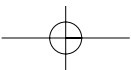
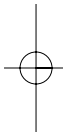
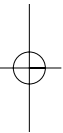


PART 7

**ENGAGING IN
S&M SEXUAL PRACTICES**



S&M

An Introduction

The first and most fundamental principle to keep in mind when considering deviance as a sociological phenomenon is “things are not always what they seem” (Berger, 1963). In other words, popular and widespread understanding of deviance may be spectacularly inaccurate. In very few other areas of deviance do we notice such a wide and yawning chasm between myth and reality as with S&M.

What is the public understanding of S&M? S&M, or sadism and masochism—or (in reverse) master and slave—is thought to be a sexual perversion, a psychological disorder; common wisdom has it that the sadist and the masochist are mentally ill. Most people believe that one partner (the sadist), the “active” partner, obtains sexual pleasure from inflicting pain on the passive or semi-unwilling partner (the masochist), who nonetheless obtains pleasure from receiving pain. In addition, it is assumed that the sadist often includes unwilling partners in his or her sexual practices, forcing them to submit to his or her twisted, perverted lust.

Another stereotype, among some radical feminists at any rate, is that S&M is a form of cruelty and hence, a model, paradigm, or slight exaggeration of conventional male-female relations, which contain a generous measure of coercion, domination, cruelty, and violence (Linden, Pagano, Russell, & Star, 1982, p. 78). Pornography, likewise, represents the essence of male domination and, whether in diluted or pure form, is based on sadism (Dworkin, 1981; Lederer, 1982).

A third stereotype is that S&M is an either-or proposition, that rough sex is either present in the sexual experience or absent, that there is no in-between territory; “abnormal” sex is a world apart from what we all regard as normal sexuality.

These views (which are not necessarily all held by the same ideological or intellectual circles) are mistaken, and for at least seven reasons.

First, pain is not the central or guiding principle of S&M. Indeed, it is not even essential to sadomasochistic activities (Baumeister, 1988, p. 37; Weinberg, 1995b, p. 291). In fact, it is the *illusion* of pain that is crucial; it is *symbolic* of dominance and control (Moser, 1988, p. 50). S&M is about dominance and submission, controlling and being controlled (Weinberg & Levi Kamel, 1995, p. 19). Pain is far from unknown in S&M, but the pain is secondary.

The second point is that the masochistic partner is far from passive. S&M is a *social* and *interactional* activity. The masochistic (or “bottom”) partner emits cues to the sadistic (or “top”) partner as to what he or she wants to do, and vice versa. Both partners “are actively involved in the development of the scenario” (Weinberg, 1995b, p. 294; Calafia, 1994). Collaboration, not force, is the foundation of S&M. Sadists who force their partners to engage

in activities against their will “are avoided and quickly find themselves without partners” (Weinberg & Levi Kamel, 1995, p. 19). Weinberg describes a scene in which a man was hoisted up onto a wall by a hook. At a certain point, the two women who were engaged in the action whispered into the man’s ear to ask him whether he was uncomfortable. He nodded to assure them that he was okay (Weinberg, 1995b, p. 295).

The third point is an outgrowth of the second: It is *scripted* behavior—it is more or less planned in advance (Gebhard, 1969, p. 78). This does not mean that there are no departures from the script. Limits are negotiable, scripts may be tossed aside—but the partners involved map out the dynamics of the action before it takes place.

Another way of saying S&M is reciprocal and that it is scripted is that partners agree, in Goffman’s (1963) terminology, on a particular S&M *frame*. S&M is theater, a world of make-believe, a shared fantasy that becomes a mutual creation. Frames inform participants “what is and is not proper, acceptable, and possible within their world. They define and categorize for their members situations, settings, scenes, identities, roles, and relationships” (Weinberg, 1995a, p. 134).

Just as frames can be constructed, they can also be violated. In the world of S&M, breaking frame is communicated in much the same way as in more conventional worlds. Brodsky (1995) describes a scene during an especially crowded weekend at the Mineshaft, an S&M bar, in which frame was broken. A man yelled out very loudly, “I said STOP THAT!” and struck another man. “The crowd was stunned, and in Goffman’s terminology, the frame was obviously broken—no one knew what to do. All sound but the disco tapes ceased. People all around stopped what they were doing and stood frozen as if in a tableau.” The assailant was removed from the scene, several people were distressed by what they had witnessed, left, several others moved in, “and the frame was reestablished within a few minutes” (p. 213).

Fourth, the two positions, sadist (“top”) and masochist (“bottom”), are not fixed; there is a substantial amount of movement from one position to the other. In fact, far from being mutually exclusive or contradictory, being a “top” trains the participant to be a good “bottom,” and vice versa. In one study, only 16% of the sample said that they were exclusively dominant or submissive; the remainder—the vast majority of the sample—was made up of “switchables” (Moser & Levitt, 1987).

Fifth, no evidence from any study based on a reasonable cross-section of S&M participants has demonstrated them to be any more mentally disordered than the population at large. Studies based on non-clinical samples have found that they are essentially normal (Moser & Levitt, 1987; Thompson, 1994, pp. 88–116; Weinberg, 1995b). The fourth edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1994, pp. 529–530) is careful to distinguish between being sexually aroused by “real” as opposed to “simulated” beating, humiliation, and suffering. While men (and women) exist who are excited by real (and unscripted) pain and humiliation, for the most part, they are not devotees of S&M, and they are not part of the mainstream S&M subculture. If they were to attempt to participate in that subculture, chances are they would be avoided and stigmatized. There are, after all, proper rules of behavior, even in a deviant context, and a violation of rules constitutes deviance in any context (see Photo 7.1).

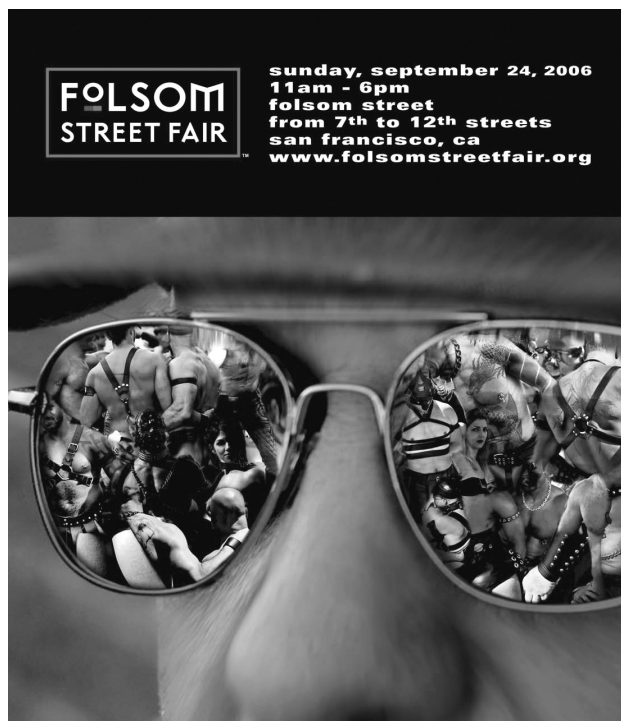


Photo 7.1. Folsom Street Fair 2006 Poster. People who engage in power play get erotic satisfaction from giving and/or receiving pain. In most communities in the United States, S&M is extremely deviant, its practitioners keeping their activities a secret from nonparticipants. In contrast, in others, such as gay neighborhoods in San Francisco, though it is a minority practice, it is more likely to be tolerated.

SOURCE: Photo by Fredalert; design by Derivdesign.com.

Sixth, the extrapolation from S&M to ordinary male-female relations, as a few feminists have done (Linden et al., 1982), is misleading. (In many S&M circles, the man is typically the submissive partner and the female, the dominant one.) The question of whether or not violence, coercion, dominance and submission, and/or humiliation are characteristic or typical of male-female relations in this or any society is not related to how S&M is conducted. As we saw, S&M behavior is mutually arrived at, reciprocal, scripted, fantasy-oriented, theatrical, carefully choreographed, socially constructed, and subculturally framed.

