



Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture, 8(2) (2001) 66-95

**DECONSTRUCTING MYTHS: THE SOCIAL
CONSTRUCTION OF "SADOMASOCHISM" VERSUS
"SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGES" OF PRACTITIONERS OF
CONSENSUAL "SM"***

by

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ABSTRACT

The following paper is based on a critical criminological, methodologically mainly qualitative, social research project that I conducted during 1996 and 1997 in London's "Scene" of consensual "SM." During this time I conducted unstructured, focused interviews as well as participant observations within Scene-clubs that aimed at exploring the "lived realities" of consensual "SM" and its "subjugated knowledges." The paper contrasts the major elements of the social construction of "Sadomasochism" that medicalize and pathologize practitioners of this consensual "bodily practice" with some of the findings of my empirical research within the "Scene" that developed around consensual "SM" in London. More specifically, the paper explores images, representations, and accounts of "kinky sex" within popular culture as well as the various motivations for engaging in consensual "SM" that were mentioned by my informants and suggests that the motivations are not pathological or peculiar but rather part of contemporary society's "subterranean values." The paper thus deconstructs the social construction of "Sadomasochism" and opposes the selective criminalization of consensual "SM" practice.

INTRODUCTION

Dominant discourses and ideologies of "sexuality" as well as of "perversion" established "conditions of domination" (Foucault, 1990) that directly or indirectly produced individual and social harm. The social construction of "sodomasochism" was part of the "deployment of sexuality" which did not operate by means only of repression but more effectively in terms of productive power relations working throughout the whole social body. The discourses and practices comprising the Western "*scientia sexualis*" (e.g., psychiatry, psychology, and sexology) aimed at reproducing socio-political power relationships by means of the authoritative character of the expert discourses that constituted the "new species" of "perverts," one of which was the "sodomasochist."

Psychopathia Sexualis, originally published in 1886 and written by Richard von [End page 66] Krafft-Ebing (1886/1978), a Professor of Neurology, serves even today as a basis for many definitions and meanings given to "sexuality" as well as to "perversions." Krafft-Ebing's *a priori* understanding of the source of "perversions" was a belief in inherited "deviant" sexual traits, which he illustrated with bizarre case studies. His focus on the manifestations of "sadism" and "masochism" was then combined with the morals and "sexual ideals" of his time and could only result in a misunderstanding of "sadism" and "masochism" as substitutes for "natural sexuality."

Even though Krafft-Ebing considered, but never elaborated on, the possibility that there could be a link, or rather a continuum, that reached from "normal," heterosexual "horse-play" to "sadism," he still defined "sadism" as an experience of sexually pleasurable sensations (including orgasm) that is produced by acts of cruelty, including bodily punishment inflicted on one's own person or witnessed. Although this definition would also cover "masochism," as he stated that a "sadist" could also gain sexual pleasure by infliction of pain on his/her own body, he created the separate theoretical construct of "masochism." The creation of this counterpart of "sadism" probably stemmed from the stereotypical belief that sadism was a pathological form of the "natural heterosexual relationship" and as women were meant to be, and therefore seen as, passive, "sadism" had to represent a pathological intensification of the "male sexual character." Since "sadism" was envisioned as active, represented by the stereotype of the "man," "masochism" had to be a predominantly "feminine" characteristic or

a sign of impotence. Krafft-Ebing's theories were thus completely determined by Victorian morals and stereotypes, which impact even on contemporary etiological approaches.

The "paraphilia" of "sodomasochism" (a sub-category within the classifications of "sexual pathology") constructs this "bodily practice" as a "sexual compulsion," a "deviant sexual trait" ([Krafft-Ebing, 1886/1978](#)) determined by either "sexual impotence," a "weak sex drive" (e.g. [Ellis, 1897/1901](#)), or by "deprived" and/or violent family backgrounds. Even in contemporary, more "open" approaches, the association with a "sexual disorder" and/or of a substitution of "natural, normal, mature, genital sexuality" lingers on (e.g., [Cowan, 1982](#); [Keyes & Money, 1993](#)).

In past and present, the social construction of "perversion," and that of "sodomasochism" in particular, is always based on the "relational distance" between the "sexual" behavior in question and "normal coitus," the established norm of "heterosexuality," as shown in the following example:

*Non-coital sexual behavior on the part of sexually mature individuals may be called abnormal only when it is practiced not just as an introduction to or accompaniment of coitus but, despite opportunities for coitus, as the exclusive or preferred form of behavior. Then only can we speak of sexual deviations. The [End page 67] further such behavior is removed from normal coital behavior, the more immature it is, the more rigid its performance, the more passionate dependence there is on it, the more justifiable it is to use the term *perversion* ([Scharfetter, 1980: 257](#)).*

DEMYSTIFYING CONSENSUAL "SADOMASOCHISM"

Negative stereotypes of sodomasochism are translated into public policy. Government action against our community is always taken in the name of fighting violence; some even claim it is necessary for the cops to arrest us to protect us from our own sexuality.

([Califia & Sweeney, 1996: xv](#))

Califia holds the association of "SM" with mental illness responsible for the social reactions with which practitioners of consensual "SM" are confronted, such as "attempts to ban our literature, harass or arrest people at our public events, or outlaw even the private practice of bondage and S/M" ([Califia & Sweeney, 1996: xv](#)). These social reactions and actions of formal as well as informal agencies of social control are based on the social construction of "Sadomasochism" and the connected discursive constitution of the "Sadomasochist" with its implicit positivistic notions of pathology and determinism.

The data collected during my fieldwork within the "Scene" of consensual "SM" in London revealed that current representations of "sexuality" as well as the "sexual" ambitions and practices of members of mainstream society are not that different from many of those stated by practitioners of consensual "SM," thus indicating the existence of "subterranean values" ([Matza & Sykes, 1961](#)). It was Matza's and Sykes's ambition to reveal that there were and are many continuities between the worlds of "delinquents" and/or "deviants" and non-delinquents/deviants. They suggested that society contains a sub-culture of "delinquency," in contrast to many sub-cultures within a society. Although much of what follows confirms Matza's and Sykes's premise, I will suggest that the operations of the system of capitalist consumer society necessitated the development of a representational system that "normalizes" what is designated to belong to a now legitimized and exploited realm of "kinky sex," while still excluding what is socially constructed as "perversion." As "Sadomasochism" has become a site of political and legal power struggles in contemporary times (e.g., in Britain especially after the *R. v. Brown* case and the subsequent decision of the European Court of Human Rights in 1997),¹ an excursion into the representations of "sexuality" and connected issues within the public sphere appear to be important. These representations can crucially influence individual perceptions and attitudes. **[End page 68]**

THE DISENCHANTED REALM OF THE "SEXUAL"

It seems that sex – its defining limits and its inter-personal objectivity shot to hell – teeters

on the brink of becoming a meaningless word;
signifying everything and meaning nothing.

