of BDSM that require people of specific genders to take specific roles require men to be dominant and women to be submissive. The only major exception is FemDom (female dominant, male submissive).

<sup>169</sup> Goreans construct relationships and activities based on the sci fi novel written by John Norman, in which men are “alpha male” dominants and women, who are “owned” as slave, can achieve personal fulfillment only through submission to an alpha male master. Goreans construct slavery as “absolute” and, unlike in most forms of BDSM relationships, there are no contracts or limits and the slave is not permitted a safeword and the lifestyle is 24/7. Goreans are generally ostracized by the larger BDSM community, who view Gor as violating the mandate of consensuality. When I first joined bondage.com in 2002, there was a small presence of Goreans, but they have now virtually disappeared from BDSM communities, at least on the internet and in the physical communities in which I have worked. To my knowledge, none of my three samples include Gorean-identified participants.

<sup>170</sup> Christian Kink, and the closely related Domestic Disciple and Taken In Hand lifestyles, are based on literal interpretations of Ephesians 5:22-24 “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church... Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing.” People who participate in Christian Kink believe that it is god's will that men be dominant and women submissive and that the bible mandates that husbands must use domestic discipline and/ or corporal punishment to enforce god's will upon their wives. The Domestic Discipline and Taken in Hand lifestyles have similar views of traditional marriages, yet are not as strongly grounded in Christianity as is Christian Kink. As with Goreans, those who participate in Christian Kink are generally not part of the broader BDSM community, although they are not ostracized by the broader community as are Goreans, many Christian Kink participants view BDSM as sin, because BDSM “perverts” the power relationship god specifies for husbands and wives by dissociating those roles from traditional, Christian marriages. Although there are several participants in this study who have strong Christian identities, are actively involved in their churches, and have traditional marriages, none identify their practices as Christian Kink and none identify the roles they take as mandated by god.

dispositions, in the case of Gor, or on particular interpretations of biblical messages about appropriate relationships between men and women, in the case of Christian Kink. The belief that only men can or should be dominant and only women can or should be submissive is not limited to participants who participate in styles of BDSM that mandate a specific role according to gender, however. In fact, none of the participants included in this study participate in Gorean, Christian Kink, or related lifestyles, yet many participants nonetheless perceive a “natural order” of gender and BDSM role. Across all data sources, participants who believe that some BDSM roles are more appropriate for a specific gender are overwhelmingly likely to believe that only men should be dominants and only women should be submissives. None of my interview partners and very few of the participants included through discussion board data believe that women are more natural, legitimate, or appropriate dominants than men or that men are more natural, legitimate, or appropriate submissives. Interestingly, the only participants in this study who espouse that view are male/masculine identified; no female/feminine-identified participant in this study took the position that only women should be dominants.

Beliefs about who should dominate and who should submit are fundamentally beliefs about the appropriateness and legitimacy of power, because dominating and submitting are activities built on power exchange. Many participants who believe that only one gender (nearly always men) should dominate or are the only legitimate dominants and only one gender (nearly always women) should submit or are the only legitimate submissives, perceive this arrangement as “natural,” often based in biologically essentialist views of gender. One participant writes, for instance, “I

personally [sic] think it is against mans [sic] nature to be submissive.”<sup>171</sup> Similarly, another supports the idea that only men should dominate, writing, “submitting to a woman... yikes! It’s ingrained in us that males are naturally dominant.”<sup>172</sup> And another argues, “evolutionarily, men are bred to power and dominance.”<sup>173</sup> Beliefs such as these—that men are “naturally dominant” or “bred to power and dominance” are hegemonic cultural gender beliefs, which link masculinity with power and dominance. Some participants draw a direct contrast between perceptions of men’s greater “natural” strength, power, and dominance and perceptions of women’s comparative weakness in these areas. One participant, for instance, writes, “as personalities go, submissive women are often softer. Even a man at his weakest is still stronger.”<sup>174</sup> In comparing men and women submissives, this participant argues that even a submissive man at his weakest is still stronger than a submissive woman. Men have greater “natural” strength and power, thus women—no matter how strong--are always weaker even than a man at his weakest.

The belief that men are innately and always naturally more powerful, strong, and/or dominant compared with women is also indicated by participants’ explanations that they cannot understand men submissives. Lee, for instance, told me, “I firmly believe men are naturally more dominant than women and for me, it boggles my mind when I see a submissive male. I could never, ever submit to a woman or top a man.” For Lee, the “natural” dominance men have compared with women means not only that Lee would not “submit to a woman or top a man” but also cannot understand how any man could choose to submit, explaining that it “boggles” zir mind when ze sees a submissive male.

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<sup>171</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

<sup>172</sup> 2004, “A Woman Could Never Top Me”

<sup>173</sup> 2004, “A Woman Could Never Top Me”

<sup>174</sup> 2002, “Male subs vs. female subs”

Similarly, another participant writes, “I know many male submissives, and much as I appreciate their own particular deviation, and much as I enjoy their insight, their unique take on things, it just seems intrinsically abberant [sic] from the natural order ..... Color me prejudiced or elitist or \_\_\_\_\_ist, but I just can't get my brain around it.”<sup>175</sup> The “deviation” from the “natural order” of gender and power this participant perceives in relation to male submissives rests on the idea that men are naturally dominant.

The presence of participants whose gender and BDSM role identifications don't conform to normative association of gender and power does not disrupt the beliefs of participants who hold hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power, however, because the presence of those participants can be simply explained as a “deviation” or “aberration,” which serves to reaffirm the perception of a “natural order” that frames men as naturally powerful and natural dominants. Another participant explains a similar view: My dislike of male submission to a FemDom comes from my personal belief system...the man is to be in control in \*all\* situations... To see a man who not only allows a woman to control him, but \*asks\* for her to do so makes it extremely difficult for me to ever again view him as being in that position of authority. Choosing to respect a woman's wishes, even desires is one thing, but actively serving her, submitting to her, is another. The discomfort is born of my views on the proper relationships of men and women to one another.<sup>176</sup>

Men who submit to women violate this participant's perception of the “proper relationships” of men and women, in which men should “be in control in all situations” and should not allow, much less desire, a woman to control them. For this participant,

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<sup>175</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

<sup>176</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

seeing a man submit to a woman undermines the legitimacy of that man's power and authority in all subsequent interactions. As ze explains, seeing a man submitting to a woman, "makes it extremely difficult for me to ever again view him as being in that position of authority." By submitting to women, men violate hegemonic cultural beliefs that men "naturally" have greater power than women.

The framing of masculinity and power as synonymous is a theme that also emerged repeatedly in the archival data I collected, particularly in letters written by male/masculine-identified participants to Anthony de Blasé, who identified as a gay male dominant and master. In letters to de Blasé, male/masculine-identified submissives repeatedly frame submission in terms of masculinity and power. For one correspondent, for instance, the idea of being powerless in the context of a BDSM interaction was highly erotic because it would result in his being "emasculated." He explains, "the cock, for some reason, is such a symbol of power and pride for men, having it made ridiculous" by another man is "a source of extreme pleasure."<sup>177</sup> Control of genitals symbolizes both masculinity and power for other participants as well. Another participant, who like de Blasé identified as a dominant, writes, "the cock and balls for me are such a symbol of masculinity and power... and in my fantasies, both are negated... his [a male slave's] symbol of masculinity is obviated, so his masculinity and manhood as we socially understand it is negated...".<sup>178</sup> For these participants, masculinity is synonymous with power and both are symbolized by male genitals. As a result, BDSM activities that involve controlling a man's genitals symbolize controlling his masculinity as well as his power.

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<sup>177</sup> 1988, Elias to Tony. Personal papers of Anthony de Blasé, Leather Archives and Museum.

<sup>178</sup> Undated letter from Phillipe to Tony. Personal papers of Anthony de Blasé, Leather Archives and Museum.

While participants like these focus on the association of power with male genitals, others focus on the idea that men are innately physically stronger compared with men and women and perceive these differences in physical strength as the basis of men's comparatively greater power. One participant, for example, writes, "for me I can't be submissive to a lady, because a lady can't overpower me physically. As a rule I do not see women as dominant figures."<sup>179</sup> Similarly, on a thread titled, "the Fleeting Power of a Domme," another participant argues:

Only Male Tops have true power. If a male submissive decides that he no longer wants to play, he can turn the tables. He can force the domme to be his servant by sheer physical force. There are some weak men that can not accomplish this, but more than 98% of all men can. If a female submissive decides she no longer wants to play, there is really nothing she can do but to place her trust in the stronger male Top. There are some women that can turn the tables on their Top, but likely less than 2%. The only true power in this game of bdsm is owned by men. Women will always bow to this power in the end... The power that a female has is given by a male.<sup>180</sup>

The perception that men have greater physical strength—"sheer physical force"—compared with women means for this participant that men always retain the power in any interaction and that the power exchange is thus inauthentic because women dominants don't "really" have the power. At the same time, the idea that physical force is at the root of power means, for this participant and others like zir, that male-dominant/female-submissive power exchange is a more legitimate and authentic form of power exchange, because female submissives are perceived as physically weaker and thus unable to take back the power should they choose to. Similarly, another participant writes, "I love really masculine dominant men... They are physically strong such that you're in no doubt that if it came to a show of strength you just wouldn't be able to get up if they pinned you

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<sup>179</sup> 2002, "Sexuality of Dommies vs. Doms"

<sup>180</sup> 2003, "the Fleeting Power of a Domme"

down.”<sup>181</sup> For this participant, the perception that dominant men can enforce their power through physical strength makes the power exchange more authentic. This view is also reflected by Carter, a male dominant who writes to J.D. Rabbit, “By its very nature the female must open to (surrender to) the penetration of the male in order to finally realize the ultimate extacy [sic] her body was designed for... If it came down to it I could subdue any woman I wished to.”<sup>182</sup> For Carter, what happens in BDSM contexts is simply an extension of the “natural” arrangement between men and women—the female must “by its very nature...surrender to” the male. The “naturalness” of women’s submission and men’s dominance is also underscored by Carter’s perception that “if I came down to it I could subdue any woman I wished to.” His perception of having greater physical strength than *any* woman confirms his own sense of his dominance and power. What makes him powerful, as he explains to Rabbit, is his ability to dominate any woman, regardless of her feelings or desires. This linking of gender and power, which follows normative, traditional linkages of masculinity and power, is one of the ways in which Carter performs masculinity in his letters to Rabbit.

In accounts like these, masculinity, physical force, and power become synonymous in ways that make female dominance illegitimate while simultaneously highlighting the legitimacy and “naturalness” of male dominance. The belief that only men have true power, by virtue of their greater physical strength, leads participants like these to believe that any power women have is only by virtue of being allowed that power by men who control “real” power. Participants who perceive men as being physically stronger than women believe that men can always “take back the power” if they truly

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<sup>181</sup> 2004, “What Makes a Man Masculine?”

<sup>182</sup> Undated letter to J.D. Rabbit from “Carter.” J.D. Rabbit Personal Papers Collection, Leather Archives and Museum.



want to, which disrupts the construction of a power exchange as authentic, legitimate, and/or “real.” In other words, if a male submissive can stop the scene at any time he chooses by exerting his presumably greater physical power, he retains the power and thus the female dominant is not *really* in control. As one participant quoted above explains it, “the power that a female has is given by a male.” While for some participants, the perception that most or all men have greater physical strength than women is interpreted as an indication that only men can and/or should dominate, for other participants as I discuss in detail later in this chapter, perceived gender-based differences in physical strength are instead interpreted as leading to equally legitimate *styles* of dominating. For the participants discussed in this section, however, differences in “natural” power, including physical strength, mean that only men can be authentic and legitimate tops, because only men have “real” power. Participants who believe that men are natural and/or better dominants and women are natural and/or better submissives often recognize the diversity of gender and BDSM role identifications present in their communities, but frame those who take roles that don’t conform to normative gender-power stereotypes as illegitimate and/or inauthentic.

Other participants also perceive men as having greater “natural” power compared with women. Aubrey, for instance, initially seems to reject the idea that some BDSM roles fit better with men versus women, but goes on to explain that men naturally have more power than women and that ze has a hard time experience a woman as “really being the dominant”:

[In general would you say that some BDSM roles kind of fit better with women and some fit better with men or not necessarily?] No. I don’t think so. I think it’s really you know with psychologically kind of who you are and what power position you identify more with... I don’t like looking at

BDSM pornography of men and women with women in the traditional submissive role and men in the dominant role [laughs] because you know it's like when you're seeing these images it kind of triggers that part like there might be real abuse of power going on. And I actually tend to look at a lot of gay male BDSM [pornography]... the kind that I look at it tends to be the very masculine stereotypically masculine men. And seeing a man being submissive sort of helps take away all that like you know maybe anxiety or whatever and it's not necessarily true but for some reason it feels more consensual to me because I see maybe men as having more natural power it's more comfortable for me to look at. It doesn't bring up that kind of like underlying anxiety of what's really happening here... I really like seeing two men... I like the appearance that it's equal at least. [And what about two women?] No. No. That's comfortable too to me. But again it's hard for me to experience the woman as really being the dominant. You know? So I guess yeah I do definitely read in the gender roles there in the sense of like I really like a manly man being the dominant. It's definitely a gendered thing there.

The belief that men have more “natural power” than do women leads Aubrey to perceive men as more authentically dominant than women. Aubrey has difficulty watching male-dominant/female-submissive BDSM pornography because ze is concerned that abuse might be involved. Because Aubrey views men as having more natural power compared with women, Aubrey does not view male-dominant/ female-submissive interactions as involving partners who start out with equal power. Aubrey's belief that women do not have as much natural power as men also makes it difficult for Aubrey to enjoy BDSM pornography involving only women, because Aubrey does not experience women as legitimately dominant; as ze says, “it's hard for me to experience the woman as really being the dominant.” Additionally, Aubrey explains that ze “really like[s] a manly man being dominant,” because ze views masculinity as indicative of natural power. Masculinity enables Aubrey to perceive power and dominance as natural or

legitimate, while femininity leads Aubrey to perceive power and dominance as illegitimate.

The perception that dominance is masculine is a theme that appears repeatedly in my data and is articulated especially clearly by Taylor, who told me:

I tend to say this where I think that all guys kind of want to dominate, tie up, and spank girls and all girls kind of want to be tied up and spanked by their guys. And I do think that sometimes it's tougher—women almost feel more feminine being taken and being pleased. I think that there's something that girls and guys both sense. That there's something more male about dominating a person, more female about being dominated. And I definitely see people that kind of like to act more helpless and effeminate. Kind of all the words you use to describe something as being kind of weaker or feminine. Weaker or more female. Stronger as being like get some balls, act more like a man, things like that. And I think women who dominate tend to act kind of manly, kind of mean. [So it sounds like you're saying the dominant roles fits better with men and submissive with women?] Yeah, definitely. Like I said. I mean I know. Whenever I say this there's always someone who goes 'what about this and this person?' and I'm like 'you're giving me an example and I'm saying like trends like take a huge percentage of a huge percentage of women want to be tied up and spanked and a huge percentage of men want to be want to do the tying up and spanking.'