And last, as Rebecca Plante's contribution below on sexual spanking demonstrates, rough sex, engaged in mutually by consenting partners, is a continuum, a matter of degree, not an either-or proposition. The degree of "roughness," constraint, control, pain—or its illusion—depends on the couple. Moreover, for most participants, some measure of S&M is, in a given experience, optional rather than compulsory. In other words, S&M is "extreme" only in its more extreme versions.

Not all participants in S&M are into the same activities. Partners who spank one another for sexual stimulation do not necessarily like to tie up one another; partners who are into



Photo 7.2. S&M entails a wide continuum of activities, from married couples lightly spanking one another to practices involving the use of a variety of paraphernalia such as harnesses, gags, chains, whips, restraints, leather outfits, metal rings, and balls inserted into one or another orifice. Most of us would be shocked to find out that a friend or relative engaged in sex that involved what this woman is experiencing.

SOURCE: Copyright © MedicalToys.com.

leather are not necessarily into spanking. There is a great deal of variation in what partners engage in when they engage in rough sex. Many participants tolerate but do not participate in some of the more extreme S&M conduct, just as they recognize that not everyone who is interested in S&M partakes of some of their activities. Much deviant behavior is stereotyped by the majority, and most stereotypes “flatten” the people or their behavior into a misleadingly homogeneous consistency. S&M is far from consistent. Differences and distinctions within a particular unconventional scene and the role they play among their members are some of the more interesting aspects of deviance (see Photo 7.2).

In this section, Rebecca Plante discusses the process by which sexual spanking, a mild form of S&M, is justified by heterosexual males who try to make sense of their unusual sexual predilection. A very small minority of women find such behavior stimulating, and hence, the likelihood that a man who does will come into contact with such a woman is extremely small. Stigma adheres to the activity; hence, the activity must be hidden from non-participants

and its stigma must be neutralized. The hold that conventional norms have even on participants of this unusual sexual practice is illustrated by the statement of one of Plante's interviewees who said, "I am not interested in a full S&M lifestyle, just in erotic spanking with members of the opposite sex." The implication is that if a clear and bright line can be drawn between S&M and spanking, then surely spanking is not so deviant after all! S&M and sexual spanking may not be pathological, but it *is* deviant in the normative sense. In a volume titled *Sexual Deviance*, Roy Baumeister and Jennifer Butler (1997) refer to S&M as "deviance without pathology." And in a volume on "sexual domination and submission," Gloria Brame and her colleagues refer to S&M as a "different loving" (Brame, Brame, & Jacobs, 1996). Deviant it is, and "different"—extreme S&M is so far off the charts for most Americans that it does not even appear in a survey of the public's sexual behavior or preferences (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Kolata, 1994; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994)—but not pathological. It is kept secret to all but its participants; as Plante suggests, participants go to great lengths to engage in the practice, and it can be an occasion for rejecting a potential sexual partner.

Below, Marianne Apostolides defines some of the basic terms used among S&M aficionados, explains that their practice is "no longer a pathology," speculates about the origin of the S&M impulse, and establishes, as we explained, that it is one end point along the broad "sexual continuum." And "Jackie" contributes a first-hand account to illustrate the S&M experience for one participant.

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The Pleasure of Pain

Marianne Apostolides

Bind my ankles with your white cotton rope so I cannot walk. Bind my wrists so I cannot push you away. Place me on the bed and wrap your rope tighter around my skin so it grips my flesh. Now I know that struggle is useless, that I must lie here and submit to your mouth and tongue and teeth, your hands and words and whims. I exist only as your object. Exposed.

Of every 10 people who read these words, one or more has experimented with sadomasochism (S&M), which is most popular among educated, middle- and upper-middle-class men and women, according to psychologists and ethnographers who have studied the phenomenon. Charles Moser, Ph.D., M.D., of the Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco, has researched S&M to learn the motivation behind it—to understand why in the world people would ask to be bound, whipped, and flogged. The reasons are as surprising as they are varied.

For James, the desire became apparent when he was a child playing war games—he always hoped to be captured. “I was frightened that I was sick,”

he says. But now, he adds, as a well-seasoned player on the scene, “I thank the leather gods I found this community.”

At first the scene found him. When he was at a party in college, a professor chose him. She brought him home and tied him up, told him how bad he was for having these desires even as she fulfilled them. For the first time, he felt what he had only imagined, what he had read about in every S&M book he could find.

James, a father and manager, has a Type A personality—in control, hard working, intelligent, demanding. His intensity is evident on his face, in his posture, in his voice. But when he plays, his eyes drift and a peaceful energy flows through him

as though he has injected heroin. With each addition of pain or restraint, he stiffens slightly, then falls into a deeper calm, a deeper peace, waiting to obey his mistress. “Some people have to be tied up to be free,” he says.

As James’s experience illustrates, sado-masochism involves a highly unbalanced power relationship established through role-playing, bondage, and/or the infliction of pain. The essential component is not the pain or bondage itself, but rather the knowledge that one person has complete control over the other, deciding what that person will hear, do, taste, touch, smell, and feel. We hear about men pretending to be little girls, women being bound in a leather corset, people screaming in pain with each strike of a flogger or drip of hot wax. We hear about it because it is happening in bedrooms and dungeons across the country.

For over a century, people who engaged in bondage, beatings, and humiliation for sexual pleasure were considered mentally ill. But in the 1980s, the American Psychiatric Association removed S&M as a category in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. This decision—like the decision to remove homosexuality as a category in 1973—was a big step toward the social acceptance of people whose sexual desires aren’t traditional, or vanilla, as it’s called in S&M circles.

What’s new is that such desires are increasingly being considered normal, even healthy, as experts begin to recognize their potential psychological value. S&M, they are beginning to understand, offers a release of sexual and emotional energy that some people cannot get from traditional sex. “The satisfaction gained from S&M is something far more than sex,” explains Roy Baumeister, Ph.D., a social psychologist at Case Western Reserve University. “It can be a total emotional release.”

Although people report that they have better-than-usual sex immediately after a scene, the goal of S&M itself is not intercourse: “A good scene doesn’t end in orgasm; it ends in catharsis.”

S&M: NO LONGER A PATHOLOGY

If children at [an] early age witness sexual intercourse between adults . . . they inevitably regard the sexual act as a sort of ill-treatment or act of subjugation: they view it, that is, in a sadistic sense.

—Sigmund Freud, 1905

Freud was one of the first to discuss S&M on a psychological level. During the 20 years he explored the topic, his theories crossed each other to create a maze of contradictions. But he maintained one constant: S&M was pathological.

People become sadistic, Freud said, as a way of regulating their desire to sexually dominate others. The desire to submit, on the other hand, he said, arises from guilt feelings over the desire to dominate. He also argued that the desire for S&M can arise on its own when a man wants to assume the passive female role, with bondage and beating signifying being “castrated or copulated with, or giving birth.”

The view that S&M is pathological has been dismissed by the psychological community. Sexual sadism is a real problem, but it is a different phenomenon from S&M. Luc Granger, Ph.D., head of the department of psychology at the University of Montreal, created an intensive treatment program for sexual aggressors in La Macaza Prison in Quebec; he has also conducted research on the S&M community. “They are very separate populations,” he says. While S&M is the regulated exchange of power among consensual participants, sexual sadism is the derivation of pleasure from either inflicting pain or completely controlling an unwilling person.

Lily Fine, a professional dominatrix who teaches S&M workshops across North America, explains, “I may hurt you, but I will not harm you: I will not hit you too hard, take you further than you want to go, or give you an infection.”