(Polhemus & Randall, 1994: 4-5)

The "sexual liberation" of the sixties enabled humans to notice and throw off their inhibitions as well as making sexual freedom a civil liberty, but it also brought negative results. Whereas the original aim was the achievement of "authenticity" through sexual liberation, however that was defined (e.g., in terms of essentialism), a shift in the opposite direction occurred through the marketing of "sex." "[S]ex itself, it[s] saturated external reality, [was] becoming part of mainstream culture. Sex as image became far more significant than sex itself" (Grant, 1993: 264). The consequences of this media and cultural "sex-overkill" may be interpreted as leading to a "disenchantment" of the "sexual" realm, as expressed by Baudrillard:

Nothing is less certain today than sex, behind the liberation of its discourse. And nothing today is less certain than desire, behind the proliferation of its images. When desire is entirely on the side of demand, when it is operationalized without restrictions, it loses its imaginary and, therefore, its reality; it appears everywhere but in generalized simulation (1990: 5).

While "normalized sexuality" has been used in advertisements since the so-called "Sexual Revolution" to market even the most unrelated products, in recent years the exploitation of the "perversions" has begun as capitalist consumerist societies require "innovation" to generate the buyer's desires and demands.

Language always lags behind visual symbols, and one need only look at today's fashion, advertising, or pop videos to realize that perviness pervades the mass as well as the minority. Everywhere you look (and this is as true of continental Europe, Japan, and the USA as it is of Britain), that which excites is that which incorporates some undercurrent of erotic weirdness, decadence, or perversity. The erotic, like everything else, is subject to fashion change – the pendulum swinging between nature and artifice, sunlight and darkness, normality and deviance, the girl/boy next

door and the vampiric alien other (These contrasts are all perfectly realized in David Lynch's film *Blue Velvet*) ([Polhemus and Randall, 1994: 5](#)). An example of this development in the realm of marketing can be seen in the 1995 promotion of the perfume "Ma Griffe," which was entitled "Leave Your Mark on a Man" and presented the reader of magazines like *New Woman* ([Nov. 1995: 46-7](#)) with the sight of an exposed "male" back showing green scratch-marks left by a woman's long nails. **[End page 69]**

As exotic and/or bizarre objects, even "sexualities" that were formerly constructed and thus perceived and treated as "deviant" and were pathologized and/or criminalized, as has been the case with "Somasochism," are being used to promote consumer products. In their winter promotion of 1996 (until February 15, 1997), the company "Häagen-Dazs" advertised their ice cream product using the slogan:

CALL DIRECT RESPONSE ON

Men in Leather – Will deliver your Häagen-Dazs on mopeds.

FULFILL YOUR CHOCOLATE
FANTASIES WITH OUR

INDULGENT NEW FLAVOR,
CHOCOLATE MIDNIGHT COOKIES.

JUST CALL THE HOTLINE BETWEEN
10PM AND 4AM,

ASK FOR HÄAGEN-DAZS AND OUR
BOYS WILL ZIP ROUND ([Häagen-Dazs, 1996a: 1](#)).

And in true "gender" coverage of the potential consumer groups, Häagen-Dazs had a parallel advertisement:

DOMINANT MISTRESS

WANTS HÄAGEN-DAZS NOW

Any time of night between 10pm and 4am
your demands can now be satisfied with our

new sensual flavor, Chocolate Midnight Cookies. Just call the Hotline and insist we whip round with Häagen-Dazs, OR ELSE.

THE NEW CHOCOLATE MIDNIGHT COOKIES HOTLINE ([Häagen-Dazs, 1996b: 62](#)).

These suggestive and seductive representations of signifiers of "Sadomasochism" in the competitive winter ice cream sale did not harm the sale of "Häagen-Dazs" ice cream as these advertisements continued to be used in various magazines within the United Kingdom. If the former meaning ascribed to "Sadomasochism" had still applied, this promotion would have used different signifiers; this once again shows a shift in the meaning, and the rising acceptability in the public's view, of the label "kinky" or "kinky sex." This label, however, still excludes constructed "Others" who are designated as practicing "real perversions."

A similar approach to product promotion was applied by "Tango" soft drinks with their advertisements on TV; the different flavors of these soft drinks were characterized [**End page 70**] as being "deviant," "against family values," and so on. Moreover, the brewery "Boddingtons" used the image of a black whip twisted round a full glass of beer with the slogan, "The Cream of Manchester," for the 1996/97 promotion of their beer in several magazines and newspapers sold within the United Kingdom. The impressions an advertisement by "Clairol" is supposed to leave the potential customer with are not hard to imagine:

YES! YES! YES! YES!

Introducing *Herbal Essences*

Start an affair with your hair.

A totally organic experience!

Unleash the powers of nature with these wonderful new shampoos and conditioners. Unique combinations of organic herbs and botanicals blended with mountain spring water. Its distinctive fragrances will stir your senses to unparalleled heights.

CLAIROL ([Clairol, 1997: 8-9](#)).

The customer appears to be openly encouraged, if the advertisement is taken literally, to follow a "deviant" career in hair "fetishism" to obtain an organic (orgasmic?) experience. About ten years ago an advertisement with this content would possibly have ruined the "Clairol" company.

The "deployment of sexuality" penetrates nearly all areas of everyday life and can thus be seen as responsible for the "widespread dissatisfaction with our own sexual experiences, which somehow never seem to live up to our culture's extravagant myths of erotic fulfillment" ([Polhemus & Randall, 1994: 7](#)). From a critical criminological perspective, the potential effects of media proliferation can be explained with Mathiesen's ([1977](#)) addition to Foucault's notion of the "panopticon." The "panopticon" describes the system of surveillance operating through the "gaze," which at first is merely external (through agents of social control), but through internalization turns into the internal supervision of oneself.

In his essay "The Viewer Society," Thomas Mathiesen ([1997](#)) suggested that Foucault's concept of the "panoptic" process needs to be supplemented with its opposite, the "synopticon," and that these processes operate in a reciprocal relationship with each other. Mathiesen sees "synopticism," as well as "panopticism," as characteristic to our Western societies, using these concepts to suggest that the situation in which masses of people focus on a selected few represents the opposite of "panopticon" and is embodied in the total system of modern mass media. The "synoptic space" performs its visual and continuous power over masses of people through an active process of filtering [**End page 71**] and shaping the "informations" "within the context of a broader hidden agenda of political or economic interests" ([Mathiesen, 1997: 226](#)).

The functions of control and discipline performed by "synoptic space" can be best appreciated by emphasizing "the total Gestalt produced by the messages of television," meaning an effect of broader enculturation in the population. Referring to Enzensberger ([1974](#)) and Tuchman ([1974](#)), Mathiesen ([1997](#)) states: "synopticism, through the modern mass media in general and television in particular, first of all directs and controls or disciplines

our *consciousness*" ([Mathiesen, 1997: 230](#)). "Synopticon" thus functions in terms of social control through inducing people to specific patterns of self-control and, I would add, also by inducing specific patterns of desire and "sexuality," which fit the requirements of consumerism. Although "lived bodies" are never completely determinable, the effects of the "synopticon" should not be underestimated as it serves a similar function to that formerly occupied by the church: the need for escapism through the offerings of a televised "world paradigm." Thus, the "synopticon" as a functional alternative to the church works smoothly in communion with "panopticon" in the prevention of critical thought: "surveillance, panopticon, makes us silent about that which breaks fundamentally with the taken-for-granted because we are afraid to break with it. Modern television, synopticon, makes us silent because we do not have anything to talk about that might initiate a break" ([Mathiesen, 1997: 231](#)).