Taylor explains that “there's something more male about dominating” and something “more female about being dominated” emphasizing that women “feel more feminine being taken.” For Taylor, submission is explicitly a feminine/female act, while domination is a male act. Ze goes on to explicitly describe weakness as feminine, “weaker or feminine... weaker or more female” and strength as masculine, “stronger... like get some balls, act more like a man.” The strong associations ze perceives between masculinity and dominance also lead Taylor to perceive women who dominate as “act[ing] kind of manly.” The perception that men are more naturally dominant and powerful while women are more naturally submissive and powerless also leads Taylor to believe that “all guys want to dominate, tie up, and spank girls and all girls want to be tied up and spanked by their guys.”

Like Taylor, other participants sometimes argue that all men enjoy sexual dominance and all women enjoy sexual submission. Another participant, for instance, writes, “from my experience, most females tend to have submissive fantasies as they start experimenting sexually. And most men have dominant fantasies as they start becoming sexually aware. Some people get angry or defensive when I say this, but I’m certain of it.”<sup>183</sup> Statements like these are relatively infrequent among BDSM participants in general, however, because most communities—local physical communities as well as web communities—include at least some women tops/dominants and men bottoms/submissives and/or non-heterosexual participants. The presence of women tops/dominants and men bottoms/submissives challenge the belief that all women are submissive and all men are dominant. Hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power, however, can help participants overlook those whose behaviors and identifications do not conform to the arrangements specified by those beliefs.

Importantly, while most participants who believe that BDSM roles are more appropriate for some genders than others do not perceive women as legitimate dominants, it is the legitimacy of women’s *power* as dominants rather than their *gender* that is challenged. In contrast, the majority of these participants view the conflict between masculinity and submission as challenging the *gender* of men who submit, rather than the legitimacy of their submission or powerlessness. This emerges especially clearly in the language participants use to discuss women dominants and men submissives. Participants explain that women *cannot* truly dominate, while explaining that men *should not* submit. This construction makes clear that participants perceive men as having the option to submit—that is, as having power that they can—but should not—choose to relinquish.

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<sup>183</sup> 2010, “Submissive Females”

Women, on the other hand, are perceived as not having the option to “really” dominate, because they do not have power that they can choose to exercise.

Yet participants who believe that only men should dominate or are legitimate dominants and that only women should submit or are legitimate submissives are in the minority of BDSM participants and other participants often explicitly challenge their beliefs, as I discuss later in this chapter. Thus, while participants who affirm normative cultural beliefs about gender and power are supported by the hegemonic status of those beliefs, they are also often challenged and occasionally even marginalized in BDSM communities, in which support of hegemonic cultural beliefs, including those related to gender and power, is often seen as a sign that participants don’t really understand BDSM and particularly the importance of pressing social and cultural boundaries in BDSM interactions. Additionally, the heteronormativity of assumptions that “all men want to dominate, tie up, and spank women” and that “all women want to be tied up and spanked by their guys” is often strongly critiqued by other participants. Because the majority of participants engage in BDSM with partners of a variety of genders, participants who voice these kinds of beliefs are often subject to intense criticism from other participants.

Many participants also often react in strongly negative ways to arguments that frame all women as naturally and innately submissive and all men as naturally and innately dominant, pointing out that these constructions remove the crucial elements of choice and consent. They also point out that subduing someone by force against their will is also by definition non-consensual. Thus, those who espouse highly normative views of gender and power are often marginalized by other participants both because of their support of gender essentialist, heteronormative stereotypes and because their views are

often perceived to violate the premise of consensuality. Because consensuality is the tool participants most frequently use to defend themselves against stigma and perceptions that BDSM is synonymous with abuse and violence, participants who even appear to endorse non-consensual physical violence and force, such as those who argue that men can always subdue women by physical force, often face strong backlash, and in some cases ostracization from the larger community.<sup>184</sup> Yet participants who face criticisms of their normative gender and power beliefs from other members of the community can find ubiquitous support for these beliefs in other social settings in which they participate, making even the harsh criticisms they can face from other participants unlikely to change their beliefs.

**Gender Influences Styles of Enacting Power and Powerlessness: “The more I top men, the more I think there may be some differences in styles based on our innate gender tendencies.”**

While the participants described above rely on normative cultural gender beliefs to affirm the idea that specific BDSM roles are appropriate only to people of specific genders, the participants discussed in this section, who are also a minority (16% of my interview partners), reject the idea that particular BDSM roles are more appropriate to one gender than to others, yet rely on hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power in attributing different styles of enacting dominance and submission to men and women. Differences in style include differences in intent, focus, and outcome or effect.

Differences in style of enacting BDSM role are crucial to understanding the relationship

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<sup>184</sup> This strong backlash may have contributed to the development of specifically Gorean and Christian Kink communities. While the advent of the internet certainly facilitated the creation of more specific BDSM communities, the negative reactions and ostracization participants who support and/or participate in highly gender normative lifestyles such as the Gorean lifestyle often face from other participants likely also contributed to the development of more specialized communities, particularly in the case of cyber communities.

between hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power in the context of BDSM, because perceptions of ways of enacting BDSM roles are most often perceptions of different ways of using or demonstrating power. When participants perceive men and women as having different styles of enacting particular BDSM roles, gender becomes more salient for them, because gender appears to give them important informational clues about how they can expect tops and bottoms to act, based on their gender presentations.

Among participants who perceive sex category/ gender-based differences in styles of enacting particular BDSM roles, several perceived differences in style appear for both dominants and submissives. A small minority of these participants perceives differences in the specific kinds of activities participants engage in. With the exception of feminization, however, I do not discuss these perceived differences in preferences for specific activities for several reasons. First, perceptions of differences in the relative frequency of particular activities according to gender are extremely rare. Second, with few exceptions there was little agreement in my data about the specific kinds of activities participants are more or less likely to engage in based on gender (e.g. while some participants said female dominants are more likely to engage in flogging, many other said male dominants are more likely to do so). Third, most activities about which there was agreement about differences in frequency of participation by male and female dominants or male and female submissives are genitally-based activities only possible for people with specific anatomies (e.g. CBT (cock and ball torture), vaginal fisting—can only be done with a partner who has an anatomy that can accommodate that activity). Most participants who describe these differences do not view them as one of differences in styles, but as “just a plumbing issue,” explaining that these differences “don’t matter

much—it's really only about anatomical possibility.” While sex category and gender are often so tightly intertwined in my data as to make their conceptual separation impossible, participants' descriptions of differences in genitally based differences between males and females are relatively clear instances of perceived sex category rather than gender differences. Because participants themselves frame these differences as ones of sex category, they are not particularly useful for understanding how or the extent to which participants perceive *gender* differences.

Rather than perceiving differences in the extent to which men and women engage in, desire, and/or enjoy particular activities the majority of participants who perceive gender-based differences across dominants and submissives understand those differences as *styles* of doing particular activities or engaging in interactions. Participants on discussion boards often post comments such as: “Generally, there are differences in the way a Male Dom and a Female Domme exercise their dominance.”<sup>185</sup> In this section, I analyze several of the specific differences in ways of exercising dominance and demonstrating submission identified by participants. While many participants acknowledge that these perceptions are stereotypes rather than hard and fast rules, they nonetheless find categorizing styles of topping and bottoming according to gender useful as a method of understanding and predicting the behavior of other participants. On a thread about differences in male and female dominant styles, for example, one participant writes:

Yes, I realize we are all individuals and we vary a lot within all of the groups each of us is a part of. However, if you back way way up and look at a very general picture (which isn't a bad thing to do now and then) I do believe that if you put all the men in one room and all the women in another room, you'd see a \*total\* of certain characteristics more in one than the other. Yes, each person in those rooms

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<sup>185</sup> 2006 “Does Gender Really Matter in Power Exchange?”



is an individual and the variances within each room are vast. But it would still be true (and worth studying) that the general tone of each room would be different from each other.

In other words, despite individual variation, participants like these perceive men in general as having different styles and characteristics as dominants compared with women.

While participants cite a variety of differences in styles across men and women dominants and submissives, at least three differences appear to be nearly universally acknowledged as differences perceived by a significant number of participants. The first frequently perceived difference is related to the ways that men and women exert power and control as dominants. The second commonly perceived difference relates to the interest in and frequency with which submissives/ bottoms experience subspace.<sup>186</sup> Both of these differences reflect differences in perceptions of both power/powerlessness and in emotional experiences. Third, many of these participants perceive a particular type of gender role play, forced feminization, as humiliating to men; importantly, there is no corollary type of humiliating gender role play for women. In the sections that follow, I discuss each of these perceived differences, analyzing how they reflect hegemonic gender cultural beliefs related to power.

#### Styles of Dominance: “The Men Tend To Swing Harder, But the Women Are More Inventive”

One of the most frequent gender-based style differences participants report is in *how* men and women exercise power, as evidenced in their styles of dominating. Drew, for example, explains:

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<sup>186</sup> Subspace refers to a mental state achieved by bottoms/submissives, which participants describe as an experience similar to an out of body experience, using adjectives such as “floating,” “flying,” and “freedom” to describe the mental/emotional feelings that accompany subspace.

“All female doms— most of them will shoot you if they hear you say that— but they all have the capability of being a sadistic bitch, you know. It’s part of it. Part of the genre. But for the most part I think that because they are female that there is a certain point of...oh, what’s the term? I don’t want to say softness. Not apathy. But there’s a certain. To at least some degree there’s a certain amount of nurturing that can occasionally happen. And that’s a gender thing.”

The idea that women use power in ways that produce stronger experiences of nurturing compared with men is a frequent difference in style cited by participants. Posters on discussion board threads about gender differences frequently explain that women use power in more nurturing ways than do men. For instance, one participant writes, “I think my dominant style compared to the men I’ve talked with is that I’m more nurturing. It also seems I approach the emotional aspects more heavily than the physical.”<sup>187</sup> The idea that women in general use power in more nurturing ways compared with men draws on hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power to identify gender-appropriate methods of using power. Nurturing, for most of these participants, is perceived as a type of power that focuses on the emotional/mental aspects of power exchange.

The perception that men more often use physical power while women more often use emotional and mental power is another frequent difference in styles of power cited by participants. One participant, for example, writes:

Women are physically weaker than men, as a rule, so their approach in dominating can’t be backed (even subconsciously) as much by the knowledge of the ability to overpower a sub physically. That difference in perspective (even if a male dom would never use a physical advantage with a sub) flavors the process.<sup>188</sup>

Similarly, another writes, “A woman can only REALLY dominate a man if she incapacitates him with bondage...whereas a man can dominate a woman by superior

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<sup>187</sup> 2003 “Differences Between Male/ Female Styles”

<sup>188</sup> 2003 “Differences Between Male/ Female Styles”

strength alone.”<sup>189</sup> And another writes, “Female Dominants, not having superior strength in most cases to back up their air of command (not that male Doms threaten subs with this overtly, but simply knowing one can be overpowered physically adds to the psychological context of females submitting to men), seem to opt for the mental manipulation instead.”<sup>190</sup> Other posters agree that females/ women are less physically strong than males/ men and this requires them to demonstrate power and control in non-physical ways, particularly through mental manipulation or control. Another writes:

The more I top men, the more I think there may be some differences in styles based on our innate gender tendencies. Why mess with wrestling a man to the ground when I know if he truly resisted hard he'd win?... So maybe the reason I jump to the mental control over the physical control is because I know the physical control is illusionary? We [women] may gravitate toward the mental control because we generally aren't physically stronger.<sup>191</sup>

Another participant writes, “Male tops are more likely to focus on the physical aspects of BDSM, and female tops on the psychological/emotional.”<sup>192</sup> And when I asked whether ze thinks some BDSM roles fit better with men and some with women, Dakota told me:

I mean no. I would say it wasn't about gender either. Well, you know. The men tend to swing harder, but the women are more inventive. You know? And the women can be a lot more sadistic as well than men. The one thing I will never do is piss off a female dominant. I'll quite easily piss off a male dominant. But female dominants. Now that's probably on my range of danger. [And why do you think it is that women can be more sadistic?] They have an evil mind. That they're more imaginative with the way they can do things. They're more creative. And the men are good at building things. The women will put them to use in ways we haven't thought of at that moment in time. And so it depends on your kink I suppose. I don't see it being gender specific. There is often the misconception that if you're female you're submissive and if you're male then you're dominant. No.

While Dakota explicitly rejects the stereotype that women are or should be submissive and that men are or should be dominant, ze also relies on stereotypes about differences

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<sup>189</sup> 2003, “Differences between Male/Female Dominant Styles”

<sup>190</sup> 2002, “Male subs vs. female subs”

<sup>191</sup> 2006 “Does Gender Really Matter in Power Exchange?”

<sup>192</sup> 2003, “Differences between Male/Female Dominant Styles”

between men and women. Like many others, Dakota perceives men as being physically stronger, explaining that they “swing harder.” In contrast, women, lacking that physical strength, have to be “more inventive,” and are more “imaginative” and “creative.” Similarly, Andy also explains that differences in physical strength impact men’s and women’s styles and abilities. Ze says, “I’ve seen flogging done by men and women. Men seem to do that better. Maybe that’s a matter of physical stamina.” And another participant says, “I think men may tend to dominate with our bodies because it’s easier. I can pick her up and throw her on the bed without breaking a sweat.”<sup>193</sup>

In these accounts, men are universally presumed to have greater physical strength compared with women (though this assumption is sometimes challenged by other participants, as discussed later in this chapter). For these participants, greater physical size and strength are constructed as synonymous with maleness/ masculinity and are framed in ways that make clear that physical strength is the standard of power to which other forms of power are compared. Women’s use of emotional or mental control and power is often framed not as a free choice between styles, but as a way that women can get around or make up for their lesser physical power. Interestingly, no participant framed using physical power as a way that men could get around or make up for their lesser creative abilities; physical power is set as the clear standard among participants who espouse hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power.<sup>194</sup> For some participants, these variations in styles of power are different but equally authentic types of power and many participants highly value the creativity demonstrated by female dominants. For others, however, physical power is the standard and emotional or mental

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<sup>193</sup> 2003, “Differences between Male/Female Dominant Styles”

<sup>194</sup> As discussed in Chapter 5, a strong majority of participants, however, focus on the emotional/ mental aspects of BDSM.

power is a lesser substitute used by women who don't have the "real" power that physical strength brings. The belief that women must rely on emotional or mental rather than physical power and control also reinforces the idea that women are less authentic tops and/or that their power is less natural than men's for some of these participants.