Despite the research indicating that S&M does no real harm and is not associated with pathology,

Freud's successors in psychoanalysis continue to use mental illness overtones when discussing S&M. Sheldon Bach, Ph.D., clinical professor of psychology at New York University and supervising analyst at the New York Freudian Society, maintains that people are addicted to S&M. They feel compelled to be "anally abused or crawl on their knees and lick a boot or a penis or who knows what else. The problem," he continues, "is that they can't love. They are searching for love, and S&M is the only way they can try to find it because they are locked into sadomasochistic interactions they had with a parent."

LINKING CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AND ADULT SEX

I can explore aspects of myself that I don't get a chance to explore otherwise. So even though I'm playing a role, I feel more connected with myself.

—Leanne Custer, M.S.W., AIDS counselor

Meredith Reynolds, Ph.D., the Sexuality Research Fellow of the Social Science Research Council, confirms that childhood experiences may shape a person's sexual outlook.

"Sexuality doesn't just arise at puberty," she says. "Like other parts of someone's personality, sexuality develops at birth and takes a developmental course through a person's life span."

In her work on sexual exploration among children, Reynolds has shown that while childhood experiences can indeed influence adult sexuality, the effects usually "wash out" as a person gains more sexual experience. But they can linger in some people, causing a connection between childhood memories and adult sexual play. In that case, Reynolds says, "the childhood experiences have affected something in the personality, and that in turn affects adult experiences."

Reynolds' theory helps us develop a greater understanding of the desire to be a whip-bearing mistress or a bootlicking slave. For example, if a

child has been taught to feel shame about her body and desires, she may learn to disconnect herself from them. Even as she gets older and gains more experience with sex, her personality may retain some part of that need for separation. S&M play may act as a bridge: Lying naked on a bed bound to the bedposts with leather restraints, she is forced to be completely sexual. The restraint, the futility of struggle, the pain, the master's words telling her she is such a lovely slave—these cues enable her body to fully connect with her sexual self in a way that has been difficult during traditional sex.

Marina is a prime example. She knew from the time she was six years old that she was expected to succeed in school and sports. She learned to focus on achievement as a way to dismiss emotions and desires. "I learned very young that desires are dangerous," she says. She heard that message in the behavior of her parents: a depressive mother who let her emotions overtake her, and an obsessively health-conscious father who compulsively controlled his diet. When Marina began to have sexual desires, her instinct, cultivated by her upbringing, was to consider them too frightening, too dangerous. "So I became anorexic," she says. "And when you're anorexic, you don't feel desire; all you feel in your body is panic."

Marina didn't feel the desire for S&M until she was an adult and had outgrown her eating disorder. "One night, I asked my partner to put his hands around my neck and choke me. I was so surprised when those words came out of my mouth," she says. If she gave her partner total control over her body, she felt, she could allow herself to feel like a completely sexual being, with none of the hesitation and disconnection she sometimes felt during sex. "He wasn't into it, but now I'm with someone who is," Marina says. "S&M makes our vanilla sex better, too, because we trust each other more sexually, and we can communicate what we want."

ESCAPING THE MODERN WESTERN EGO

Like alcohol abuse, binge eating, and meditation, sado masochism is a way people can forget themselves.

—Roy Baumeister, Ph.D., professor of psychology,
Case Western Reserve University

It is human nature to try to maximize esteem and control: Those are two general principles governing the study of the self. Masochism runs contrary to both and was therefore an intriguing psychological puzzle for Baumeister, whose career has focused on the study of self and identity.

Through an analysis of S&M-related letters to the sex magazine *Variations*, Baumeister came to believe that “masochism is a set of techniques for helping people temporarily lose their normal identity.” He reasoned that the modern Western ego is an incredibly elaborate structure, with our culture placing more demands on the individual self than any other culture in history. Such high demands increase the stress associated with living up to expectations and existing as the person you want to be. “That stress makes forgetting who you are an appealing escape,” Baumeister says. That is the essence of “escape” theory, one of the main reasons people turn to S&M.

“Nothing matters except you, me, and the sound of my voice,” Lily Fine tells the tied-up and exposed businessman who begged to be spanked before breakfast. She says it slowly, making her slave wait for every sound, forcing him to focus only on her, to float in anticipation of the sensations she will create inside him. Anxieties about mortgages and taxes, stresses about business partners and job deadlines are vanquished each time the flogger hits the flesh. The businessman is reduced to a physical creature existing only in the here and now, feeling the pain and pleasure.

“I’m interested in manipulating what’s in the mind,” Lily says. “The brain is the greatest erogenous zone.”

In another S&M scene, Lily tells a woman to take off her clothes, then dresses her only with a blindfold. She commands the woman not to move. Lily then takes a tissue and begins moving it over the woman’s body in different patterns and at varying speeds and angles. Sometimes she lets the edge of the tissue just barely brush the woman’s stomach and breasts; sometimes she bunches the tissue and creates swirls on her back and all the way down. “The woman was quivering. She didn’t know what I was doing to her, but she was liking it,” Lily remembers with a smile.

Escape theory is further supported by an idea called “frame analysis,” developed by the late Erving Goffman, Ph.D. According to Goffman, despite its popular conception as darkly wild and orgiastic, S&M play has complex rules, rituals, roles, and dynamics that create a “frame” around the experience.

“Frames suspend reality. They create expectations, norms and values that set this situation apart from other parts of life,” confirms Thomas Weinberg, Ph.D., a sociologist at Buffalo State College in New York and the editor of *S&M: Studies in Dominance and Submission* (1995).

Once inside the frame, people are free to act and feel in ways they couldn’t at other times.

S&M: PART OF THE SEXUAL CONTINUUM

S&M has inspired the creation of many psychological theories in addition to the ones discussed here. Do we need so many? Perhaps not. According to Stephanie Saunders, Ph.D., associate director of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction at Indiana University, “a lot of behaviors that are scrutinized because they are seen to be marginal are really a part of the continuum of sexuality and sexual behavior.”

After all, the ingredients in good S&M play—communication, respect, and trust—are the same ingredients in good traditional sex. The outcome is the same, too—a feeling of connection to the body and the self.

Laura Antoniou, a writer whose work on S&M has been published by Masquerade Books in New York City, puts it another way: “When I was a child, I had nothing but S&M fantasies. I punished Barbie for being dirty. I did Bondage Barbie, dominance with GI Joe. S&M is simply what turns me on.”

WHIP SMART: BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF SAFE PLAY

While S&M can be a psychologically healthy activity—its motto is “safe, sane, and consensual”—sometimes things do get out of hand.

Abuse

It is rare, but some “tops” get too involved in power and forget to monitor their treatment of the “bottom.” “I call them ‘Natural Born Tops,’” says dominatrix Lily Fine, “and I don’t have time for them.” Also, some bottoms want to be beaten because they have low self-esteem and think they deserve it. They are forlorn, absent, and unresponsive during and after a scene; in this case, S&M ceases to be play and becomes pathological.

Boundaries

A small percentage of people inappropriately bring S&M power play into other facets of their life. “Most people in S&M circles are dominant or submissive in very specific situations, while in their everyday life they can play a whole range of roles,” says psychology professor Luc Granger. But, he continues, if the only way a person can relate to someone else is through a kind of sadomasochistic

game, then there is probably a deeper psychological problem.

The Use of S&M as Therapy

People often confuse the fact that they feel good after S&M with the idea that S&M is therapy, says psychology professor Roy Baumeister. “But to prove that something is therapeutic, you have to prove that it has lasting beneficial effects on mental health . . . and it’s hard to prove even that therapy is therapeutic.” In mental health terms, S&M doesn’t make you better and it doesn’t make you worse.

EXCERPTS FROM AN S&M GLOSSARY

Bondage and Discipline (B&D): A subset of S&M not involving physical pain.

Bottom: The submissive person in a scene; synonyms: submissive, sub, slave.

Dungeon: A place designated for S&M play.

Dominatrix (pl. dominatrices): A female top, usually a professional.