The influence of media on individual perceptions and expectations concerning "sexuality" could thus be seen as the combined effect of "synopticon" and "panopticon." The proliferation of "sexual ambitions" and their pursuit extend further and further, so that in contemporary consumer culture interest in "sex" is a must. As Sarah Litvinoff has written:

When we talk about sex we're not talking about what goes on in individual bedrooms, but about the acceptable public face of sex....and the public face of sex in the Nineties is about very upfront sexual gratification; anything goes with anyone. It's a more hard-edged version of the free love of the Sixties and Seventies. For everyone who is liberated by this kind of attitude, there are others who are made unhappy because they feel pressurized into acting in a way that they don't want to. In today's sexual climate, you are assumed to have a problem if you are not particularly into sex (quoted in [Lacey, 1997: 1](#)).

TRANSGRESSING THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE SPLIT

[A] huge gap exists between erotic expectations and

sexual realities.

(Polhemus & Randall, 1994: 7) [End page 72]

Through the commodification of "bodies" and their "sexuality," the strict division of public and private broke down. In 1995, Annie Sprinkle toured the United Kingdom with a performance called "My Body Is A Temple For A Multi-Media Whore," using her "sexualized body" for artistic performances in public settings and thus further eliminating the formerly rigid split between public and private. A large proportion of the internet focuses on "sexuality" and thus becomes potentially a new source for the further deployment of "sexuality." "Stripping in cyberspace" serves as an income for some: "Couples with a camera, a computer and access to the Internet . . . earning thousands by getting on-line and getting it all off" (Gill, 1998: 13). The private/public boundary is blurred through these displays of "authenticity" in "sexual exposure" which, in some respects, appear like a reaction against the cult of the "sexual body image:" "What a relief to find a real woman between all of those retouched ones" (Gill, 1998: 13). The private/public line is further transgressed by the interactions between some of the visitors to these websites and the women and men who strip for them, as the strippers sometimes display themselves according to suggestions made by viewers (Gill, 1998: 14). Gill further remarks that this so-called "electronic streaking" is "hip" and easy and that "tens of thousands of men and women" engage in this cyberspace activity, which provides anyone with the chance of "15 megabytes of fame" (Gill, 1998: 14). The so-called "net exhibitionists" see their activities as positive not only for the viewer but also for themselves: "Having a Web site changed their lives The Web now gives . . . the anonymity to explore the dark side" (Gill, 1998: 15).

Apart from various "normal sex" sites (i.e., the "Adult Sites"), the internet provides plenty of resources for the "sexual deviant." There are the "S&M News" (<http://www.smnews.com/>), the "Erotic Punishment" website (<http://www.4bdsm.com/pt=pmb1730/entrance.html>), the "IC: UK BDSM Directory" (<http://www.informedconsent.co.uk/ubd/>), and the "SM: Safe Magic for Gay Men" (<http://www.safersex.org/ssex/safemagic.html>). The list could go on and on as the internet is full of "sexual" freesites.² This technological development holds the potential for positive change

in terms of diminishing formerly rigid borderlines of exclusion. Ken Plummer explored the growth and change of the "intimate" within the borderless space of the modern media. Whereas in the nineteenth century "sexual stories" were mass-printed in magazines, each of which would be read by a separate audience, "the new electronic media have blurred previously distinct spheres, such as those between men and women, young and old, gay and straight, black and white, making once segregated worlds more pervasively accessible" (as quoted in [Weeks and Holland, 1996: 35](#))

Yet not all public representations are inclusive:

Fetish imagery has never been more common in music videos, haute couture, and mass media. S/M is a talk-show staple and a reliable staple of crime shows. While it's nice to have people admire our clothes and to hear jokes about **[End page 73]** handcuffs during prime time, these media references too often include damaging and dangerous stereotypes about us. When latex, leather, and metallic accessories are taken out of context, we get ripped off so the viewers at home can be titillated ([Califia & Sweeney, 1996: xiv](#)).

These effects of distortion that lead to a reinforcement of stereotypes of "Sadomasochism" can also be seen in many "SM" movies:

Cinematic SM is twisted into the non-consenting, violent realm of the unhinged that *we* know it is not. Fetishism is used as an excuse for a bit of titillatory semi-nudity, or to identify the villain – the man in black leather. Horror films, in particular, will happily throw in a leather catsuit or a gratuitous bondage scene to spice up a mediocre script (Olley, as quoted Woodward, 1993: 19).

Other movies that attempt to give a more authentic view of consensual "SM" practice are rare: Nick Broomfield's "Fetishes," which showed for two weeks in London during September, 1997, as well as "Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan,

Supermasochist," a documentary by Kirby Dick, which provides an insight into consensual "SM" as a possibility for a reclaiming of "body," experienced and developed by a man who suffered from cystic fibrosis.

As movies and/or documentations that do not operate with and thus reinforce negative, reductionist stereotypes about consensual "SM" are very much in a minority and often are only shown in selected cinemas, the impact of distorting representations of consensual "SM," like for example in the movie *9 1/2 Weeks*, will remain strong. Sensationalism is the common reaction towards performances like the "Jim Rose Freak Show," which annually features as part of the "Edinburgh Festival" and even advertises itself as a show of "freaks." Within this show "bodily practices" that are part of "auto" and consensual "SM" are performed for their shock value.

RISING INTEREST IN CONSENSUAL "SM" WITHIN THE "GENERAL PUBLIC"

The rise of public interest in consensual "SM" within the last decade is striking. In Britain, for example, the magazine *Elle* featured an article called "The Dominatrix Next Door," which stated that "the S&M scene has never been bigger" (Weese, 1994: 74). Although 1994 was the same year in which the "Spanner" trial³ ended with the conviction of 16 men who had engaged in consensual "SM," making it publicly known that consensual "SM" bodily practices are indirectly and selectively criminalized in the United Kingdom, "there are thousands of ordinary couples" engaging in these practices (Weese, 1994: 71). "For many couples who practice S&M, the clubs provide a rare opportunity to act out their fantasies in public. Others create their own dungeons or [End page 74] torture chambers at home, keeping them locked to avoid upsetting the children" (Weese, 1994: 71). In this feature the journalist Sandra Weese conducted interviews with women who engaged in practices that are labeled "Sadomasochism." Her first interviewee, who has been married for 30 years, explained her motivations: "It wasn't that we didn't have a good sex life, but after 10 years of marriage, we needed something to spice it up" (Weese, 1994: 71). As culturally constructed ideas about "sexuality" and fulfillment are constantly reinforced through the diverse channels of the media, "routine in the bedroom" is a major motivation for people to start experimenting with alternatives to the "normal." The

heightening of pleasure, excitement, a prolonged foreplay, and the element of surprise are among the most appreciated features of this couple's (and surely many others, including some of the subjects in my sample) experiences with consensual "SM." The interviewed woman summed up:

S&M has definitely helped our marriage. But you have to maintain the unexpected element – if we did this every time we went to bed, it would become mundane, like normal sex. We still enjoy the candlelit dinners and tender lovemaking, but now there's so much more to our sex life. After 30 years, we are still getting to know each other and it is never dull (Weese, 1994: 71).

Another female interviewee told Weese that she was approached by a man, who had a fetish, when she started to get into the "Scene." Later she met her long-term partner, while she was looking for a "submissive" partner for consensual "SM." Her search turned out to be quite easy as:

A good dominatrix is not easy for a man to find. A lot of women do it for the money but aren't into it in their personal lives There are an awful lot of married men out there who wish their wives would be dominant in the bedroom. You only need to look inside a London telephone box to see all those cards from men wanting to be spanked (Weese, 1994: 74).