Participants who perceive gender-based differences in styles of dominating are less likely to believe that women cannot be legitimate or authentic dominants compared with the participants discussed in the previous section, however.

Submission and Subspace: "The guys didn't seem to be able or want to get into subspace the way my submissive women do."

The idea that women are more likely to be invested in emotional experiences compared with men is not limited to discussions of dominants. Participants also perceive differences in styles of submission across genders. One participant, for example, writes, "Women intellectualize their submission a bit more... [while] males are less cerebral and respond more directly to physical cues than symbolic ones."<sup>195</sup> The idea that submission is a more mental or intellectual experience for women and a more physical experience for men underlies the frequent perception that men and women submissives experience subspace differently and/or with different frequency. Several of my male-identified interview partners reported wanting and trying to experience subspace, but not having been able to get there yet. Dakota, for example, told me, "I have never been in subspace. That's a goal. And she [Dakota's top] wants to eventually get me to subspace." All of my female-identified bottom/ submissive interview partners, on the other hand, reported experiencing subspace frequently and easily. This theme was also reflected in the discussion boards. One participant, for example, writes, "one difference I found when I

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<sup>195</sup> 2004, "Male and ritual"

started playing with men, is that they guys didn't seem to be able or want to get into sub space the way my submissive women do.”<sup>196</sup> On the over 150 threads on the subject of subspace, the overwhelming majority of those who post about their own experiences identify as women/female, which also suggests that women may experience subspace more frequently compared with men.

A few threads explicitly explore whether male submissives experience subspace at all and if so, if their experiences are different from those of female submissives. These threads, however, get significantly fewer responses (usually a dozen or less) than the other threads about subspace, which often generate over a hundred responses each. For example, on one thread, the original poster asks, “We often hear about subspace and the female submissive. What about the male subs?”<sup>197</sup> A few male-identified participants respond that they have had experiences similar to subspace or that they have experienced subspace. Compared with the dozens to hundreds of responses from female submissives on general threads about subspace, however, these few responses contribute to the perception that male submissives do not experience subspace with nearly the same frequency as female submissives/bottoms. This perception is reflected on other threads, as well. On a 2003 thread titled, “subspace—no boys allowed?” the original poster asks, “It occurred to me... that I’ve never seen any male subs talking about going into subspace. It’s always something I hear from the sub females though, or about them. So I was wondering... is this something that guys just don’t get into?” On this thread, participants suggest that male and female submissives may be equally likely to

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<sup>196</sup> 2007, “differences in the male/female sub experience”

<sup>197</sup> 2003, “Subspace and the Male Sub/Bottom”

experience subspace, but less likely to concentrate on, discuss, or report reflecting on the subspace experience.

Given that women are more highly socialized to reflect on their own emotional experiences than are men, this finding is unsurprising. For example, another participant explains that men may be less inclined to focus on emotional than physical experiences. Ze writes: “Perhaps male subs feel less inclined to articulate their emotional/ psychological responses to play and concentrate more on the physical level.” As with perceptions of gender differences in styles of topping, in which participants often construct male tops as primarily focusing on and using physical power and female tops as primarily focusing on and using emotional/ mental power, participants perceive a similar physical/emotional split when in differences of experiences of submission. Because subspace is constructed as a mental space that is only achieved when one has truly given up power and turned all control over to the top, the ability to achieve subspace is closely tied to the power exchange process. That participants perceive women as more easily giving up power and thus being able to achieve subspace more easily reflects hegemonic cultural gender beliefs that women have less power and are less powerful compared with men. Because women have more experiences of powerlessness in everyday life, it is unsurprising that many participants perceive women as achieving the powerless state of subspace more easily than men.

**Gender Play and Humiliation: “Maybe the humiliation brings him [a male submissive] truly to his knees, whereas submissive women have an easier time being there already.”**

Participants do not generally perceive submission and giving up power as a humiliating experience in and of itself, yet there are some particular types of power

exchange interactions that participants frequently perceive as humiliating. In my data, only one of these types of interactions emerged as a different experience for male/masculine-identified and female/feminine-identified submissives. Feminization (also sometimes referred to as sissification or forced feminization) is a relatively frequent activity in interactions that involve men who bottom (19% of my interview partners described scenes that included feminization, usually forced). Feminization is a type of role play that involves treating a male/masculine-identified submissive as a woman, often by dressing zir in women's clothing and requiring zir to do stereotypically feminine tasks, such as housecleaning and cooking. Harper, for instance, described "playing with men and dressing them up in wigs and heels." For many participants, the "force" in forced feminization is crucial, as it allows them to distance themselves from their own desire to be feminized. Importantly, most female/ feminine-identified dominants who engage in forced feminization with male/masculine-identified submissives do so *at the request of the bottom/submissive*. For example, Pat told me that ze engages in forced feminization with zir submissive partners because it is something they enjoy but that does not particularly appear to zir. Ze explains:

Some of the men I play with when I'm dominating them I make them dress up. Just because it's something they like to do. It's something you know I could do either way. I don't mind it but it's not something that I make them do for me. If I make them do it it's for them. [When you say make them dress up do you mean make them dress up as women?] As a girl, yeah. Lacy panties and stuff like that.

Pat's explanation that "if I make them do it it's for them" highlights the artifice of the "force" involved in forced feminization. Pat knows that dressing up is "something they like to do" and thus "makes" them do it. Similarly, another participant who "forces" zir male/masculine identified bottoms/submissives into feminization play explains, "I don't



consider it as an act of domination myself— most of the boys I've had over the years were already predisposed to the idea of women's clothes. I have considered [it] more of an indulgence than anything.”<sup>198</sup> Other participants describe forced feminization as a “reward” for their bottoms/submissives.<sup>199</sup> Female/feminine-identified dominants are often ambivalent about forced feminization, a striking contrast to the intense desires for feminization expressed by many male/masculine-identified submissives.

In contrast, however, Shawn describes a feminization scene suggested by zir top.

Ze describes zir experience:

My very first scene. The very first individual I did anything with... She asked me what size underwear I wore. And I was like ‘I don’t know, just size inch 28 inch underwear. That’s my pant size.’ And she was like ‘ok.’ So she comes up with some black lacy panties. [Laughs.] And she’s like put these on. Well for maybe a second I was like, why am I wearing panties? I thought, really, you want me to wear panties? Uh. No. But then it went to, this is her place. No one else is here. No one else is seeing this. Who cares? And that was it. It was absolutely a who cares. It was like no this doesn’t matter. This doesn’t affect me as a person. So I was like ok. Whatever. Took my clothes off and put the black lace panties on and she smiled at me. Her way of being happy. Forcing a guy to wear panties... And since then it hasn’t influenced me, it hasn’t affected me. In fact I even share that with people. She wanted me to wear female panties. Like ‘ooo, not female panties! [Laughs.] Anything but that. You know, don’t threaten me with female panties.’ But now I’m just like it’s a non-issue. Whereas at the time I was like ‘really, what?’

Shawn describes struggling at first with being asked to wear panties, explaining that zir initial reaction was “Uh. No.” Significantly, what enabled Shawn to comply with zir dominant’s request was the realization that no one else would know: “no one else is here. No one else is seeing.” That realization allowed Shawn to reframe the experience as one that “doesn’t matter” and “doesn’t affect me as a person.” Shawn’s articulation of zir

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<sup>198</sup> 2009, “Forced Feminization”

<sup>199</sup> The framing of feminization as a “reward” is ubiquitous on the discussion boards (e.g. 2004, “D/s and feminization,” 2004 “Forced Feminization,” 2005 “Forced Feminization,” 2009 “Feminization Play in the Bedroom,” 2009 “Forced Feminization” etc.).

internal struggle indicates zir realization that wearing panties violates a gender norm; only by convincing zirself that no one else would see or know could Shawn convince zirself that wearing panties wouldn't "matter" or "affect me as a person." Because no one else would know, wearing panties wouldn't undermine Shawn's perception of or portrayal of zirself as masculine in subsequent interactions with others. For Shawn, this conclusion served to reinforce zir sense of zir masculinity so much that ze now often shares this story with others. By framing being threatened with wearing female panties as a joke and a 'non-issue,' Shawn's story is intended to demonstrate to others that zir masculinity is secure enough not to be threatened by being made to wear women's clothing. In this account, Shawn takes what could be perceived as a threat to zir masculinity and reframes it as a confirmation of zir masculinity. Paradoxically, for many participants, feminization actually serves to reinforce rather than undermine their performances of masculinity, by allowing them to demonstrate that even feminization that takes place in the context of BDSM does not override their "real" and masculine gendered selves.

Struggling with the humiliation or potential humiliation of having their masculinity undermined is, for many, a frequent experience. Drew, for instance, told me:

I have been through some forced feminization sessions... There's a humiliation kind of thing. And I feel. Well first off I feel kind of bad or naughty because this isn't right by society's definitions. I feel humiliation. A certain level of humiliation. But also sexually excited. [And what is it in specific that makes it humiliating for you?] Just the thought that I'm being— that I'm not representing my traditional role as a male. And that a female is seeing me as doing this. [So would it be different if it were a male seeing you doing it?] That'd probably be even more embarrassing.

For Drew and others like zir, the humiliation they experience in the course of forced feminization stems from their perception of behaving in ways that violate "society's

definitions” of masculinity and that required them to violate their “traditional role as a male.” Another participant explains using gender roles to create feelings of humiliation, “I like the gender roles. I like them because it allows for GENDER humiliation play. ‘No REAL man would ever do such a thing!’”<sup>200</sup> Similarly, another explains that male/masculine-identified submissive are more likely to enjoy humiliation, “Male subs seem to enjoy humiliation more than their female counterparts.”<sup>201</sup> Participants’ perceptions of feminization as humiliating suggests that for masculine-identified participants in particular, play that troubles their usual gender performance can be emotionally uncomfortable.

Significantly, while feminization is a relatively frequent activity for male/masculine-identified submissives and several of my interview partners reported engaging in play that involve forced feminization, *none* of my interview partners reported engaging in “masculinization”—forced or otherwise. Indeed, while forced feminization/sissification are widely recognized activities in the BDSM community and consistently appear on checklists of BDSM activities, there is no equivalent type of play that involves masculinizing (forced or otherwise) female/feminine-identified participants. A search of the bondage.com discussion boards also demonstrates the lack of an equivalent to feminization. A search of subject lines of all sections of the discussion boards returns 75 threads for “feminization” and only 1 thread for “masculinization.” Unsurprisingly, the masculinization thread is a discussion of the lack of an equivalent of feminization. This is not to say that BDSM interactions never involve participants enacting different gendered selves (as discussed in depth in the previous chapter) or gender role play, but that simply

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<sup>200</sup> 2006, “Does Gender Really Matter in Power Exchange?”

<sup>201</sup> 2002, “Male subs vs. female subs”

enacting stereotypical traits of a different gender is not perceived as a distinct type of play outside the context of male/masculine-identified submissives being “forced” to act like women. Further, role-playing that involves taking on different gender roles than one does in other areas of one’s life, such as daddy-boy role play (most common among two female/feminine-identified participants or a male/masculine-identified top and female/feminine-identified bottom) is constructed as taking on a role rather than enacting a different self and is usually not perceived as humiliating.

That male/masculine-identified submissives engage in and desire experiences that lead to feelings of humiliation while female/feminine-identified submissives do not is a significant gender-based difference among submissives. Some participants explicitly connect differences in desire for and/or tolerance of submission with the social valuation of gender, as does the participant who suggests “maybe the humiliation brings him [a male submissive] truly to his knees, whereas submissive women have an easier time being there already.”<sup>202</sup> This participant believes humiliation is more difficult for men, because it gives them a sense of powerlessness—being brought to his knees—that men do not usually experience in life, particularly compared with women, who are “there already.” Similarly, another participant explains, “I think the love of humiliation play by some male subs comes from the fact that men are raised to be overtly more powerful, and humiliation that strips away that power is going to feed their subspace.”<sup>203</sup> Being humiliated, for men, is an experience of powerlessness that directly conflicts with the social construction of masculinity as powerful. In one of the most widely-referenced BDSM guides, Warren and Warren (2008) comment extensively on this gendered

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<sup>202</sup> 2002, “Male subs vs. female subs”

<sup>203</sup> 2002, “Male subs vs. female subs”

difference in humiliation play and their insightful analysis is worth quoting at length here:

Nowhere is the difference between the psychologies of male and female submissives so markedly different as on the subject of humiliation play... The majority of male submissives seem to crave some degree of humiliation as part of their servitude... The vast majority of female submissives... seem turned off by humiliation. This, of course, does not mean that all women reject humiliation as part of a scene... Part of the answer to this difference may be that an essence of BDSM is contrast... Taking it from this point of view, you can see why humiliation is not attractive to most women. It offers little contrast between many women's daily lives and the scene. They find they are served a full daily diet of humiliation by our society. They hardly need to seek more. Men, on the other hand, are largely shielded from humiliation, and, when they experience it, are permitted by society to strike back in a physical manner. To experience humiliation in a controlled environment is a novel and exotic experience. (p. 161)

The only gender-based form of humiliation play that exists as a widely recognized type of BDSM activity is play based on the humiliation of being “forced” to act like and being treated as a woman. With the exception of forced feminization, all other forms of gender role-play of which I am aware center on taking *specific types* of gender roles (e.g. daddy, little girl) rather than a generic gender role, as is the case in forced feminization. In my data, female/feminine-identified participants who take on masculine roles (e.g. boy) do not find that experience humiliating. Because masculinity is more socially valued than femininity, there is little that is humiliating about being treated as a man for female/feminine-identified participants. Because femininity is less socially valued than masculinity, however, male/masculine-identified participants who participate in feminization often find the experience of being treated as a woman humiliating, particularly because that experience conflicts with the higher status, power, and prestige they are socially expected to enact as men.

Participants who perceive gender-based differences in styles of bottoming and topping often reflect hegemonic cultural gender beliefs about the appropriateness of power, dominance, and control according for people of particular sex categories/genders. Gender, for these participants, does not determine BDSM role, but it does significantly influence how one enacts a particular BDSM role—whether one relies primarily on physical or mental control when dominating for example, as well as the kinds of experiences one has in that role—whether or not one can easily access subspace, for instance. These perceived differences make gender a salient social category for these participants, because gender helps them anticipate how they and others should act. The appropriateness of BDSM roles is not determined entirely by gender for these participants, yet hegemonic cultural gender beliefs about differences in men’s and women’s power influence how participants perceive dominance and submission.