Fetish: An object that is granted special powers, one of which is the ability to sexually gratify. It is often wrongly confused with S&M.

Lifestyle Dominant/Submissive: A person involved in a relationship in which S&M is a defining dynamic.

Masochist: A person who derives sexual pleasure from being abused by others. Sadist and masochist are sometimes used playfully in the S&M community, but are generally avoided because of psychiatric denotation.

Negotiating a Scene: The process of loosely outlining what the players want to experience before they begin a scene.

Play: Participation in a scene.

Sadist: A person who derives sexual pleasure from inflicting pain on others.

Sadomasochism (S&M): An activity involving the temporary creation of highly unbalanced power dynamics between two or more people for erotic or semi-erotic purposes.

Safe Word: A prearranged word or phrase that may be used to end or renegotiate a scene. This is a clear signal meaning “Stop, this is too much for me.”

Scene: An episode of S&M activity; the S&M community.

Switch: A person who enjoys being a top in some scenes and a bottom in others.

Top: The dominant person in a scene; synonyms: dominant, dom, master/mistress.

Toy: Any implement used to enhance S&M play.

Vanilla Sex: Conventional heterosexual sex.

Sexual Spanking

Rebecca F. Plante

Traditionally, spanking, or its umbrella term, flagellation, has been administered as punishment. However, very possibly in every society, some individuals have found spanking sexually arousing and engage in it as an erotic practice. The *Kama Sutra*, the ancient Hindu sex manual, includes a section on “love blows,” offering detailed instructions on how to administer the most arousing slaps and punches. Historically, a certain proportion of sexual workers, mainly prostitutes, have used flagellation as one way to excite their clients. Erotic spanking can be seen as a variety of bondage/domination and sadomasochism. The purpose of erotic spanking is to achieve the emotional and sexual gratification of either or both parties. It plays a part in fantasy scenes of punishment or misbehavior, which many participants find arousing.

Here, I highlight the activities of a group of heterosexual men who enjoy spanking consensual heterosexual women as an erotic, sexualized activity. I frame my investigation with several questions: How do people who engage in unconventional

sexual behavior understand and make sense of their stigmatized sexual interests? How do they mitigate the effects of stereotypical, and negative, sexual scripting? What is the larger social context for a type of sexual conduct that might appear, at first glance and for most audiences, to be the province of only a few, highly atypical, individuals?

Participants in this activity know about broader cultural narratives and social constructions of normal sexual expressions and are aware that their interests and activities are stigmatized and widely regarded as deviant. In this vein, they work to redefine deviance by means of several strategies and techniques for neutralizing stigma. They collect and share popular cultural references to sexualized spanking and suggest that most people are interested in spanking but simply aren't aware of it. Participants also know that conventional audiences would condemn them and what they do, and they have a repertoire of interactional devices with which to introduce, or avoid introducing, the subject to others.

My participants differentiate themselves from sadomasochistic practitioners, defining themselves as interested solely in “the bottom” or the buttocks and in scenes specifically involving the erotic tableau of a man spanking a woman. Definitionally, spanking is one activity within a broader rubric of sexual bondage, domination, and sadomasochism. This encompasses a wide range of practices including, but not limited to, flagellation, humiliation, restraints, torture, and blindfolding. As a set of sexual practices and interests, sadomasochism (S&M) is ecumenical, with gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, pansexual, and transgendered practitioners. The fluidity of identities, roles, and fantasies opens S&M to participants with a broad range of sexual orientations, although minority practices and interests do coalesce within this broader umbrella, such as gay leather scenes, heterosexual infantilism, and so on.

Most prior research on the subject has emphasized the aberrant features of S&M participants, arguing that the activity plays a role in satisfying impulses derived from childhood pathologies. Sociological and ethnographic research is more recent and less abundant than psychoanalytic inquiries. Such research attempts to locate S&M and spanking within the framework of sexual scripts; it is guided by the question, “Why does anyone have the sexual interests he/she has, whether those interests are normative or non-normative, mainstream or outside the mainstream, deviant or conventional?”

THE CONTEXT OF SEXUALIZED SPANKING

Gagnon and Simon (1973, 2005) first advanced the idea of sexual scripts, those sociological blueprints that guide our erotic interests. Scripts specify the who, what, where, when, why, and how of sexualities and sexual practices. Scripts can be, from the broadest to the narrowest levels, cultural, subcultural, interpersonal, or intrapsychic. Intrapsychic

scripts include the stories we tell ourselves, memories, and internal rehearsals. We assemble intrapsychic scripts based on cues from culture, subculture, and social interactions with others. Interpersonal scripts develop from interactions we have with others. Subcultural scripts include discourses, ideologies, and expectations at the small-group level, for example, based on ethnic or religious group membership. And the broadest, cultural scripts derive from discourses, ideologies, and expectations at the societal level.

Standard cultural scripts are nonmainstream and do not include sexual spanking. The standard heterosexual script eroticizes the basic sexual practices, such as kissing, breast fondling, genital stimulation, and penile-vaginal intercourse. How does someone come to adapt and transform this basic cultural script? How would an individual exposed to the larger or cultural definitions of appropriate sexual practices expand this script to include sexual spanking? More specifically, how does one adapt his or her sexual scripting to encompass a practice that is stigmatizing?

Stigma is an attribute that is discrediting to an individual's identity (Goffman, 1963). Persons interested in spanking have a *discrediting* stigma, one that has not yet been discovered, one that can be hidden from conventional others. According to Goffman, “Even where an individual has quite abnormal feelings and beliefs, he is likely to have quite normal concerns and employ quite normal strategies in attempting to conceal these abnormalities from others” (p. 131). Awareness of a stigmatizing condition requires impression management to determine to whom the attribute will be revealed, in order to maintain control over revelations of the discreditable attribute.

One coping mechanism that enables someone to continue engaging in nonmainstream sexual practices entails embracing the acceptability of said practices and rejecting the dominant norms that define such practices as unacceptable. With respect to sexual spanking, this often implies

believing that everyone is actually interested in spanking, but most of us just aren't yet aware of it. Minority sexual subcultures often develop oppositional definitions that parody the practices of the sexual mainstream. A commonly-used description of those mainstream practices is "vanilla" sex, that is, sexual interests and practices that are bland, boring, and unexciting. Turning the mainstream into a negatively labeled category enables the sexual nonconformist to reject the standard cultural scripting, thus normalizing the self. This is a fairly straightforward form of stigma management.

Another strategy for interpreting the sexual self is to construct a story describing its attributes, tracing its history, and locating it within the nexus of cultural sexual scripting. Plummer (1995) looked at the sexual stories in circulation, arguing that they constitute patterned discourses that are constructed and given meaning within specific social contexts. In spite of the fact that these stories encompass the sexually different, they represent efforts to normalize unconventional actors, to place them into broader social contexts.

Simon (1996) noted the tendency to essentialize sexualities, locating them within the genes or as a product of innate tendencies. Thus, for example, increasingly, homosexuals will claim that they were born with a same-sex gender interest, that they are obeying an impulse that has been present all along, that it is an essential aspect of their sexual being. The culturally motivated interest in essentializing sexuality is linked to the social construction of what is acceptable—and unacceptable—practice. "Once the normal is constructed," Simon states, "its explanation organizes our understanding of all other variations by moving us to conceive of all other outcomes as violations or variations of the logic of the normal" (p. 14). By this logic, then, spanking is viewed as a violation of the normal, requiring an explanation of how and why such interest develops.

Looking at sexual spanking demands that we recognize the reality of stigma. "Vanilla" cultural scripts provide a foundation for identity

development. Deviations from narrowly rendered norms force aficionados to recognize that mainstream members of the society may condemn and stigmatize them for their sexual practices and interests. To address such potential and actual stigma, persons with variant interests must develop coping strategies and design culturally and subculturally meaningful sexual stories. The spanking stories aficionados narrate address the management of stigma and provide a script that attempts to deflect stigma from the behavior they engage in.