Here another common motivation becomes apparent – the wish for role-reversal. As the social construction of "masculinity" implies that men's "nature" determines that they play the active and dominant part in "normal sexuality," consensual "SM" provides a space for a release from the pressure of social and individually internalized expectations under which a lot of men suffer. The interviewee's remark about London phone-boxes is valid and can be confirmed by the numerous cards in the same phone-boxes from women offering to dominate men for money.

The magazine *She* ([The Sex You're Having Now, 1998: 53](#))

published the results of its December survey called "The Sex You're Having Now," which asked its female readership about how they [End page 75] felt about sex. The average age of the respondents was 32 years and half of the survey population had children. This survey showed that, for example, the use of "sex toys" "to spice up your lovemaking" was integrated into sexual encounters with their partners by 31 percent of the respondents. Apart from the use of pornographic films as stimulus (47 percent) and anal sex (60 percent), the respondents also made use of outfits: "Two thirds of respondents told us that they like to wear PVC, rubber, or other kinky underwear to turn their man on; 30 percent of you like wearing it on a night out, when just the two of you know. Although 79 percent of you don't fancy the idea of making love to a man clad in women's underwear, one in ten do – and love it 37 percent of you would love to try bondage provided you got to be in control . . ." ([The Sex You're Having Now, 1998: 53](#)).

COMMODIFIED "SADOMASOCHISM"

"[P]assive" and "masochistic" sexual fantasies and practices, although seen as definitively "feminine," are at least as frequently the experiences and practices of men. By a ratio of four to one, Nancy Friday informs us, men's fantasies are masochistic.

([Segal, 1994: 257](#))

Apart from countering "moral feminist" concerns about the alleged re-inscription of societal power positions through the "bodily practices" of consensual "SM," at least in the case of men taking part, these male fantasies and experiences are reflected in part by the many related services offered by prostitutes in London's busy city center. During the months I stayed in London, I found the number of cards in phone-boxes that offered professional "SM" services amazingly high. "Normal sex" is comparatively rarely offered on these cards. As the cards (10-30 per phone-box) constantly get removed and then replaced, the business of consensual "SM" prostitution must be a worthwhile one. The contents of these cards reflect the desires of the men, who pay for the services offered. To give an impression of an ordinary phone-box in central London, which gives some indication of the "average" demand for "SM," I quote only a few of those cards I

collected:

"P.V.C.-RUBBER-DOMINATION-CORRECTION-
OPEN LATE"

"KINKY SPECIALIST-RUBBER
SPECIALIST-WATER SPORTS-C.P.
[standing for: corporal punishment]-DOM-
LEATHER BONDAGE with a difference-
P.V.C."

"BRAND NEW 'DOMINANT' SABRINA" [End page
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"Demanding Black Lady – Leather and
Rubber Clad – Very Understanding for
Beginners (Inferiors)"

"Afternoon Playschool for Naughty Boys –
Painful flavors – Spanking, Stripping, Caning,
Smacking, Cropping, Slippering, Blistering,
Strapping, Birching, Paddling, Leathering,
Whopping, Whacking, Tanning, Flogging,
Thrashing, Disciplining, Beating, Punishing,
Chastising – Miss ROD"

"Domination – Mistress Annabel's Secret City
Chambers – Bondage – Corrective Therapy –
Humiliation – C.B.T. Specialist – Slave
Training-Psychodrama's –T.V. Dom. etc."

These are "non-Scene" offers (although some professional
"Dominatrixes" frequent the clubs as well) of services that are
obviously in demand within the average "male" population, as
"normal sex" offers are rare in these London phone-boxes.

In a feature called "Destination: 'Other World Kingdom' –
Holidays a la de Sade" in the magazine *Marie Claire*, the reader
was encouraged to "imagine working in a holiday camp where the
guests wait on you hand and foot by day and spend the night in
cages THE KINKY CASTLE. Where women keep men in
dungeons" ([Connolly, 1998: 88](#)). The setting for the "Scene" thus
described is the Czech Republic, where a 500 year old castle serves
as a space in which "European professional males-turned-slaves

[are] being whipped into submission by young attractive women and, if they are lucky, by the queen herself" ([Connolly, 1998: 88](#)). This package-holiday, which sounds like a reversal of the situation described in *The Story of O*, attracts many businessmen who are willing to pay for the almost "complete illusion of submission towards women" ([Connolly, 1998: 88](#)).

ENTERING THE "FIELD" OF CONSENSUAL "SM"

As "Sadomasochism" is behavior which is ascribed ([Kühl, 1981](#)) on the basis of a comparison with the myth of "natural sexuality," the attempt to explain it in terms of physical or psychological deficiency would only be valid if this behavior were not understandable to a sufficient degree (Weber, 1949). My empirical field research on consensual "SM" clearly showed motivations that are understandable and sufficient, especially with regard to their "cultural background," in terms of reflecting "subterranean values" ([Matza and Sykes, 1961](#)) that were largely generated by the continuous demand for "innovation" to sell consumer products and, further, through the socio-cultural emphasis on "safe sex" after the emergence of AIDS. In order to contextualize the findings of my research project to the reader, I will outline the methodological tools used to conduct my research. **[End page 77]**

My approach could be located within the tradition of ethnographic fieldwork and is also informed by feminist-inspired approaches to social research. During the one year of social research in London, I conducted "unstructured non-directive interviews" with sixteen interviewees, who were contacted through "snowball sampling" and "relational outcroppings" ([Lee, 1993: 68](#)).⁴ The major advantage of unstructured, focussed interviewing is the fact that it allows the interviewees to express their views in terms of their own "frames of reference," thus providing the possibility for the researcher to understand the meanings attributed to their "life worlds" (e.g., the "bodily practices" of consensual "SM" as well as the meanings that individual practitioners attribute to the label of "Sadomasochism"). This is also a feminist-inspired approach to qualitative research, with its roots in Oakley's ([1981](#)) approach. An unstructured but focussed approach, grounded in respect for the frame of reference of the "other," has, in my experience, led to profound insights and revelations about the lives of my interviewees. In communion with other feminist researchers, I consider and practice research as a "two-way" process, which has

also come to be known as "dialogic retrospection." Humm (1989) defined this feminist-inspired concept and research practice as: ". . . open and active exchange between the researcher and participant in a partnership of co-research" (Humm,1989: 50).

The choice of the access methods of "snowballing" and "relational outcropping" appeared, and turned out, to be the most effective ones as I had to deal with a "hidden" and "deviant" population" (Lee, 1993) with all its sociological problems. As the topic of this research project is a sensitive one as it is, for example, dealing with the relatively private realm of "sexuality" and also involves "bodily practices" that are now indirectly and selectively criminalized, obtaining data was not an easy task to undertake. As Lee (1993: 6) has noted: ". . . sampling becomes more difficult the more sensitive the topic under investigation, since potential informants will have more incentive to conceal their activities."

Due to the secrecy and the resulting problem of "invisibility," access to the "field" was crucially dependent on the information and trust I gained from the two "gatekeepers" I found. May (1993: 42) defines "gatekeepers" as ". . . those who control access to the information which the researcher seeks." In this case, access to the population of interest was mostly conditioned by the possibilities of access through the "gatekeepers" (one from the "bi-and hetero"-consensual "SM-Scene" and one from the lesbian "Butch-Scene") and the development of trust between myself as researcher and these two "gatekeepers."