#### **ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL BELIEFS ABOUT GENDER AND POWER**

While hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power unsurprisingly influence some participants’ perceptions of the relationship between gender and BDSM, the majority of participants in this study reject hegemonic gender beliefs that construct power and dominance as more appropriate for men compared with women and powerlessness and submission as more appropriate for women compared with men. Yet while most participants who reject the idea that gender and power are linked in ways that influence dominating and submitting perceive gender as having low or no salience in BDSM contexts, some hold alternative beliefs about gender and power that allow them to reframe powerlessness as compatible with or even as evidence of masculinity. Interestingly, while participants often go to great length to explain that masculinity and

submission can be compatible, arguments that femininity and dominance are compatible appear infrequently in my data. This suggests that participants may perceive a greater normative conflict between masculinity and submission than between femininity and dominance or that the normative conflict between femininity and dominance is less relevant in BDSM settings than that between masculinity and submission. Masculinity and submission thus appear to require more explanation and justification than do femininity and dominance.

In the sections that follow, I first explore how participants who reject hegemonic gender and power beliefs and perceive gender as having little salience in BDSM contexts respond to hegemonic beliefs and construct and rely on alternative beliefs about gender and power. Second, I investigate the creation and use of alternative beliefs about gender and power that reject normative associations of masculinity with power and dominance yet retain masculinity as an important and high prestige social category. I argue that while both of these beliefs reject normative beliefs in favor of alternative beliefs about gender and power, they have significantly different implications for how participants perceive gender in BDSM contexts.

**Gender and Power Are Unrelated: “It isn’t about a male female power dynamic. It’s about a power dynamic that isn’t gender based...”**

A majority of participants (72% of my interview partners) do not support hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power in the context of their perceptions of the relationship between gender and BDSM role. These participants perceive the appropriateness of BDSM role as related to personality and/or “hard-wiring” for a particular role and do not perceive a connection between gender and BDSM role, either in the appropriateness of a particular role or the styles that an individual demonstrates

when enacting that role. These participants explicitly reject the idea that people of one gender and/or sex category are better or more legitimate dominants or submissives than people of others genders. One participant sums up this perception simply, “men make better submissives for people who prefer submissive men.”<sup>204</sup> For participants like these, there is nothing about men *as men* that make them better or worse submissives compared with people of other genders. Similarly, another participant writes, “submission is not a function of the genitals,”<sup>205</sup> indicating zir perception that submission is not tied to one’s sex category. Morgan also rejects the idea that submission is gendered, telling me “I don’t think submission has a gender at all to be honest.”

Other participants more explicitly reject normative associations of gender and power when it comes to BDSM role/identification. When I asked whether ze thinks some BDSM roles fit better with men and some with women, for instance, Devore, told me, “No. I really don’t think so. I think it’s totally that individual. I really do. It’d be about their personality and how they are. I’ve never put people in those little pockets, you know. Because I know female masters and I know male masters and they’re equally all the same to me.” Devore explains that the fit of BDSM role is about personality and rejects the idea that there are differences between male and female masters, explaining that “they’re equally all the same to me.” Similarly, Devon frames the fit of BDSM role as being about personality rather than gender. Ze told me, “It all depends on the person... And it doesn’t go with gender. It goes with who wants to play the specific part.” For Devon, who takes or identifies with a specific role depends on who wants to play the specific part, a desire Devon perceives as independent of gender.

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<sup>204</sup> 2007, “differences in the male/female sub experience”

<sup>205</sup> 2004, “Masculine Slaves”



Like Devore and Devon, Harper also views BDSM role as an individual choice, explaining that “gender is pretty much irrelevant.” Chris also frames gender as irrelevant to which BDSM role(s) participants take and/or identify with. Ze says:

I think gender is irrelevant to be quite honest with you. I know and have met and folks who are pre-transition, lesbian couples, lesbian— a lesbian dominant and her gaggle if you will or group of female submissives... That’s why I keep saying it’s [gender is] irrelevant... The roles could be played out in any way. I think the power is more important.

Power, for Chris, is both separate from and more important than gender, particularly when it comes to BDSM role, which leads zir to perceive gender as “irrelevant.” Quinn also describes sex category/ gender as irrelevant. Ze says:

The things that determine who is wired to be a sub and who is wired to be a dom, frankly. They have absolutely nothing to do with whether you sit or stand to take a pee. I think it’s really more just about how a person’s head is wired. You know. Because there’s doms and tops and switches on all 3 sides. You know the transgendered community... I think it’s really just kind of irrelevant in terms of a person’s gender. Spin the wheel and see what happens. I personally consider that [gender] to be completely— I really consider a person’s genitalia to be absolutely 100% fucking irrelevant to the role that they play in the BDSM lifestyle. It’s got as much to do as your favorite brand of socks quite frankly.

For Quinn, some people are “wired” to identify with specific BDSM roles, yet that writing has “absolutely nothing to do with gender,” making gender “100% fucking irrelevant to [BDSM] role.”

Like Chris and Quinn, Sam also belongs to a local community in which there is significant diversity in gender and BDSM role identification. Ze responded to my question about BDSM roles and gender:

We’re involved in a very large community. There’s all sort of relationships... There’s male masters, female masters. Male slaves, female slaves. It’s all over. No, I’ve never thought that [that some BDSM roles fit better with men or women]. No. Not at all. Because I’ve seen and met so many people that. No. No. It just doesn’t. Just because you’re a male doesn’t mean you’re a

dominant, just because you're a female doesn't mean you're a submissive. There are so many variables. The human condition is nothing but variables.

Sam rejects the idea of that one's gender determines one's BDSM role, going on to explicitly refute the normative association of maleness/masculinity with dominance and femaleness/femininity with submission. That participants like these explicitly refute the association of dominance with masculinity and submission with femininity underscores the hegemonic status of normative gender and power beliefs that link dominance with masculinity and submission with femininity. Importantly, no participant in any of my data sources said that just because someone is a woman doesn't mean she's a dominant or just because someone is a man doesn't mean he's a submissive; participants don't believe anyone would automatically assume that men are submissive and women are dominant.

Participants like Devore, Devon, Sam, Chris, Sam, Harper, and others who reject hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power in the context of BDSM often explicitly reject the arguments made by other participants who rely on hegemonic cultural beliefs. Many participants, for instance, voice dislike for specific BDSM lifestyles that are based on normative gender-power associations. One participant, for example, writes, "One of my pet peeves is when people link power exchange roles with gender (the Korean novels being good examples)."<sup>206</sup> Participants often point out that linking power and gender in that way incorrectly makes it appear that *all* women are submissive and *all* men are dominant. Participants often point out that while *some* women may be submissive, submission is not an innate or natural trait of women any more than dominance is of men.

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<sup>206</sup> 2006 "Does Gender Really Matter in Power Exchange?"

Participants also argue that differences in styles of BDSM cannot be explained by gender. In response to another participant who argues that all women focus on the emotional aspects of BDSM and all men focus on the physical aspects, for example, one participant writes:

I'm not denying that your experience is as you state, but you're making generalizations that I don't think are valid. Not all women behave and think the same way, and not all men behave and think the same way, and assuming that they're all going to respond to rituals, or anything else, in the same way according to gender doesn't make much sense.<sup>207</sup>

Participants like these reject gender-based generalizations about BDSM experiences. By explaining that the assumption that participants will “all... respond to rituals, or anything else, in the same way according to gender doesn't make such sense,” this participant challenges the salience of gender as a social category that can provide information clues about how participants will respond to BDSM interactions. Similarly, another participant argues, “There are so many different styles within a gender group let alone across the gender gap. This is not a team sport. We don't wear team uniforms. We don't have a rulebook. It is an individual achievement category of events. Keyword= Individual.”<sup>208</sup> For this participant and others like zir, the diversity of styles “within a gender group” makes gender not a useful category for predicting who will use or like a specific style. Similarly, on a thread discussed in the previous section in which participants suggest that ritual has a different effect on male and female submissives based on the premise that men respond to physical cues and women to emotional cues, one participant responds, “as a male submissive I don't believe there is any a priori difference in intellectualizing

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<sup>207</sup> 2004, “Male and ritual”

<sup>208</sup> 2003, “Differences between Male/Female Dominant Styles”

things, as you suggest... The split doesn't follow gender lines..."<sup>209</sup> Another poster makes a related argument:

Of course there are men and women that both fall into the category of body first, mind second and the opposite is true as well and there are those that float between the two extremes. Personally, I tend to fall on the middle path, leaning often towards the mind first side of things, however I also can float freely between the two, when needed. It tends to be a scene-by-scene basis and on who the Domme is and their individual style.<sup>210</sup>

This participant rejects the idea that women experience BDSM in more emotional ways, while men experience it in more physical ways, explaining that both men and women can have either primarily physical or emotional experiences and that some have blended experiences. These different types of experiences, ze explains, are based on participants' "individual style" and who the other participant in the scene is, noting that types of experience aren't static but instead vary on a "scene-by-scene basis." Ze does not perceive gender as providing useful informational clues about how men and women will experience BDSM interactions, particularly related to how likely they are to experience subspace.

Other participants similarly reject the idea that gender provides useful clues about how to interact with other BDSM participants, particularly in the context of a scene or play. One participant, for example, writes:

I play with both men and women and I don't think I've ever considered there to be a difference in terms of how I approach different genders. I approach dominance in a variety of ways with different people. I'm more concerned with individual perceptions, issues, interests, and modes of processing information than gender characteristics.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> 2004, "Male and ritual"

<sup>210</sup> 2004, "Male and ritual"

<sup>211</sup> 2003 "Differences Between Male/ Female Styles"

This participant does not perceive differences across gender in terms of styles of BDSM, which leads her to focus on “individual perceptions, issues, interests, and modes of processing information” rather than “gender characteristics” when interacting with BDSM partners. Similarly, another participant writes, “I personally have not seen much of a difference. I have seen both genders (Dom/mme, male sub, femmesub) interact in about the same way. The dynamics of interaction is about the same, imho [in my humble opinion].”<sup>212</sup> Most participants view differences in styles and preferences as matters of individual preference that are unrelated to gender. Another participant explains, “From what I've seen the needs between individuals vary vastly independently of gender. I think that trying to stereotype male and female subs would probably serve no other purpose than to just create more \*cubby holes\* that people as a rule generally don't fit into.”<sup>213</sup> Like the majority of participants, this participant perceives differences between individuals in the context of BDSM as “independent” of gender, explaining that attempting to determine differences between male and female subs creates “cubby holes” that “people as a rule generally don't fit into.” The “cubby holes” created by gender don't appear to participants like these to provide useful informational clues, because they create categories that people don't actually fit into. The idea that gender does not provide useful informational clues about what participants like and dislike and how they can be expected to act appears repeatedly in my data. Another participant argues:

It would be totally incorrect to stereotype all male and female submissive into two particular groups who supposedly like this and don't like that. Just from reading posts of female submissives on this site I have seen a whole range of things that they like and dislike. Some I can identify with, others I cannot. I have even had female submissives write to me to tell me how much they identify with what I post on these forums. I'm quite sure that there are other female submissives who

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<sup>212</sup> 2002, “Male subs vs. female subs”

<sup>213</sup> 2002, “Male subs vs. female subs”

totally disagree with me. Where's the gender divide when it comes to what submissives like???. I don't believe that there is any one thing you can point to and say that all female submissives like it and all male submissives don't or vice versa.<sup>214</sup>

That what submissives like and dislike cannot be predicted by gender effectively reduces the salience of gender in BDSM contexts for participants like these. Most participants, such as the participant quoted above, perceive differences across submissives as a group, but perceive these differences as being unrelated to gender.

Most participants in this study do not perceive differences in interaction based on gender. For these participants, gender does not appear to be a valid or useful category for predicting and interpreting the behavior of others. Participants like these do not perceive generalizations based on gender as holding up in everyday life. As a result, these participants argue that gender cannot be used to predict behaviors, desires, or interests. Rejecting the idea that gender is correlated with these types of individual level behaviors reduces the salience of gender as a social category for these participants, because gender does not appear to them to provide a useful or accurate interpretive or predictive framework.

Participants also frequently criticize specific kinds of assumptions others make about gender and power in the context of BDSM. Some participants, for example, point out that not all men can physically overpower women, which challenges the idea that men can always rely on physical strength as a source of power. On a thread in which other participants argue that men have greater physical power and that this makes them more natural dominants, for instance, one female-identified participant responds, “I'm pretty strong and my taste runs to men who are height-proportionate to me, so I've had

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<sup>214</sup> 2002, “Male subs vs. female subs”

normal healthy male partners I could physically overpower.”<sup>215</sup> Similarly, another female-identified participant explains that as a dome, ze has:

Found that no matter how much stronger or physically bigger my boys where I could easily over power them physically and mentally. I am a total sadist. If I want to do something to someone bad enough I seem to find the strength to do it. Which needless to say is fun when you're topping a 6'4" 275lbs guy.... I think it's all in the mind set.<sup>216</sup>

For this participant, physical strength is a product of mind set rather than gender. Female-identified participants who share their own experiences of physically overpowering male-identified participants challenge other participants’ assumptions that all men can physically overpower all women. Because some participants perceive physical strength as the primary and/or most important source of power, women who have equal or greater physical strength than the men they dominate challenge the idea that women don’t have power because they don’t have physical strength.

Participants who reject normative gender and power cultural beliefs frequently challenge other participants directly, as is evident on the discussion boards, as well as in my conversations with participants about how they interact in their local physical communities. For instance, on a thread titled, “D/s as indulgence in male/female polarity,” in which the original poster suggests that submission is a deep expression of a woman’s femininity, other participants challenge the fusion of femininity and submission perceived by the original poster. The participants who challenge the original poster provide a variety of arguments against the theory proposed by the original participant.

The person who initiates the thread writes:

It has occurred to me that experiences of submission for a woman could be interpreted as a deep engagement with her own femininity – an indulgence in her

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<sup>215</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

<sup>216</sup> 2003, “Differences between Male/Female Dominant Styles”

gender...I suspect that most female subs love being women...I suspect that they would be more inclined to voice their like of male strength, confidence, even intelligence, or anything else in a man that turned them on. I suspect that they would prefer more feminine or sexy clothes (skirts over pants or loose jeans ?); I suspect that they would like a gentleman who displays chivalry and self-control... This idea about submission as deep experience of one's femininity, makes me think that there are probably many women out there who don't identify as subs, but would love it if only they knew only because they've never known what a complete engagement with their sexuality and womanhood it would represent.<sup>217</sup>

This participant frames submission and femininity as natural correlates, suggesting that female submissives display highly stereotypical feminine traits and are universally attracted to men who display similarly stereotypical masculine traits. Further, this participant suggests that women who don't identify as submissives "would love it [submission to a man]" if they knew about it, because it would allow them to experience "complete engagement" with their "womanhood."