THE STUDY

My fieldwork looks at participants in a loosely organized group of adults interested in consensual spanking. All participants were told of the research and gave consent to be included in my study. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, participants are described in such a way that they cannot be identified. Since this research included observation, it is appropriate to situate the author in the fieldwork. I obtained access to the group through a key informant, Jim, a longtime member of the scene. After we met at a professional conference and engaged in non-sexual conversations, Jim mentioned that he had long been interested in spanking. In making this admission, he sought to determine whether he could trust me. Jim was also curious whether I had an interest in being spanked. A year later, Jim confirmed that he had hoped that I was a "bottom" because men outnumber women, particularly younger ones, in the scene. Since my interests were strictly research related, the fieldwork was fraught with conflicts, dilemmas, and ambiguities so often experienced in qualitative research. I never misrepresented my sexual interests to gain access, and all my research was confined to observation.

Jim provided access to a complex and dynamic community of spanking aficionados. My fieldwork included spanking parties, discreetly held in

small-town hotels on floors far from hotel traffic; formal interviews; casual conversations; and observations of private scenes between two people. Supplemental research included reading spanking stories, spanking newsletters, and spanking magazines. I examined participants' toy boxes, which included paddles, straps, hair-brushes, and whips. I expanded the scope of the research to include other aspects of the larger world of sadomasochism, including observations in sex clubs, scanning Web sites, interviews with persons who incorporate S&M into their sexual activities, and visits to commercial ventures such as Boston's Fetish Fair. The fieldwork took place in Boston, New Hampshire, metropolitan New York, New Jersey, and Atlanta between 1993 and 2000.

SPANKING STORIES AND STRATEGIES OF NEUTRALIZATION

The narratives offered by the participants to explain or situate their interests in spanking are strikingly similar to narratives offered by others who adapt standard sexual scripts. Men who like to spank said that they had this interest for as long as they could remember. This is similar to gay men who are asked to explain the origin of their same-sex interests. Women who like to be spanked said that it took many years for them to realize that they were interested in being spanked, similar to most lesbians who report many heterosexually active years before realizing their same-sex orientation. The men tended to essentialize their interests, while the women tended to locate them in interpersonal scripting, describing the influence of partners who assisted the development of their sexual interests. With respect to spanking, both men and women explained their interest by asserting that everyone has hidden desires about spanking.

Researchers note that men tend to be more likely to develop an interest in S&M, and to develop it earlier, than women. Breslow, Evans, and Langley's (1985) sample of S&M practitioners surveyed

130 men and 52 women. Among the men, nine out of ten had acknowledged S&M interests by their early twenties, and by age 14, more than half had done so. Damond's (2002) study of 342 male S&M participants found that over nine in ten said that they had childhood or adolescent fantasies relating to S&M. To neutralize stigma, most developed an impression management strategy that entailed a variation on "I was born this way, this is hard-wiring, I have no choice, so don't discriminate against me."

Some of these men offered stories of having been spanked as children and having made a connection at those early moments between sexual arousal and the punishment they received. This strategy seems designed to imply that the individual has not consciously orchestrated or chosen this sexual interest. Taylor and Ussher (2001) commented, "Such discourse usually involved some awareness of S&M as having a neuro-physiological component in which pain and arousal become inseparably paired" (p. 307). Others were never spanked as children but nonetheless asserted a long-standing interest in spanking. Even as a five-year-old—indeed, ever since Christina could remember, she explained to me—she wanted to be spanked. She thought she was weird and thought it best to keep the matter to herself for most of her life. Preston vividly recalled the first time he developed an interest in spanking. He was 12 years old and saw an ad depicting "a beautiful woman's bottom." He looked at it and thought, "That's ripe for spanking."

But the narratives differed slightly from person to person and encompassed a range of interests. Jim could not precisely pinpoint the development of his interest in spanking. His wife knew that he enjoyed spanking, but refused to participate and did not attend parties. Jim, Christina, and other participants described spanking relations that did not include intercourse or other stereotypically sexual activities. These relationships were forged with trust—female participants noted that trust was essential for a good scene—and comfort. The

focus was on playing out fantasy scenes, with men providing erotic/sexual discipline. However, Christina and Belinda had confessed their interests to the men whom they later married. These husbands were able to integrate their sexual scripts of spanking and discipline with more “vanilla” sexual practices. Including spanking in these relationships enabled these and other women participants to feel much less alone, “less freakish,” as Christina said.

Outside the contexts of relationships, it was difficult for participants to fully accept and understand themselves. Initially, Michael thought he was the only person in the world who was into this “bizarre perversion.” Once he had been in the scene for four or five years and discovered publications on spanking, he felt he was not alone. Initially, he felt his affinity for spanking was “bizarre,” a perspective that seemed to be borne out in the Midwestern state where he lived. Officials there had threatened to outlaw spanking publications, arguing that they depicted violence against women. Michael noted that it was especially important that he eventually found publications by “real” spanking aficionados because originally, the items he found “were done by people just looking to make a buck.” They were less realistic and arousing than the later publications he found.

Several participants combed more general publications for mentions of spanking. Jim was extremely knowledgeable about popular culture references to spanking, seemingly non-sexualized, but to him, sexually charged. He situated his interest by arguing that everyone needs to try sexualized spanking, asserting that there is nothing “deviant” about his interests. About spanking aficionados, he said, “We wonder about ourselves and our ‘perversion’ endlessly.”

Newer participants are especially prone to these musings. Andrew said, “You know, I can’t believe that I’m here. I look around and wonder what the hell I’m doing here. I mean, I’m not like these other people. This isn’t all I do or anything.” He was trying to neutralize stigma to himself by

comparing himself to the other partygoers. He implied that the others have a single-minded focus on spanking but he is normal, that his interest in spanking is just a small piece of his identity. He also told me that he finds me “stereotypically attractive,” attempting to neutralize the perceived stigma of spanking by validating his attraction.

Another stigma neutralization technique followed this path: an attempt to broaden spanking parties beyond the ostensible reason for gathering. Several male partygoers noted that the parties they attended seemed “especially sterile.” Michael said, “Especially among the men, there’s this tendency to talk about sports, politics—anything but spanking.” In dancing around or avoiding the subject that had drawn the group together, participants could diminish its seeming importance and, like Andrew, present the impression that they have interests and identities beyond spanking.

Another stigma neutralization strategy was common among spanking aficionados. Many men took care to mention that those interested in spanking were different from those interested in S&M more generally. There is a spectrum of activities included in S&M, including play with whips, bondage devices, clothing such as leather and latex, and role playing. Much of the specific lingo has been reluctantly borrowed from S&M, according to participants. Spanking and other forms of flagellation are sometimes included in spanking activities, thus the apparent need for participants to differentiate themselves from S&M practitioners. But participants generally defined S&M as “truly kinky” and “where the real weirdos go.” In this strategy, members of one group denigrate another fringe group in order to mitigate the stigmatizing effects on them: “We are more normal than they are; they are the true deviants.”

THE PARTY AND SUBCULTURAL RULES

At the party I observed, something occurred that constituted a defining moment in an attempt to

normalize the activity and differentiate spanking from S&M. The party included about 50 people, perhaps 15 women and 35 men, almost all white and middle to upper middle class. Some had traveled from the West Coast and Midwest to this East Coast event. It was a social event where people of like minds could meet. For many of the participants, communication had only been through correspondence; this rendezvous was their first face-to-face meeting. Others brought regular spanking dates. Scenes only entailed spanking and fantasies; penile-vaginal and oral intercourse were limited to marital and dating partners. One married couple described their spanking scenes as separate from but also integral to intercourse.

Party organizers had leeway with respect to how much planning to do. Men tended to simply arrange the time, place, and basic snacks, while women tended to make more elaborate preparations, including decorating and organizing public spankings and demonstrations. Occasionally, partygoers provided their own public demonstrations, playing out a scene in the main gathering space while attendees watched avidly.