As it turned out to be difficult to sample a relatively hidden population, Lee's (1993: 61) suggestion to employ a combination of the strategies known as "networking" or "snowballing" and "relational outcropping" as a strategy for ". . . sampling 'special populations' [End page 78] which are rare and/or deviant in some way. . . ." seemed to provide an adequate approach. In order to gain more control over the referral chains of my interviewees, I had to engage in explicit efforts to obtain information about the "gay SM" population as well as about the more easily obtainable data on "bi-and hetero" and "lesbian/butch"-consensual "SM"- "body-practices." My fieldwork data were generated through the employment of the social research method of "participant as observer."⁵

The sample method I used is known as "relational outcropping." Lee (1993: 69) describes this as ". . . one method of sampling a rare

or deviant population [which involves finding] some site in which its members congregate and to study them there." My seeking out of "relational outcroppings" within the "Scene" was partly limited by the code of secrecy that made some parties and clubs unobservable to the non-member. After some time within the "field" and the collection of a reasonable amount of qualitative data, I followed the advice of the majority of my interviewees and started to extend my observations to include the semi-public events of the "SM-Fetish"-market and to focus on a particular club that was recommended by them. As the club that was suggested to me allowed me a possibility to "blend in" and as the problem of access was resolved by the membership of one of my "gatekeepers," I decided to attend these club-events several times.

Whenever I went to any of the "Scene-clubs," the group or individuals that took me along were always informed of the purpose of my undertaking. At the "Scene-clubs" themselves, I observed and asked questions only when the flow of events allowed me to do so. As the people at these clubs wanted to enjoy themselves, I had to respect their wish to "play" without being a hinderer or a disturbance. Especially since some of their "modes of enjoyment" are criminalized and a number of clubs had been raided by the police, I did not want to increase the fears among the practitioners in the club about getting "busted." I did not dress in a typical "Dom" or "sub"-outfit but wore a rather "untelling" black rubber dress in order to adhere to the club's often rather strict dress codes.

It was a time of direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgression, when anatomies were shown and intermingled at will . . . it was a period when bodies "made a display of themselves ([Foucault, 1990: 3](#)).

This opening sequence of Foucault's "History of Sexuality," in which he illustrates a view of the relationship towards "sexual" practices at the beginning of the seventeenth century, came immediately to my mind when I encountered the "Scene" of consensual "SM" in London. In the so-called, "Fetish-Scene" and "SM-Scene," which do overlap, the exposure of bodies or body-parts and their manipulation are also the most striking features of visual encounters. The display of interacting bodies that indulge in erotic experiments appeared like a flight from the everyday wholesale product "sex." As genital [**End page 79**] sexuality loses

its socially reinforced importance and becomes a more or less rare by-product of the "bodily practices" within this "Scene," I was confronted with my own internalized and limited preconceptions about "somasochistic sexuality" that were based on categories of "normalization."

The following section of this article will present findings from my social research project. These observations reveal that the pathologizing explanations of traditional sexology and psychology for the engagement in consensual "SM" are wrong. This conclusion is evidenced through the direct words of my interviewees.

MOTIVATIONS FOR THE ENGAGEMENT IN CONSENSUAL "SM" "BODILY PRACTICES"

In this section of the paper, I discuss the most important aims mentioned by my interviewees for engaging in consensual "SM" "bodily practices." Altogether, five motivations were revealed through my conversations with practitioners of consensual "SM." My informants viewed these "bodily practices" as an alternative to "normal genital sexuality," as "safer sex," as an exploration of the dimensions of "lived body," as a possibility to transgress gay and lesbian stereotypes of "sexuality," and as a possibility to experience the transformative potentials of "lived body." In the following pages, each of these aims will be described in turn.

A. Consensual "SM" as an alternative to "normal genital sexuality"

For Ella the "bodily practices" of consensual "SM" were taken up as a possibility to enhance the sex life within her long-term marriage:

Ella: "Well, I've been married for about thirty-two years and really basically we started getting into it as part of our sexual play. We started with tying each other up and doing little things and it developed from there." (personal interview, 1997: 1).

This motivation could be understood as a choice to perform "sex work" within the framework of marriage as elaborated by Duncombe and Marsden (as cited in [Weeks and Holland, 1996](#)) which appears to be a quite widespread phenomenon. The effect

Ella gets from consensual "SM play," she describes in great detail:

Ella: ". . . relaxed and sexy. I mean I have to say obviously it heightens up our sex life, there's no doubt about it. I mean because when you are doing something like that I mean it keeps you horny for days, basically, you know. . . . you get into what you are doing, you get really sexually 'high' and it gets really sexually exciting. . . . Yeah, I mean it's very much part of my life, it's part of both of our [End page 80] lives because it's important. Because sex is important to me. And I don't ever want to stop that. I mean it's an enjoyable activity if you like, if people say fishing is their hobby, o.k., sex is my hobby. But, yeah, you do, you feel really good. It's great" (personal interview, 1997: 7).

For the next couple the choice of alternatives to genital "sexuality" is the main motivation for their engagement with consensual "SM" "body practices." Bess and Tom have a relatively new relationship; they also practice "vanilla" sex but enjoy novelty:

Bess: "There's nothing better than sweet, kind, loving ['vanilla sex']. There's nothing better than that but like everything, one diet gets boring. So the variety is really good" (personal interview, 1996: 5).

For Ryan, consensual "SM" "bodily practices" also serve as an alternative to penetrative "sexuality" which he found to be mandatory within gay culture:

Ryan: "I suppose it started, my first sort of experiences 'S/M'-wise, was seeing that film called . . . [later it turns out to be *Cruising*]. Oh dear, the gay 'S/M' film? Oh, god, I can't remember its name."

Andrea: "Maybe you can remember it later. Was it on TV or in the cinema?"

Ryan: "No, in the cinema and it got a very bad

reputation because it portrayed gays as deviants and it was set in America. I can't remember what it was called, it's really bad! But anyway it was 1978 and it just came out and I was sort of, about 14, 15. . . . And then watching it and actually being very turned on by the leather in it but also the power-games. So I was sexually turned on. And then, another film that I saw was the . . . "

Andrea: "Ah, 'Querelle'?"

Ryan: "Again, I got it on video and I watched it and I was just. . . . And I suppose that sort of. . . . And then I started experimenting with partners and to be honest I suppose I'm more interested in, you know, you've heard the term 'vanilla sex,' yeah? I'm more interested in that sort of, not 'vanilla sex', the other sort of sex" (personal interview, 1997: 1).

For Pat, the "bodily practices" of consensual "SM" provide the possibility to have meaningful "sexuality" within an environment of trust and safety:

Pat: ". . . you can have all of that excitement in a place where you're feeling trust [**End page 81**] and where you're feeling safe, and where you're getting intense sensation and where you're communicating on a very intense level with the other person. And I think, I mean that's what people want from sex, isn't it? They want to communicate in an intense way with another person that they care about and that cares about them and that they trust. And that's what they want from sex, isn't it? I mean apart from casual sex, but that's what people want from life. Meaningful sex – and that's what I get from S/M" (personal interview, 1997: 8).