The range of ways that other participants refute the assumptions made in this post are representative of the diverse ways that BDSM participants challenge normative hegemonic gender and power cultural beliefs that link masculinity with dominance and power and femininity with submission and powerlessness. For example, one participant responds:

Some of us do have a 'deep engagement with our own femininity' something like you describe.... And some of us are hardcore feminist power women who detest the idea of a man opening doors for us... Some of us wear feminine/sexy clothes in daily life, while some of us are complete 'tomboys.' Some of us voice a like of 'male strength and chivalry' on a daily basis, while some of us voice a deep dislike of 'male arrogance,' and we may well be referring to exactly the same kind of behaviour. And even *within* a D/s relationship, a woman who is submissive may not at all fit into your idea of a typical 'female submissive,' in which the femininity and submission of a woman seem to be tied together. Hell, I even know of a woman who had a long relationship with a daddydom; she was his little *boy* [original italics].<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> 2008, "D/s as indulgence in male/female polarity"

<sup>218</sup> 2008, "D/s as indulgence in male/female polarity"



This participant directly challenges the idea that “femininity and submission” are “tied together” while also challenging the idea that submission requires or is indicated by stereotypically feminine behaviors. By citing the example of a female submissive who identified as a little boy with her daddydom, ze further refutes the association of submission with femininity proposed by the original poster. Another female-identified submissive similarly rejects the idea that submission and femininity are linked:

Very little of what you mentioned above would describe me, but then I suspect that very little of what you perceive to be domhood would attract me anyway. Please do not make the 19th century mistake of reducing all women to only two dimensions. Being a woman has fuck all to do with dresses, and the cliché that femininity has become. I am the proud slave and submit to only one, my owner. And despite being a tough, workaholic, fearless, dominant, opinionated, dress hating feminist, it would seem I am more than enough female and submissive for my man. And sincerely, what a boring world it would be if we all fitted into those neat little fantasy boxes of yours. In parting, I think the thing that annoys me most about your post is that you seem to be implying that submission is the natural order for woman, and that woman who finally embrace this natural order are experiencing the depth of what femininity is.<sup>219</sup>

Explaining that ze is a “tough, fearless, dominant, dress hating feminist,” this participant uses zir own life to refute the idea that submissives display a “deep engagement with their femininity,” explaining that ze does not need to engage in stereotypically feminine behaviors to be “enough female and submissive” for zir BDSM partner. Ze also explicitly critiques the idea of a “natural order” of submission and powerlessness for women. Other participants similarly reject the idea that submissiveness or dominance can reinforce or undermine one’s gender identification. One participant, for instance, argues, “saying that a male sub is less of a man makes about as much sense as saying that me being a female

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<sup>219</sup> 2008, “D/s as indulgence in male/female polarity”

sub makes me more of a woman. Completely ridiculous.”<sup>220</sup> For participants like zir, submission and dominance are unrelated to gender.

Interestingly, when I asked at the end of the interview whether there was anything the interviewee thought it was particularly important for people to understand about BDSM, participants frequently stressed that BDSM roles are not based on gender—indeed, this theme was second only to responses that emphasized that BDSM participation is not caused by abuse and is not a mental illness. Harper, for example, told me that the idea that women are submissive and men are dominant is a “very common myth,” describing that myth as “what people may believe who don’t know a lot about the lifestyle.” Morgan similarly emphasized that the idea that women are the submissives and men are the dominants in BDSM is a misconception when asked if there was anything else important I should know. Ze said, “the gender thing. I think that’s very important. I think that people must realize that it isn’t about a male female power dynamic. It’s about a power dynamic that isn’t gender based.” That many of my interview partners view resisting the application of normative cultural beliefs about gender and power to BDSM roles/identifications as the most important thing others should know about BDSM suggests the strength with which participants reject those beliefs. Participants who reject hegemonic cultural beliefs that link masculinity with power and dominance and femininity with powerlessness and submission, at least in the context of BDSM, view gender and BDSM role as independent. These participants reject the idea that some people are more legitimate, authentic, or natural tops/dominant or bottom/submissives based on their gender identifications and also reject the idea that gender influences *how* people enact particular BDSM roles.

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<sup>220</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

Yet participants who reject hegemonic gender beliefs cannot systematically rely on alternative gender beliefs and instead must negotiate alternative and hegemonic gender beliefs in BDSM as well as in other social contexts. Participants who hold alternative gender beliefs frequently reflect on the ways that the hegemonic beliefs supported by others influence BDSM settings, particularly when they lead other participants to assume that all female/women participants are submissive and all male/men participants are dominant. One participant for example, comments:

There is a default assumption made that girls are more likely to be sub; it's either a hangover of sexism or wishful thinking on the part of male Tops, or both. You could dress in killer heels and all the trappings, call yourself MistressTopControlFreak, and still be treated like a bottom by some of the clueless het[erosexual] males and females in the scene. It's very obvious online, when a discussion of Doms vs. subs comes up and it suddenly turns into men vs. women instead, or equating D/s with old-fashioned M/f vanilla relationships.<sup>221</sup>

This participant notes both the pervasiveness and strength of hegemonic cultural beliefs among “clueless het[erosexual] males and females,” who perceive all women as submissive, including those who dress in ways that indicate their dominant identification and use scene names that obviously indicate their dominant identification (e.g. “MistressTopControlFreak”). Another participant similarly explains zir frustration with the automatic assumption that ze identifies as a submissive simply because ze identifies as a woman, writing:

You know, I recently talked to a very good friend (not in the scene but familiar with it) and casually ‘outed’ myself with her. Later in the conversation I noticed a large bruise on the underside of my arm and just mused where it had come from. She said – ‘You got it from your master.’ This is someone who's known me for over 10 years. Who should definitely know better! I was stunned that *even she* made the assumption that just because I'm female, I'm the sub. So, it happens. I think it's programmed into our Western culture that women are submissive ('cause if you're not.... you're a bitch!). [original italics]<sup>222</sup>

<sup>221</sup> 2002, “Gender, roles, expectations (and me)”

<sup>222</sup> 2002, “Gender, roles, expectations (and me)”

Participants like the one quoted above often comment that even individuals they believe should “know better” often assume that women/female BDSM participants are submissive, indicating the prevalence of hegemonic gender beliefs. Importantly, participants who hold alternative beliefs about gender and power cannot avoid interactions with others who hold hegemonic cultural beliefs. Thus, although participants who hold alternative beliefs may be in the majority in many BDSM settings (and are a majority of my interview partners), because their beliefs do not have hegemonic status, participants cannot systematically rely on alternative beliefs in interactions with others, because they cannot assume that all other participants in that settings also hold alternative beliefs.

**Masculinity Doesn’t Require Power: “Some new male bottoms think they have to lose their masculinity in order to be submissive. You don’t. You can be both, and we’ll love you for it.”<sup>223</sup>**

While most participants who reject hegemonic cultural beliefs that link gender and power reject the idea that gender is an important social category in general, some participants construct alternative beliefs about gender and power that reject the idea that submission clashes with masculinity. While only one of my interview partners who rejected the idea that some BDSM roles fit better with one gender than others or that gender-based differences in styles exist explicitly argued that masculinity and submission do not necessarily “clash,” this theme was common in my other data sources. Pat told me, “I don’t think being submissive takes away from the masculinity of a man unless it’s a situation where he wants that taken away.” For Pat and others like zir,<sup>224</sup> submission only

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<sup>223</sup> 2005, “Masculine male submissives”

<sup>224</sup> This theme appeared much more frequently in my discussion board and archival data than in my interview data. I suspect this is a result of the interview process itself rather than reflective of a difference

has an emasculating result when participants want it to; emasculation is not an automatic or necessary result of men's submission. Another participant similarly argues that submission does not always or necessarily have an emasculating effect. Ze writes:

What makes you think that being in touch with femininity is a submissive trait? Or that enjoying male strength and intelligence and maleness is a submissive trait? My male subs are strong, intelligent, masculine, capable men...He doesn't need me to strip his masculinity from him, nor do I feel the need to do so. (Though there's nothing wrong with that kink, either. Just making a point here!) His submission has nothing to do with some lack of manliness...Being more feminine does not make one more submissive....<sup>225</sup>

This participant explains that not only is there not a necessary correlation between femininity and submission but that masculine men can also be submissive and do not need to have their masculinity stripped from them in order to be submissive.

Other participants argue that it takes great strength (a trait normatively perceived as being highly correlated with masculinity) for a man to go against social norms by submitting and/or identifying as a submissive. One participant, for instance, writes, "I think that it takes a very strong man to admit to his submissiveness."<sup>226</sup> Another participant writes, "it takes a very strong man to admit, much less embrace his submissiveness, as the odds he'll be accepted for who he is are slim in our society."<sup>227</sup> Similarly, another argues, "a man that is strong enough to submit to his Dom/me takes a certain type that is comfortable enough in who they are and what they have to offer to realize that submission and giving of oneself is probably the hardest thing ever for someone to do, especially men."<sup>228</sup> Other participants similarly frame a man's submission

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in interview participants compared with other participants. Because I did not frame my interview questions in ways that suggested perceived a "clash" between masculinity and submission, my interview partners were not presented with normative beliefs to which they had to respond.

<sup>225</sup> 2008, "D/s as indulgence in male/female polarity"

<sup>226</sup> 2002, "Male submissives are not real men?"

<sup>227</sup> 2002, "Male submissives are not real men?"

<sup>228</sup> 2002, "Male submissives are not real men?"

as evidence of significant strength, explaining, “actually I see the strength of a male submissive in the courage in the face of adversity”<sup>229</sup> and “I have had the great pleasure to be acquainted with, and have received service from, male subs who have absolutely defined masculine strength!”<sup>230</sup> The idea that men/male submissives demonstrate their strength—and by extension masculinity—is also reflected by the participant who writes:

It takes a very strong person to allow himself to be what he is. I think a male sub has it harder than female subs given societies [sic] views. It’s traditional for a female to be subservient. Men, however, aren’t even supposed to show emotions, let alone submit to a woman...Submission, be it from females or males, isn’t about showing masculinity or femininity [sic]...I know many male subs and I’ve never even thought about questioning their masculinity. They are who they are, and accepting that makes them even stronger.”<sup>231</sup>

While arguing that submission isn’t “about showing masculinity or femininity,” ze also argues that being submissive requires a man to be “very strong” and accepting his submissives makes a man “ever stronger.” Thus, while submission may not be about showing masculinity *per se*, it allows a man to demonstrate significant strength and by demonstrating that strength, men can confirm their masculinity. For participants like these, a man who submits demonstrates extraordinary strength by doing so and thus not only retains but even highlights his masculinity. Because strength retains its normative association with power and masculinity in these accounts, participants do not view women who top/ dominate as highlighting their femininity.

That submission can reinforce a man’s masculinity is an idea reflected by other participants as well. Another participant, for example, argues:

If anything it [submission] makes them [men submissives] more masculine and have far more strength of character in my eyes to be submissive than to be a Dom/Top... It takes a very strong man to admit, much less embrace his

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<sup>229</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

<sup>230</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

<sup>231</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

submissiveness, as the odds he'll be accepted for who he is are slim in our society.<sup>232</sup>

This participant argues that submission makes men *more* masculine compared to men who dominate. Other participants go further, reframing submission as evidence of masculinity by arguing that it takes a “real man” to be confident enough in his masculinity to go against social norms by submitting, especially to a woman. One participant, for instance, argues, “to go against the societal ‘norm’ and be true to your heart is an act that takes great strength and courage. REAL MEN have both of those qualities no matter which side of the flogger they are on.”<sup>233</sup> For this participant, the strength demonstrated by men who are “true to their hearts”, regardless of whether that leads them to identify as dominant or submissive indicates that they are “real” men. Similarly, responding to the stereotypes that submissive men are not masculine another participant writes, “it's a load of crap. I feel I 'm much more of a ‘real man’ than the guy who has urges (dom, sub, bi, gay, whatever) but won't accept and follow them.”<sup>234</sup> Accepting and following one’s non-normative urges is, for this participant, a sign of a “real man.” A different participant uses similar language, arguing, “To go against the societal [sic] ‘norm’ and be true to your heart is an act that takes great strength and courage. REAL MEN have both of those qualities no matter which side of the flogger they are on.”<sup>235</sup> Going against social norms is again frames as a quality of “real men.” In this rare instance, the language of “real men” is broadened to include dominants, who usually are not explicitly included in conversations about clashes between BDSM role

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<sup>232</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

<sup>233</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

<sup>234</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

<sup>235</sup> 2002, “Male submissives are not real men?”

and masculinity, because most participants do not perceive a conflict between dominant-identification and masculinity.

Beliefs that men can be both masculine and submissive—an identification that by definition requires one to enact powerlessness—are alternative cultural beliefs about gender and power, because they reject normative associations between masculinity, dominance, and power. These beliefs retain the importance of masculinity, however, by recoding submission and powerlessness as masculine. Thus, while participants like those discussed in this section rely on alternative cultural beliefs about gender that reject normative associations of masculinity with power and dominance, the salience of gender in BDSM contexts is not decreased for these participants. Instead, by attempting to retain gender as a socially meaningful category while simultaneously relying on alternative beliefs about gender and power, these participants must continually work to reframe behaviors not normatively associated with masculinity through the framework of masculinity, making gender highly salient.

Significantly, while alternative cultural gender beliefs that frame men's submission as evidence of masculinity appear frequently in my data, there is no analogous belief in my data that frames dominance as evidence of femininity. Given that power and dominance are more culturally valued than powerlessness and submission, there is less need to explain or justify enacting traits that are highly valued culturally than there is to explain enacting traits that are culturally devalued. In American culture desiring to “move up” in prestige and power is considered normal, while desiring to “move down” in prestige and power is considered a deviation. Women who take on top/dominant roles in BDSM contexts may be going against cultural gender beliefs about



the traits they should appropriately display as women, but are acting in accordance with the broader cultural logic that assumes everyone is trying to “move up.” In contrast, men who take on bottom/ submissives roles in BDSM contexts violate both gender norms and the cultural narrative that assumes no one would willingly “move down” in power. The presence of women who top/dominate can be explained through the cultural logic of “moving up,” which minimizes attention to the normative conflict between femininity and dominance. The presence of men who bottom/ submit cannot be similarly explained through the cultural logic of “moving up,” however. In the absence of a cultural narrative that can easily explain why someone would go against gender norms, participants who perceive gender as an important social category must create interpretive frameworks that can explain why someone would violate both gender norms and broader social messages that frame desiring to “move up” as the norm. Reframing male/ masculine submission as evidence of a particular kind of strength allows participants to construct male/masculine submission as a confirmation rather than a violation of masculinity.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this chapter, I have analyzed the extent to which participants rely on hegemonic or alternative cultural beliefs about gender and power. I add to previous work that explores perceptions of gender and power by focusing on settings in which actors explicitly negotiate and reflect on power through interactions based on consensual power exchange. Specifically, I investigate how participants draw on normative and alternative cultural beliefs about gender and power in conceptualizing the relationship between gender and BDSM role.