The organizer of this particular party planned a "Bid-a-Swat" auction. The women at the party would bid on men with the number of swats they wished to receive. The men were expected to display forearms, biceps, and hand spans. The auction hostess demonstrated her hand span for comparison so that bidding women could assess the spanking potential of the men. Finally, each man was told to say, in his sternest possible voice, "Young lady, get over my knee now!" The most stereotypically attractive men, the men with the largest hand spans, and the two men who were known to be good spankers were bid on the most.

A group of six women monopolized the bidding. Many of the women made comments about one particular woman, Annalisa, because of her bidding behavior. She had won a cute young man with a high bid of 600 swats, after already having won a large-handed man with a bid of 400 swats. When two other women grouped their bid to get a

total of 500 swats from Michael, who was known as a good spanker, someone with just the right touch, sternness, and trustworthiness, they asked Annalisa whether she was splitting her 600-swat bid with anyone.

"No," she responded emphatically, and seemed offended at the suggestion that she would share her swats with anyone. Behind Annalisa's back, the other women were moved to judge her behavior. One said, "There's no way she can do all that! She's going to need a pillow on the plane back!" The other women who had been bidding whispered to each other, "Wow, she's crazy," and looked at her disdainfully.

These women attributed her apparent desire to receive over a thousand swats from several men to masochism, the desire to receive pain. The women at the party did not link spanking with masochism, pain, or S&M. Belinda told me, "It's more about knowing that someone cares about me to discipline me, to keep me in line when I act like a brat." The women's desire to be spanked was seen as an emotionally laden activity within a caring context—not as the desire for pain or humiliation. One man captured the group's shared distinction between S&M and spanking in the following words: "It's tough for male first-timers to get to spank anyone because there is a shortage of women, and they like to go with men they know they can trust. It's also difficult to know a woman's limits because there she is, crying out, 'No, no, stop,' and your natural inclination is to heed her cries." This hints at a presumed difference between sadism and spanking, with participants believing that men who spank do so for the emotional fulfillment of women, not to hurt them. This rationale is supported in numerous spanking short stories and fantasies, and in Belinda's words about someone caring enough to "provide discipline."

Other male and female participants described their interests in similar terms, though men were more likely to readily acknowledge a sexual element. Male participants admitted that there is an erotic charge in having "a squirming, bare-bottomed

woman over your knee,” as Cooper explained. Thus, the apparent “Goldilocks” rule was revealed: There is a just-right amount of spanking to administer or receive, or a just-right amount of discipline to desire, and a just-right amount of eroticism to derive. Bidding for too many swats is constructed in this context as beyond the pale: no longer just about having been a brat, but more about pain and masochism.

Other apparently unspoken rules were revealed at this party when one woman dared to offer to spank men. Since this party was billed and constructed as a gathering of women who like to be spanked and men who like to do the spanking, most of the women were offended by this act of switching. Only four men ended up bidding on the woman’s services. She looked uncomfortable throughout the auction. She refused to say, “Young man, get over my knee, now!” Finally, she offered to let all the men come to her room so she could line them up and spank them all.

Some of the partygoers were in awe of this woman’s offer, but most seemed disdainful of the fact that she was switching, knowing that she would spank men and be spanked herself. “She doesn’t even know what she is,” one woman said. The woman who switched does have her limits, however. Melanie asked whether she would spank women too, and her very cold response was, “No.” Although in this particular setting she was clearly seen as deviant, she remained resolutely heterosexual, in accordance with broader sexual scripts about sexual orientation.

However, in line with the subcultural scripting in this particular community, all of the behavior described above was transgressive. A woman wanting too many swats, from more than one man, all of whom were strangers to her—this was outside the unspoken rules. A woman offering to spank men at an event that had been constructed with specific roles and rules—that is, only men spank women—was also deviant in this community. Before the party, a male participant had said, “Women who want to spank are borderline with being tops in the S&M scene. Most [heterosexual] men in the spanking scene would be loathe to

admit an interest in being spanked—as opposed to men in the S&M scene,” in which men tend to be bottoms, or the masochistic partner. The harshest judgment was reserved for transgressive women, instead of the men who offered their bottoms or the multiple swats, most likely because women’s participation in the constructed and overt order of things was crucial. With women outnumbered almost three to one, men were eager to become accepted in the scene, trusted by women, and thus, desired as a spanking partner. Women were the gatekeepers for men being able to participate in “what they came for,” according to Brett. The men had come to spank willing women, not to be spanked.

DISCUSSION

The participants in this study delighted in discussing public and popular references to spanking as a way of emphasizing the normality of their interests. Particularly pleasing were the references to stories that participants thought suggested the sexualized component of the activity, even if one needed to split hairs to find the sexual symbolism. For example, several participants recounted the spanking activities in the household of all-American singer and entertainer Pat Boone. One said, “There was far too much spanking going on for it to lack any sexual charge for him.” In *Starving for Attention*, the autobiography of Boone’s daughter, the sexual edge is conveyed in the following words:

I knew disobedience would result in swift, sure punishment. . . . I was strangely thankful for the uncommon spanking I did receive because it created a kind of penitential release for me—a victory over the nagging, inner torment of guilt. There would be a time of praying, crying, and hugging after the punishment and this seemed to give me a new lease on life. (Boone O’Neill, 1982, p. 37)

This was precisely the kind of anecdote my informants enjoyed most because they interpreted it to mean that Cherry actually enjoyed this form

of punishment, an interpretation most readers would not draw.

In a similar vein, participants recounted numerous references to sexualized spanking as validation of the normalcy of their activity. For instance, a song by Madonna, popular in the early 1990s, referred to spanking in a casual and favorable manner. In the early 1990s, the *Arsenio Hall Show*, a popular talk show, twice featured guests who extolled the virtues of a good spanking. Actor Robert Pastorelli of *Murphy Brown*, a popular early 1990s sitcom depicting a stubborn, clever female television journalist, commented that the Candice Bergen character, Murphy Brown, could use a good spanking. Participants pointed out that FM talk show host and “shock jock” Howard Stern mentioned spanking quite a bit in his autobiography, *Private Parts*, and that actors Ryan O’Neal and Farrah Fawcett had made veiled references to her being spanked during their long-term relationship. Stern had tried to convince NBC executives to broadcast him spanking a woman on Jay Leno’s late night television variety show, but censors refused to allow it.

What is the significance of these and other widely circulated references to an activity that may have a clear sexual meaning to some but only punitive meaning to others? For spanking aficionados, these references are like unpolished gems, indicative of the larger context of their special sexual interests. They believe that these anecdotes reveal a cultural fascination with corporeal punishment in all forms, and they offer these anecdotes as proof that they are neither alone nor deviant in their interests. The efforts within the spanking community to delineate themselves from and disavow S&M practices are offered as proof, again, that they are not deviant, at least not as deviant as others.

Is it really true that S&M, an exotic and unusual pleasure, is part of all of us? If so, does it reveal itself in timid and unrecognized ways, such as spanking? How do spanking aficionados understand and explain themselves?

One intention of the many spanking publications, videos, toys, and Internet statements is to

draw a distinction between S&M and spanking. At the same time, the differences between and among spanking, flagellation, and S&M are obscured by the casual use of all three terms. But participants insist on drawing a bright line between S&M and spanking. “I am not interested in a full S&M lifestyle,” said one, “just in erotic spankings and discipline with members of the opposite sex.”

What does this foray into one sexual subculture suggest about sexual scripts, the neutralization of stigma, impression management, and the development of the sexual self?

First, we might conclude that the social norms are pervasive, even in a sexually radical subculture. This subculture’s participants compared themselves to each other, made microlevel distinctions about the just-right or “Goldilocks” amount of spanking, and offered justifications for their interests. They made within-group judgments, redefinitions, and made use of stigma neutralization techniques. This echoes the discourses that surround us in the cultural scripting of what is regarded as normal and deviant.