For Bette, consensual "SM" and "ordinary sex" are similar in that both ". . . happen to utilize sort of extreme physical sensations

in order to bring pleasure . . ." (personal interview, 1996: 1) but with very distinctive features. The meaning and existential importance of communication between the partners engaged appears to Bette a point of difference:

Bette: "I think that "SM"-sex in a way is more conscious, more verbal and non-verbal communication between people throughout. I mean if somebody is being beaten, you ought to be looking at the person and trying to get it absolutely right. I mean that should be true in ordinary sex as well but I think it's more true of "SM"-sex than any other sex. . . . Men just go for their own pleasure. I think that part of the thing is the difference between intercourse and beating somebody; with intercourse, man having intercourse with a woman, there's a very direct sexual path, there's a very sexually fixed pleasure. And therefore he has a motive for just getting what he wants. But if what he does is not directly genital or sexual. I mean it may give immense satisfaction, but the satisfaction it will give will be in the communication with the other person. The fact to get it right with the other person. The fact that it's turning the other person on. Unless this man is just violent. But assuming it's a proper "SM"-person. There isn't a direct path . . ." (personal interview, 1996: 5).

Therefore, Bette concludes that empathy is more crucial in consensual "SM" than in "ordinary sex" as consensual "SM" depends directly on the communication between the partners; otherwise, it would not work out.

It appears as if the shortcomings of the "Sexual Revolution," with its focus on the goal of "heterosexual intercourse" that was to be achieved through the means of "foreplay," have been individually as well as socially recognized and alternatives have been found at the former fringes of "sexuality." The ideological and socially constructed "sexuality" has been found to be unsatisfying as well as limiting; in Bette's opinion: ". . . a lot of people miss out enormously on sex. Particularly men do, particularly heterosexual

men do" (personal interview, 1996: 7). After reading the *Hite Report on Male Sexuality*, Bette was astonished: **[End page 82]**

Bette: "It's just so tragic in a way how limited, what they appear to enjoy is. And how little use, you know, they are just so genitally orientated. It's just so terribly, terribly sad. You just think, what they are missing out on. You haven't explored your mind or other parts of the body. Have you not been taught about being fucked yourself or what about your nipples. I mean all you do is with your penises. It's so sad. I mean putting your penis in isn't much communication. And I mean sex doesn't have to be like that. And being a man doesn't have to be like that" (personal interview, 1996: 7).

This comment has clear parallels to Michel Foucault's (1990) criticism of the genital fixation in the concept of "sexuality" and its effects of domination, which often led (leads), for example, to "dominating body usages" on the side of human beings that had to prove (or maintain) their socially constructed "masculinity," thus preventing "communicative body usages."

B. Consensual "SM" "bodily practices" as "safer sex"

As several interviewees mentioned the possibility that the rising interest in consensual "SM" could be related to AIDS, I asked for Bette's opinion and she replied: "Oh, absolutely. Because it's so, I mean we don't know of any case at all, where it's been caught in that way" (personal interview, 1996: 11). Bette engages in consensual "SM" as well as "ordinary sex" and notices that the feelings afterwards can be quite different, more obligating after "ordinary sex." She added:

Bette: ". . . it's also a slight danger that you might catch something or get pregnant or something like that if you do something like that. There were two other equivalent people who I've done the opposite, I've done not 'SM' but been to bed with. Sort of younger men, I mean that was fun but on the other

hand. I mean it didn't change our relationship, I mean in some way it did change, but it was: 'What if I get pregnant? What if I get HIV?' I mean we did use condoms, it was okay. But these were two other gay men. But it's not as carefree. The thing about 'SM,' as long as it's properly regulated, you don't injure somebody, it's completely harmless. You cannot catch anything, you can't get pregnant, nothing can happen. So it's a very easy thing to do" (personal interview, 1996: 11).

Ros Coward views the emergence of AIDS as creating a crisis but also as potentially causing a "sexual revolution" since:

Women have been bearing the brunt of making sex safe for men in the past. . . . But now, suddenly, it's a matter of life and death to men that they abandon their historical privilege of spontaneous sex and assume personal responsibility for their actions . . . sexuality could be redefined as something other than male **[End page 83]** discharge into any kind of receptacle. In this new context where penetration might literally spell death, there is a chance for a massive relearning about sexuality (as quoted in [McEwen & O'Sullivan, 1988: 57-8](#)).

Jane confirmed that responsibility and "safe sex" are important issues in the "Scene," more so than in mainstream society:

Jane: ". . . it's a lot better, I mean, I much rather go to a party that is an 'SM'-party than a 'normal' party because, you know, that if somebody harasses you, that's considered unacceptable and it's going to be dealt with. People are much more responsible usually about sex and there's a lot more emphasis on safe sex" (personal interview, 1997: 7).

Apart from individual self responsibility, which appears to be increased within the "Scene," Jane mentioned that there is always

the pressure of "significant others:" "Peer pressure to behave. So people who may be not necessarily sensible and respectful will be pressured into behaving like that" (personal interview, 1997: 7).

[I]t would be difficult to imagine a more powerful or urgent demonstration than the AIDS crisis of the need to conceptualize sexuality, after the manner of Foucault, as "an especially concentrated point of traversal [*point de passage*] for relations of power" ([Halperin, 1995: 27](#)).

The "sexual" politics of AIDS employed modes of empowering knowledge in combination with the traditional modes of authorization and legitimization – power in order to administrate the public and private "body" and its pleasures. In other words all the modalities of "bio-power" ([Foucault, 1990](#)) were applied in the fight for medical "truth" and social regulation. As Foucault has observed:

[R]epression is always a part of a much more complex strategy regarding sexuality. Things are not merely repressed. There is about sexuality a lot of defective regulations in which the negative effects of inhibition are counterbalanced by the positive effects of stimulation (as quoted in [Kritzman, 1990: 9](#)).

The "change in the economics of sexual behavior in society" that Foucault talks about in this interview was also to occur through the AIDS epidemic and its "better late than never," "safe-sex" campaigns. The educational initiative to prevent the further contamination of people with the HIV virus was very much focussed on the use of alternative methods of sexual interaction in preference to penetrative "ordinary sex" in order to avoid any direct contacts with body fluids, especially blood. Therefore, diverse **[End page 84]** suggestions were presented to the scared public on how to have "great sex without being at risk" and the involvement of fantasy and toys was promoted. As Swartz has made plain: "It is the plague time. It is possible to eroticize latex. It's the only responsible thing to do. Exchanging fluids is suicide" (as quoted in [Califia & Sweeney, 1996: 177](#)).

I consider one effect of preventing unsafe sex through educational sex discourse on a broad and public level to be the rising interest in consensual "SM" and "Fetishism." The intensification of both anxiety and of newly discovered pleasures was, in my opinion, the result of the societal reaction to AIDS. As Singer points out:

The ideology of safe sex encourages a reorganization of the body away from the erotic priorities with which it has already been inscribed. Specifically, safe sex advocates indulgence in numerous forms of non-genital contact and the reengagement of parts of the body marginalized by an economy of genital primacy. . . . Safe sex presumes that pleasure [better: desire – A. B.] and practice can be reorganized in response to overriding utilities and presumes, as well, the capacity of regimentary procedures to construct a body capable of taking pleasure in this new form of discipline. Unless bodies and pleasures are politically determined, they can not be redetermined, even in cases where that is what rational prudence would demand. The success of this strategy will thus depend not only on promulgating these techniques, but also on circulating a discourse that allows individuals to reconsider their bodies in a more liberatory and strategic way (as quoted in [Butler & MacGrogan, 1993: 122](#)).