In short, BDSM participants frequently reject normative hegemonic cultural beliefs that link gender and power by rejecting the idea that specific BDSM roles, which are constructed around power/powerlessness and dominance / submission, are more appropriate to one gender than others. A strong majority of participants perceive gender as “irrelevant” to BDSM role identification and do not perceive gender as influencing how individuals enact BDSM roles. This finding supports the arguments of sex-positive feminist and queer theorists who argue that BDSM resists normative linkages between gender and power (e.g. Bersani 1995a; Califia 2000). In the context of BDSM settings, many of these participants rely on alternative cultural beliefs that disassociate gender and power and view gender as having low salience in BDSM contexts, while others rely on alternative cultural beliefs that disassociate gender and power—especially masculinity and power—while retaining the importance of gender as a social category in BDSM contexts.

A small minority of other participants, however, holds hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power that significantly influence their perceptions of the appropriateness, legitimacy, and naturalness of specific BDSM roles for participants of particular gender. These participants’ reliance on hegemonic gender beliefs leads them to perceive men as the only natural or legitimate dominants and women as the only natural or legitimate submissives. While these participants acknowledge the presence of BDSM participants whose gender and BDSM role identifications do not correspond to normative alignments of gender and power, these participants frame women dominants as illegitimate and inauthentic and construct men submissives as going against the “natural order.”

Finally, another small minority of participants holds hegemonic cultural beliefs that influence their perceptions of the styles participants use when enacting BDSM roles. These participants perceive men and women as equally legitimate and natural dominants and submissives, yet perceive significant differences in the ways that men and women enact power/dominance and powerlessness/submission. Specifically, this minority of participants perceives women dominants as using styles of power based on traits on which women are rated more highly compared with men, such as emotionality and nurturance and perceives men dominants in contrast as using styles of power based on traits such as physical strength. Perceived gender-based differences in experiences of powerlessness also result in these participants' belief that women experiences subspace more frequently and easily compared with men submissives. Additionally, participants perceive differences in men and women submissives' interest in and desire for gender-based humiliation play.

While a majority of participants reject hegemonic cultural beliefs that link masculinity with power and dominance and femininity with powerlessness and submission, participants cannot systematically rely on these beliefs even in BDSM contexts, because they are aware that not all BDSM participants share alternative cultural beliefs. Instead, participants must rely on conversational and interactional clues to determine which beliefs others in the setting support and must modify their own actions accordingly. Yet while participants cannot rely on alternative beliefs systematically in BDSM settings, most participants perceive BDSM as the social setting in which they find the most support for alternative beliefs. Rather than BDSM being a space in which participants can rely systematically on alternative gender beliefs both to guide their own

behavior and to predict and interpret that of others then, BDSM is thus a space in which participants expect greater—but not universal—support of alternative cultural beliefs about gender and power compared with other social settings in which they interact.

BDSM is at root about the pleasures of consensual power exchange—dominance and submission. Through the use of alternative gender beliefs, participants disassociate these pleasures from gender (one of the most important social categories through which bodies are interpreted and regulated). As a result, many participants perceive BDSM as a setting in which an economy of bodies and pleasures can exist in which the pleasures of submission and powerlessness are not normatively restricted to women and the pleasures of dominance and power are not normatively restricted to men. Yet there is not simply *one* economy of bodies and pleasures in operation in BDSM settings. Instead, BDSM settings are influenced by multiple economies of bodies and pleasures, which might be visually conceptualized as a series of concentric circles. All social interactions, including BDSM interactions, take place in the context of a broader socio-cultural context created, organized, and influenced by social norms with hegemonic status. There is no “outside” or “beyond” the social system in which one lives. At the outermost level then, is the hegemonic economy of bodies and pleasures that structures and is structured by the norms of a given society. To the extent that BDSM participants are involved in one or more BDSM communities, physical or virtual, the economy of bodies and pleasures created by the social norms of those communities also influence interactions. The economies of local physical and cyber BDSM communities thus constitute a middle circle. Finally, at the innermost level, through interaction with one’s BDSM partner(s) participants create economies of bodies and pleasures that govern those specific

interactions—“cultures of two” in C. Jacob Hale’s terminology (see Chapter 3). These micro-level economies created in the context of BDSM interactions have the most immediate impact on interactions and the norms that govern these economies are also the most malleable, because they can be supported, resisted, or altered by local participants and do not require large-scale social support as do more general social norms.

There is nothing intrinsic to BDSM, however, which necessitates either support of the current hegemonic economy of bodies and pleasures or creation of different economies on the micro or middle levels. This suggests that both radical feminist arguments that frame BDSM as a practice that always and necessarily supports gender normativity and inequalities and queer arguments that assume BDSM often or always works in gender subversive ways overlook the critical importance of interactionally-created meanings in their assessments of the relationship of BDSM to normative gender and gender inequality. For instance if there was something about BDSM that *necessitated* support of the current hegemonic economy, in which the pleasures of powerlessness and submission are considered appropriate only for female bodies and the pleasures of power and dominance appropriate only for male bodies, male submissives and female dominants would not exist. Similarly, if there was something about BDSM that *necessitated* resistance to the current hegemonic economy, no participants would perceive men as more natural or legitimate tops/dominants compared with women. Instead, the interactional processes that influence participants’ perceptions of the salience of gender as well as challenge or lend support to hegemonic and alternative cultural beliefs about gender and power determine the extent to which the various economies of bodies and pleasures that influence BDSM interactions will differ from the hegemonic economy. Yet

while there is nothing intrinsic to BDSM that requires either support or challenge to the current economy, the majority of participants nonetheless perceive BDSM as an economy of bodies and pleasures in which the normative rules of gender—and of gender and power in particular—are less frequently or harshly enforced than in other social settings.

While this research demonstrates that individuals can and do use alternative cultural gender beliefs in specific interactional settings, such as BDSM, it also demonstrates that individuals in BDSM settings cannot *systematically* rely on these alternative beliefs. Instead, participants who hold alternative gender beliefs must negotiate both their own beliefs and the beliefs of interactional partners whose gender beliefs they may not know prior to their interactions. Although the majority of BDSM participants included in this study hold alternative gender beliefs, this does not lead participants to assume that all of their interactional partners in BDSM settings hold similar beliefs. Even in settings in which individuals know or can reasonably assume that the majority of others in that setting do not hold hegemonic cultural gender beliefs, participants must still be mindful of hegemonic cultural beliefs.

Additionally, even when participants know that their interactional partner(s) reject hegemonic cultural gender beliefs, they may not know which specific alternative cultural gender beliefs others hold. Interestingly, the presence of a relatively wide variety of gender beliefs in a given setting may function to require more deliberation around gender than in settings in which participants assume most others hold hegemonic gender beliefs. In settings in which one believes that other actors in that setting hold a variety of gender beliefs, one cannot as systematically or reliably use gender to predict or interpret the behaviors of others. As a result, other social categories and statuses may become more

relevant compared with gender in that setting. While this research demonstrates that BDSM participants do not systematically rely on alternative gender beliefs in BDSM settings, there may be other social settings in which individuals can and do rely systematically on alternative cultural gender beliefs. Future research could investigate how perceptions of gender salience are influenced by more systematic reliance on alternative cultural gender beliefs.

## **CHAPTER 8 CONCLUSION**

In this dissertation, I have explored perceptions of gender, power, and sexuality among BDSM participants. In this final chapter, I begin by summarizing the key findings of this research with regard to the meanings and uses of gender and sexuality as interpretive schema among BDSM participants. Next, I link these findings to several broader issues for the study of gender and sexuality in the contemporary U.S. Finally, I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the challenges and limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

### **SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS**

The first four chapters provide the framework within which this research was conducted. In Chapter 1, I provided an overview of the research questions and significance of studying BDSM participants. The underlying question guiding this research has been: does BDSM create a different economy of bodies and pleasures in which participants have different experiences of gender, power, and sexuality in BDSM compared with other social settings? In Chapter 2, I traced the history of research and theory on BDSM, paying particular attention to feminist and queer approaches to BDSM and empirical research on participants' experiences of gender in the context of BDSM. For much of the history of scholarship on BDSM, scholars have approached BDSM as a mental disorder or form of deviance. More recent social constructionist approaches, however, take a non-pathologizing view and focus on the social norms, processes, and meanings of BDSM among BDSM participants themselves. Feminist and queer scholars debate the relationship of BDSM to systems of social inequality, including gender. Some argue that BDSM creates spaces in which traditional gender norms and gender inequality



can be resisted (e.g. Califia 2000; Hale 2003), while others argue that BDSM reifies gender inequality (e.g. Linden et al. 1982; Reti and Parker 1993; Williams 2002). Extant empirical work demonstrates that some participants view BDSM as a setting in which traditional gender norms are not as salient as in other settings, but these studies are limited to samples of feminist and/or queer identified participants and may not be representative of the larger BDSM population (Bauer 2007; Bauer 2008; Ritchie and Barker 2005).

In Chapter 3, I described the queer feminist symbolic interactionist conceptual framework and key concepts I relied on to frame this research. I argued that as a primary person category and primary frame for social relations (Ridgeway 2009; Ridgeway 2011), gender is a key component of the current economy of bodies and pleasures theorized by Michel Foucault (1990 [1978]). In this economy, bodies are regulated, organized, and interpreted through social categories including gender. I used key symbolic interactionist concepts including selves, interactions, and meanings (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1967; Mead 1934), to examine the gendered selves and meanings created in the context of BDSM interactions. I drew on the feminist sociological “doing gender” (Fenstermaker and West 2002a; Fenstermaker, West, and Zimmerman 2002; West and Zimmerman 2002 [1987]; West and Zimmerman 2009) and queer feminist “performative” (Butler 1993; Butler 1999 [1990]; Butler 2004) approaches to gender, along with the social psychological “framing” approach (Ridgeway 2009; Ridgeway 2011), which more directly articulates the relationship of micro and macro aspects of gender. Using these approaches, I investigated perceptions of gender salience—the degree to which gender appears to provide important informational clues to actors in a

given setting—for self and others. I also examined the extent to which participants rely on hegemonic and alternative cultural beliefs about gender and power. Additionally, in the current economy, pleasures—especially sexual pleasures—are regulated and interpreted in part through the sexed/gendered bodies experiencing those pleasures. I discussed the areas of intersection between gender and sexuality that are of particular significance for this project and discussed the conceptualizations of sexuality I draw on in this project.

In Chapter 4, I explained the methods used to collect these data. In sum, I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 32 BDSM participants, collected archival data from several personal papers collections held by the Leather Archives and Museum, and collected data from discussion boards at one of the largest BDSM community websites in the world. By relying on qualitative approaches to my research questions and drawing on several compatible yet distinct conceptual approaches, I was able to better understand the processes through which participants negotiate and experience gender, power, and sexuality in both BDSM and other social settings. In addition to reporting on my recruitment, collection, and analysis procedures, I also reflect on my own positionality and ethical issues in conducting research on BDSM.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I presented the findings of this research. In Chapter 5, I examined participants' perceptions of the relationships among sex, sexuality, and BDSM. The majority of participants frame BDSM as “sexual but not sex” and perceive BDSM as not only different from but “better” than sex. Participants differentiate sexual BDSM experiences from “sex” in three primary ways. First, participants construct sex as requiring genital contact and/or intercourse while constructing sexual BDSM experiences

as activities that involve sexual arousal, feelings, and/or fulfillment in ways that do not necessitate normative indicators of sexual pleasure, especially those which are genitally based, such as orgasm. Second, participants perceive sexual BDSM experiences as deeper, more meaningful, and/or more fulfilling compared with sex as a result of the more intense emotional/mental and interpersonal experiences they have during BDSM compared with sex. Third, participants create and use a temporal distinction that constructs sex as what happens after BDSM.

In this chapter, I also examined the assumption of most extant empirical research that BDSM always involves a sexual context or sexual meanings. I found that a strong majority of participants (87%; n=26) do not perceive BDSM as always or necessarily a sexual experience. Whether participants perceive a particular BDSM interaction as sexual depends not on the presence of traditional markers of sexual experience, such as genital contact or orgasm. Instead, participants rely on a combination of interactional factors when interpreting a specific interaction as sexual or non-sexual. These factors include: the particular partner(s) with whom they are interacting, the type and combination of activities taking place, the overall definition of the scene or set of interactions, and whether or not participants intend the scene or play to be sexual. Some participants also assign sexual meanings to BDSM interactions when those interactions are followed by conventional sex and/or intercourse. For many participants, BDSM creates a context in which simply wanting or intending an activity to be sexual is enough to make it so. This is one of the most appealing aspects of BDSM for many participants. For many, the possibility of expanding the range of experiences—especially to emotional/mental

experiences— that can be perceived as sexual— is one of the most pleasurable and important aspects of BDSM interactions.

In Chapter 6, I focused on participants' perceptions of the salience of gender for self and others, comparing their experiences in BDSM and other social settings. A majority of participants (60%; n=19) report similar perceptions of the salience of gender for their selves across all social settings, including BDSM settings, in which they interact. A significant minority of participants (40%; n=13), however, report different perceptions of the salience of gender for their selves in BDSM compared with other social settings. As we would expect from previous research that suggests gender norms may be enforced less frequently in BDSM than other social settings (e.g. Bauer 2007; Bauer 2008; Ritchie and Barker 2005), I found that some participants perceive gender as less salient in BDSM compared with other settings. Surprisingly, however, I found that these participants were a small minority (9%; n=3). Additionally, I unexpectedly found that a significant minority (31%; n=10) of participants perceive gender as *more* salient for their selves in BDSM compared with other social settings.

I also examined participants' perceptions of the salience of gender when interacting with other BDSM participants, focusing particularly on the role of gender salience in their interactions with partners and potential partners. A significant minority (40%; n=13) of participants engage in BDSM with partners of only one gender. For these participants, gender is highly salient in their interactions with others, since they use gender to determine whether other participants are potential partners. Most participants, however, (60%; n=19) engage in BDSM with partners of any gender. The salience of gender for interactions with others varies among these participants, however.

Specifically, some participants (3%; n=1)<sup>236</sup> engage in gender-based switching—bottoming only to people of a specific gender (e.g. men) and topping only people of a different, specific gender (e.g. women). Although these participants do not use gender as a criterion to rule out other participants as potential partners, gender is nevertheless highly salient for these participants, because the gender of their partner determines the specific BDSM role they will take in a given interaction. The majority of participants who engage in BDSM with partners of any gender (57%; n=18), however, do not perceive gender as highly salient when interacting with other BDSM participants. These participants do not use gender as a criterion when selecting partners and do not perceive the gender of their partners as influencing the interactions they have with those partners.