These observations suggest that sexualities are enormously complex. The sexual self is clearly fluid, variable, and is simultaneously individually and culturally contextualized. Sexual scripts are blueprints, yes, but they can clearly be adapted and revised for the user. Sexual spanking should be viewed as one of many sexual adaptations individuals make, based on interactions and changes to intrapsychic and interpersonal scripts. An expanded view of sexualities, seen as the potent interaction between cultures and individuals instead of a series of simple rights and wrongs, can only benefit all who seek to find sexual paths of comfort, pleasure, and pain.

To understand participation in sexual spanking, we need to ask large questions about sexual participation. Why does anyone do what they do sexually? Why is the society as concerned as it is about what is sexually normal and abnormal, normative and deviant? We need to learn a great deal more than we know about nonmainstream sexual activities and the role they play in their participants’ lives.

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The S&M Experience

Jackie

I am a 21-year-old bisexual female who, in the BDSM [bondage-discipline-sadism-masochism] community, is known as a “switch.” I was raised Catholic in an interesting sort of family life. My mother is a diagnosed antisocial psychopath. My father raised his siblings because his mother was the town drunk while his dad abused both him and his siblings; he, in turn, grew up to be a rage-aholic, a verbal and physical child abuser. I lived off and on with my “grandmother”—one of my half-sister’s grandparents—who has been more of a parent than anyone else. I began studying psychology in an attempt to work with children so I would be able to remove them from the sorts of abusive situations I had to endure as a child.

I have always thought women were attractive. I remember watching beautiful women when I was younger. My mother was a beautiful woman. My

mother was a very sexual woman, and there was a constant stream of men in the house. She used them to get things, not for sex—that was part of her disorder. Because of this, I grew up seeing men and women in much the same light. I don’t think I fully admitted this to myself until I was in college. I have always done a lot of nudes in my paintings, females preferably because I like their lines better. When I visited my high school art teacher—also a close friend—because I was having a crisis over the stress of admitting I was gay, she informed me she had known that since she met me. Even my guy friends in high school knew. Recently, I asked John how he knew about me. He said the whole time he had known me I had looked at men and women with the same interest and desire, whereas usually, people choose one or the other. Specifically, he said, most men look at women and drool, whereas he

looked at other attractive men and wished he looked more like them. John said I looked at attractive women *and* men with a drooling look.

At one point, I tried telling my grandmother. I could never tell my mother—she was a gay-basher—or my father, whom I don't feel close to. My grandmother said it was a phase. At some point or another, every woman had fantasies about other women. She "knew me," she said. I'd meet some knight in shining armor and get married; I'd live in a nice house surrounded by a picket fence. Besides, she'd say, even if I were a lesbian—it wasn't possible to like both sexes, she believed—I could never marry another woman. And I couldn't live in sin—I was a Catholic, after all. And so I'd have to live my life alone.

I've had relationships primarily with men, but a few with women. Men are easier to come by. There is more of a selection of males to choose from, and I am picky with the people I date. It's harder finding same-sex partners, although it's easier living so close to a big city than in a less urban area. I'm not openly gay. My first gay relationship was with Emily, my best friend in high school. I was at her house, fooling around with a guy friend. I was young and most definitely stupid. I remember feeling uncomfortable with this guy. I really wasn't into fooling around with this guy, but he was and he kept going. Finally I called Emily over and she began kissing me on the neck and breasts and I felt exhilarated. We drove our friend home and she and I talked. Apparently, we have been attracted to each other since we had met but we were just afraid to act on our desires. Within the week, we were dating and were constantly with one another. My family knew that she was my best friend, so they didn't suspect anything. Her mom knew about us but she also knew how much we cared for each other as friends, so she never minded my staying over, although we never had sex when we stayed over. There are some things I just considered too uncomfortable.

I've always believed in monogamy no matter who my partner was. I always hated the stigma

that bisexuals are "easy," into having sex with as many people as possible simply because they like both sexes. Even now, most of my friends don't know I am bisexual. Definitely not my roommates or my mother. My roommates are a little more tolerant than my mother, but when you're living in a house full of girls, they start getting uncomfortable. One of my housemates in particular, Jennifer, whom I love dearly—in a strictly platonic way, mind you—had a run-in because one of her past roommates was bi and told her not to worry because she wasn't attracted to her. Instead of feeling less anxious, she got insulted. It's like me saying, I am not going to grope you in your sleep so you can rest easy and not live in terror.

During my freshman year of college, I worked in an office in a work-study program. I didn't think anything of being bisexual until one day my supervisor began talking about a guy in the department she thought was gay. I couldn't believe it when I heard her refer to this kind, intelligent man as a "fag"; then she began making jokes about the fact that he was a homosexual. I wanted to crawl into my skin or a deep hole and never come out. I knew if anyone at my job found out I would be harassed or, even worse, I'd lose my job. Sometimes the nicest people make a complete change of face when they find out someone is gay. There is a lot of stigma associated with being bisexual. Most people think we are lascivious, can't make up our minds, sick, perverse—you name it, we are pretty much labeled it.

I think about who will be reading this account. I hardly share any of this with outsiders. If anyone were to find out how I lead my sexual life, I could lose all credibility as a therapist simply because of the stigma of how perverse I am. The things I do would shock anyone, I guess. For as long as I can remember, seeing men and women tied up, spanked, smacked, or interacting in violent or sexually aggressive ways has always been a turn-on [for me]. No one else I knew seemed to have these feelings. Having had the background I did, I couldn't tell if it was my own form of self-abuse,

mental illness, or seeking the familiar. My childhood was very abusive. I thought it may be possible that I seek humiliation, abuse, and power in relationships because I was trying to act out familiar patterns. That didn't really make sense, though, since in sex, I played the dominant or dominatrix role. I have always had some form of a power dynamic in my relationships, even with partners who weren't into being kinky. The first woman I dated, I told her that I had a surprise. I came home and blindfolded her and I tied her up and tickled and tease her as I watched her writhe until I was satisfied that her release and satisfaction were completely dependent on my will. In the beginning, I didn't really consider it kinky; I saw it mainly as experimentation.

Most of the time my actions got really negative responses. I can remember one guy I dated in high school. When I pulled his hair and tried to bite his neck, he kinda freaked out. From then on in that relationship, I never tried anything out of order again. I did remain the "top" partner, though, the person who causes the sensation. That was doing what I wanted—getting my way, staying in control, and enjoying every minute of it. I wanted to take the dominant role in pleasing a partner. At the time, I didn't realize there was a community and a literature about all this that explained that what I was doing could please both me and my partner. Women were a lot more welcoming with my tendencies than men. Men never seemed to understand what I was up to, or they would see my dominance as challenging their masculinity. The women I dated liked being tied up, blindfolded, bitten, degraded, smacked, and used sexually. I guess this is one reason why I always like to dominate women. I don't think another woman could ever dominate me. I just don't have that mind-frame. I enjoy watching them too much.

You could look at this and say that I am trying to assume a power role because I was badly abused in childhood. Being dominant in my sexual relationships is safer because I call the shots. But the

fact is, I never really saw myself as a victim. In school, when I was living with my parents, I thought these behaviors—shaking, hitting, punching, throwing across the room, leaving bruises—happened to everyone. When I was living with my mom, I hadn't known anything different. My sense of what should happen in a family was kind of skewed. I've thought a lot about it, though. Maybe my whole reason for seeing this as interesting and arousing is that it uses sex as manipulation as my mom did. It's a possibility; she was my earliest role model. No one can be born liking this, right? When I was younger, I still viewed this as sick and twisted.