C. The "bodily practices" of consensual "SM" as exploration of the dimensions of "lived body"

For Jane, consensual "SM" allows her to experience her "lived body's" sensuality as well as emotions. Jane's motivation is the exploration of sensuality: "I enjoy everything that is sensually exciting and new . . . exploring feelings, emotional feelings. Having fun really, I think it's great fun" (personal interview, 1997: 1). Apart from being a strategy for drawing a borderline between reality and fantasy, consensual "SM" also serves Anthony as a space for exploration of "bodily" possibilities and choice:

Anthony: "But we have to also separate fantasy from reality, I think that's what 'SM' does for me as an individual. And also it is, I want to explore lots and lots of things, whether it's 'SM,' being tied up, watersports, or whether it's scating – it provides this space. Where I can say this is for me or this is not for me, you know what I'm saying?" (personal interview, 1997: 2).

For some practitioners consensual "SM" provides a space which is free of taboos [End page 85] and the ordinary conventions of keeping a "face" ([Goffman, 1967](#)):

Mike: "The major thing I get from it is a tremendous sense of release and freedom. Because it's something that you can get into a very sort of primitive relationship with someone. It's very physical and it deals with very sort of dark elements. And it's a place, where you let it all go."

Andrea: "You don't have to pretend anything?"

Mike: "No, you don't have to pretend. So, no one is gonna judge you. People are not gonna say: 'You are weird,' when you're in a 'Scene' with someone" (personal interview, 1997: 3).

Some informants regarded consensual "SM" as a possibility to transgress set limits of "political correctness" through these "bodily practices:"

Anthony: "I did work around cross-dressing and drag. It was at a time I found cross-dressing and drag interesting for me. And then the work comes through that as well. 'SM' came into my work, I made photographs and I found it interesting. I was also meeting other black men within various spaces, who were into it. I'm actually curious by nature anyway. And I thought: 'What is this shit about?,'

basically. And also about three years ago there was a lesbian and gay exhibition in the Brixton Art Gallery and on the invite it said that non-'SM'-related work would be accepted. And I felt concerned, here you have a platform for gay men and they say what is accepted and what is not. And I think that was another reason to say: 'Well, push those boundaries a bit further as well.' I do believe 'SM' and black people creates problematics for lots of black people. But those people miss an argument. First of all, there is a consent, whereas slavery wasn't with consent" (personal interview, 1997: 3).

D. The "bodily practices" of consensual "SM" as a possibility to transgress gay and lesbian stereotypes of "sexuality"

What I think is interesting now in relation to lesbian S/M is that they can get rid of certain stereotypes of femininity that have been used in the lesbian movement; a strategy that the movement has erected from the past. This strategy has been based on their oppression. But now, maybe, these tools, these weapons are obsolete. We can see that lesbian S/M tried to get rid of all those old stereotypes of femininity, of anti-male attitude and so on (Foucault; as quoted in [Lotringer, 1991: 387](#)).

Through the experiences I gained within the field of lesbian as well as gay consensual [**End page 86**] "SM," I suggest that Foucault's comments are also valid for gay practitioners of these "bodily practices," as Ryan's example shows. During an interview with Ryan, who does not approve of labels because he finds them limiting, he brought up the topic of gay stereotyping and the "liberating effect" of consensual "SM:"

Ryan: "What I found, Andrea, on the 'Scene,' when I first started, when we were young on the gay 'Scene' is that, I've never been into penetrative sex, being penetrated, not because of being raped or anything like that, I've just

never been inclined. And I find it painful, you know, when people try to, I've never found any pleasure in that. What I find, when I was on the 'Scene,' when I was young, older men just wanted to do that to you. And this was just pre-AIDS, yeah? Late seventies, early eighties? So in a way 'SM'-sex has actually helped me get round it. Because I remember, when I was very young, before I went to college in '82, you know, my first sexual experiences, when I was about fourteen to eighteen that I was getting a bit depressed, thinking: 'Oh, I'm not really gay because I don't get fucked.' You know, or: 'I don't want to fuck.' And I suppose 'SM'-sex, as you say, was like a trigger of wakening me, to have a sexual possibility, which I found much more interesting."

Andrea: "So it does not only overcome hetero-categories of sexuality but also gay categories of sexuality?"

Ryan: "Yeah, gay, gay, what's the word now? Gay stereotyping, you know, that we're all into anal sex. That's why a lot of heterosexual men are wary of gay men, 'cause they feel that all they want to do is just 'bugger' them. And that's not, that's not, you know, for me, it's never been . . . I mean I have been, I have had anal sex but very few, very few occasions" (personal interview, 1997: 6).

E. Consensual "SM" as a possibility to experience the transformative potentials of "lived body"

Bette enjoys many variations of sex. An important motivation for her to engage in consensual "SM" is the relaxation she obtains from doing it, which she illustrated with an example:

Bette: "I mean I find that kind of sex [consensual 'SM'] very relaxing. I've got a serious eye condition, and I had some laser

treatment in the hospital. Physically, it's not that painful but very upsetting. I was very uptight. It's quite a nasty thing to have done. This woman, X, came around and . . . she ended up beating me. And it was mainly unbelievably relaxing."

Andrea: "It can release you from tension?" **[End page 87]**

Bette: "Yeah, absolutely. I just think, physically, if it's done well, you know, it's very similar to being caressed. I mean I was covered in bruises, it was quite a . . . I mean it wasn't an enormously heavy but it was fairly heavy, it wasn't a light 'Scene.' Also, if you get injuries in that way, they don't hurt which I think is very interesting . . . It has certainly a big spiritual element to it" (personal interview, 1996: 6).

The spiritual dimension of these "bodily practices," mentioned explicitly here, is elaborated upon in my thesis, but as it would take up too much space within the context of this paper, I will leave this interesting issue aside for now.

Apart from experiencing sensations of release and freedom, Henry, Pat, John, and Mike enjoy testing and transgressing their own limits as well as transforming the sensations to which they expose themselves:

Mike: ". . . you can just get on and do things that feel good and that are a lot of fun and that push your limits. To see, you know, what you can actually take. And for me it's a case of what I can take and whether I can convert that sensation into something enjoyable. So, there is a lot of, sort of, personal combat and willpower involved, I suppose" (personal interview, 1997: 3).

The motivations to engage in consensual "SM" cited above illustrate that, apart from being rooted in a contemporary cultural

goal centered on the primacy of "fulfilling sexual experiences" which is achieved by means of consensual "SM," a lot of practitioners are interested in the exploration of the dimensions and potential limits of their "lived bodies" by means of these "bodily practices." In that way they experience and potentially change their "life-world" in a manner outlined in *The Visible and the Invisible* by Merleau-Ponty (1968: 135): "The thickness of the body, far from rivaling that of the world, is on the contrary the sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh."

CONCLUSION

Categorizations like the two that follow should be an item in the past of modernity. Under the heading "Sexual and Gender Identity Disorders," within the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994: 233-51), the reader will find a list of "paraphilias:"

302.83 Sexual Masochism – (A) Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving the act (real, or simulated) of being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made [End page 88] to suffer. (B) The fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

302.84 Sexual Sadism – (A) Over a period of at least 6 months, recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving acts (real, or simulated) in which the psychological or physical suffering (including humiliation) of the victim is sexually exciting to the person. (B) The fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (American Psychiatric Association, 1994: 245).