Additionally, I investigated the use of gender stereotypes in gender-based relationship structures and in BDSM interactions that involve gender play. I argued that while some participants use stereotypical gender-based relationship structures in ways that support normative linkages of sex category, gender, and gender performance, others use gender roles to structure relationships in more complex ways. For instance, some participants use gender roles (e.g. housewife, daddy) that do not normatively “match” their sex category and/or gender identification. Those who participate in gender-based relationship structures and/or gender play often use gender stereotypes in complicated ways. Specifically, many participants view gender stereotypes as optional resources they can choose to draw on rather than as rules they and others must use to guide their behavior. Participants often enact gender stereotypes that do not “match” their sex category and emphasize that this “clash” exposes the artificiality of gender as a social

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<sup>236</sup> Although only one of my interview partners reported this pattern, it appeared repeatedly in my discussion board data.

category. Additionally, some participants who enact stereotypical gender performances that appear to “match” their sex category explicitly construct their use of stereotypes as role-playing and emphasize that their performances of gender stereotypes are neither the natural nor automatic result of their sex category.

In Chapter 7, I examined the use of hegemonic and alternative cultural beliefs about gender and power. The utility of gender as an interpretive schema is rooted in shared cultural beliefs about presumed differences between people based on their sex category/ gender (Ridgeway, 2011). Hegemonic cultural beliefs in the contemporary U.S. link men and masculinity with power and link women and femininity with powerlessness (Radtke and Stam, 1994; Glick et al., 2004; Ridgeway, 2011). People of a variety of genders who participate in BDSM, however, take BDSM roles structured on power or powerlessness, such as dominant and submissive. I therefore explored how participants negotiate hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power and whether and how they develop alternative cultural gender beliefs.

The majority of participants (72% of my interview partners) reject hegemonic cultural beliefs that associate masculinity with power and femininity with powerlessness. These participants do not perceive men’s power as more legitimate or natural compared with women’s and do not perceive differences in men’s and women’s styles of using power. Other participants, however, (16% of my interview partners) reject the idea that men are more naturally or legitimately powerful compared with women, yet perceive significant differences in the ways that men and women express power and powerlessness through dominance and submission. Finally, a small minority of participants (12% of my interview partners) support hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power and

perceive the appropriateness of BDSM roles as determined largely or entirely by an individual's sex category/ gender.

Participants who view the appropriateness of BDSM role for a given individual as a result of that individual's sex category/ gender perceive men as more naturally and legitimately powerful and dominant compared with women. These participants also view women as more naturally and legitimately powerless and submissive compared with men. They often rely on biologically essentialist arguments, suggesting, for example, that all men are physically stronger than all women and that men are therefore more powerful in any interaction regardless of the power exchange process. Participants who perceive gender-based differences in styles of enacting power and powerlessness draw on hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power by arguing that men rely on physical strength and power when dominating while women rely on emotional/mental control when dominating. These participants also perceive different styles of enacting powerlessness among men and women submissives. They explain that women are more easily able to get into the mental "headspace" of powerlessness and submission than men because women are more used to powerlessness than are men. As a result, these participants report that women submissives more readily and easily reach subspace than do men. Additionally, they explain that men submissives are significantly more likely to engage in gender-based humiliation play—known as forced feminization or sissification—than are women submissives. Because femininity and the traits normatively associated with women and femininity are socially devalued, men who are "forced" to enact those traits by their tops/ dominants experience their enactment of those traits as humiliating.

The majority of participants who reject normative associations of gender and power in BDSM contexts reject both the idea that men or women make more legitimate or natural tops/dominants or bottoms/submissives and the idea that men and women have different styles of topping/dominating or bottoming/ submitting. The majority of participants who reject hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power do not perceive gender as a useful social category for predicting or interpreting the behaviors of others in BDSM settings. Yet even in BDSM settings, these participants cannot systematically rely on their alternative cultural beliefs about gender. Given the hegemonic status of normative cultural beliefs about gender and power, these participants must assume that their interactional partner(s) hold hegemonic beliefs unless their partners explicitly indicate that they do not. Nevertheless, because a majority of participants reject hegemonic cultural gender beliefs in favor of alternative gender beliefs, most participants perceive BDSM as a setting in which they are less likely to be treated according to gender stereotypes compared with the non-BDSM settings in which they interact.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER AND SEXUALITY STUDIES**

Now that I have summarized the main findings of this research concerning experiences of gender, power, and sexuality among BDSM participants, I now turn to linking these findings to several broader issues in the study of gender and sexuality. Based on my findings, I discuss the complexities of studying alternative sexualities, the conceptual and methodological implications of approaching gender as an interactional process, and the implications of my findings related to the use of alternative cultural



beliefs about gender and the variance of gender salience for our understanding of the influence of gender on interactions.

### **The Complexities of Alternative Sexualities**

While the move away from identity-based to practice-based research designs has significantly improved the accuracy of sexuality research, this study suggests the need for further refinement of our approach to sexualities. The findings of this study suggest that individuals may not include their non-normative or alternative sexual experiences when responding to questions about their sexual practices unless specifically asked to do so. Additionally, the surprising finding that some individuals who perceive BDSM as sexual and engage in BDSM with partners of a variety of genders self-identify with monosexual orientations (e.g. gay, heterosexual) suggests that “sexual orientation” may have previously under-recognized limitations as a conceptual tool. Individuals may consider only their mainstream or normatively recognized sexual experiences when identifying their sexual orientations, for example.

“Sexual orientation” may also be of limited value as a conceptual tool when working with individuals whose sexual identities or orientations are based on social categories and identities other than gender—such as dominant and submissive, in the case of BDSM. This suggests that sexuality research must be conscious of identities, practices, and meanings relevant to specific kinds of sexual practices and interactions. It also lends additional support to Yost’s (2007) argument that “meaningful identities, beyond gender and beyond sexual orientation, must be incorporated into research designs whenever possible, in order to avoid imposing larger cultural norms on subcultures that conceptualise gender and sexuality in more complicated ways” (152). Rather than

eliminating sexual orientation as a conceptual tool when working with individuals whose sexualities are not based significantly on the gender(s) of their partners, we might usefully extend the concept of sexual orientation to include non-gendered orientations.

Recognizing and better understanding sexualities that are based on social categories other than gender can also help us analyze the distinctive features of sexuality and gender as social systems. Feminist scholars have long argued for the importance of conceptual distinctions between gender and sexuality. In a now-classic statement on the concepts of gender and sexuality, Rubin (1984), for example, argues that “it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect more accurately their separate social existence” (p. 33). Similarly, Vance and Snitow (1984) argue that “if patriarchy fuses gender and sexuality, the analytic task of feminism is to take them apart” (p. 131). Over the past several decades feminist scholars have taken this challenge seriously (Andersen 2005; Butler 1999 [1990]; Ingraham 1994; Ingraham 1996; Jackson 2006). This has been a difficult task, however, given the frequent fusing of gender and sexuality in people’s everyday experiences. The findings of this study suggest that investigation of non-gendered sexualities may be particularly fruitful for feminist scholars interested in advancing our understanding of gender and sexuality as distinctive social systems because non-gendered sexualities can provide useful insights that may help us to more accurately and identify features of sexuality that are distinct from those of gender.

### **Gender as an Interactional Process**

A primary conceptual and methodological contribution of this dissertation was how I approached gender. While most gender scholars recognize that gender is an ongoing process rather than a fixed, stable, individual characteristic and that gender

identifications and selves are more complex than normative binary categories would suggest, this recognition does not always extend to methodological decisions about how to assess gender; most research conducted in the sociology of gender, for example, treats gender as a dichotomous, stable variable (Lorber 1996; Lorber 2006; Smith 2009).

Research designs that compare “women” and “men,” for example, treat gender as a fixed, dichotomous characteristic or variable. Such designs obscure individual variability in gender performances and selves and contribute to the normative understanding of gender as a stable individual characteristic. I add to sociological research on gender by taking a more nuanced approach to gender on the individual level.

Instead of approaching gender as a dichotomous, stable identity or characteristic, I used the widely accepted understanding of gender as an interactional process developed by West and colleagues (Fenstermaker and West 2002b; West and Zimmerman 2002 [1987]; West and Zimmerman 2009) as a methodological tool. I used this tool to guide my data collection, analysis, and write-up decisions. For instance, my interview guide included questions that enabled participants to reflect on both similarities and differences in their gender performances and selves. In the analysis phase, rather than comparing “men” and “women,” I compared participants with stable and variable gendered selves. I analyzed how participants perceive and use normative gender categories (i.e., men, women), but I did not use those categories as an analytical starting point. I also used gender-as-interactional-process as a methodological tool when writing up my results. I avoided using simplified dichotomous, fixed gender categories when describing participants, assigned gender-neutral pseudonyms to all of my interview partners, and used gender-neutral pronouns throughout. This allowed me to foreground participants’

own voices and descriptions of their gender(s) and/or non-gender(s). I argue that this strategy is particularly useful because it avoids ascribing dichotomous, fixed gender(s) to research participants, yet enables such understandings of gender to appear in the analyses and write-up when they appear in the data.

This methodological strategy is particularly useful because it allows us to more accurately capture the range of genders and/or non-genders individuals experience and perform. It also enables us to assess similarities and differences in gender performances and selves across social settings. An individual may perform one masculine gender in a particular setting, for example, and perform different masculine, feminine, genderqueer, and/or non-genders in other settings. As gender scholars, we must be mindful of how we conceptualize gender. How we define and assess gender and how we ask people about their gender(s) may affect our findings. The language we use to ask about gender may also influence the language people use when answering. For instance, asking “what is your gender?” is more likely to produce normative, dichotomized answers (e.g. man, woman) than is asking “how would you describe your gender or genders?” We must also be careful to avoid the assumption that individuals have only one stable, fixed gender. By avoiding this assumption, I was able to examine the diversity of gendered and non-gendered selves present in my data and to explore the interactional conditions individuals perceive as more or less conducive to the enactment of specific kinds of gendered and non-gendered selves.

### **Gender in Interaction**

Finally, while I found that hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender and power still influence BDSM interactions, this does not translate into universal support of those

beliefs. In fact, I found that despite widespread acknowledgement of normative cultural beliefs that link masculinity with power and dominance and femininity with powerlessness and submission, individuals actively negotiate these beliefs through interactions with others. The majority of participants in this study reject the idea that men have more natural power or are more legitimate or competent users of power compared with women. This suggests that even when individuals are aware of the hegemonic status of normative cultural beliefs about gender, they do not necessarily interpret their own interactions by drawing on those beliefs.

However, this study also suggests that it may be difficult for individuals to systematically rely on alternative cultural beliefs about gender. Ridgeway (2011) explains that alternative cultural beliefs about gender “affect behavior most directly in gatherings of like-minded others” and that “hegemonic gender beliefs remain the default rules of the gender game in public settings” (p. 89). She calls for future research to “to investigate the context in which we systematically rely on alternative gender beliefs, rather than hegemonic beliefs, to guide our behavior” (2009, 150). I found that most participants perceived BDSM settings as gatherings of like-minded others, particularly in relation to cultural beliefs about gender and power. Yet this did not translate into systematic reliance on alternative beliefs about gender. Even when participants expected all or nearly all of the other individuals in a given BDSM setting to hold alternative cultural beliefs about gender and power, they could not be certain *which* specific alternative beliefs their interactional partners held. As a result, participants could not systematically rely on alternative beliefs to predict and interpret interactions because they did not know which of a variety of alternative cultural beliefs others held. This finding suggests that it may be

especially difficult for individuals to systematically rely on alternative rather than hegemonic cultural beliefs about gender. Even in settings in which individuals know that others reject hegemonic cultural beliefs, the mere presence of a variety of alternative beliefs may preclude systematic reliance on those alternative beliefs.

Because the salience of gender in a given setting is directly correlated with the extent to which individuals perceive gender as providing useful informational clues for predicting and interpreting the behavior of others, when participants do *not* perceive gender as providing useful informational clues they are less likely to rely on gender as an interpretive frame when interacting with and evaluating others (Ridgeway 2009, 2011). As a result, in contrast to West and Zimmerman's argument that gender "accountability is invariant and hence doing gender is unavoidable," I found considerable variability in the extent to which individuals hold one another accountable to gender (West and Fenstermaker 2002 [1993], 54). Additionally, I found significant variation in the extent to which individuals "do gender" in different social settings. I also found that participants perceive significant differences in the extent to which they and others are expected to do gender across social settings. In particular, I found that most participants perceive BDSM as an interactional setting in which doing gender is more optional compared with non-BDSM settings.

Other scholars have similarly critiqued West and colleagues' argument that doing gender is unavoidable. Deutsch (2007), for instance, argues that West and colleagues' "definition of doing gender and their assumption of the universality and ubiquity of doing gender are incompatible with a theory of change" (108). Deutsch goes on to suggest that "the argument that people are always and everywhere accountable to gendered norms

presupposes that perceptions of other people are always gendered” (116). Risman (2009), similarly critiques the emphasis on gender maintenance contained in the doing gender approach. Risman’s argument for more nuanced conceptual approaches to gender in interaction is worth quoting at length here:

The ubiquitous usage of ‘doing gender’ also creates conceptual confusion as we try to study a world that is indeed changing. The finding that we all do gender, even when we do not do it in easily recognizable ways, is deceptive. Fundamentally, we must know what we are looking for when we are looking for gendered behavior and then be willing and ready to admit when we do not find it. Why label new behaviors adopted by groups of boys or girls as alternative masculinities and femininities simply because the group itself is composed of biological males or females?... This is not to suggest that we ignore the evidence of multiple masculinities and femininities that do exist and vary by class, ethnicity, race, and social location. Nor should we underestimate those instances when doing gender simply changes form without diminishing male privilege. Instead, we should pay careful attention to whether our research is documenting different kinds of gender, how gender may be changing, or whether it is being undone. Perhaps a criterion for identifying undoing gender might be when the essentialism of binary distinctions between people based on sex category is challenged (Joey Sprague, personal communication, 2008). (82)

Deutsch (2007) offers a slightly different definition of undoing gender, suggesting that we might define it as “social interactions that reduce gender difference” (122). This study documents both types of interactions defined by these authors as “undoing gender.” The frequent rejection of binary sex category-based distinctions—Risman’s definition—among participants in this study suggests that at least in some instances BDSM interactions may undo gender. Additionally, this research documents interactions that reduce gender difference—Deutsch’s definition—through processes that avoid reliance on normative gender stereotypes, particularly those related to gender and power. The findings of this study thus contribute to emerging attention among gender scholars to the concept of undoing gender. Future research should explore other interactions that reduce gender difference and challenge essentialist binary sex category-based distinctions and

should examine whether different interactional processes occur in other social settings. Future research should also investigate whether and how instances of undoing gender that occur in one interactional setting transfer to other settings and whether and how those instances influence the broader gender system.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS**

Now that I have outlined the key findings of this study and implications for the study of gender and sexuality, I turn to the limitations of this study and directions for future research. First, this study is limited by the non-generalizability of the findings. I chose to create a purposive sample not to be able to generalize to the larger BDSM population, but instead to better understand the processes through which participants experience gender, power, and sexuality in the context of BDSM and other social interactions. A strength of this study is that I was able to examine these processes through participants' own accounts of their experiences. By drawing on gender salience and cultural beliefs, I was able to understand how participants use gender in the context of BDSM and other interactions, which was the main objective of this dissertation.