Every time I was abused at home, I swore I would never hurt anyone like that. So I went through extreme bouts of cognitive dissonance. I was thinking along one track while trying to do the exact opposite. For me, sexual activity was fun, but without certain elements, I never really got fulfilled. There came a time when I knew I wanted to try something different. I wanted to be in the other role. I wanted to be subservient. I craved it. I tried prompting boyfriends at the time by bringing up non-scary items, such as scarves. I could tell there was something wrong with me. I still wasn't fulfilled because those boyfriends were terrible at doing what I wanted them to do, but I was also terrible at trying to explain how to do it in a way that wouldn't send them running. So I continued to remain dominant.

Don't get me wrong: Bad things can happen both during sex and during a relationship. There is a population of people who believe that bondage and discipline is all about force—real abuse, real rape. I had a relationship with a guy. For a while, things were pretty good. I was usually dominant, but occasionally, things switched the other way. He became verbally and emotionally abusive, taking out his anger at his exes on me. He eerily reminded me of my father. We were very volatile, providing catalysts for one another. We went through phases when we would cut things off and end up sleeping

with one another, over and over again. I thought maybe we could be just friends, but I realized I was being naïve and foolish. One night, I went to his place thinking that he was going to help me find parts for my car. When he wanted to have sex, I told him no. I tried to pull away from him but couldn't because he was stronger. He tied me up from hand to foot. Before, we had played with handcuffs and ropes, but I just never thought he would use them without my consent. I felt very violated that night. I walked home, shaking. I couldn't sleep. I sat on the fire escape outside my bedroom, smoked two packs of cigarettes, and watched the sun rise. I thought that if I kept doing these bad things I would end up with more people who would take advantage of me. My next relationship was with a very conventional guy. I guess there's a Catch-22 situation here: When I engaged in bondage and discipline, bad things happened; when I didn't, bad things happened.

The conventional guy, we talked about marriage and kids, but he hated anything even remotely kinky, even the non-scary things. He saw bondage and discipline as abusive to women. He accused me of being a nymphomaniac—apparently all I wanted was sex. I became extremely depressed and began taking antidepressants. I realize now that I wasn't satisfied with the sex I engaged in, so I tried to make up with it in quantity. He ended the relationship, and I got upset because he was perfect for leading the life my family wanted me to lead: the husband, the family, a two-car garage, a good income—and most definitely no collars or handcuffs. I felt guilty about the failure of the relationship. I had screwed up what would have been perfect if I could just be normal. This was everything I was supposed to want by conventional standards. I won't ever have a normal life, I thought.

I started visiting specialty adult stores. I accumulated a little collection of the toys I enjoyed. This is part of me, I realized. When I fight who I am, I end up miserable. It didn't take me long to get over this guy.

Through a friend, I met Jason, the guy I've had my most recent relationship with. I completely brushed him off, and he thought I was a total bitch. We met again three months later. We decided to change our stances toward one another. At first, we talked as friends online. He told me things about myself no one had ever bothered to notice. He was supportive when we were talking about sex. He felt the same things. He had problems with sex earlier because he didn't want to see himself as abusive. He took the teacher role, showing me books and answering my questions. He wasn't sickened by me, and he gave me an opportunity to fulfill my need for being submissive. He became my friend, lover, and above all, master. He explained what being submissive entails. The dominant partner has to earn the trust and respect from the submissive to play the role. He told me that whatever may go on in the bedroom—degradation, humiliation—they happen because the submissive partner wishes to fulfill the role that involves those activities. He would treat me in this way because he respects the dynamic between us. In turn, I would allow him to treat me like that because I would have the control to say who treats me as such and when. He also set up what's called a "safe word" for me. Sometimes things can become so intense that the words you might speak in a typical dialogue during a scene won't stop the action. You need a safe word that you would never say during a scene that would be a signal to stop the action so that the participants can try to fix anything that may be going wrong. S&M is all about communication. My safe word is "blue." I think I picked it because I think primarily in colors and it reminds me of feeling scared. It seemed right.

We have a library of books that explain techniques of the bondage and dominance "lifestyle." Occasionally, when I'm reading one of them, one of my roommates will walk in and see my book, and so I explain it away as a book for research on deviance or aesthetics or some other such thing. As for my toys, they are usually kept in a duffel bag or

in drawers in my closet. One aspect of the bondage and discipline lifestyle is covering up evidence of how we live, including bruises and bite marks, or simply putting away the toys so that no one will ever find out about it and accuse us of abuse. We have many friends in the bondage and discipline community because it tends to be very tightly knit. We choose to keep it private among ourselves.

Some people in this community find romance in pieces of glass—that is, bloodletting, cutting the skin to achieve sexual arousal. I enjoy many different things. Sometimes the simple act of being tied or having something placed around my neck will send me into a frenzy of arousal, wanting to do anything to please, to earn pleasure. Sometimes I surprise Jason by setting up a scene for him when he comes home from work. One such scene involved 12 lit candles lining each side of the corridor to the bedroom door and red rose petals scattered on the floor. Inside the bedroom, I trailed petals up to the bed with candles lighting the windowsill. A rope trailed zig-zag through the petals under the door and onto the bed, connected to the collar I was wearing. It was then my turn to wait, having mentally prepared myself for him to come home, when he would decide what happened next. One night, paddling or flogging; the next night, maybe hot wax, anal intercourse, or bondage and teasing.

There is a sensation called “floating” a lot of submissives describe. It’s when you get so far into your personal head-space that sensation floods you and everything feels like soft pillows. After we have a vigorous scene, my master usually gathers me into his arms or holds me and we talk about everything we felt and went through in our minds, things that happened—and maybe didn’t happen—during the session. This is the most fulfilling and loving relationship I have been in. In the morning, we’re like every other couple. We get up and shower, brush our teeth, dress and the like, and go about our normal lives; for him, it is his work, for me, to school and therapy sessions—where we await the next time we see each other.

When we get together, we’re distinctly not like other couples.

It excites me to think I will be able to spend the rest of my life with someone who fills me with such joy—emotionally, intellectually, and physically. Someone who pushes me to be the best I can, someone who makes me dinner when I am stressed or gives me a back rub or surprises me by putting up Christmas lights or bringing my favorite candies for a devious blindfolded study break. Someone who won’t judge me. To me that doesn’t seem deviant. It’s really all in the way you look at it.

I have a job I enjoy tremendously, trying to make the lives of children better. I am in my last year of college. I won’t talk about private members’ clubs for bondage and discipline participants in my deviance course because all eyes would turn to me in accusation. If people in my everyday life knew about my sex life, they would accuse me of being sick, being just like a child molester, accuse me of doing things with my clients with the same ignorant thought processes that lead people to think you can “catch” homosexuality. I won’t discuss anything that happened the night before, when I subjected myself to any number of abuses and perversities. I will put on the mask of a confident, conventional, heterosexual woman. I will hope that I remembered to put all my toys away, that I haven’t left a trail that may lead to being scrutinized, judged, evaluated, stigmatized. And I will love being comfortable, finally, with who I am.

Everyone wants to feel accepted. I spent most of my life either not admitting things to myself or thinking I was a bad person because I felt a certain way. Now that I feel accepted in one area of my life, I have a much easier time separating the two halves of my life and not worrying about one affecting the other as much. Now that I have confidence in my sexual self, I am much more confident in my social self. Jason says it is funny that my family never liked any of the guys I dated in the past who were supposed to be so acceptable. Now that my family knows Jason—the one person who

shouldn't be acceptable—they've fallen in love with him. Jason says, "Being comfortable allows other people to be comfortable with you." I don't

consider myself "normal" in the way that the "American dream" is normal, but I am the way I want to be.

Discussion Questions

1. How do the popular and the "insider" or sociological views of S&M differ? Discuss some implications of this fact.
2. Discuss the relevance of Erving Goffman's concept "frame" or "framing" in the world of S&M.
3. How do participants in S&M explain their interest in their unconventional sexual activities?
4. Place the forms of extreme deviance discussed in this book along a continuum or spectrum of "extremeness." On what basis would you construct this continuum? Can such a continuum be constructed?