As seen through the excursions presented in this article, first into the societal commodification of elements of "SM" and the rising interest in consensual "SM" and then into the "life worlds" of consensual "SM," the labeling, exclusion, and selective criminalization of consensual "SM" as "deviance" and "pathology" does not make any sense, as many elements of consensual "SM" are part of the "subterranean values" of society. What is problematic about the commodification of elements of consensual "SM," apart from the fact that it is just another tool of consumerism, is the fact that it is decontextualized:

[D]ynamic reciprocity lies at the heart of S/M and it structures all of its philosophy and actions . . . such reciprocity couldn't exist without mutual concern and respect. And it is these three fundamental tenets of the S/M Scene – reciprocity, concern and respect – which make the stereotyped public perception of such activities so erroneous ([Polhemus & Randall, 1994: 113-14](#)).

As my conversations with participants in London's "Scene" attest, the "bodily practices" of consensual "SM" provide the "players" with the possibility to appropriate for themselves strategies and positions of power, as well as "technologies of government," which usually serve to effect states of domination and the establishment of authority, in order to produce individual states of "bodily pleasure." The experimental games of consensual "SM" further allow for the discovery of new intensities, the diverse dimensions and potentials of "lived bodies," as well as the development of contextual ethics; thus, they do have the potential to bring about a "political spirituality" on a practical level which would involve a "questioning through which people might start to depart from the historical limits of their identifications" ([Rajchman, 1991: 108](#)).

Contemporary understandings and representations of the "body" and "sexuality," especially those oriented to consumer culture, fail to make their objects meaningful. In comparison to these, the richness of meaning as well as the complexity of existential interaction and communication (both verbal and non-verbal) that characterized the **[End page 89]** empirical world of consensual

"SM" in London, makes the rising interest and potential engagement in these "bodily practices" more understandable. Although it is, on the one hand, beneficial that the notion of "kinky sex" now allows for more diversity in "sexual" encounters, the negative side of this development is obviously that the selectivity of this proliferation of images and discourse distorts social reality and thus neutralizes the potential for resistance that, as argued in my thesis, is inherent in consensual "SM."

Even the "risk" involved within some consensual "SM" would not justify the "pathologization" or "criminalization" of practitioners. As within many areas of social life, the experience of "risk" as excitement has become a commodity, ready to be marketed. In Western consumer cultures the experience of risk within the areas of sport practices and other leisure activities is in high demand. This tendency to promote high-risk sports as thrills seems to attract large numbers of mainstream members of society; and as these activities, although "risky," still serve the "normalizing" aims of consumption, they are legal. Risks, as well as risk products, seem therefore to function as social distinguishers in terms of cultural capital in contemporary culture. If "risk" taking functions as a form of "cultural capital" and is by now commodified in many ways, the criminalization of the "bodily practices" of consensual "SM," on the grounds of potential risks to health and safety, appears like a political judgment in pursuit of the "normalization" of "lived bodies." [End page 90]

ENDNOTES

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1. Since the *R. v. Brown* case (1992-93) and the subsequent decision of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg (1997), the effects of the social censure of "Sadomasochism" have been intensified as they have been reinforced through the legal agencies of social control. Practitioners of consensual "bodily practices" labeled "Sadomasochism" are now in danger of being prosecuted once their enacted "plays" ("Scenes") leave wounds that are not "trifling or transient." Three of the men who were convicted by the United Kingdom courts took their cases to the European

Court of Human Rights in the hope to get their verdicts overruled on the ground that it breached Article 8 of the European Human Rights Convention. The decision of the European Court of Human Rights (February 19, 1997) to officially criminalize the "bodily practices" of consensual "SM," even though undertaken in the private sphere and without the causation of serious injury, violates the human right to privacy and makes the right over one's body questionable. Article 8 of the European Human Rights Convention states that: "Everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence." The Strasbourg court based their decision that the British ruling was justified on the exception to the Article that covers "the protection of health." If consent forms a defense to assault charges in other instances, like for example contact sports or operations for medical or aesthetic reasons, the judgment appears to be primarily moralistic and "bio-political" ([Foucault, 1990](#)).

2. As these websites move, change, or at times even stop to exist, the website addresses provided might be subject to change.

3. In 1987 a police operation called "Operation Spanner" acquired private videotapes which showed nearly fifty gay men involved in consensual "SM" "Scenes." Sixteen of these men were then arrested. In the years 1990-91 the trial against these sixteen men took place. They were facing charges under Sections 20 and 47 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. The initial trial judge ruled that consent was no defense to a charge of assault ([Thompson, 1994: 3](#)) and therefore the defendants, who at first had pleaded not guilty, had to change their pleas. On December 19, 1990 they were formally convicted. The ruling of the initial judge included the declaration: ". . . that it was the role of the court to draw the line between what was and was not acceptable in a civilized society, and that as sadomasochism was 'degrading and vicious' it was on the wrong side of the line" (as quoted in [Thompson, 1994: 4](#)). At the Court of Appeal the decision was later on upheld. **[End page 91]**

Consensual "SM" "bodily practices" should have never been subject to an assault charge as it involves consent as well as that the pain inflicted is actually perceived as pleasurable by the practitioners themselves. As with other categories of "perversion," official bodies of social control presumed non-consent and based their decisions on the presumption of violence, instead of

acknowledging consensual pleasure. It was a victimless crime because no one complained of an offense being committed and because no one's privacy or decency was invaded by the consensual, private "plays" of these men. Therefore, the "masochists" were, and had to be, constructed as the "victims," even though ". . . the majority of the defendants [like most of my interviewees – AB] were in the habit of switching roles" ([Thompson, 1994: 6](#)).

Importantly, the individual psychological and social harms that were the effects of the "Spanner" trial, and thus of the official social reaction towards consensual "SM" and not the effects of the consensual "play," were high as all of the defendants lost their jobs, several were thrown out of their flats, and all of them were "outed" as "perverts." Three of these men were convicted and jailed for assault on consenting participants during the practice of consensual "SM" and later took their cases to the European Court of Human Rights.

4. In *Quantity and Quality in Social Research* Bryman ([1988](#)) describes one of the crucial advantages of the unstructured but topic-focussed form of interviewing in comparison to structured or semi-structured interview forms. Although it has an open-ended character: ". . . rambling can be viewed as providing information because it reveals something about the interviewee's concerns. Unstructured interviewing in qualitative research, then, departs from survey interviewing not only in terms of format, but also in terms of its concern for the perspective of those being interviewed" ([Bryman, 1988: 47](#)).

5. The role of "participant as observer" implies, according to May ([1993: 117](#)), that ". . . a person adopts an overt role and makes her or his presence and intentions known to the group . . ." and that ". . . during the process of observation the attempt to form a series of relationships with the subjects such that they serve as both respondents and informants . . ." is made. **[End page 92]**

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WEBSITE RESOURCES

"Erotic Punishment" [<http://www.4bdsm.com/ptpmb1730/entrance.html>]

"IC: UK BDSM Directory" [<http://www.informedconsent.co.uk/ubd/>]

"S&M News" [<http://www.smnews.com/>]

"SM: Safe Magic for Gay
Men" [<http://www.safersex.org/ssex/safemagic.html>] [**End page
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