Although I was not interested in generalizing my results, it is nonetheless important to note several limitations of my sample. While little is known about the overall demographics of the BDSM population, most BDSM researchers report that the BDSM population is whiter than the overall U.S. population. Nonetheless, it is difficult to ascertain whether the relative whiteness of my sample is reflective of the larger population. Previous studies have rarely included information on the racial/ethnic composition of the sample, yet those that do have been based on racially similar samples.



Since race/ethnicity significantly impact beliefs about gender (Ridgeway 2011), future research could examine the influence of race/ethnicity on participants' perceptions of gender salience and use of hegemonic and alternative cultural gender beliefs.

Additionally, lesbian-identified participants are underrepresented in my interview sample and little previous work has focused on lesbian-identified participants. Future research could examine if and how lesbian-identified participants experience gender and sexuality differently compared with participants of other sexual orientations/identifications. For instance, do lesbian-identified participants perceive gender as less salient in BDSM contexts compared with other participants? Are lesbian-identified participants more or less likely to hold alternative beliefs about gender and power compared with other participants?

Second, the sample on which this study is based is limited to participants who have at least some engagement with one or more BDSM communities. The experiences of participants who read about BDSM in one or more of the many how-to guides now available but have no contact with either virtual or physical communities are not reflected in this study and their experiences may be significantly different from those of participants who have at least some contact with one or more BDSM communities. A strength of this study, however, is the inclusion of participants whose participation in communities varies significantly across types of communities in which they are involved, as well as the frequency and type of participation in those communities. Nearly all previous research on BDSM involves samples of participants who play or scene primarily in public spaces such as dungeons and who are highly involved in local physical communities. In creating a purposive sample, I intentionally recruited participants who

play only in private spaces and who participate infrequently in either physical or cyber communities. The type and frequency of participation in communities reflected in this sample ranges from participants who play only in private and whose community participation is limited to occasionally reading and commenting on virtual discussion boards to participants who play in public spaces on a weekly basis, hold leadership positions in multiple BDSM organizations, and have won BDSM-community awards for their service and leadership.

Third, an additional limitation of this study is the cross-sectional approach to experiences. It would be useful to take a longitudinal approach to explore how participants' experiences may change over time. Since participants face a significant learning curve when entering BDSM communities and/or first identifying in BDSM terms, their experiences as they first begin participating may be different from later experiences. I found that participants who had longer experience with BDSM generally had stronger opinions about both the extent to which and the specific ways gender influences—or doesn't—BDSM interactions. Another strength of this study is that I asked participants to reflect on how their BDSM experiences may or may not have changed over time, but to more directly explore changes in experiences future research could include interviews across multiple time points.

Fourth and finally, this dissertation focuses on the intersections of gender with power and sexuality. Future research could explore how other systems of social inequality, such as race and class, influence and are influenced by participants' perceptions of gender in BDSM settings. For example, do participants' perceptions of social class and race influence how they perceive the gender performances of other

participants with whom they interact? Are participants' perceptions of the legitimacy and naturalness of power and powerlessness enacted by bottoms and tops influenced by race and class differently than they are by gender? Given that race, like gender, is a primary person category in the U.S., it would be useful to examine how participants' perceptions of race influence and are influenced by their participation in BDSM.



**APPENDIX B**  
**Interview Guide**

**SIMULA INTERVIEW GUIDE**

**PRIVACY AND INFORMED CONSENT**

Use IRB-approved informed consent sheet.

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**GENERAL BDSM**

Could you start by telling me a little about how you first became interested in BDSM?

If someone asked you to describe your BDSM interests, what would you say? Your BDSM role, if you have one [Probe: some people describe themselves as dominants, submissives, tops, bottoms, switches, sadists, masochists, etc. Do any of these terms fit you?]?

If you are currently involved in a relationship that involves BDSM, could you describe that relationship?

If you've been involved in other BDSM relationships, could you tell me a little about those?

If you haven't had a relationship that involved BDSM, would you be interested in such a relationship with the right person in the right circumstances?

---

**EXPERIENCES (SCENES/ PLAY)**

Could you start by walking me through your MOST RECENT scene/ play?

How were you feeling before, during, and after?

How did you know it was going to start and when it was coming to an end?

Where were you playing and was it a space you've used before?

Did you do anything specifically to prepare?

Did you know in advance what specific activities were going to happen or was it more spontaneous?

Did you take a particular role and is this one you often take?

What, if anything, did this scene have in common with other scenes in which you've participated?

Repeat for:

- FIRST
- FAVORITE
- UNEXPECTED-SURPRISING
- FREQUENT/ RECURRING

How are these scenes different from each other and what do they have in common?

---

## **GENDER**

What role did gender play in each of the scenes/ play you've described?

Have there been any times that you felt your own gender(s) clashed with or went against something that happened during a scene/ play?

Have there been any times when you felt that something happened during a scene/play really supported your gender(s)?

Some BDSM participants have told me that they feel like they get to experience their gender/genders in different ways in BDSM situations than in other parts of their lives—like at work. Have you had similar experiences?

In general, would you say that some BDSM roles fit better with men and some fit better with women?

- If yes, what makes particular roles fit well with men or women?
  - If no, is there anything that does make particular BDSM roles a better fit for certain people? In what way, if at all, do you think gender matters in BDSM scenes/play?
- 

## **SEXUALITY**

How do your BDSM experiences differ from other sexual/erotic experiences that you've had?

In what ways have your BDSM experiences been similar to other sexual/erotic experiences you've had?

How important is BDSM to who you see yourself as sexually?

If you had to choose between BDSM and non-BDSM sexual or erotic activities on any given day, which would you choose and why?

What percent of your sexual or erotic activities involve BDSM?

In your experience, is BDSM always sexual?

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## **POWER**

Some people refer to BDSM as “power exchange” or “erotic power exchange.” Do either of those phrases describe your experiences with BDSM?

What does the term “power” mean to you. How do you know if you’re experiencing it?

What is being exchanged?

Do you think the kinds of power people have over each other are different in BDSM settings than in other settings, like in work or family settings?

In sex that doesn’t involve BDSM? Have you had experiences with erotic power exchanges in non-BDSM sex?

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## **BDSM AND SOCIAL LIFE**

How important is BDSM in your life?

If for some reason you were no longer able to participate in BDSM activities, what impact would that have on your life?

If there have been times in your life when you wanted to participate in BDSM but couldn’t, how did that feel?

How important would you say BDSM is to you as a person—to what makes you *you*?

In what ways, if at all, do you think your participation in BDSM influences other aspects of your life?

- Work/ career
- Family
- Friendships
- Religion/spirituality
- Intimate relationships

Have your BDSM experiences influenced how you approach life?

Some people have told me that BDSM allows them to express a different part of themselves than they do in other parts of their lives—like at work or with their family. Is that true for you?

In what ways do you think BDSM settings are similar to other settings?

- Work
  - Family
  - Friendships
- 

## **DEMOGRAPHICS**

Region of country

Rural area, small town, city

Age in 10 year span, 20-30, 30-40

Race/ethnicity

Gender

Sexual orientation

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## **WRAP-UP**

Are there things that you think it's important for people who don't know about or understand BDSM to know that we haven't talked about yet?

Do you have any questions for me?

---



**APPENDIX C**  
**Response to BDSM community website member**

Hi [username omitted]. Thanks for your response! I understand that many people don't like the feeling of being studied or approached as 'the Other'. Many people that I have interviewed, including people I know from my many years on bondage.com, however, appreciate the chance to have their views included in academic research on BDSM and to be part of educating the general public about what BDSM actually involves. My own work does not treat BDSM or any kind of sexual practice as abnormal, deviant, or pathological, but treats all consensual activity as part of the normal range of human sexuality.

You are completely correct that there are often no direct benefits for people who participate in academic research. The benefits for participants in my research are indirect: I will be publishing my work in academic journals, and will also deposit lay (general audience) summaries of my work with the Leather Archives and Museum, which will be accessible to everyone, and where I have done previous research. Additionally, I have presented the findings of my previous work at a variety of academic conferences, including the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, the American Sociological Association, and the Southern Sociological Society and will continue to present the results from my dissertation at similar conferences over the next several years. Educating academics and other researchers about the consensual, non-pathological nature of BDSM is one of the main ways that I try to give back to participants in my research. Researchers who take this view of BDSM have played an important role in changing the way that mental health professionals view BDSM, another indirect benefit for participants.

I choose not to share my own stories and experiences publicly, on bondage.com or elsewhere, but am happy to discuss them with people on an individual basis, whether or not they are interested in participating in an interview. Like many other members of the bondage.com community, I am here primarily to learn.

Before an interview begins, I talk with a potential interviewee about my research, the kinds of questions I ask, and my previous work. I am also happy to send copies of previous papers I have written and talks I have given on BDSM so that people can better understand my approach to BDSM. I am certainly not an "expert" on BDSM, although I have studied BDSM for nearly a decade and have written and presented on BDSM extensively, beginning with my senior honors thesis as an undergraduate and continuing throughout my doctoral program.

My work is actually focused on understanding how BDSM intersects with other areas of people's lives and much of the interview focuses on non-BDSM activities and especially on work life. I recognize that BDSM participants have a variety of careers and life experiences and it is exactly this diversity that I hope to reflect in my research.

I have had several responses from bondage.com members and have already had the opportunity to interview several members who have responded to this post. I have also

conducted interviews with many BDSM participants who do not belong to bondage.com. However, I do understand that many people take a negative view of academic research.

I am happy to speak with you or anyone else who has questions about my work via email or phone, whether or not you are interested in participating in an interview. The Emory University Institutional Review Board has extensively reviewed my study and research design and approved my research based on the protection of participants and scientific merit. The Emory IRB can be contacted directly to verify my credentials or with questions about the nature of my study. You may reach the University IRB toll-free at 1-877-503-9797. My project ID is Study No.: IRB00041374.

Thanks again for sharing concerns that may be common to many bondage.com members and allowing me the opportunity to address them publicly.

## APPENDIX D

### Overview of interview sample characteristics

Interview	Gender	Age Range	Sexual orientation	Race/ ethnicity	Region	Location	BDSM Role (General)	# of years of BDSM participation	Interview Setting
1 Chris	Male	40-50	Heterosexual+	White*	West coast	City	Top	6-10	Skype
2 Sam	Female	20-30	Pansexual	White*	Southeast	City	Bottom	Missing	Phone
3 Jordan	Male	Missing	Bisexual	Missing	Southeast	City	Switch	Missing	Phone
4 Tracy	Female	40-50	Heterosexual+	White*	Midwest	City	Top	6-10	Phone
5 Lee	Female	30-40	Bisexual	White*	Midwest	City	Switch	11-19	GChat
6 Taylor	Male	50-60	Missing	White*	Midwest	Suburban	Bottom	11-19	Phone
7 Casey	Trans	60-70	Bisexual	White*	Northeast	City	Bottom	1-5	Yahoo Instant Messenger
8 Robin	Male	30-40	Heterosexual+	White*	Midwest	City	Switch	11-19	Yahoo Instant Messenger
9 Morgan	Female	20-30	Bisexual	White*	West coast	City	Switch	6-10	Phone
10 Pat	Non-gender	30-40	Heteroflexible	Indian	Midwest	City	Switch	20+	Skype
11 Reese	Male	20-30	Gay^	White*	Southeast	City	Bottom	6-10	Phone
12 Ryan	Male	40-50	Gay^	Native American	Southeast	City	Top	20+	Phone
13 Shawn	Female	30-40	Pansexual	White*	Midwest	Rural	Top	20+	Phone
14 Riley	Male	60-70	Bisexual	White*	Midwest	City	Top	6-10	Phone
15 Andy	Male	50-60	Heterosexual+	White*	Midwest	Rural	Switch	< 1	Phone
16 Jamie	Female	30-40	Likes everybody	White*	Midwest	City	Top	11-19	Phone
17 Devore	Female	50-60	Heterosexual+	White*	Southeast	City	Bottom	20+	Phone
18 Quinn	Male	50-60	Gay^	White*	West coast	City	Bottom	11-19	Phone
Interview 19 Alex	Male	30-40	Heterosexual+	White*	Northeast	City	Switch	1-5	In-person
20 Cody	Male	Missing	Missing	Missing	Southeast	City	Top	20+	In-person
21 Sydney	Male	50-60	Heteroflexible	White*	Midwest	Small town	Top	6-10	Phone
22 Avery	Female	40-50	Heterosexual+	White*	Midwest	Suburban	Bottom	6-10	Phone
23 Dana	Male	30-40	Straight with bicurious	White*	Midwest	City	Top	20+	Phone
24 Sydney	Female	30-40	Heteroflexible	White*	Northeast	City	Bottom	11-19	Skype
25 Dominique	Female	30-40	Heterosexual+	Ukranian	Southeast	City	Switch	11-19	Phone
26 Devon	Female	40-50	Queer	White*	Southeast	Suburban	Top	11-19	Phone
Interview 27 Drew	Male	30-40	Heterosexual+	White*	Midwest	City	Top	20+	Phone
28 Shannon	Female	Missing	Missing	Missing	Southeast	City	Bottom	11-19	Phone
29 Peyton	Female	20-30	Heterosexual+	Native American	West coast	City	Bottom	1-5	Phone
30 Harper	Female	20-30	Heterosexual+	White*	Southeast	City	Switch	11-19	Phone
31 Dakota	Male	40-50	Gay^	White*	Southeast	City	Bottom	20+	Phone
32 Aubrey	Female	50-60	Bisexual	White*	Midwest	City	Switch	1-5	Phone

+ Includes interviewees who self-identified as either “heterosexual” or “straight.”

\* Includes interviewees who self-identified as either “white” or “Caucasian.”

^ Includes interviewees who self-identified as either gay or who identified as both male and homosexual.

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